
28th September 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 12th June to 8th September 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 12th June to 8th September 2023:

- 3.1 **Verity House Agreement – A New Deal with Local Government:**
I was in attendance at COSLA HQ on 30th June for the signing of the Verity House Agreement – A New Deal with Local Government, brought forward by the First Minister Humza Yousaf. This new partnership framework between the Scottish Government and councils in Scotland is still in its early stages and is structured around three agreed shared priorities – tackling poverty, just transition to net zero, and sustainable public services.



The agreement also acknowledges that a shift in relationship is required – a change to the way national and local government work together and embedding positive and proactive engagement. Part of that includes a commitment to improved engagement on budget matters for this financial year. There is more information about the commitments which make up the agreement at [New Deal with Local Government – Verity House Agreement - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot)

At the same meeting, Michael Gove was also present – I had an opportunity to make the point to him that while parts of Argyll and Bute make significant contributions to UK coffers through export, crucial infrastructure and routes to market weren't keeping pace. We have invited him to come to Argyll and Bute to see for himself and, although a visit has not been possible over the summer period, we will continue to press hard for UK Government engagement with Argyll and Bute.

3.2 **Housing Matters:**

Argyll and Bute Housing Summit: When we declared a housing emergency at the June meeting of the Environment, Development and Infrastructure Committee, part of our commitment was to hold a Housing Summit this year, bringing together key stakeholders to explore swift and effective solutions for an issue that is a crucial part of making the most of Argyll and Bute's many opportunities and tackling our challenges.

The summit will take place on 27th November at the Scottish Association for Marine Science near Oban. It will include a series of workshops designed to draw out and identify priorities and actions, but to further shape and influence the day we will be holding a series of focus groups over the next few weeks with key stakeholders.

The session will also offer an opportunity to look more closely and constructively at a range of issues including labour and skill shortages; resources and procurement options; scope for regulation of private stock; worker accommodation solutions; tackling homelessness more effectively; and overcoming infrastructure challenges. We also hope to invite industry specialists to give an overview of modular construction products and to build in scope to look at local housing sites if possible.

I have written to Paul McLennan MSP, Minister for Housing, to invite him to be a keynote speaker at the Summit. We have previously been in correspondence and he indicated that he would be keen to participate, so now that we have a date set, I hope that we will be able to welcome him to Argyll and Bute and that he will be a key part of the Summit.

Strategic Housing Forum: Colleagues may have seen recent press reports where the Chairs of Argyll and Bute's housing associations came together to confirm their support and reaffirm the importance of partnership working to tackle the area's housing challenges, following our declaration of a housing emergency earlier this year.

We very much welcome this public commitment – it is testament to the strong working relationships we have together, especially through the Strategic Housing Forum which, since my last report to council, met on 13th June and is due to meet again before September council.

The June session offered the first opportunity for the Forum to discuss the housing emergency officially declared by our Environment, Development and Infrastructure Committee on 1st June. The committee report was a priority item on the agenda along with updates from our housing partners and the Scottish Government who also attend.

This meeting was the last for Anne Marie Thomson and Sarah Docherty from the Scottish Government's More Homes Division, as both have now retired. Their contributions to the Forum's discussions and work have been invaluable – effective partnership working on this crucial issue is essential. We wish them all the best, and look forward to continuing our working relationship with the Scottish Government through the Forum.

Community Housing Network: I attended the Community Housing Network group meeting on 14th June. This was a really constructive session where, once again, our housing emergency paper was a headline feature on the agenda.

I found it incredibly useful and, indeed, encouraging to be able to discuss that with some of the community trusts and groups who are exploring, or already developing, local housing projects in their own areas. Their contributions are and will be invaluable as we tackle this together. I am clear at every single housing-related meeting that I attend that we need to be radical in our thinking, innovative in our delivery and fast-paced in action and in partnership given the vital importance of finding housing solutions as part of securing a positive future for Argyll and Bute.

Separately, I attended a meeting with Tarbert and Skipness Community Trust who have been working for some time on exploring options and solutions for affordable housing in the Tarbert area. They have carried out a number of studies over the years and are looking to work proactively and positively with other agencies. I am glad that their work is progressing and look forward to hearing more as they drive this forward.

I have been encouraged by informal discussions locally following our declaration of a housing emergency and approaches from people and businesses who have the scope and the will to try to play a part. These conversations are in very early stages but they are important and we are taking up every such opportunity that arises, no matter how informal at this point.

3.3 Ministerial Meetings:

Bio-degradable Municipal Waste (BMW) Ban: Members may recall from previous reports and committees that we have been attempting to engage with the Scottish Government on the forthcoming BMW ban and the council's request for a nine-month derogation.

We were eventually able to secure a meeting with Lorna Slater MSP, Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity, on 26th July. We were initially encouraged by the discussions we had, but I have subsequently received a response confirming that a derogation will not be possible and directing us to engage with the Scottish Environment

Protection Agency (SEPA) instead. I have written back to Ms Slater expressing our disappointment and pressing again for Scottish Government assistance in finding some kind of solution to avoid significant cost pressures to the council for the sake of a nine-month period. I am also writing to SEPA's Chief Executive and Chair asking for an urgent discussion. In the meantime our officers continue to engage with Scottish Government civil servants and colleagues at SEPA.

Refugees Minister visit to Bute: On 29th August I travelled to Bute to meet with Emma Roddick MSP, Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees. She is also a Highlands and Islands regional list MSP representing Argyll and Bute and takes a keen interest in the local area and its key issues.

Our Refugee Resettlement Team on Bute provided a morning of visits and activities for the Minister and her team, including a visit to Rothesay Joint Campus and meetings with local refugee families who have settled in the area. This was a very positive introduction to our meeting in the afternoon.



We met first of all with a Ukrainian family who now live on Bute and who are working to develop an art-based home business. They paid tribute to all agencies involved in resettlement, from the Scottish Government's national programme to the on-the-ground support provided by the council's Resettlement team – which ranges from housing support right through to getting to grips with living and doing business in an island community. They were also very clear that the support of the local community was a very significant factor and both consider Bute to be an absolutely beautiful and happy place to live.

It is incredibly encouraging and humbling to hear first-hand experiences like this – from people who have gone through unimaginable challenges and often tragedies, but who have been able to benefit from the sterling work of the council's Refugee Resettlement team. The closing remarks

from our Ukrainian family sum it up wonderfully: 'We believe that kindness must be Scotland's national characteristic.'

We then had an opportunity for a short private discussion with Ms Roddick. Following an overview from our Settlement Project Officer about the work being done with the Repopulation Zone communities in Argyll and Bute (Coll, Tiree, Isle of Bute, Kintyre and Rosneath peninsulas), we were able to highlight the work we have been leading on with seven other west coast local authorities facing a geographical depopulation trend. We were encouraged to hear Ms Roddick's assurance that this is a top priority for her in terms of her ministerial role and activity, and also that she wants to maintain momentum in terms of engaging on this and other matters relating to her remit. We look forward to welcoming her back to other areas across Argyll and Bute as part of that engagement on our most crucial strategic challenge. Being on Bute, we also took the opportunity to highlight Rothesay Pavilion to her and the contribution that a restored building can make to that population agenda.

Meeting with Joe Fitzpatrick, 2nd August 2023: Following our introductory call, covered in my previous report, I was delighted to welcome Joe Fitzpatrick MSP, Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning, to Dunoon on 2nd August.

Prior to our own discussion, Mr Fitzpatrick had a short walking tour of Dunoon, accompanied by council officers working on the Dunoon Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme and representatives from the Dunoon Area Alliance. They highlighted key sites and activities before joining a round table discussion at the Burgh Hall.

We had a short private meeting with Mr Fitzpatrick afterwards and took the opportunity to highlight some of the council's positive work around the three themes of the New Deal with Local Government. This included our exploration of a Single Authority Model and also the work of the Financial Inclusion and Advice Group in tackling poverty and ensuring people can access assistance.

As is the case at all ministerial meetings these days, we also highlighted the Rothesay Pavilion Project – there is considerable work going on to raise the profile of the funding gap and to attract additional investment to take the project forward and turn aspirations into reality and benefits for the community of Bute and far beyond.

3.4 Meeting with Argyll and Bute Community Councils, 26th June:

Representatives from many of Argyll and Bute's 56 Community Councils joined us for a virtual meeting on 26th June. Coming together in this way was very fitting given that 2023 is the 50th anniversary year of Community Councils in Scotland. I served on one of the very first Community Councils at the age of 16 and always try to bring to mind my own experiences from that time when working with local groups in my current council role.

The roles are of course different; each of us, community councillors and local authority councillors, have different responsibilities, experiences, different jobs to do. There are areas of common ground and there are inevitably areas where we may disagree from time to time. We are, though, united in that we want to see the best outcomes for the communities we represent.

Coming together to discuss issues like partnership working, engagement, citizen participation in services is particularly helpful in the current local governance landscape in Scotland. All levels of government in Scotland have seen very significant changes in the past fifty years, with various reorganisations taking place. We are likely to see further change over the next few years given the context of considerable financial pressures that councils and other public sector bodies must cope with, and of course against which they must balance community needs right now and ambitions for the future.

We do not know what the future of local governance will look like, but that common goal of seeking the best for Argyll and Bute's communities will remain a constant. As we navigate through this, councils and Community Councils must continue to fulfil our own distinct roles and look for opportunities to work in partnership where we can in the context of challenge and change.

I felt that this was a helpful session and there was an appetite from all to repeat it in the future – given the changing environment I am sure that this approach will prove to be particularly useful.

As a follow-up, I attended an Improvement Service webinar on Supporting Your Community Councils with Place Plans on 16th August. This too was a really useful session and looked at Community Map Scotland – resources for community councils developing their own place plans. You can watch a recording of the seminar at [Community Map Scotland webinar - YouTube](#)

3.5 Leader Correspondence:

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

- I wrote again to Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Levelling Up, inviting him to come to Argyll and Bute and welcoming our participation in the UK Islands Forum, which we would also be keen to host at some point. Unfortunately he is not yet able to confirm a visit to the area but we will continue to engage with him and press for UK Government visit to Argyll and Bute.
- On 12th July I wrote to Fiona Hyslop MSP, Minister for Transport, by way of introduction following her appointment to the portfolio. I set out again the concerns that people and businesses continue to raise in relation to the A83 Rest and Be Thankful situation, and asked for any clarity about timescales and, crucially, security of funding for the permanent solution.

Prior to the cabinet changes the previous Minister, Jenny Gilruth, had committed to holding a meeting of the A83 Taskforce in June. This commitment was made at the last meeting of the Taskforce in Arrochar – in January. I have asked the Minister if she is prepared to convene an urgent meeting to fulfil that commitment. I have not yet received a response to my letter.

- I wrote to Mairi McAllan MSP, the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition, on 1st September following an urgent meeting with Calmac’s leadership (see later report). While this focused mainly on ferry issues across Argyll and Bute, I also repeated the concerns originally set out in my earlier correspondence to the Transport Minister.

3.6 COSLA Leaders Meetings:

Since my last report, COSLA Leaders have met three times – on 30th June, 25th August and a Special Leaders meeting on 5th September at which I was represented by Cllr Kieron Green.

The following agenda items were considered at these meetings:

30th June:

- First Minister’s Address and signing of Verity House Agreement
- Address from Michael Gove MP
- Local Government Finance
- Council Tax Joint Working Group Update
- Pay Update
- National Care Service
- Local Government Data Platform Project
- Free School Meals – Delay to Rollout

- The Promise
- Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children
- Asylum Dispersal
- Educational Psychologists Training Programme
- Distribution

At this meeting, Leaders also made a presentation to Sally Loudon, formerly Chief Executive of this council, at her final COSLA Leaders meeting as its Chief Executive. We wish Sally all the best in her next endeavours and adventures. We look forward to working with COSLA's new Chief Executive, Jane O'Donnell, who is now in post.

25th August:

- Scottish Welfare Fund Action Plan update
- Local Government Finance
- Fiscal Framework for Local Government
- Pay Update
- Strategic Review of Funding for Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Services
- Scottish Recommended Allowance for Foster and Kinship Carers
- Joint Health and Social Care Winter Planning Priorities
- Asylum Contingency Accommodation and Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children
- Ukraine Strategic Policy Position, Welcome Accommodation Proposals and Funding
- Distribution

5th September:

A special Leaders meeting in relation to local government pay negotiations was called for 5th September and this was attended by Cllr Kieron Green who deputised.

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.

3.7 Rothesay Pavilion Restoration Parliamentary Reception:

I joined councillor colleagues and officers in travelling to Holyrood for the Rothesay Pavilion Restoration Parliamentary Reception, sponsored by Clare Adamson MSP with the support of Jenni Minto MSP.

Securing a rare parliamentary reception slot signifies the importance of this project – and organisers' efforts were rewarded with a very healthy turnout indeed of MSPs, funders and senior creative industry representatives. Feedback on the night was extremely positive and the

Rothesay Pavilion Charity had put together some excellent visual and video presentations to highlight to guests the potential that the Pavilion can deliver.

Chris Stewart, President of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (RIAS) spoke about the building's national and global architectural significance, and Cabinet Secretary with responsibility for Culture, Angus Robertson MSP, also spoke to officially open the reception.

Work continues apace now, building on the success of the reception, to work in partnership to meet the £4m fundraising target.

- 3.8 Ferry crisis – urgent meeting with Calmac:** As an island resident and councillor I am constantly aware of the situation with local ferry services, and they feature in my inbox multiple times a day. In mid-August though the situation became particularly concerning when it was announced that the Islay summer timetable would stop four weeks early, services to Colonsay would be severely impacted, and the Campbeltown-Ardrossan service would not run for the rest of the season – all due to vessel issues.

I wrote immediately to Robbie Drummond, Calmac's Managing Director and asked for an urgent meeting to discuss the very serious impact on these essential Argyll and Bute ferry services.

We met on 22nd August, joined by community representatives, who put a number of questions and possible solutions to Calmac management.

Unfortunately there has been no easy answer and the situation remains with all services noted above severely disrupted.

While we do understand the pressures on the operator, the risks to the affected communities are too significant to ignore. Following the meeting with Calmac, I wrote to Mairi McAllan MSP, the Cabinet Secretary with responsibility for transport, setting out the grave concerns we and affected communities have and asking for urgent discussions. I will update council when I receive a response.

- 3.9 Gaelic:**
Faster Rate of Progress Meeting: I attended the latest Faster Rate of Progress call with the Scottish Government on 30th August. This series of discussions, first put in place by John Swinney, focuses on progressing Gaelic in the education context. We continue to make progress in this area and work hard to promote the Gaelic language and maintain its profile.

Progress in this area has included:

- Bespoke moderation site for Gaelic Medium was created and launched
- Highly successful pilot project in conjunction with Highland Council to deliver online Gaelic language lessons combined with professional learning for practitioners.
- Creation and dissemination of Gaelic L3 toolkit
- Increased staff engagement with GLPS programme, open university course and National 5 Gaelic learners course
- Full programme of activities has resumed at the Furan Gaelic Centre including: Weekly Gaelic 4 Parents sessions, weekly Bookbug sessions and Parent's Paisde group
- Extended the support on offer to schools from the administrator of the Furan Centre.
- Gaelic New Qualified Teacher in Strath of Appin Primary this session

All of these activities are helping to raise the profile of Gaelic across Argyll and Bute and are impacting positively on learners' experiences and Gaelic language skills

Mod 2024: On 21st October, the Provost will represent Argyll and Bute Council at the official handover of the Mod flag from this year's hosts, Renfrewshire Council, to ourselves. Mod 2023 takes place in Paisley and next year it will return to Oban.

3.10 Meeting with National Farmers Union Scotland local representatives:

On 28th August I met with local NFUS representatives. We had an opportunity to discuss a range of issues including, of course, the situation at the A83 Rest and Be Thankful; ferry services; Food for Life and food and drink strategy; education and skills; the local impact of slurry storage regulation changes; and goose management. It was helpful to reconnect with local agricultural sector representatives and I'm sure we will have further discussions in the future.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1** This report highlights the activities of the Leader of Argyll and Bute Council for the period from 12th June to 8th September 2023.

Councillor Robin Currie
Leader, Argyll and Bute Council

8th September 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