
25th November 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 30th September 2021. This report covers the period from that date until 9th November 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 and the Business, Regeneration and Commercial Development remit currently being covered by the council Leader.

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 the Leadership Support Manager, 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 Community and Wellbeing Board, 17th September:

Due to a clash with the HITrans Board meeting the same day, I was unable to attend the COSLA CWB session. The following topics were included on the CWB agenda:

- National Care Service for Scotland consultation
- Programme for Government
- Equally Safe at School – Whole School Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls
- Humanitarian Protection Schemes
- New Scots Refugees Integration Delivery Projects
- Covid Framework for Migrants Without Recourse to Public Funds
- Support for Hong Kong British Nationals (Overseas) Migrants
- Local Government Response to Nationality and Borders Bill
- COSLA and Public Health Scotland Collaboration on Gender Equality and Gender Based Violence
- Domestic Abuse and Trauma Informed Practice
- Improving Lives of Gypsy Travellers
- Employability Evaluation Framework
- Scottish Welfare Fund and Self Isolation Support Grant
- Children’s Disability Payment Pilot and Social Security Update, Universal Credit
- Consultation on Reform of Competition and Consumer Policy
- Draft Consultation Response on Social Housing Charter – Short Term Lets Guidance
- Participatory Budgeting
- Policing and Scottish Police Authority Engagement Plan
- Water Safety

COSLA Leaders, 24th September:

The following items were considered:

- Social Renewal Advisory Board
- Tackling Poverty – COSLA Role and Contribution
- EU Exit Local Impacts
- Local Government Finance
- Pay Negotiations
- Programme for Government
- Fiscal Framework for Local Government
- Historical Child Abuse Redress
- Scottish Attainment Challenge Post 2022

- Covid Legislation Consultation
- Humanitarian Protection for People from Afghanistan
- Local Authority Support for Destitute People Without Recourse to Public Funds
- Alcohol and Drug Partnerships – Whole Family Approach Framework
- Councillor Remuneration Survey
- Local Government Settlement and Distribution

COSLA Environment and Economy Board, 22nd October:

The following agenda items were considered (with the final two reports being private and confidential):

- Physical Activity
- COP26
- Local Heat and Energy Strategy
- Transport – 20% Reduction in Car Kms Route Map Development
- Town Centre Action Plan
- Post EU Exit Issues
- Freeports
- Recycling Improvement Fund
- Flood Risk Management

COSLA Leaders, 29th October:

The following topics featured on the agenda for this COSLA Leaders session. An additional Special Leaders meeting was called urgently to convene on Wednesday 27th October, two days prior to this session, in relation to the ongoing matter of pay negotiations (which also features on this agenda):

- Revised COSLA Constitution
- COP26 Update
- COSLA Response to the National Care Service Consultation
- Pay Negotiations Update
- Adult Social Care Pay Uplift
- Local Government Finance Update
- UK/Scottish Government Fiscal Framework Review
- Proposal for Transfer of Digital Office into COSLA
- Scottish Disability Assistance and Child Disability Payment
- Scottish Attainment Challenge Funding
- Progress Review of Implementation of Morgan Review of Additional Support for Learning
- SQA Levy

- Contingency Hotel Accommodation for People Seeking Asylum
- Capital Funding for Gypsy/Traveller Accommodation
- National Workforce Strategy – Health and Social Care
- Local Government Settlement and Distribution

3.2 Islands Issues:

Islands Strategic Group: On 15th September, I attended the second meeting (in the life of the current Scottish Parliament) of the national Islands Strategic Group. Chaired by Mairi Gougeon, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, this session featured a comprehensive agenda covering the following significant issues in the islands context:

- Aviation
- Ferry Freight Services
- National Islands Plan Delivery Updates:
 - Healthy Islands Fund
 - Island Communities Fund
 - Island Infrastructure Fund
 - Population
 - National Islands Plan Delivery Group
- Pandemic recovery

Island Communities Fund success for Argyll and Bute: The Scottish Government confirmed its allocations for Islands Communities funding in October 2021. I was delighted that four Argyll and Bute projects received a total of £319,044:

- Gigha Active Travel Hub - £75,600
- Cornabus Tree Nursery, Islay - £86,000
- Ulva Housing Refurbishment - £72,859
- Islay Leisure resilience and sustainability - £84,585

Our officers continue to liaise with Scottish Government officials through the National Islands Delivery Group in relation to islands matters and funding streams, including preparation for the competitive Islands Infrastructure Investment Fund, the Healthy Islands Fund and the Islands Bond.

Net Zero Islands: The Scottish Government has made a pledge to support delivery of three net zero islands. I have written to Mairi Gougeon, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, making the case for Islay to be considered for this project. At the time of writing, I have not yet received a response, but will update members when I do so.

Argyll Islands Sounding Board, 4th November: Our own strategic islands group met on 4th November. We had an update on islands work, project delivery and future projects, including a constructive discussion about issues including digital connectivity, employment and transport (with the current ferry issues featuring particularly here). We agreed that it would be helpful for officers to meet with colleagues in the Scottish Government Islands Team on a quarterly basis to ensure that workstreams and future planning priorities are aligned.

The national Islands Team also provided a helpful update on the National Islands Plan and delivery of the implantation route map.

3.3 Gaelic Issues:

Faster Rate of Progress/Scottish Government, 27th September: I have provided updates on these meetings (previously convened by Deputy First Minister John Swinney) in past Leaders Reports. This session was chaired by Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Shirley-Anne Somerville. Following an overview of manifesto commitments from Ms Somerville, Group Leads gave updates on the themes of community engagement, digital and media participation, economy and labour market, and teacher recruitment and retention. After an update on National Gaelic Plan and the development of a future Plan, there was an opportunity for partners to provide updates and input, and to consider next steps.

Gaelic Gathering preparations: The Gaelic Gathering continues to meet on a regular basis ahead of the Gathering next March. A key focus for the group is exploring effective ways of engagement with young people to boost participation.

John Swinney has been very supportive of our previous events and we will be extending an invitation to the Scottish Government for the March Gathering.

3.4 HITrans Board meeting, 17th September: At this session, HITrans sought views from members on regional transport priorities, issues and ambitions and these will be reported through future meetings. Agenda topics pertinent to Argyll and Bute were:

- Finance
- Research/Strategy Development Programme 2021/22
- Regional Transport Priorities Update
- Fair Fares Approach
- Scotrail timetabling consultation
- Mobility as a Service (MaaS)
- Demand Responsive Transport App
- Active Travel Update

- Hydrobus (trial vehicle during COP26)
- 20 Minute Neighbourhoods
- Bus Partnership Fund
- European Projects

3.5 Camanachd Cup Final, Oban, 18th September: I was delighted to join the Provost and other local members at the latest in a series of significant shinty matches to take place in our own Mossfield Stadium – on this occasion it was shinty’s premier tournament, the Camanachd Cup Final.



While it’s disappointing that no South/local teams made it quite as far as the final this year, it was still a great game, and congratulations to Kinlochshiel who took the trophy home for the first time ever after beating Lovat 3-1.

3.6 Housing Issues:

SAMS Housing Summit, Oban, 20th September: The Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS) brought together a number of key stakeholders on 20th September for a virtual summit to discuss current pressures on obtaining accommodation for students and staff in the Oban area. In attendance were several MSPs who represent the area, including constituency MSP Jenni Minto and Brendan O’Hara MP. Representatives from HIE, the University of the Highlands and Islands and local RSLs were joined by private sector partners. Chairing the session was Professor Nick Owens of SAMS, who gave an overview of the current pressures before asking housing providers present to update the session on their key

developments and projects, including in this element the council's Rural Growth Deal.

The group then had a discussion on potential solutions, including scope for commercial partnerships and a range of other options, agreeing it would be helpful to continue the conversations again soon in the hope of making swift progress on a solution.

Transition to Rapid Rehousing Plan update: Argyll and Bute Council has been awarded an additional £93,000 funding through the Tenant Hardship Grant Fund. This new intervention aims to complement the range of options local authorities already use to prevent homelessness. It is also intended to be linked to the existing pre-action requirements for rent arrears in both the social and private rented sectors; and the main focus of the new grant funding is on supporting those most at risk of homelessness, where tenancies can be saved, and where this funding can support an agreement between the landlord and tenant.

The grant is administered by local authorities and is available to all tenants living in the private and social rented sector at risk of homelessness. It is primarily aimed at the most vulnerable people and households, and where applicable, landlords must demonstrate that they are complying with the pre-action requirements for rent arrears and agree not to progress a repossession on the basis of rent arrears where a grant is paid and the tenant meets all future agreed rent and repayment obligations.

The grant is aimed at helping to repay rent arrears that have arisen due to the Coronavirus pandemic between 23rd March 2020 and 9th August 2021. Arrears before 23rd March 2020 will not be covered and arrears after 9th August 2021 can only be covered in exceptional circumstances, where the local authority is satisfied that arrears relate to continued impact of the pandemic restrictions.

Housing officers have also undertaken virtual Housing First training during October.

- 3.7 Alliance Scotland, 22nd September:** Alliance Scotland (formerly Industrial Communities Alliance) – following the AGM an ordinary meeting was held and included a discussion on Levelling Up – the ten priorities for the Spending Review and the White Paper, led by Professor Steve Fothergill of the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University. There was also a session on Land and Property Development in the Scottish Context. These discussions helped to shape a position statement in relation to the second meeting of the Cross Party Group on Industrial Communities, which was scheduled to

meet on 28th September and which featured the same topics on its agenda. .

3.8 Community Planning Partnership Management Committee, 29th September: The CPP Management Committee came together on a virtual basis once more on 29th September to consider the following:

- Matters arising from Area Community Planning Groups
- Climate Change
- Child Poverty
- Financial Inclusion
- Community Wealth Building
- Digital
- Building Back Better
- Update on Public Safety Projects and Community Safety Partnership (Police Scotland)
- Water Safety Awareness
- Public Health Argyll and Bute Annual Report
- National Care Service for Scotland Consultation – presentation and discussion
- Argyll and Bute Employability Partnership – Terms of Reference and Improvement Action Plan
- Staff Recruitment and Retention (HIE)

3.9 Oban’s City Status Bid: On 13th October, the scheduled Oban, Lorn and the Isles Area Committee Business Day gave me an opportunity to meet with OLI members to discuss Oban’s bid for city status.



We had a really positive discussion about what we can contribute, as elected members, to engaging with the local community as the council prepares its bid for submission in early December. We identified a number of options to pass on to officers who are working on the bid, as well as opportunities where we can get involved.

This is an important strategic initiative for the whole of Argyll and Bute, given the potential benefits if we succeed in being the location for Scotland's first west coast city. Being able to draw on the local knowledge of the OLI members was incredibly helpful and it's heartening that there is cross-party support for this ambitious bid.

3.10 National Care Service consultation: On 7th October, COSLA held an event for Community Wellbeing Board members to share views on the National Care Service consultation, which will have a significant impact on Scottish local authorities. Our council's response was, of course, the subject of the Special Council meeting on 28th October and our officers were working right up to the previous day finalising the formal submission to this particularly significant consultation, in the context of COSLA issuing its own final response.

3.11 Commercial Services Update:

One Council: The service continue to make good progress in terms of proactively managing property development, rent reviews the efficient use of heritable property. During the last period a number of leases and sales have been concluded on surplus property/assets, including the sale of Port Ellen Schoolhouse on Islay; two flats at Sinclair Street in Helensburgh; Blairvadach (phase 1), Helensburgh; and the former School and Schoolhouse, Bridge of Orchy.

The One Council property approach has met the capital target of £5.5M which was set for the first three years of operation and is on schedule to meet the £1M target for this financial year.

Learning Places Scotland Awards – Shortlist: The service has been shortlisted in three categories at the prestigious Learning Places Scotland Awards, which celebrates excellence and achievement in Scottish Education. The submissions are in respect of the refurbishment of Dunoon Primary School and the outdoor spaces that have been developed as part of the 1140 hours roll out:-

- Early Learning and Childcare – Argyll and Bute Early Years Outdoor Spaces
This award recognises excellence and innovation in the briefing, design, development and delivery of ELC facilities in a community setting.

- Innovation in Delivering a Sustainable Learning Space – Argyll and Bute Outdoor ELC
This award recognises sustainability practice across all levels of decision making in existing and new build learning spaces to support improved performance of the key spaces.
- Pupil/Student Experience
This award recognises a learning establishment which has undertaken a buildings/facilities investment that significantly improves the pupils/students' learning and social experience and positively enhances their health and wellbeing.

The winners will be announced at an awards ceremony scheduled to take place on 23rd November 2021 at the Scottish Exhibition Centre.

3.12 Business and Regeneration Update:

Shopfront Improvement Fund Scheme: This initiative was launched in early November and is now open to retail businesses in rural areas and small settlements. Grants made from the fund can be used for painting, joinery and masonry improvements and are designed to contribute to community revitalisation, encouraging people to use local shops and increase footfall. It is particularly positive to see this opened up to businesses in our more remote communities. Applications close on 17th December 2021.

Support for Businesses and the Local Economy:

The Argyll Economic Resilience Forum continues to meet every three weeks, with a key area of focus at present being recruitment and workforce availability.

The Discretionary Hardship Fund for Business is now closed and the council has distributed £508,000 to support local businesses. Members will recall that the Policy and Resources Committee agreed to augment this with £98,000 from the Recovery and Renewal Fund, meaning an additional 27 businesses could be supported. In total 129 businesses (from 208 applicants) were able to receive support.

Business Gateway Local Growth Accelerator: The programme remains on track to meet total spend of £855k by December 2022. Current total committed spend is £718,693, with approximately £140,000 remaining available to award.

To date, 163 grants have been approved. 129 have been completed, with funds totalling £437,229 paid out. 34 are in progress, with committed funds totalling £224,733. 41 specialist advice sessions have been completed,

totalling £41,567 with 8 in progress bringing total committed spend to £49,647. £7,084 has been spent on marketing.

Digital Boost Programme: Twenty nine one-hour surgeries with a digital expert have been completed (target 50 by March 2022). Eight in-depth (typically two day) digital one to one support sessions with a digital expert have been approved (target 20 by March 22). Sixteen new coaching sessions have been scheduled (target 16 by March 22). Social media marketing and sponsored business pages in the local press will promote the DigitalBoost support in November.

Fair Start Scotland: Seven additional starts have signed up to Fair Start Scotland, bringing the total to 242 participants since the service commenced (52 Helensburgh, 57 Campbeltown, 26 Rothesay, 41 Dunoon and 66 Oban). Key workers have supported a total of 79 people into work. 46 of these job starts have occurred during the COVID-19 period.

Parental Employability Support Fund: Delivery of PESF continues to go well. This service is funded by the Scottish Government and designed to support low income families to increase their income through work, both through supporting parents to access paid employment and in helping those in lower paid jobs to progress to higher income.

Our two part time PESF Engagement Workers deliver intensive in and out of work employability support, including person centered support to upskill, apply for jobs, gain progression whilst employment, money advice, health support, motivational support, etc. A total of 37 parents have signed up to receive PESF support.

3.13 Climate Change:

COP26 Fringe Event – SSE, 5th November: I attended the Biodiversity Net Gain and Social Capital event hosted by SSE, a major renewable provider in Argyll and Bute. The aim of the event was to explore why protecting and enhancing biodiversity and the climate emergency are inseparable. The event was chaired by Lynne Banks- WWF with the following panellists:

- Chris Packham. Wildlife expert, TV presenter, author and conservationist
- Lorna Slater- MSP- Minister for Green Skill, Circular Economy and Biodiversity
- Francesca Osowska- CEO of NatureScot
- Julia Barker- Biodiversity Technical Specialist- Balfour Beatty,
- Julie Young- Argyll and the Isle Coast and Countryside Trust (ACT)
- Richard Baldwin- Head of Consents and Environment – SSE Transmission

Before I summarise the event, it is important to clarify what Biodiversity Net Gain means- basically it's leaving biodiversity in a better state than before and the resulting Social Capital which contributes to the benefits we receive from biodiversity i.e. food, clothing, medicines, building materials, clean air and water.

Ron McDonald- Director of SSE Transmission welcomed us with a video of some of the biodiversity work associated with their renewable energy projects; Julie Young from ACT featured in the video and told us about some of the native tree planning projects on Argyll and Bute Council land.

Each panellist took it in turn to provide an overview of the climate emergency with the initial focus by both the Minister and Chris Packham on species loss, habitats lost or in poor condition and the unsustainable use of biodiversity, followed by an illustration of more positive work that both the Scottish Government are funding in terms of Peatland Restoration, Tree planting, what NatureScot, Balfour Beatty, ACT and SSE are doing in terms of policies, building in targeted biodiversity actions early in project development, supporting communities near installations and more importantly delivering on these targets.

Further discussions centred on funding, especially on continuity of funds to community groups rather than one off payments; other topics included that people value biodiversity (nature) more as a result of the pandemic, the role of agriculture and the greening of our cities. Overall this was an extremely useful and thought-provoking session.

Argyll and Bute Climate Change Event, Helensburgh, 6th November: The following day, it was back to Argyll and Bute for the council's own climate change event at the Helensburgh and Lomond Civic Centre.

To coincide with the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) being held from 31 October to 12 November in Glasgow, the Council has been participating in a number of climate change events. The council's own successful family friendly event was designed to enable people to discover how they can become more climate friendly in their everyday lives.

Visitors had the chance to try out an electric bike; find out how ways to make their home more energy efficient; and see the Council's wide range of electric vehicles.

Those in attendance were also given an insight into what happens to waste and recycling in Argyll and Bute.

It was the efforts of the children and young people taking part in a climate change poster competition that really stole the show though – they really

have a tremendous grasp of this vital issue and their contributions are very much valued.

- 3.14 Meeting with Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation:** Along with the Chief Executive, I met with Tavish Scott, CEO of the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation, on 28th October in Kilmory. This was a very helpful and positive meeting where we covered a number of areas of common interest – including, of course, the Rural Growth Deal, in which aquaculture is a key theme, and the connections to other aspects like housing, ports, transport and infrastructure.

The SSPO are keen to engage with local elected members given the significance of aquaculture to the local economy across the whole region, and officers will continue to explore opportunities for this, including possible future seminars for members.

- 3.15 Economy and Growth:**

Meeting with HIE Leadership, 29th September: It was useful to have an opportunity to catch up virtually with new Highlands and Islands Enterprise Chief Executive Carroll Buxton who is now in post, along with Board Chair Alistair Dodds and our Chief Executive.

Carroll and Alistair gave an update on HIE's current priorities, pressures and recovery actions along with their Growth Deal activity. It also offered a chance for us, as partners, to consider the forthcoming COHI agenda and some Argyll and Bute specific matters, including the Kintyre economic situation following CS Wind entering administration earlier that month.

Convention of the Highlands and Islands, 25th October: The autumn session of COHI took place on 25th October. A few days prior to the event, held on a virtual basis once again, the leaders of the Highlands and islands councils convened as the Highlands and Islands Leaders Group to consider the agenda and how best to work together, where possible, to secure the best outcomes for the region. The pandemic has meant that these once-regular meetings have been paused for some time, but it was very useful indeed to catch up with colleagues who share the same challenges and opportunities that we do.

In normal circumstances Argyll and Bute would have been hosting this particular COHI session and we hope that it will be possible to do so in person next year.

COHI featured the following agenda topics:

- Review of previous COHI outcomes
- Covid-19 recovery
- National Strategy for Economic Transformation
- Population
- Housing
- Developing Tertiary Education in the Highlands and Islands
- COHI Project Update – Spotlight: Energy
- Outcomes and forward look

Correspondence: In October I wrote to Michael Gove MP in his capacity as Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, encouraging him to visit Argyll and Bute so that we can highlight the ways in which we can maximise our opportunities and address our challenges. I have not received a response as yet, but will update members when I do so – I hope very much that a visit can be agreed.

I am also in discussions with Graeme Dey's office given his Scottish Government transport portfolio, as we have a number of matters to discuss with him, including the A83, a range of ferry matters and other issues. While diaries at both ends are very challenging we are hopeful that a meeting can take place soon.

4. CONCLUSION

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

Councillor Robin Currie
Leader, Argyll and Bute Council

9th November 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