
29th June 2023

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 10th April to 12th June 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 10th April to 12th June 2023:

- 3.1 **A83 – Preferred Option for Permanent Solution Announced:**
The A83 has featured in, I am sure, every Leader's Report that I have brought forward to Council. On 2nd June came the announcement of the preferred option for the permanent solution (the 'Brown Option' – 2.4km long and including a debris flow shelter). This is perhaps one of the most significant updates yet – but timescales are utterly crucial and we need this to continue to move quickly so that the permanent solution becomes reality.

At the time of writing we were awaiting confirmation of the new Transport Minister and I will be engaging with them in very early course indeed once they are in post.

3.2 Housing Matters:

Argyll and Bute Housing Emergency: We agreed, at the June meeting of the Environment, Development and Infrastructure Committee, to join other areas of the United Kingdom and declare a housing emergency in Argyll and Bute. While each area has its own particular challenges, the housing system in the whole country is experiencing very severe pressure and is at crisis point.

Housing is absolutely vital to so many of the ambitions and successes that we want to deliver for Argyll and Bute and its communities. It is an essential key to growth of both the population and economy and, once again in this term, is intertwined with very many of the Council's Priorities, as it has been in previous council terms.

The emergency comes, in the simplest terms, from reduced supply, increasing demand and higher/unaffordable prices, exacerbated by other factors like the pandemic, the cost of living crisis, second home numbers, rising construction/materials costs and much more.

While our Local Housing Strategy is already updated every year to reflect needs, demands and current circumstances, it will now become the vehicle by which we look at addressing housing issues, along with partners at all levels of the public and private sectors.

This is a huge and complex issue and it is one which will involve concerted effort in partnership. The collaborative approach which has seen delivery of hundreds of affordable homes through the Strategic Housing Investment Programme will be invaluable as we move forward.

An officer group is already developing proposals at pace which will feed into the Local Housing Strategy. This complements the actions that the council itself has already driven forward including the expansion of the Empty Homes team, co-operation through the Community Housing Network and progressing key worker accommodation through the Rural Growth Deal.

I will also be attending the next meeting of the Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership (HIREP) where we will consider a progress update on the establishment of the HIREP Housing Sub-Group. We agreed at the March meeting of HIREP to set up this sub-group given the regional pressures on housing and to examine both barriers to, and means of progressing, housing development in the Highlands and Islands.

The proposal was also endorsed by the Convention of the Highlands and Islands at the March session and the first meeting of the sub-group will take place in July. It will be helpful to feed into this and to participate at a regional level.

Delivery of affordable homes: At the Strategic Housing Forum meeting on 13th June, I was encouraged to hear about the progress and proposals that our housing association/Registered Social Landlord (RSL) partners are making in addressing Argyll and Bute's housing need.

At the Dunbeg development near Oban, 259 new homes have been handed over – this includes 24 wheelchair accessible flats or bungalows and 24 properties available for purchase on a shared equity basis.

There are developments under way all over the area from Dunoon to Port Appin and elsewhere, and RSLs outlined their plans for over 420 new affordable homes from Helensburgh to Mull and again many places in between. It is encouraging to hear about these plans which are at various different stages but share the common goal of bringing more affordable homes to the communities that need them.

Empty Homes Team: The Council's Empty Homes Team have a considerable track record and are nationally recognised for their achievements. On the ground, this means in reality that last year alone they brought 41 empty properties back into use as homes. This particular batch was delivered through provision of advice alone rather than direct financial assistance.

The team will be expanding in a project that is the first of its kind in Scotland. An additional Empty Homes Project Officer is currently being recruited for a two-year pilot to work with the private sector and other public sector bodies to bring empty properties back to life as accommodation for key health and social care workers. They will take a targeted approach, working where recruitment exercises have highlighted housing as a barrier to securing new staff and sustaining service delivery.

I am delighted that Argyll and Bute is leading the way in this vital work and I look forward to hearing more about the project when the officer is in post.

Community Housing Network: This meets by Teams on a quarterly basis and its most recent meeting in March included representatives from seven of our island communities. There are a number of potential community-led housing developments in the pipeline all over Argyll and Bute and the council is involved in these discussions with local groups and trusts, along with other partners who have a role in supporting these much-needed projects to become reality.

Recent highlights include a local consultation day in Tiree where over 100 people came along to find out more; Colonsay Community Development Company is now actively seeking expressions of interest for the new affordable homes on the island which are well under way; and there are various other possibilities where ideas and discussions are at different stages with land owners or other agencies before moving forward.

At the time of concluding my report I am due to attend the next Community Housing Network meeting and will be happy to give colleagues an update in a future report.

Argyll and Bute Gypsy/Traveller Working Group: This working group (ABGTWG), which includes Gypsy/Traveller community representatives as well as council staff and other partners, is now meeting on a quarterly basis. It aims to understand the needs of Gypsy/Travellers in terms of accommodation as well as other public services, and to work with the community to strengthen links and improve engagement.

The community representatives have fed back on a number of their key priorities including better engagement, raising awareness to tackle discrimination and remove stigma and accommodation issues. Their views are in alignment with the key aims of the national *Improving the Lives of Scotland's Gypsy/Travellers Action Plan* and ABGTWG is currently developing a local action plan to take this forward.

On 20th April I also attended the national COSLA Leaders Network session on Gypsy Traveller Outcomes and it was helpful to hear what other local authorities are doing in relation to this.

3.3 Ministerial and MSP Meetings:

Jenni Minto MSP: As part of our regular schedule of catch-ups, I met with Jenni Minto MSP on 17th April. This meeting came shortly after the Scottish Government Cabinet reshuffle and Jenni's appointment as Minister for Public Health and Women's Health. I was pleased to hear her comments about many examples of good practice in these areas across the area and we both agreed that Argyll and Bute has much to contribute to Scotland's overall wellbeing and success.

We took the opportunity to catch up on some of the key issues affecting Argyll and Bute at present including our request to the Scottish Government for a derogation in relation to the forthcoming biodegradable municipal waste ban; challenges with ferry services; and of course the Highly Protected Marine Areas consultation which had closed that day and which has attracted such widespread and deep concern.

As the new Cabinet settles in I am writing to a variety of ministers to highlight our opportunities and our challenges; this work is ongoing and we welcome the support of any of our constituency and regional MSPs who can help us to secure discussions at a ministerial level to look at these significant matters in more depth with national government, given the need for collective action on many of them.

Joe Fitzpatrick MSP: The new Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning, Joe Fitzpatrick MSP, arranged a short introductory call on 19th April as part of his engagement with all Scottish local authority leaders.

This was a very positive meeting in which Mr Fitzpatrick was very clear about the Scottish Government's will and desire to reset the relationship with local government to one of mutual respect – acknowledging that this may not always have seemed apparent in the past.

This is a very welcome shift and one with which we will engage as positively and constructively as possible to secure the best outcomes for communities.

We heard the message from him about the need to ensure that all of Scotland is able to benefit, grow and thrive. We know that Argyll and Bute has much to offer and makes a very significant contribution to the national economy – but that there is scope for more if we can work in partnership to tackle challenges like population growth, connectivity of all kinds and more. As noted earlier in my report, this has and will feature highly in my ongoing engagement with Scottish ministers.

Ariane Burgess MSP: Later on the same day I had a further short call with Ariane Burgess, one of our Highlands and Islands regional MSPs. We covered a range of issues including some questions from Ms Burgess about care provision and staff recruitment, public transport, active travel and HPMA's, and once again took the opportunity to highlight the critical depopulation issue where action and intervention at a national level is urgently required.

3.4 Leader Correspondence:

I have noted below headlines of my strategic correspondence during the period April to June, and will be happy to discuss any of this in more detail:

- Letter to Joe Fitzpatrick MSP, Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning, following up on our call of 19th April as noted above. By the time of this letter, we had had an opportunity to consider the First Minister's policy prospectus *New*

Leadership: A Fresh Start. In my letter I was able to highlight to Mr Fitzpatrick that here in Argyll and Bute we have a variety of examples which showcase the First Minister's three themes of Equality, Opportunity and Community (including our Financial Inclusion and Advice Group's work, our regeneration activity and more). I have since had a reply and Mr Fitzpatrick has indicated he is keen for a follow-up meeting with me and also to visit Argyll and Bute – we will be progressing arrangements for this in due course.

- I wrote to Mairi McAllan MSP, the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition, following the Environment, Development and Infrastructure Committee's March meeting and subsequent decision to set out formally the Council's concerns in relation to the Strategic Transport Projects Review 2 (STPR2). Colleagues may recall that we had previously been advised to remove two transport-related projects in the initial stages of developing the Rural Growth Deal, as these would be picked up through STPR2. Neither has in fact been covered and STPR2 includes only two recommendations relating to Argyll and Bute. One of these is the A83 Rest and Be Thankful permanent solution, which we would contend has been a commitment long before STPR2. The other relates to a fixed link to Mull and it is unclear where this has come from and why it has been included, given that it was discarded as an option by the regional consultation group.
- I have followed up my earlier correspondence to Lorna Slater MSP, Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity, repeating our request made originally in December of last year for a meeting to consider the need for a nine-month derogation in relation to the biodegradable municipal waste ban. Members will recall this request from previous Leader's and committee reports; despite offering date and time options to the parliamentary office and indicating we would make ourselves available, it has not been possible to finalise a meeting. Although our officers have continued to liaise with civil servants, we are now at the stage where there is a pressing need for this meeting at ministerial level to take place.

3.5 COSLA Leaders Meetings:

Since my last report, COSLA Leaders have met twice, on 28th April and then again on 26th May, when the council was represented by Cllr Kieron Green.

The following agenda items were considered at these meetings:

28th April:

- Partnership Agreement between Scottish and Local Government
- Local Government Finance
- Pay Update
- National Care Service
- National Care Home Contract Update
- Strategic Housing and Humanitarian Issues
- Historical Child Abuse Redress Scheme – Financial Report
- Early Learning and Childcare Feature Report
- Scottish Veterinary Service Update
- Distribution

26th May:

- Partnership Agreement between Scottish and Local Government
- Scottish Government Policy Prospectus
- Local Governance Review
- SOLACE/Improvement Service Transformation Work
- Local Government Finance
- Pay Update
- Climate Intelligence Service
- Non-Domestic Rates Incentivisation Scheme
- Fiscal Framework for Local Government
- Flood Risk Management
- Learning Estate Investment Programme
- Councillor Remuneration – SLARC Review Update
- Local Government Digital Office – Annual Update
- DigitalBoost and Digital Business Support
- National Care Service Negotiations
- Covid Inquiry Update
- Prescribing Minimum Learning Hours – Consultation Response
- Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy
- Myjobscotland Contract Extension
- Changes to Strategic Scrutiny and Best Value Arrangements
- Distribution

These items were taken in private session which restricts what can be shared publicly, but if you would like more information in confidence about any topic, please contact Leadership Support staff in the first instance.

I am due to attend in person the next COSLA Leaders meeting on 30th June at which we will say farewell to our own former Chief Executive Sally Loudon, who is leaving COSLA, and officially welcome the new Chief Executive Jane O'Donnell.

3.6 Machair wind update on Islay, 21st April:

It was helpful to catch up with representatives of Scottish Power Renewables (SPR) who were on Islay on 21st April as part of their ongoing engagement in relation to the Machair Wind offshore development.

They highlighted that a vessel would be on site during the last week of April to lay out some navigation buoys which will assist with gathering wave, wind and tidal data over the next year to 18 months. Later in the summer, there will be more activity on site, this time to look at geophysical data and site depth, bedrock and so on.

SPR have appointed a local engagement manager who will contribute to their ongoing community engagement activity programme. When I met with them, they advised that there would be a supply chain event in Oban in May with more future activity planned. They are also liaising with education providers and employers in relation to skills and opportunities in the renewables sector.

We will continue to keep in close contact with SPR on this very significant development and to press for every possible benefit for the communities of Argyll and Bute.

3.7 Argyll and Bute Renewables Alliance, 17th May: I was glad to be able to join, on a virtual basis, the Argyll and Bute Renewables Alliance (ABRA) meeting on 17th May. Here too we heard an update from SPR on Machair Wind as well as a progress report on the Cruachan Expansion Project from Drax. Useful updates came also from Crown Estate Scotland and the Transmission/Distribution arm of Scottish and Southern Energy.

3.8 Tackling the Cost of Living: The Financial Inclusion and Advice Group (FIAG) continues to meet regularly. Key highlights from our May meeting include:

- £458,284 Scottish Welfare Fund allocation for Argyll and Bute in 2023/24.
- We have administered 54 Crisis Grants, totalling almost £6,400, and 53 Community Care Grants to the tune of £27,200.
- 4,266 households have sought advice on home energy compared to 3,268 for the same period last year – these are fairly evenly spread across Argyll and Bute.
- The team have made 2,554 referrals to Warmer Homes Scotland, other loan providers, warm homes discounts and other schemes.
- Warmer Homes Scotland activity in Argyll and Bute includes 14 loft insulations, 21 floor insulations, 46 heat systems

insulations, 32 energy efficient glazing/doors, 54 secondary heating systems and more.

3.9 Rural Growth Deal: Progress continues to be made with Rural Growth Deal outline business cases with the majority now at draft stage. Two have been submitted to Government for approval and a third being finalised. The Rural Growth Deal Programme Management Team are meeting fortnightly with Government Growth Deal Leads to try and accelerate progress towards signing the Full Deal Agreement. Government have recently provided feedback on the draft Governance Plan which will form part of the suite of documents required for Full Deal signing.

3.10 HSCP Interview Panel, Head of Strategic Planning, Performance and Technology:

I welcomed the opportunity to join colleagues on 9th May as part of the recruitment panel for this key strategic role within the Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership.

Kristin Gillies has been appointed to take up the role and brings with her a wealth of experience in healthcare management and leadership, as well as significant knowledge of the challenges of service design and delivery in Argyll and Bute's remote, rural and island communities context.

She will replace Stephen Whiston, who retires this month after many years of service locally. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Stephen for his many years of service locally in the health and social care sector, and to wish him all the very best in his retirement.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 This report highlights the activities of the Leader of Argyll and Bute Council for the period from 10th April to 12th June 2023.

Councillor Robin Currie
Leader, Argyll and Bute Council

12th June 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