

24th November 2022

LEADER'S REPORT

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Leader of the Council and Policy Lead Councillors routinely provide a report outlining their strategic activities for consideration at each meeting of Argyll and Bute Council, except for the annual budget meeting in February.
- 1.2 This report provides an update on the activities of the council Leader, Cllr Robin Currie, for the period 15th September to 11th November 2022. It also includes notes on activities relating to the Leader's Policy Lead portfolio of Housing, Economy and Rural Growth.

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. LEADER ACTIVITY 15th SEPTEMBER TO 11TH NOVEMBER 2022

- 3.1 **Argyll and Bute Parliamentary Forum, 8th November:**
Colleagues may recall that in previous terms, the council's political and senior officer leadership have met together with the Parliamentarians representing Argyll and Bute to discuss the key strategic issues relating to the area. The pandemic interrupted these but, with a new council term now under way, I felt it would be useful to reinstate these sessions.

With the support of Jenni Minto MSP, we met at the Scottish Parliament on Tuesday 8th November. Joining me were Cllr Gary Mulvaney, Depute Leader, and Cllr Reeni Kennedy-Boyle on behalf of the SNP Group. This is the first time we have taken a cross-party approach at council level to these meetings, and I believe that to be a positive and constructive development, one which we will continue as we progress arrangements for future Forum meetings.

We extended an invitation to both constituency MSPs, Jenni Minto and Jackie Baillie, and to all regional list MSPs for the Highlands and Islands and West Scotland regions, both of which span Argyll and Bute.

Given that this was the first Forum session in the new council term, with some familiar and new MSP faces present, Pippa Milne, Chief Executive, and Kirsty Flanagan, Executive Director, presented an overview of Argyll and Bute's opportunities and challenges - setting out some of the considerable investment and regeneration activity that the council has been carrying out recently and highlighting the particular challenges that we do face, including the urgent need for population growth and current financial pressures.



We took the opportunity to raise the issue of Rothesay Pavilion with the Parliamentarians, who agreed to share the detail with colleagues and to remain in dialogue with ministers, following our own approach to them earlier this year. There will be further engagement with parliamentarians on the matter of the Pavilion, both arising from this session and through

the activity of the Lobbying Group as the Pavilion action plan is progressed in partnership with the Rothesay Pavilion Charity Trust.

The Forum also afforded an opportunity to raise other issues like the forthcoming bio-degradable municipal waste (BMW) ban and the implications for Argyll and Bute, and the unprecedented severe weather damage to the Ardbeg Road sea wall during Storm Barra in December last year.

This was a really positive session and all agreed that the Forum should continue, so officers are making arrangements to take forward the issues discussed at this first meeting and to liaise with colleagues at the Scottish Parliament on additional sessions next year.

We also had a short meeting with Douglas Ross, who is one of the Highlands and Islands regional list MSPs for the area but who was unable to attend the Forum session. This too was a useful and positive discussion and we were able to highlight the same challenges to him also, thus raising the profile of the Pavilion in particular as well as the unique challenges presented by our geography, our population levels and other factors.

3.2 Housing Matters:

September - Strategic Housing Forum:

The Strategic Housing Forum convened on 20th September for its latest quarterly meeting, bringing together key partners and RSLs involved in housing delivery. Housing is a key priority for us and these Forum sessions play a key part in our overall activity. We considered reports on the Annual Local Housing Strategy 2022, an update from the Scottish Government More Homes Division, and the Strategic Housing Investment Plan for 2023/24 to 2027/28 which, along with the Housing Annual Assurance Statement, was of course on the agenda for September council following this Forum meeting. Both of those papers contain significant detail about plans for housing provision over the coming years and I would recommend them to colleagues given the significance and vital importance of housing to the area and to addressing the challenges we face.

It is no surprise that the cost of living crisis also featured on the Forum agenda. Forum member organisations are all actively involved in providing a range of services, support and advice in relation to coping with fuel poverty and mitigating the impacts of punishing living costs. With national media reports citing Argyll and Bute as one of the most affected areas in terms of significantly increased costs, this will remain a critical area for focus, including through the Financial Inclusion and Advice Group.

Rural and Islands Housing Association Forum - Scottish Rural and Islands Housing Conference, Ballachulish:

I was pleased to attend the RIHAF - Scottish Rural and Islands Housing Conference in Ballachulish in late October. There were a number of extremely useful talks and workshops, including sessions with Sally Thomas, Chief Executive of the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations and Andrew Watson, the Scottish Housing Regulator. Other speakers and session leaders included representatives from the Poverty Alliance, Energy Action Scotland, Wellbeing Economy Alliance, Existing Homes Alliance and a number of housing associations from across Scotland. This was a useful event overall offering opportunities to share practice and ideas with others who deliver housing in rural and island communities, and again the impact of the high cost of living featured significantly across all discussions.

3.3 COSLA Leaders Meetings:

As indicated in my previous report to council, the national local government pay negotiations have again required a number of additional Leaders meetings at short notice, alongside the regular schedule.

30th September - Leaders:

Agenda items for this meeting were:

- Presentation from Accounts Commission Chair, Bill Moyes
- Local Authority Mutual Investment Trust Board
- Local Government Finance
- Pay Claim
- National Care Service and Children's Services Reform
- Winter Planning for Health and Social Care
- Programme for Government
- Disabled Children and Young People (Transition to Adulthood) (Scotland) Bill
- Distribution

25th October - Special Leaders:

This meeting focused on the Local Government Pay Claim.

28th October - Leaders:

Cllr Gary Mulvaney deputised for me at this meeting which considered the following issues:

- Local Government Finance
- Pay Claim Update
- Accounts Commission - Future Engagement
- Historical Child Abuse Redress Scheme
- 16 Days of Action - Gender Based Violence
- Free School Meals
- Ukraine

- Health and Social Care Winter Planning
- Settlement and Distribution

28th October - Convention:

Again Cllr Mulvaney attended in my place for COSLA Convention where the following topics featured on the agenda:

- Appointments to Outside Bodies
- COSLA Audited Financial Statements to 31st March 2022
- COSLA Plan 2022 to 2027
- European Charter of Local Self-Government

3.4 Meeting with Ukraine Refugees and Resettlement Team:

On 12th October I went to Oban to meet with a number of Ukrainian refugees who have come to Argyll and Bute, along with members of the council's Resettlement Team.

First, we met with a group currently in hotel accommodation and awaiting longer-term housing arrangements. Some were due to move to their new homes (in different locations) the following day; others had only just arrived in the area and were just embarking on the resettlement process.



We had a very lively discussion about a range of issues - including starting up businesses, finding employment and, of course, how they are finding life in Scotland. Later, we had a drop-in session in Corran Halls where all

those currently staying in the Oban area were invited to come along and share any issues that they wanted to raise.

I was also privileged to meet with one young family who have already moved into a flat in the Oban area. Hearing their relief and gratitude for a safe, clean home, was humbling. I was shown a photograph of a bomb site where the home of one woman's father - who has remained in Ukraine - once stood. While those who are now with us in Argyll and Bute have left those experiences behind, the memories of what they have gone through, and the fear and anxiety for loved ones still in Ukraine, remain all too present. Everyone I met spoke of going home some day.

The team behind the resettlement programme are doing an incredible job to help people who have faced horrendous circumstances that we can only imagine. I hope to be able to have further meetings with our refugee community in the future, and to hear how they are getting on in their new homes.

3.5 Learning Success:

It's been my privilege to attend two events in this period where we are celebrating the success of local learners.

The first was the University of the Highlands and Islands Graduation Ceremony in Dunoon on 23rd September. The rejuvenated Queen's Hall was the ideal setting for this very happy in-person recognition of the achievements and successes of Argyll-based students graduating from their local UHI Argyll College learning centres around the area. My congratulations go to all those who graduated and I wish them every success for the future.

The next event took place earlier on the day I finalised this report - the Council's own Learning Awards, where we recognise the efforts of our own staff who have achieved qualifications while they work. Our employees are incredibly dedicated and committed to excellence, to improving and learning, to building up their skills so that they can deliver the best possible services to people and communities. I am glad that we were able to mark their endeavours and achievements with a virtual awards ceremony on Friday 11th November. Learning and studying for qualifications of all levels, at the same time as doing your job, is rewarding but challenging. Thank you to all staff who make such efforts in order to improve and strive for excellence.

3.6 A83 Rest and Be Thankful:

It is rare to have a Leader's report without some comment on the A83 Rest and Be Thankful, and this report is no exception.

I was happy to welcome members of the RABT Campaign Group to a virtual seminar for all members on 22nd September. The group gave us an overview of their campaign activities and reiterated the context of which we are all too aware: that the ongoing disruption at the rest poses very significant risks to Argyll and Bute, with economic, social and countless personal impacts.

The group encouraged each of us to make individual representations to the Minister for Transport pressing for increased urgency on putting a solution in place and bringing an end to the disruption.

Colleagues will recall at our September meeting that we agreed a motion, confirming this council's long-held position on the Rest in this new term. The matter was also discussed at the Parliamentary Forum on 8th November. I have previously covered my own correspondence as Leader to the Transport Minister and, alongside the individual representations referred to above, I will continue to engage with national government wherever possible, including through ongoing participation in the A83 Taskforce as well as continued correspondence and discussion.

3.7 Convention of the Highlands and Islands, 2nd and 3rd October:

It was a pleasure to be able to take our turn in hosting an in-person COHI event after a number of sessions had to be held virtually due to the pandemic. The Autumn COHI took place in Oban in early October and it was great to welcome Scottish ministers and colleagues from our fellow Highlands and islands authorities and partner agencies to the town.

We met with H&I Leaders and representatives from HIE on the evening preceding the discussions and, as always, this offered a useful opportunity to consider the agenda and formulate key positions on the various issues.

The agenda included the following:

- Review of previous outcomes
- My Life in Highlands and Islands - feedback on a large scale survey of over 5,300 residents
- Cost of living
- Regional Economic Partnership update
- National Strategy for Economic Transformation
- Population
- Transport
- Outcomes and Forward Look

Following the event, I received a note of thanks from the Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, who acknowledged the efforts of council staff who put together the event in Oban and said:

“You provided a positive environment for what proved to be a very productive discussion about how we move forward together to tackle the obstacles to sustainable and inclusive growth across the Highlands and Islands and I look forward to building on that when we come together again in March.”

3.8 Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership, 22nd September:

This meeting offered an opportunity for partnership members to consider several of the COHI agenda items in advance, as well as a number of other key issues.

Cost of living has been a running theme across so many of the meetings I have been involved with and undoubtedly this will continue to be the case. This was no exception; at a previous meeting of the partnership we had resolved to write to both the UK and Scottish Governments, urging action to mitigate against the impact of cost of living and highlighting the very severe experiences of communities across the Highlands and Islands. Following the September meeting we did receive responses from both governments, but momentum must be maintained - the impact on our communities is already proving to be extremely severe.

3.9 Carbon Literacy Training, 20th and 21st October:

I completed the Carbon Literacy training, offered to all members, on 20th and 21st October. These virtual sessions, delivered by Argyll and the Isles Coast and Countryside Trust (ACT) were very interesting and can help us as individuals contribute to the collective effort on climate change, as well as the overall action taken as an organisation. If you have not yet taken the training, please sign up through Member Services - we have as a council committed to taking action where we can, as part of the global effort, to tackle climate change and undertaking this training helps to cement that commitment.

3.10 Islands matters - national strategic meetings:

UK Government Islands Forum - Orkney/Virtual, 27th and 28th September:

Over the past few months, the UK Government has been in touch in relation to its plans for an Islands Forum. Ministerial changes had an impact on this, but the inaugural meeting did go ahead on 27th and 28th September, with in-person meetings in Orkney and virtual options available also.

Due to council commitments it was only possible to attend on a virtual basis on this occasion. I participated in one of the fringe sessions on 27th September, *Influencing Government Policy*, and an additional workshop with Ofgem on the morning of the 28th.

The formal Islands Forum meeting took place on the 28th and it was very helpful to be able to consider islands issues not only with our fellow island authorities but with UK Government ministers and officials, alongside representatives from other key agencies like Ofgem. I hope that there will be opportunities to participate in future Islands Forum meetings and look forward to hearing more about these when the UK Government finalise arrangements.

Scottish Government - Islands Strategic Group, 10th November:

On 10th November I attended the virtual Islands Strategic Group meeting, hosted by the Scottish Government and chaired by Mairi Gougeon MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands. The agenda was dominated by cost of living matters:

- Islands Cost Crisis Emergency Fund - a £1.4m Scottish Government fund to assist island families to cope with increasing living costs and included along with other measures by the Deputy First Minister in his Emergency Budget Review.
- Cost Crisis - a report on which all local authorities had an opportunity to provide input on the characteristics of the impact in their local area and specifically addressing the following additional discussion topics:
 - Fuel Poverty
 - Rising Cost of Travel

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1 This report highlights the activities of the Leader of Argyll and Bute Council for the period from 15th September to 11th November 2022.

Councillor Robin Currie
Leader, Argyll and Bute Council

11th November 2022

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