



Nairn West and Suburban Community Council
jointly with
Nairn River Community Council

May 2022

Dear Councillor,

NAIRN'S FUTURE: AN OPEN LETTER

You have just been elected to serve as a representative of Nairn's people for the next four years. We congratulate you on your success and wish you well in your task.

The Community Councils, too, are elected to represent the town's community. That is why we address this open letter to you.

The past five years have been marked by a lack of collaboration, an atmosphere of hostility, and a secretive approach to decision-making. This has been unhelpful, and bad for the town.

We believe that needs to change. Both the town's CCs wish to see a more co-operative and inclusive attitude on the part of elected Councillors. Both CCs are committed to engaging constructively in local discussion.

Loyalty and commitment

As a Councillor, your primary loyalty is not to any party manifesto, nor to any corporate Council aims. Your obligation is to serve the people of Nairn.

Your Code of Conduct means you should not use your position to promote your political ambitions, nor to advance your own personal or financial self-interest. You should represent all sectors of the community, without favouring selected client groups, organisations, or categories of people.

Engagement and open-ness

For too long local government in the Highlands has been characterised by a culture of secrecy and a reluctance to engage in genuine dialogue.

Local discussion has largely taken place in closed Ward Business Meetings. Policies and decisions have been imposed – often without public debate or community consent.

Too often, questions have been regarded as criticism, comments have been treated as complaints, and requests for information have been ignored or dismissed. It should not be necessary to resort to FoI requests to find out what the Council is doing in our area and how decisions are made. This takes up time and effort which could be better directed to other tasks.

A fundamental change is needed: we will expect transparency, not secrecy. We will look for answers, not evasion. We will seek to be included in the decision-making process, not simply be informed after decisions have been made. We will look for cooperation and dialogue; we will not accept exclusion and dismissal.

Priorities

The candidates' election manifestos all listed various local issues. Most are familiar and well-known, from the need for a bypass to the importance of a new Academy. The CCs have considerable knowledge and experience on all these subjects and have been researching and campaigning on most of them for many years. For that reason we set out in this open letter a reminder of some of the key issues on which we will seek early action.

Common Good

Nairn Councillors are trustees of the town's Common Good Fund and assets. Your duty as trustees is to protect and safeguard those assets and to ensure they are used prudently for the benefit of the town's residents. This trustee obligation overrides any commitment you may have to pursuing the policies or objectives of the Council.

There are several proposals already on the table which affect Nairn's Common Good. Most immediate is the question of the future of the Sandown land. The CCs have challenged the motives for the sale of the whole of Sandown for development, and the methods adopted by the Council in their [second] consultation exercise. It is clear that the local community is strongly opposed to the disposal by sale of this important asset.

We expect our Councillors to reflect that unequivocal local view and to oppose the sale of the Sandown land at this time.

Other lease amendments and disposals have been proposed (eg property at Grant Street). The Council's policy on leasing and disposal of other CG assets has been inconsistent and poorly managed. It has in the past resulted in significant financial loss to the CG Fund. Current arrangements continue to result in the imposition of unacceptable and unjustified charges on the CGF.

We therefore urge and support action to reform and localise the management of Nairn's CG. We look to our Councillors to campaign for and implement such a change. Local community representatives must be directly involved in all decisions affecting the town's Common Good.

Development planning and Nairn's future

We are at a critical stage in local planning. The national government planning framework is to change in June 2022 with the deliberate aim of encouraging locally-driven place planning. Highland Council has however produced a revised version of the existing IMFLDP, which is essentially a site-allocation exercise for developers – with specific targets for housing-delivery – and is seeking consultation-comments before the end of June.

This revised plan is not acceptable. Zoning land for housing is not the main or only priority. **We will be looking to our Councillors to press for revision of the proposed plan** so that development is based on locally-agreed priorities and reflects government policy on Local Place Planning. In particular:

- infrastructure first. Not only is delivery of the bypass a prerequisite for any major new development in Nairn, but as the disastrous experience of Lochloy has demonstrated, **Councillors must insist that the provision and upgrading of road capacity, drainage, sewage, water supply and other services is essential and must be delivered before more development is permitted.**
- flood prevention. This aspect of infrastructure deserves separate mention. SEPA drew up a flood prevention strategy in 2012. Nairn and its immediate surroundings are identified as high-risk Potentially Vulnerable Areas. Highland Council has the lead responsibility for implementing flood prevention measures. There has been no action and significant delay. The timings set out in the strategy have not been met. Meanwhile extensive flood precaution works have been completed in Moray and in Inverness. **We would like Councillors to press for early practical action to reduce the risk of flooding in and around Nairn.**
- employment, industry and the economy. Housing alone does not bring growth. The local economy depends on attracting visitors to Nairn as a tourist destination. It also means sustaining and expanding existing businesses and industries. This includes especially the major employers such as those at Grigorhill, Balmakeith and Nairn South.. The reclassification of the so-called ‘Nairn East’ site from “non-preferred” to “preferred” has not been adequately explained. Any development there will have serious implications for existing businesses at Grigorhill and nearby residential areas (Balmakeith and Riverside Parks). Constructing housing adjacent to heavy industry is bad planning. It raises serious issues of safety, security, noise, and access. **If the site is not removed from the plan, then we will look to Councillors to ensure that no development proceeds until all the infrastructure issues are satisfactorily resolved: this includes modification of roads and access, completion of the bypass, and necessary flood prevention measures as well as adequate drainage and water supply.**
- Delnies. Planning consent for housing at Delnies was explicitly linked to, and conditional upon, development of other leisure and recreation facilities (hotel, golf course, green spaces). The Council has since stated that development of that site, distant from the town, is now considered inappropriate. **We await clarification and an explanation of why the housing part of the Delnies site is now advertised for sale “with permission for 300 houses” and no mention of the leisure facilities which were a major factor in obtaining the original permission.**
- Ardersier. The closure and obstruction of access along the coast and beach by the company intending to redevelop the port has provoked considerable local criticism. Highland Council has said publicly that these measures are not authorised. **We wish to see early action by the Council to enforce that position, to re-establish rights of public access, and to ensure that the main road entrance to the Port is modified or relocated from its present hazardous position.**

Town centre

There is universal agreement that the town centre and the High Street need revival.

The way in which government regeneration funding was diverted into the construction of a large new housing block, despite the existence of an agreed town centre plan, without community consultation, and in collaboration with a favoured local organisation [the CAB], was rightly condemned by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman.

We urge our Councillors to support official government policy on repurposing empty, under-used and derelict town centre buildings, to seek funding to achieve this, to promote action to increase footfall in the High Street, and to enhance the harbour and seafront/Links as a venue for visitors.

This means – for example – the restoration of the Old Police Station, the continuing use of the listed former Finance Department building, the retention of the Library in the town centre, and the provision of adequate parking.

Local amenities and facilities

Nairn is one of the major tourism-destinations in the region. Post-Covid, the trend to staycations will increase visitor-numbers. Yet local facilities are wholly inadequate.

We look to our Councillors to bring about significant improvements:

- repair, reopening and maintenance of public toilets (*a response is still awaited from the Council on the refurbishment of the Harbour Street public toilets*);
- provision of designated visitor parking and motorhome facilities. A fresh look at policy is required. The existing parking-fees scheme arrangements are unacceptable, and do not meet safety regulations. Charging can only be justified in return for quality services. All revenue from the use of Common Good assets must go into the CG Fund. This issue needs to be looked at in the wider context of reforming the management of Common Good assets and also...
- A broad-based tourism strategy. Given Nairn's location, its natural assets and the leisure facilities that the town can, and should, be offering, it is inexplicable that the Council should fail to recognise that Nairn is one of the key visitor-destinations in the region. It is inexplicable that an official tourism strategy should have been produced apparently in private discussion with the BID (who represent only the retail business ratepayers) and without appropriate local engagement by all tourism-related providers, community representatives and stakeholders. This failure has been acknowledged (by Colin Simpson, HC Tourism Officer). **We expect Councillors to press for and support a significant revision of the current tourism strategy.**

Resources, funding allocations, and “fair shares”

We have evidence from the Council itself that the pattern of spending on public services is grossly inequitable across the region, and disadvantageous to Nairn. Particular examples include the spend on leisure and recreation, and on health and social care. Explanations are still awaited from the Council on several local issues:

- Nairn Common Good is – uniquely – charged for maintenance, and is not paid any rent, for Council use of CG land to provide public leisure and recreation facilities. Elsewhere such facilities are funded by the Council, and the Common Good Funds of other burghs are paid rent or have maintenance provided in lieu of rent. Also among hundreds of Leisure and Recreation facilities managed by High Life Highland, only those on Nairn Common Good sites are charged HLH management costs.
- Developer contributions, supposedly intended for the provision and improvement of local infrastructure and facilities, are being channelled – without any public consultation – to fund the Council’s own activities and properties (and notably, to pay for the expansion of HighLife Highland’s swimming pool in Nairn, which is structurally near end-of-life).
- The allocation of dedicated grant-funding (such as the Town Centre Fund and Place Based Investment Funding) has been arbitrary, secretive and without any public discussion or engagement. This contrasts with the open bidding process undertaken elsewhere (eg in Moray) for such funds.

We will be looking to our Councillors to investigate, review, and revise funding allocations and management charges across the Highland region in order to safeguard Nairn’s Common Good Fund, to achieve more equitable distribution of resources, and to ensure timely notification and open discussion about available financial grants.

The new Academy (and the Library)

The current school building is unfit for purpose, the site is constrained by the railway and adjacent residential housing, and access is limited. Public engagement in the planning for a new academy has been restricted (until late 2021, CCs were excluded from the stakeholder meetings and planning discussions).

Recent new schools elsewhere have suffered from design failures (eg Wick) and inadequate capacity-forecasting (resulting in the addition of portakabins – eg at Culloden).

The future location of the Library (and indeed other facilities eg the swimming pool) should be considered separately on their own merits and not simply as possible component parts of a new Academy. The Library must be located and managed so that it best meets the needs of the local community and complies with official policies on sustaining town centres.

We expect our Councillors to examine all possible alternative locations for a new academy (as recently indicated by the Executive Chief Officer responsible); to ensure that lessons are learned from the planning and design failures elsewhere; and to give proper and separate consideration to the future of the Library and other community facilities.

Health and welfare

In the wake of Covid, concern has been expressed about the delivery of vaccinations by NHS Highland.

Requiring Nairn residents to travel to Inverness for immunisations is a nonsense when the town has a high-quality modern health centre and an efficient and willing General Practice able to deliver this service. Arranging ad hoc clinics at the Community & Arts Centre is an illogical and inefficient alternative.

We hope all Nairn Councillors will be prepared to campaign vigorously for the reinstatement and continuation of vaccinations – and a full range of healthcare services – at our local health centre.

These are just a selected few of the most pressing current issues. Many other subjects will be on the agenda for the new Highland Council when it is confirmed in office.

We are under no illusions. The Council – and indeed the government – is in a difficult financial situation. Hard choices will have to be made. But the need for prudent management actually makes it even more important to ensure fairness and transparency in the deployment of resources and the efficient provision of services.

Joint collective action is needed to speak up and act in support of Nairn's interests, and to work to make the town a better place to live, work and visit. As Community Councils we are ready to play an informed and constructive role.

We wish you well in your task as councillors, and we look forward to a close and productive working relationship over the next four years.

Yours sincerely,

Alastair Noble

Dr Alastair Noble. MBE

Interim Chair, NW&S CC

Hamish Bain

Hamish Bain

Chair Nairn River CC