

Wester Ross, Strathpeffer & Lochalsh Joint Community Councils

Notes of Meeting held in Kinlochewe Village Hall, 26th March 2009

Chair: Richard Munday, (Shieldaig Community Council)

Present: Shieldaig CC; Marybank CC; Coigach CC; Lochbroom CC; Torridon & Kinlochewe CC; Applecross CC; Wester Lochewe CC; Garve & District CC; Dornie & District CC; Lochcarron CC; Gairloch CC; Aultbea CC.

Cllr Biz Campbell; Cllr Richard Greene; Cllr Audrey Sinclair; Cllr Jean Urquhart; Cllr David Alston (Black Isle Ward);

Apologies: Glenelg & Arnisdale CC; Lochalsh CC; Loch Duich CC; Plockton CC; Stromeferry & Achmore CC.

Officials in attendance: Robbie Bain (Highland Council, Ward Manager); Mary Gibson (SNH).

Introduction

Richard Munday welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained the background to the meeting.

Highland Council Budget for 2009/10 and expenditure prospects for the longer term.

David Alston, Highland Councillor in the Black Isle Ward and Budget Leader for the Council gave an overview of the current situation regarding public sector finance. He noted that there had been strong growth in public sector funding between 2000 and 2008 but that budgets would be "flat" from 2010/11 with a real prospect that the public sector would face a period of very tight budget settlements and possible cuts in budgets for the next 10 or so years as the Government recouped the money spent during the recession. This would also be at a time when there would be considerable other pressures such as the need to invest in methods to reduce Carbon-dependence.

However, it should be remembered that the public sector would still be spending considerable sums in Highland every year (Highland Council about £3,000 per person; NHS about £2,000 per person and other agencies about £1,000 per person).

There will need to be changes in the way that The Council and other agencies work. There will need to be better joined-up working between departments. Sustainable solutions may need to be found with communities taking control of service delivery. Communities will need to consider their own priorities across services although there will be limits to what variation in standards would be acceptable. In The Council, hard questions will need to be asked, since it may not be possible to make cuts at the edges of services and instead The Council may have to stop doing some things completely, leaving a gap that might be filled by communities themselves.

Discussion commenced with issues of winter maintenance on the road system. The Council had already spent £5.2m on winter maintenance this year and spend on this would probably be about £0.5m over budget at the year end. While £350k had been removed from the winter maintenance budget as a result of a series of milder winters, it was noted that spend this year was still higher than previous budget levels.

It was suggested that the Council owned more assets than it had the finances to adequately maintain and that to bring this into balance, some rationalisation would be needed.

Discussion on communities taking control of service provision highlighted the example of the Howard Doris Centre which had significant benefits beyond Lochcarron. The recent community needs assessment in Shieldaig was given as an example of how useful it is for a community to identify the resources and skills that are present within it.

The issue of school closures was raised and while it was acknowledged that there was existing protection for rural primary schools there was concern that when schools become too small, issues can arise in terms of education quality and children's social development.

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Affordable Housing was seen as one of the keys to keeping small communities alive, but even where affordable housing was present, there was often little opportunity for residents to move out of this and free it up for younger families. There was concern about the loss of young people who couldn't find affordable accommodation which was particularly galling given the number of second-homes that lay empty for much of the year. There was a shortage of available land for building but local landowners might be reluctant to give up land unless they were sure the houses would be made available - and stay available - to local people.

Scottish Water. Robbie Bain presented on Scottish Water's behalf, using information contained in an email from Joanna Peebles. It was noted that Scottish Water was in the process of making a considerable level of investment in Ward, with a total of nearly £42m worth of capital investment either completed or in the immediate programme:

- Achnasheen - £307k upgrade of water production plant - completed autumn 2008
- Aultbea - £204k upgrade of water production plant - started autumn '08 complete now
- Badcaul - £3M new Water Treatment Works
- Kinlochewe - £519k upgrade of drinking water supply - complete spring '08
- Kishorn - £5M Wastewater Treatment works - due to be constructed this year once planning permission and land negotiations are complete.
- Loch Ewe - £15M at Aultbea and Mellon Charles is making progress. A treatment works and sewer system are being installed to remove private discharges of raw and poorly treated sewage into the shellfish waters of Loch Ewe.
- Loch Maree - £10M Regional Drinking Water supply - planning applications have been submitted.
- Poolewe £745k upgrade Wastewater Treatment Works - due or completion this year.
- Sheildaig - £212k upgrade disinfection system has just been completed.
- Ullapool - £7M project to provide clearer, fresher drinking water. New water from boreholes at Inverbroom was recently put in to supply. A new treatment works is due for completion in the spring of 2010.

The level of investment in the Ward was welcomed, however concerns remained about the quality of some of the older pipework and while it was noted that there was a rolling programme of pipe replacement on-going, in the meantime some communities were facing repeated bursts and disruption as piece-meal emergency repairs were carried out. Concerns were raised about communication through the service centre, although there was general praise for the front-line staff and the speed of response to emergencies.

Post Buses. There was a brief discussion on the current situation regarding the withdrawal of post buses from three routes in the Ward. It was made clear that the Royal Mail response that the withdrawal of service had come about as a result of discussion with The Council was completely without foundation. It was suggested that the only way forward was to mount a political campaign to expose Royal Mail's approach on this matter to closer public scrutiny.

Out of Hours Group. Liz Pritchard presented the Group's 6th Progress Report, covering the period May 2008 to March 4th 2009. The full report is appended to this minute. The Group asks for continued support for its work; for help in spreading the information to the community and for consideration to be given to a dedicated meeting which would allow greater discussion of the OOH Group's work.

Future Arrangement for Ward Forums and Joint Community Council Meeting. This item was left over for discussion at a future ward forum.