

**REPORT BY POLICY LEAD COUNCILLOR FOR COMMUNITY & CULTURE, AND STRATEGIC HOUSING**

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

This is my second report as Policy Lead and covers the period from 1<sup>st</sup> June to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2014 and aims to highlight developments within my portfolio.

**2. RECOMMENTION**

It is recommended that Members note the contents of the report.

**3. UPDATE**

**3.1 Housing**

I have a lot of good news to report. I was delighted to be asked by ACHA to officially open the 2 new houses at Bonawe in August. Through the grant and loan system, Argyll and Bute Council contributed £279k (£155,957 grant and £123,122 loan) to this development.

In November it was a pleasure to be asked to the official opening of the 51 houses in Helensburgh at the old Hermitage site. The official opening was carried out by the Housing Minister, Margaret Burgess and when addressing those present, I said that not only has the Council contributed to the cost of the houses but it has also invested in the wider infrastructure to ensure that the remainder of the site offers an attractive opportunity for further developer investment. In total the Council contributed £2.77m to the total cost of £7.1m. Also in November I attended the official opening of 40 houses at Glenshellach, Oban again the Council made a substantial contribution to this development providing a grant of £890,000 and a 25 year loan of £2.3m. In summary in terms of housing development 93 new affordable homes have been completed in the six months since June and the Council has contributed just over £6m to these developments.

The Empty Homes Initiative has also gained national recognition and in addition to the Silver Award at the IRRV Performance Awards for excellence and innovation our work was recognised as Outstanding Overall Project at the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership Conference

in November. I was unable to attend the latter event but it was with great pride that I attended the IRRV event in Telford along with the 3 members of staff that have contributed so much to this successful scheme.

Tackling energy efficiency and fuel poverty remains high on the housing agenda and I now attend the Highlands and Islands Affordable Warmth Working Group and we have met twice in Inverness in the last six months. The main aim and remit of this group is:

To identify the main stumbling blocks in the delivery of affordable warmth in the Highlands and Islands; and

To recommend practicable course of action that Housing Associations and others could take to try and overcome them.

The Council's Strategic Housing Forum, which I chair, has met 3 times since June and is an extremely productive partnership of the housing associations operating in this area along with other stakeholders including Scottish Government. Matters discussed at the Forum have included the Strategic Housing Investment Plan, Strategy for Housing for Older People, Energy Efficiency Programmes, House Condition Surveys, Local Development Plan, Health and Social Work Integration, etc.

I attended, in December, a Housing Conveners Meeting with the Housing Minister. This is a regular meeting that we have with the Minister and the purpose of these meetings is to ensure an on-going political dialogue between local Government and the Scottish Government about housing and welfare issues. I raised with the Minister the HEEPS scheme and the fact that in Argyll and Bute the difference between the cost of energy efficiency work on old houses and the grant level were often too great for the work to be done and asked if the grant level could be increased in such circumstances. The Minister has asked for more information so that she can consider our case. Officers from Argyll and Bute Council are now in correspondence with officers of the Scottish Government.

In November I attended the Scottish Housing Event in Murrayfield Stadium. This was a major event hosted by the Scottish Government, bringing together stakeholders from across the housing sector to focus on the effective delivery of the Scottish Government's Housing Strategies. Keynote Speakers were the new First Minister and the Housing Minister. Delegates participating were asked to consider eight themes that emerged from a series of roundtable discussions held earlier in the year to identify actions for the Joint Delivery Plan and to build consensus for those actions. The 8 themes were:

- Tenures and the housing journey
- Sustainability and fuel poverty: behavioural change and long-term investment.
- Step change for investment in housing.
- Resources and how we value investment- prevention agenda and social benefits.
- Planning, land, infrastructure and development.
- Linking need and demand to communities-how do we deliver the homes and places Scotland needs?
- Town centres, leadership and regeneration.
- Joint working- effective housing collaboration with health, social care, welfare and the third sector.

As an appointee of the Council I have attended many meetings of the Care and Repair Board. This is a valuable service, dealing with repairs, aids and adaptations and housing advice, which operate throughout the area. A review of the service has been carried out and there has been a change in management and Board Members including myself have been on numerous training sessions so that the organisation is in good shape in going forward.

Over the past few months I have been visiting the housing services teams throughout Argyll and Bute and hopefully will conclude those visits in the next few weeks. Those visits have been very rewarding for myself and have been appreciated by staff. The enormous and valuable amount of work carried out by staff has been a real eye-opener for me and it is my intention to have a presentation on this work before the Community Services Committee in March.

### **3.2 COSLA**

I have attended a number of COSLA meetings over the last 6 months including the Community and Well Being Executive Group, the COSLA Sports, Arts and Culture Working Group, COSLA Sports Travel Group (which was set up at the request of myself and Cllr. Nicholson from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar ) and the COSLA National Strategy for Libraries Group.

Public papers from those meetings can be viewed by Members if they so wish.

### **3.3 Community Development and the Third Sector & Communities Group**

The Group organised a 10-site Lync conference on Broadband and Mobile Infrastructure issues in November, with guest presentations from HIE and Community Broadband Scotland.

22 of the participants in the conference completed evaluation forms, with 21 confirming the meeting was useful or very useful, 18 saying conference meetings by Lync are a useful way to share information and 17 saying they would recommend that style of meeting. However, the quality of signal was not consistent throughout the 75 minute conference and each of the 10 sites (which included Inverness and Tiree) had a varying quality of experience with the video connections in particular.

The Training and Events Sub Group is currently organising two events to support voluntary committees involved in managing community centres and village halls in Argyll & Bute. The events are scheduled for Saturday 7 March at Centre 81 in Garelochhead and Saturday 14 March at the Corran Halls in Oban. Three satellite locations in Campbeltown, Dunoon and Rothesay will link into the main venues in order to facilitate greater participation in these areas. The events will include presentations and workshops on issues ranging from funding for maintenance costs, health & safety issues, recruiting and retaining volunteers and office-bearers, and examples of good practice. Speakers from organisations including the Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations (SCVO), The Robertson Trust, Lottery and others have been invited to participate.

A pilot information session on pensions advice for individuals working in the third sector in Argyll & Bute will be delivered in late March in Helensburgh. The session will be organised with Age Scotland and will cover auto enrolment, recent changes to pensions legislation, the state pension, private pensions and other forms of pensions investments.

The Council's Third Sector Grants for 2015/16 were launched in December. The deadline for applications is Monday 2 February. More information, and an application form, can be found online at <http://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/council-and-government/third-sector-grants>.

Following the retirement of Margaret Fyfe in November, the Council's community development team is now being managed by Community Planning Manager Rona Gold.

### **3.4 Libraries**

Tarbert Library – refurbishment work well underway and the new library on course to open to the public in mid-February.

Macmillan Cancer Information and Support Service – the application for Phase 2 funding has now been submitted to Macmillan Cancer Support. Phase 2 will see the MCISS rolled out to all remaining libraries, as well as 5 island locations, over the next 3 financial years. It was a pleasure for me to attend the opening of the service in Rothesay in August.

### **3.5 Other Activities**

It was a pleasure to attend and present awards at the Argyll and Bute Youth Games in June. This was held in Oban and saw 600 pupils take part in 16 events. There is no Council budget for this popular event and each year the Active Schools team applies for external grant funding to fully cover the costs of the event and the schools/pupils do not have to pay any contribution. It was a great day and everyone involved has to be congratulated on organising the event and for participating on the day.

After attending the Queen's Baton Relay event in Inveraray and the excitement that created, it was a great privilege, on behalf of Argyll and Bute Council, to welcome to the Athletes Commonwealth Games Village in Glasgow, the teams from Cyprus and Swaziland. This was held over 2 days and I attended along with some officers from the Council and 2 pupils from Hermitage Academy. It was a truly memorable event and I'm grateful to have been given the honour in welcoming the 2 teams to Scotland.

In September I had a good meeting with Jim Barr and Torquil MacLeod of the Cammanachd Association. It was good to catch up on all things shinty and said to them how much Argyll and Bute Council looked forward to hosting the Cammanachd Cup Final in Oban in 2015.

I also met with representatives of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society in Helensburgh and discussed the Active Schools programme and the contribution that dancing can make. For many years now the Society has worked hard with schools and I look forward to this continuing if not expanding.

I had an interesting full day workshop, along with officers, and SportScotland in developing the strategy for sport in this area. We have a good partnership and look forward to working with them in the future.

**Robin Currie**  
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**12 January 2015**