

27<sup>th</sup> April 2023

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## LEADER'S REPORT

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### 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 11<sup>th</sup> November 2022 to 10<sup>th</sup> April 2023. It also includes notes on activities relating to the Leader's Policy Lead portfolio of Strategic Development.

### 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 11<sup>th</sup> November 2022 to 10<sup>th</sup> April 2023:

- 3.1 **Freedom of Argyll and Bute Ceremony, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2022:**  
It was a real pleasure to join colleagues and officers, and invited guests, for what is, I am sure many will agree, one of the most special Freedom ceremonies we have ever held – the award of the Freedom of Argyll and Bute to former Mid-Argyll councillor Donald MacMillan BEM.

It was my privilege to move the formal Freedom motion and to deliver a valedictory in support of conferring this prestigious award on Donnie – known to so many of us as a valued colleague and indeed friend over his four decades of service to local government in Argyll and Bute.



*Donnie signing the Council's Freedom Roll*

Donnie has been well known and well-loved as one of Scotland's oldest and longest serving councillors. He has given over four decades of service to the people of Argyll and Bute, from his time on Strathclyde Region and Argyll and Bute District Councils in the early 1980s, right up until May 2022 his work as a councillor concluded at the magnificent age of 94.

Each and every day of those four decades of services has been dedicated to helping the people of Mid Argyll. In terms of council business, Donnie played a very active role over the years and was always ready to support new councillors to find their way and navigate the workings of the local authority.

As well as a welcome opportunity for colleagues to get together in person, it was truly an honour to be part of such a special occasion which marks Donnie's dedication, commitment and lifetime of service to the communities of Argyll and Bute.

### **3.2 Budget Development:**

The period of time covered by this particular Leader's Report is always inevitably dominated by budget development.

The specifics of the budget have been comprehensively covered elsewhere but I would like to take the opportunity to record my thanks to the officers who work hard to ensure that the Council is able to deliver a balanced budget. The work involved is considerable and constant from the time the Scottish Government makes its initial budget announcement in December right up to the day of the Council budget meeting itself.

The financial challenges facing Scottish local government are also well documented but again this year both officers, and members across the chamber developing their political budget proposals, have worked assiduously to minimise as far as is possible the impact on services and jobs, and to maximise all possible opportunities for investment and growth. They do so in what is often a rapidly shifting financial landscape and must respond swiftly to updates and changes which very often impact many areas of the council's budget rather than happening in isolation.

While it feels like we have only just completed this year's budget, it is necessary to start thinking already about the 2024/25 process. All the indications are that this next budget will be particularly challenging for local government in Scotland, and that is why it is important for us to start our process as early as possible. There will be more detail about that in due course.

### **3.3 Leader Correspondence:**

It may be helpful for colleagues to have an update on some of my strategic correspondence over the last few months.

#### November 2022:

- Royal Mail senior management, calling for urgent action in relation to significant issues at local distribution centres in various parts of Argyll and Bute where communities are waiting several weeks to receive deliveries. The impact is particularly serious in the context of missed hospital appointments – remote and island community residents already face considerable challenges in attending hospital appointments on the mainland or in the central belt and have to plan carefully in advance to manage travel logistics. Many people reported that their mail was so delayed that appointment letters arrived days or weeks after they should have attended. The situation seems to have improved now with Royal Mail providing assurances in relation to extra staff to support clearing of backlog and bringing deliveries back to an acceptable schedule.

#### December 2022:

- To then-Deputy First Minister John Swinney pressing for urgent update on confirmation of Crown Estate funding allocation. Members (engaging very positively on a cross party basis) and officers had been working for some time to prepare a suite of projects which could be ready to go upon receipt of allocation, given the very tight timescales involved.
- To Jenni Minto MSP following up on our previous engagement in relation to Rothesay Pavilion and building on previous letters to ministers. With the Cabinet reshuffle, I will be following up on our prior engagement with Neil Gray MSP and contacting the new minister to maintain momentum.
- To Michael Matheson, then-Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, in relation to the forthcoming biodegradable municipal waste ban and the implications for Argyll and Bute.

#### January 2023:

- To Jenny Gilruth, then-Minister for Transport, seeking meeting during her planned visit to Islay (covered later in this report) and welcoming her confirmation that funding is guaranteed for the medium and long-term solutions at the A83 Rest and Be Thankful. I will be following this up with Kevin Stewart, who has assumed the Transport ministerial brief.

#### March 2023:

- To Calmac senior management and Jenny Gilruth, then-Transport Minister, in relation to capacity and block booking pressures on island routes.

With the new Cabinet now in place I will be writing to a number of ministers on key issues such as transport, waste and economy, to set out the unique Argyll and Bute context and to seek discussions. We will also be building on previous engagement in relation to west coast depopulation. At the time of writing, we are finalising arrangements for meetings with Lorna Slater, Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity, and Joe Fitzpatrick, Minister for Local Government. I am also due to meet soon with Jenni Minto MSP as part of our programme of regular engagement and, with her new ministerial appointment to the Public Health and Women's Health portfolio, it will be helpful to have an opportunity to pick up any pertinent strategic issues with her.

### **3.4 Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs):**

One of this council's strengths is its ability to come together, on a cross-party basis, swiftly and readily on the matters of real risk, challenge or indeed opportunity for Argyll and Bute. The issue of HPMAs sits firmly in the former category and the proposals under consultation (closing 17<sup>th</sup> April) pose very serious threats to various key economic sectors across Argyll and Bute and, indeed, along the entire west coast of Scotland which is already battling a depopulation trend.

At the time of writing this report, I had circulated to all councillors for their views and input a copy of the Council's draft response to the consultation, together with a letter to the new Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, Mairi Gougeon MSP. This letter (signed by myself, the Depute Leader, the Leader of the largest Opposition Group and the Chair of PPSL) and the response both reflect the grave concerns expressed by the aquaculture, commercial fishing, marine tourism and leisure industries should these proposals become reality. If progressed, they would see further areas of our sea space highly restricted and the risk not only to industries but to the survival of coastal communities themselves is potentially catastrophic.

### **3.5 COSLA Leaders Meetings:**

In my last report to Council in November, I prefaced this section by highlighting that national local government pay negotiations had required a number of additional Leaders meetings at short notice, alongside the regular schedule. The position is exactly the same for this report period. I have noted agenda topics for the various meetings which have taken place over the period – many of these are confidential and taken in private session but if you would like more information, please get in touch with Leadership Support staff.

Meetings taking place during the November to mid-April period were:

#### 25<sup>th</sup> November - Leaders:

There was an extensive agenda for this session, including:

- Local Government Finance
- Pay Claim Update
- Ukraine – update on Super Sponsor Scheme
- Improvement Service Think Piece – Delivering a Future for Scottish Local Authorities
- Accounts Commission
- COSLA Response to Social Justice and Social Security Committee on Low Income and Debt
- Scottish Attainment Challenge – Stretch Aims Publication
- Legal Advice on Provision of National Care Service

- National Care Service – Mental Health, Neurodiversity and Dementia
- Health and Social Leadership and Winter Pressures
- Draft Statement of Intent – Local Authority Rent Levels
- Additional Cost of Living Support – DHP route proposal
- Cost of Living – BEIS Alternative Energy Support
- Scottish Veterinary Service – Powers
- Asylum and Humanitarian Support
- Distribution

Leaders – 16<sup>th</sup> December:

The regular Leaders meeting which coincides with the Scottish Government budget announcement took place on 16<sup>th</sup> December, and also featured the following agenda items:

- Covid-19 Inquiries
- Local Government Finance Update
- Pay Claim
- Ukraine Tariff (an emergency item taken following UK Government announcements on 15<sup>th</sup> December prior to the meeting)

Leaders – 27<sup>th</sup> January 2023:

The first Leaders meeting of the New Year included further updates on some of the key issues and challenges facing local government – their frequency on these agendas reflecting their significant importance:

- Local Government Finance
- Pay Claim Update
- National Care Service
- Historical Child Abuse Redress Scheme
- National Care Home Contract
- Health and Social Care System Pressures
- Social Work Workforce
- Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children
- Local Governance Review Update
- Suicide Prevention Strategy
- Cost of Living – BEIS Alternative Energy Support
- Local Authority Issues Arising From Energy Companies
- UK Covid-19 Inquiry Module 1 Witness Statement
- Joint Working Group on Local Government Funding Sources and Council Tax Reform
- Distribution

### Special Leaders – 3<sup>rd</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> February:

Members may recall media coverage in relation to the Scottish Government's proposed response following indications that some Scottish local authorities were considering budget savings in relation to teacher numbers.

This – in the same context of complex teachers/other pay negotiations and industrial action – required additional Special Leaders meetings to consider the matter of Scottish Government Education Interventions.

The session on 10<sup>th</sup> February also included an update on the Local Government Settlement and Teachers Pay Negotiations.

### Leaders – 24<sup>th</sup> February:

This routine schedule Leaders meeting considered the following:

- COSLA/Police Scotland/Scottish Police Authority Partnership
- Pay Update
- Pay Claims 2023/24
- Joint Working Group on Local Government Funding Sources and Council Tax Reform
- Local Government Finance
- Scottish Government Education Interventions
- National Care Home Contract
- Complex Care Delayed Discharge Memorandum of Understanding
- Levelling Up Fund
- Digital Boost Funding Position
- Managing Pressures from Humanitarian Protection Schemes
- CELCIS – Protecting Children Programme
- Local Governance Review
- Distribution

### Leaders – 31<sup>st</sup> March:

The following agenda items came to Leaders on 31<sup>st</sup> March:

- Freedom of Information (Scotland) Bill Consultation
- Electoral Reform
- SJC Pay Claim
- National Transfer Scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children
- Funding to Support Ukraine Humanitarian Programme
- National Care Home Contract
- Learning Estate Investment Programme – Project Costs Review
- Distribution

The spring COSLA Convention took place on the same day and considered the following:

- COSLA Budget
- COSLA Plan Sign-off
- European Charter on Self Government
- Ethical Standards Commissioner – presentation
- Spokespersons Updates
- COSLA Excellence Awards

**3.6 Meeting with Jenny Gilruth, Minister for Transport, 13<sup>th</sup> February:**

Jenny Gilruth MSP, Minister for Transport, visited Islay on 13<sup>th</sup> February and I had an opportunity to meet with her during her trip.

While this was just a short meeting, it provided another opportunity to reiterate the case about the importance of the long-term solution for the A83 Rest and Be Thankful – it is vital to take every chance to press home that particular point given the impact on our communities and our businesses.

This came soon after a meeting of the A83 Taskforce (on 25<sup>th</sup> January, in Arrochar) where I asked for reassurance about the funding remaining in place for the medium and long term solutions for the Rest, and was glad to receive her confirmation that this was indeed guaranteed.

That is a positive development but the drive for swift resolution must continue and I will be picking this up shortly with Ms Gilruth's successor, Kevin Stewart MSP.

**3.7 Meeting with Jenni Minto MSP, 14<sup>th</sup> February:**

My most recent meeting with Jenni Minto MSP took place on 14<sup>th</sup> February. We have put in place a schedule of regular catch-ups which is a positive step and helps to cement our constructive working relationship. Our discussion on the 14<sup>th</sup> focused mainly on Rothesay Pavilion and Jenni's support of the lobbying activity in that regard – including plans for a parliamentary reception later in the year. I am next due to meet with her on 17<sup>th</sup> April and will be happy to provide a verbal update on any matters of significance.

**3.8 Scottish Parliament Cross-Party Group on Islands:**

The inaugural meeting of this group took place on 11<sup>th</sup> January, with the aim of providing a forum for the discussion of issues relevant to Scotland's islands and the residents of island communities, and to improve links between the Scottish Parliament and island communities. As well as Jenni Minto MSP, the Argyll and Bute Constituency MSP, as vice-convenor, its membership includes two of our Highlands and Islands Regional MSPs who have links to Argyll and Bute – Donald Cameron MSP and Jamie



Halcro-Johnston MSP. Their knowledge of our geography, our challenges and our opportunities will, I hope, prove helpful.

The group agreed that its future work programme will focus on island transport (particularly ferries); energy (especially offshore and remote island energy arrangements) and population and depopulation (including economy and jobs).

The next meeting is due to take place on 19<sup>th</sup> April and an update will feature in the next available Leader's Report.

### **3.9 Other key strategic meetings:**

Renewables: With key strategic renewables developments such as the Machair Wind offshore project and others across the areas, I have had a number of meetings with Scottish Power Renewables and Scottish and Southern Energy over the past few months. This includes an SSEN workshop on net zero communities as well as a meeting with their directors in relation to investment and growth plans.

These have largely been introductory meetings at this stage but there will be follow-up meetings (alongside the routine engagement with officers and the community engagement programmes that both companies have been operating, and where meetings and open sessions are also offered to local members). There are considerable potential benefits and opportunities for Argyll and Bute and it is important to maximise these. With the height of the budget development programme concluded, we will be arranging follow-up sessions and I will be happy to update colleagues on these in my future reports.

Aquaculture: I met recently with Tavish Scott, Chief Executive of Salmon Scotland. We spoke about a range of topics but the Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) issue, covered elsewhere in this report, inevitably dominated.

Economy: I continue to attend the regular Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership meetings and we have ongoing engagement with our partners at Highlands and Islands Enterprise. Our Rural Growth Deal Programme Board meetings are also progressing.

I was unable to attend the most recent Convention of the Highlands and Islands (COHI) in the Western Isles at the end of March, but was represented by Cllr Andrew Kain as Policy Lead for Transport, who accompanied the Chief Executive. We are yet to receive the final outcomes from that session but I will be happy to cover that in a future report.

Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd (HIAL) engagement: HIAL's senior leadership have put in place a programme of engagement with the local authorities whose areas include a HIAL facility. Their Board Chair, Lorna Jack and Chief Executive, Inglis Lyon host a call every four to six weeks with council leaders. The last call was on 24<sup>th</sup> March – these are useful sessions where leaders can hear about issues and activities relating to the HIAL sites and I very much welcome HIAL's proactive approach to local authority engagement, as well as the commitment shown by the involvement of their senior team.

### **3.10 Housing:**

Empty Homes success: At the Shelter Scottish Empty Homes Conference on 1<sup>st</sup> March this year, Argyll and Bute had a local renovation project shortlisted as a finalist in the Best Retrofit of an Empty Home category. The building, in Sandbank, had been empty for over 20 years and was causing concern due to its visual appearance. Now, it is a fantastic example of a derelict property facing demolition instead being rescued and brought back into use.

In the first nine months of the financial year 2022/23, the council's Empty Homes team have assisted owners to bring 30 properties back to life as homes – including 12 which have been empty for up to five years.

Homelessness: Homelessness applications have increased by around 29% but the Council (which has a duty to secure permanent accommodation for 258 statutory homeless households) has a 56% success rate compared to 22% across the country. There are currently 121 statutory households in temporary accommodation. The main reasons for homelessness at present are situations where people have been asked to leave due to relationship breakdown. In addition, since the pandemic, there has been an increase in landlords seeking to take properties back, but this is a matter that is challenging to address.

Through the COVID Tenant Rent Arrears Fund the team have assisted 70 households with rent arrears at a total cost of around £91K. While this funding is now fully committed, there remains support for rent arrears through the Rapid Rehousing initiative.

Strategic Housing Forum: The Forum continues to meet, bringing together key stakeholders involved in the delivery and progression of housing across Argyll and Bute.

Highlights from meetings on 20<sup>th</sup> December and 28<sup>th</sup> March include:

- Confirmation of the Council's formal approval of the Strategic Housing Investment Plan and its submission to Scottish ministers – if all projects completed this will deliver 248 affordable homes in the year.

- Exploration of ways to innovate to address housing challenges, including looking at buy-back schemes to boost availability of lower-cost homes within communities.
- Updates on new developments including the opening of the Oakhill development in Tarbert, where four new homes are now available.
- Dunoon's Eton Avenue development is progressing well and due to complete in summer this year, bringing a further four affordable homes.
- A total of 227 new affordable homes have been handed over at the Dunbeg project in Oban, including a number of accessible properties and homes for sale as New Supply Shared Equity.
- A pipeline of new projects across Argyll and Bute which would bring on over 80 more homes, around half of which would be on island communities.

Rural Housing Scotland Conference, 24<sup>th</sup> February: This always proves to be a highly useful and interesting event and this year was no exception.

The programme featured speakers including Jake Ryan, Head of Regional Development and Innovation at the Irish Government, and Shona Robison, then-Cabinet Secretary for Housing and Local Government.

There were a number of workshops and sessions delivered by local housing innovators and leaders – including one from Mull and Iona Community Trust on 'Community-led housing – how we did it!'. This tied in perfectly with this year's conference theme of 'Sustainability and Rural Communities'.

### **3.11 Cost of Living:**

Warmer homes and energy efficiency: Argyll and Bute Council was awarded funding of £2,371,323 through the Home Energy Efficiency Programme Scotland: Area Based Scheme for the year 2022/23. To date, the programme has spent £1,222,308 on insulation measures in Argyll and Bute. The current programme runs until 30th June 2023 and it is expected that all funding will be spent. The programme allows homeowners and private rented tenants to reduce their energy bills, assists with the cost of living crisis and reduces energy consumption contributing to a reduction in climate change.

The Home Energy Efficiency Team have attended public events including island and rural areas to promote the grants available for insulation measures across Argyll and Bute. Levels of customer satisfaction remain high. The team continues to work closely with other departments within the Council, for example promoting the Welfare Rights Service to those that would benefit from a referral.

The Council is also working in conjunction with Argyll Community Housing Association to insulate mixed tenure blocks of properties in Argyll and Bute. Funding of £2.2m was awarded by the Scottish Government in December 2022 to support insulation projects in Lorn, Tarbert, Bute and Cowal. The funding will also contribute towards an insulation and regeneration project in Ardrishaig. To date, £244,800 has been spent. The programme runs until 30th June 2023.

Home Energy Scotland: Local Home Energy Scotland advisors have reported (through the Strategic Housing Forum) that contacts have risen to 3,077 compared with 1,943 in the same period last year.

There have been around 350 support measures provided to people through Warmer Homes Scotland, including through insulation, glazing, draught proofing and other measures.

Financial Inclusion and Advice Group: The FIAG continues to meet regularly, bringing together a range of partners all focused on helping find ways to bring support to people in Argyll and Bute who may be struggling. I have included a selection of highlights from the March meeting below:

- 365 Scottish Welfare Fund Community Care Grants paid out between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 and 31<sup>st</sup> January 2023 – a total of £443k of support and an increase of £35k.
- £760k in Discretionary Housing Payments committed by 31<sup>st</sup> January 2023.
- School Clothing Banks now live in the majority of the Argyll and Bute area.
- £120 Scotland Loves Local Cards distributed with 85.2% activated and £680K spent in local areas. Around 1,300 cards issued to island residents who receive Council Tax Reduction Benefit. £1.60 top-up payments provided to pupils who get free school meals.
- Energy Bill Support Scheme administration - £530k funding received from the UK Government; 66 applications for support were received on the first day.
- Scottish Welfare Fund Crisis Grants – between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 and 31<sup>st</sup> January 2023, 701 grants were paid out totalling £65k. This is up 13% compared to last year. In January alone there were 192 applications – the highest ever.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

**4.1** This report highlights the activities of the Leader of Argyll and Bute Council for the period from 11<sup>th</sup> November 2022 to 10<sup>th</sup> April 2023

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

**12<sup>th</sup> April 2023**

**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](mailto:aileen.mcnicol@argyll-bute.gov.uk)**