

30th September 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 24th June 2021. This report covers the period from that date until 10th September 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, 24th June 2021

- Discussion on Strategic Finance issues facing local authorities (including pay issues) – with Kate Forbes, Cabinet Secretary for Finance

COSLA Leaders, 25th June 2021

- The Promise
- Employability Phase 2 of No One Left Behind
- COSLA and Improvement Service Partnership
- Scottish Local Government Conduct Order 2021
- Digital Citizenship Guide for Councillors – Civility in Public Life
- Christie Commission – Ten Years On
- Local Government Finance
- Pay Negotiations
- Scottish Government First 100 Days Commitment
- Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children – National Transfer Scheme Emergency Response
- Covid-19 and Supporting Roadside Encampments for Gypsy Travellers
- Abolition of Instrumental Music Tuition Fees and Core Curriculum Costs
- Pandemic Proofing the Education System
- Flood Risk Management Funding
- Priority Groups – Local Government Employment Commitment
- Affordable Housing Supply Programme
- Fair Work in Social Care
- Play Parks Renewal (100 Days Commitment)
- UNISON One Year of Covid Survey
- Distribution

COSLA Special Leaders, 30th July 2021

- Pay Negotiations
- Revised Engagement Protocol for Covid-19 Decision Making
- Support for Destitute People with No Recourse to Public Funds
- Play Park Renewal Update
- Community Planning Improvement Board
- Partnership Development Framework for ADPs
- Distribution

COSLA Leaders, 27th August 2021

- Joint Address by Scottish Police Authority Chair and Chief Constable Police Scotland
- Car Use and the Just Transition to Net Zero
- Localism – APSE report

- Economic Transformation Strategy
- UK Subsidy Control Bill
- 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence 2021 Proposal
- COP26 Climate Summit
- Role of National and Local Leadership in Ongoing Covid-19 Compliance Activity
- Local Government Finance
- Pay Negotiations
- National Care Service Consultation
- National Recovery Strategy
- Financial Support for Adult Social Care Providers
- Annual Adult Social Care Uplift
- Affordable Housing Supply Programme
- Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children National Transfer Scheme
- Afghan Locally Employed Staff Scheme
- SQA Levy in the Context of the Alternative Certification Model
- ELC Funding for 2022/23
- Scottish Child Payment – Bridging Payment
- Tenants Grant Fund
- Distribution

3.2 Interview with Improvement Service on Covid-19 Governance: The Improvement Service have been interviewing council Leaders and Chief Executives over the past few months to explore the governance arrangements that local authorities put in place and used given the necessary changes to daily business wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic.

I had an interview with David Barr of the Improvement Service on 18th June to feed back in relation to the arrangements we put in place in Argyll and Bute, namely the establishment of the Business Continuity Group and the Leadership Group. The activities of both have been covered in detail in previous reports to council. I was happy to report to David that our arrangements had worked well in terms of handling the unprecedented extent and nature of demand on council services in governance terms, supporting effective decision making and allowing other more routine decisions and items of business to continue.

3.3 Helensburgh Waterfront Development Visits: It was great to join members of the Helensburgh and Lomond Area Committee on Friday 18th June for a socially distanced outdoor site visit to the Helensburgh Waterfront development. As befits a significant multimillion pound regeneration investment, this ambitious project is making great progress and although it is very much a working construction site it's already clear what a fantastic amenity this will make for the town.



I returned to the site on 31st August to mark the first anniversary of construction work, joining councillor and officer colleagues along with main contractors Heron Bros. This £22m project remains on track with the main building structurally complete and landscaping under way. As well as promising a fantastic new facility for the town in the future, this development is currently providing employment for local people and businesses, as well as offering learning and skills development opportunities through a number of apprenticeships.

3.4 Alliance Scotland meeting: The first of two Leader engagements on 23rd June was the Alliance Scotland meeting (formerly the Industrial Communities Alliance). Agenda items discussed were:

- Gap funding for land and property development
- UK Levelling Up and Community Renewal Funds
- Making Scotland's Future – A Recovery Plan for Manufacturing
- Cross-Party Group on Industrial Communities position statement

3.5 Scottish Land Commission Public Meeting on Land Use in Scotland: 'Land matters because we all use it, and we all need it' has been the theme for a series of virtual public meetings held by the Scottish Land Commission over the summer. The session for the Argyll and Lochaber area took place on Wednesday 23rd June at 7pm.

A short presentation on the Commission's work was followed by a question and answer session with commission Chair, Andrew Thin, and

Land Commissioners Megan MacInnes and Lorne MacLeod. This offered opportunities to consider land reform, the impact in the local area and how it can contribute to national success overall.

The session also focused on the following issues:

- Modernising land ownership
- Transforming vacant and derelict land
- Land for housing
- The SLC's Good Practice programme
- Putting land rights and responsibilities into practice
- The work of the Tenant Farming Commissioner
- The new Expert Advisory Group on Tax on Land and Property

This was a well-attended session on a very interesting issue. All of SLC's virtual public meetings (and other events) are recorded and can be found on their YouTube channel.

3.6 Community Planning Partnership Management Committee: 30th June saw the CPP Management Committee coming together on a virtual basis once more to consider the following issues:

- Outcome 4 – Children and Young People:
 - The Promise
 - Children's Rights Update
 - Youth Participation Structure
- Matters arising from Area Community Planning Groups
- Cross Cutting Themes:
 - Digital Inclusion
 - Building Back Better (Communities)
 - Community Wealth Building
- Child Poverty Training for Partners
- Climate Change:
 - CPP Group Update
 - Cowal Youth Forum Video on Keep Scotland Beautiful
- Outcome 3 – Community Learning and Development Partnership

Coming together as community planning partners also provides opportunities during discussions to consider key issues that affect all of us – including the ongoing impact of the A83, for example. We are all aware of the challenges that the current situation brings to our own service delivery – as we all work together in calling for a swift solution it is helpful to add other voices, viewpoints and, crucially, experiences to what is arguably one of the most significant challenges for our region:

3.7 Transport Connectivity: Since my last Leader's Report, there has been no significant change in the current arrangements at the A83 which continues to have just one lane open under traffic light control, with periodic closures and diversions to the Old Military Road if weather conditions require it. While this, at least, affords a degree of improvement compared to last year, it remains deeply unsatisfactory and it is vital to continue pressing for urgent action here as much as possible. This is exacerbated in the context of any disruption at the A82 Loch Lomond route which has, sadly due to a number of road accidents, seen several periods of closure over the summer months.

We continue to press the case at every possible opportunity, including meetings of the A83 Taskforce (most recently on 9th September).

I did meet with Graeme Dey, Minister for Transport, when he visited Oban on 24th August. We started off with a tour of Oban Airport and an opportunity to highlight to Mr Dey the important role it plays in keeping our island communities connected. We were also able to highlight to him the NHS supply drone project which operates from the facility.

We then moved to the council's Oban North Pier building for our meeting. In our discussions we covered a wide range of transport issues including of course the A83 Rest and Be Thankful, a range of ferry issues, and the Strategic Transport Projects Review 2.

I was heartened to hear him recognise that there is room for improvement in relation to ferry services and also welcomed his offer of a session for all members with his officials in relation to the Rest and Be Thankful, and his wish to take a different approach to such discussions than has perhaps happened previously. All in all this was a positive introductory session.

I have followed up our meeting with new correspondence to Mr Dey, reiterating the vital importance of resilient solutions for transport connectivity to and from the area, and highlighting some particular areas of concern expressed to me by colleagues across the chamber and our communities. This includes the ongoing impact of an ageing Calmac fleet, the very disruptive effect on vital island links caused by breakdowns and general capacity problems. Members have also highlighted to me ongoing issues in relation to the Dunoon-Gourock passenger service and I have raised these in my correspondence with the Minister.

3.8 Island Matters: On 6th July, the first meeting (in the life of the new Scottish Parliament) of the Islands Strategic Group was held via Teams. This was the first meeting convened by the new Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, Mairi Gougeon MSP, and was a helpful opportunity for an introductory discussion with her in relation to Argyll and

Bute's unique position as the Scottish local authority with the highest number of inhabited islands. Graeme Dey, Minister for Transport, was also present.

This initial meeting considered the following topics:

- Manifesto commitments in relation to island issues
- Islands Programme Finance
- Islands Transport – Ferry Services
- STPR2 update
- Population matters
- Island Community Impact Assessments

Meeting with Cabinet Secretary, 12th July: We had an opportunity to follow on up on island issues with the Cabinet Secretary by securing, at short notice, a meeting with Mairi Gougeon when she visited Islay on 12th July.



We met with her in Port Charlotte where time was limited but we were able to convey to her some of the challenges and opportunities characteristic of Argyll and Bute's rural and island communities, including population growth, connectivity of all kinds and of course to highlight in particular the contribution that Islay and our other communities make to national priorities.

We also discussed the opportunities for rural and island communities in Argyll and Bute, including aquaculture and the employment/economic opportunities it brings, and the Islands Bonds proposals in the context of

our shared aim of ensuring local young people have opportunities in their home communities. Jenni Minto MSP was also present and commented on the positive working relationships within and outside the council.

I had a follow-up meeting with Jenni on 27th August, again on our home island of Islay, and while we had only limited time, this was once again a constructive discussion. I very much welcome Jenni's positive approach to working with the council and look forward to building on this as we move forward.

Visit to Islay and Jura, 22nd July: I was able to showcase some island challenges and opportunities to Kirsty Flanagan, Executive Director and Fergus Murray, Head of Economic Growth, when they visited Islay and Jura on 22nd July.

This full day visit covered a lot of ground and was much appreciated by the local community representatives and businesses involved.

We visited and met with the following:

- ACHA's Bowmore Phase 4 affordable homes development and Jura housing site
- Jura Community Shop
- Business units at Craighouse
- Meetings with Jura Community Development Trust and Community Council representatives to consider economy, population, recovery, connectivity and more
- Jura Hotel
- Ardfin hotel and golf course development



Island Policy Lead meetings: I continue to meet with officers from Economic Development on a regular basis to focus particularly on island matters.

Key issues that have featured of late include:

- Islands Community Fund – applications to this national fund closed in July. The fund has been heavily oversubscribed and it is understood that the Scottish Government is exploring other sources of funding to which unsuccessful applicants can be signposted.
- Island Bond consultation – the bond is due to launch in April 2022 and while the overall amount seems significant, it is important to consider how meaningful the impact will be when broken down and on an individual basis. Officers are finalising a response to the consultation.
- The Argyll Islands Sounding Board is next due to meet on 4th November.

3.9 Housing: There are a range of meetings that I attend in my capacity as Policy Lead for Housing. Over the period covering by this report, these include the Strategic Housing Forum on 7th September, bringing together RSLs and service delivery partners to look at issues in the round.

Members will also be aware that the Environment, Development and Infrastructure Committee's most recent meeting on 2nd September included updates on the Rapid Rehousing Transition Programme (RRTP) and the Private Sector Housing Grant. The RRTP has included a range of measures aimed at reducing homelessness and supporting people to retain and maintain tenancies; the Private Sector Housing Grant has also

enabled many vulnerable people to remain living independently at home through providing funding for adaptations and improvements (over 70% of the PSHG allocation was used in this way). It has also helped tackle improvement across the area's overall housing stock through leveraging in other sources of funding to increase the pot available for these works.

The Strategic Housing Investment Plan will feature on the September council agenda and more detail about our housing activity and plans will be included therein. We are also on track to bring the latest Local Housing Strategy to council in November. Our Housing Need and Demand Assessment is currently with Scottish ministers for examination.

I have also attended two sessions on Scottish Government new build resources, along with officers from our Housing service and RSL partners. These have been very useful sessions offering opportunities to explore in more depth all aspects of our Resource Planning Assumption (RPA) for the next five year period and to look at forward planning in partnership.

Meeting with Professor Nick Owens of SAMS, 13th August: This was a helpful opportunity to catch up with Professor Owens ahead of the SAMS Housing Summit organised for 20th September. I was able to outline some of the actions that the council is taking in relation to contributing to meeting the housing need in the area and also to hear some of the ideas that SAMS have for tackling this issue.

A number of key stakeholders have been invited to attend the summit to consider the current supply and demand, market pressures (including the impact of Covid) and discuss potential solutions in the short and longer terms, including exploring scope for more creative, innovative solutions.

While at SAMS on 13th August, and in a somewhat different context, it was also very positive to hear what a success the new café at SAMS is – this is run by Argyll and Bute Council's Catering team within Commercial Services and I am told it is a fantastic facility and is very popular, doing excellent trade.

3.10 Financial Inclusion: Colleagues will recall a briefing circulated in August providing an update on all of the activity being carried out to support people facing hardship of all kinds. Highlights include:

- Scottish Welfare Fund - £641,474 support for over 1,500 households facing disaster or extreme hardship.
- Handling 445 Crisis Grant and 328 Community Care Grant applications and making awards exceeding £230,000.
- Committed Discretionary Housing Fund spend of £785,119 to support housing costs.

- Ongoing meetings of the Financial Inclusion Advice Group which I chair.

Also worthy of note is the Flexible Food Fund. This has seen 535 families in need supported in just six months of operation. The project has been shortlisted for the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation (IRRV) National Performance Awards in the Excellence in Innovation (Service Delivery) category, with the winners announced in October this year at the IRRV National Conference in Telford.

Late in August I managed to catch up with representatives from Bute Advice Centre and ALI Energy, who were on Islay and Jura delivering the Flexible Food Fund Roadshow.



Roadshows have been taking place across the area to highlight the Fund to people who could benefit from assistance and also to raise awareness among other agencies who may be working with people in low income households so they can signpost people to this provision.

3.11 Gaelic: A major focus for officers at the moment is the planning and preparation for the Gaelic Gathering 2022, which will take place next March. A working group has been set up and meets on a regular basis. The two-day Gathering will build on the success of previous years' events and will focus on Argyll Gaelic, including one conference style event and a day centring on youth engagement.

A report on the recent Gaelic survey is currently in circulation to interested stakeholders and participants.

The Scottish Government's Gaelic Language Plan consultation closed on 9th September and we are looking forward to the outcomes from that.

Three online Oidhche Earra-Ghaidheal le events have been hosted, attracting over 50 live attendees and with the videos reaching over 5,500

views. This was an excellent initiative and the live music events in particular were very well received.

Gaelic Education Staffing: Gaelic staffing in our schools is currently well resourced and stable. Permanent appointments have been made at Bunessan Primary School and Islay High School. Both appointments underline the authority's commitment to sustainable growth in Gaelic Learning.

At Tobermory High School, three days per week of spare capacity in Gaelic staffing have been identified. This will see staff working with Mull primary schools, supporting Gaelic as Language 2, and specifically with the Gaelic Learners and Gaelic Medium pupils at Salen and Tobermory to develop a stronger Gaelic ethos across the two schools.

Primary One Literacy Assessment and Action Resource (POLAAR) for Gaelic Medium Education: Over the last year, we have worked in partnership with Education Scotland to adapt the Primary One Literacy Assessment and Action Resource (POLAAR) programme for Gaelic Medium Education. The resource is a proven tool for planning high-quality learning and teaching around reading at First Level, with a focus on sounds, known as phonics. All of the many games and activities in the programme, as well as the phonics and language aspects themselves, have been replaced by content relevant to Gaelic culture, context and language, with much of the work having been carried out by teachers in four Argyll and Bute schools – Salen, Bunessan, Bowmore and Sandbank.

The Gaelic POLAAR programme is now live on Education Scotland's website, where the Argyll and Bute logo can be seen prominently. The programme is due to be presented to a national audience at the Scottish Learning Festival in late September.

School Improvement Planning – GME-Specific Planning: Argyll and Bute Council has been identified by the Scottish Government body *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* as a model of excellent practice as a result of its adoption into the standard school improvement planning template of a section dedicated to strategic planning for Gaelic Medium Education. The model was presented to other local authorities in an online seminar in June, and the authority has been asked to present its practice at The Scottish Learning Festival in September.

3.12 Economic Growth: The Rural Growth Deal Programme Board work is ongoing. Sub-group meetings have now been set up for the housing and digital projects and it is also intended to set up a tourism sub-group in due course. These sub-groups include key internal and external stakeholders

and will lead on the development of options for RGD investment and act as a sounding board for the project OBCs.

The council has secured CARES funding from the Scottish Government and Local Energy Scotland to help with the development of potential options for RGD investment as part of the Low Carbon Economy Project on Islay. There will be no requirement for match funding from the council.

As the economy builds back up following the easing of restrictions, unemployment levels have dropped to an average of 4.7% (although this does vary across the area, with parts of Bute and Cowal at 7% and areas of Helensburgh/Lomond at 2%).

Some challenges in relation to recruitment continue especially as businesses seek to recoup after the impact of the pandemic. The council continues to work with Skills Development Scotland and other partners.

Members will have seen the confirmation in early September that Campbeltown-based CS Wind had entered administration. While this development was expected, it is still a very challenging blow for the Kintyre economy. I have written to Scottish ministers, building on the correspondence and engagement previously carried out over the life of this council, seeking their support wherever possible given the area's fragility in recent years – while Kintyre has faced a number of significant challenges it also offers much potential which can and should be realised.

An 'Invest in Argyll and Bute' website, targeting potential investors, is due to launch and there are plans for a marketing campaign with tourism sector partners. Our Economic Development team continue to liaise and negotiate with interested investors across a range of sectors – while much of that detail is confidential at this point there is certainly serious interest in the area from a number of companies operating in a variety of fields.

- 3.13 Meeting with National Farmers Union Scotland:** I met with the Chief Executive of NFUS, Scott Walker, plus regional representatives, on 5th August. This was a useful introductory meeting and we hope to have further discussions soon. We considered a range of issues including engagement with the council's Food and Drink Strategy, business diversification and opportunities for joint lobbying and partnership working.
- 3.14 COSLA Strategic Board meetings:** I sit on both the COSLA Environment and Economy and Community Wellbeing Strategic Boards. Meetings attended during this period are noted below, with agenda topics:

COSLA Community Wellbeing Board, 18th June 2021

- Employability Update
- Child Poverty Update
- Human Right to Adequate Housing
- Supporting Roadside Encampments and Capital Funding for Gypsy Traveller Accommodation
- Libraries Strategy
- Royal British Legion
- Delivering Equally Safe Funding
- Equally Safe Procurement and Commissioning
- Appropriate Adults
- Immigration Policy and Humanitarian Project Update
- Ending Destitution Together Governance Arrangements
- ESOL and Adult Learning Strategy
- Policing and Justice

COSLA Environment and Economy Board, 3rd September:

- Heat Decarbonisation – presentation on Local Heat and Energy Strategy, Scottish Government
- Transport – developing a road map for the 20% car km reduction target
- Subsidy Control
- Town Centre Action Plan
- Just Transition and Economic Recovery Strategy

4. CONCLUSION

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

Councillor Robin Currie
Leader, Argyll and Bute Council

14th September 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