

NAIRN WEST & SUBURBAN COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Ordinary Meeting: 7.00pm, Monday 25 April 2022 at Nairn Community & Arts Centre

DRAFT Minutes

Present:

NWSCC members: Alastair Noble (in the Chair) Others: Donald Wilson (Courier)
Ally MacDonald
Joan Noble 5 members of the public
Brian Stewart
Dick Youngson

Absent: Alan Hampson
Lorraine Mallinson

1. Welcome/Introduction

1.1 Alastair Noble (interim Chair) welcomed those present, including two of the eight candidates for the forthcoming Highland Council elections. There were no apologies, and no declarations of interest.

1.2 In his initial remarks the Chair drew attention to recent reporting on the Gurn website of remarks by a candidate in the Council elections alleging that local community groups were reluctant to collaborate. He refuted this firmly and questioned the motivation for such comments. These divisive and unhelpful remarks were not only unjustified, but were being used as an excuse by Highland Council and other agencies for not engaging with Nairn(shire). He pointed out a long list of local examples of local initiatives and projects which reflecting joined-up working. These included the new Community & Arts Centre, the Sports Club, the integrated hospital/health centre, the Hydrotherapy Pool, the Mens' Shed, the NICE/Team Hamish splashpad, the continuous work of Keeping Nairn Colourful, the Book & Arts Festival, Music Nairn and Cinema Nairn, and the Allotments Group planting project. He drew attention to the close cooperation between the Community Councils and the Residents' Concern Group on planning issues; the launch of the local Jobs Network in Nairn; and the proposed establishment of an economic forum to reflect the interests of all sectors of the local business economy. All these illustrated the willingness of local groups to work together.

1.3 The Chair said that NW&SCC – and, he believed, the other CCs in Nairnshire – were committed to working constructively with the new Councillors, and would engage with them immediately after the election on a set of local priorities which had already been clearly identified.

2. Minutes of previous meeting (28 March 2022)

2.1 The draft minutes (previously circulated by email) were approved – proposed by DY, seconded by JN.

3. Matters Arising (not otherwise listed as agenda items)

3.1 Seabank Road speed-limit sign. A reply was still awaited from the Ward Manager.

3.2 Town Centre and Ombudsman report. No new information. It was understood that Highland Council had sought a review of the Ombudsman's verdict that the Council had failed to observe proper process. Meanwhile the Council had not yet made the required apology nor indicated how their decision-making procedures would be reformed in the light of the Ombudsman's findings. The matter would continue to be monitored.

3.3 Common Good leases and disposals. No new information. The consultations on the disposal of Grant Street property and the amendment to James' Kiosk lease had taken place. The Council had not yet announced the outcomes. The matter would continue to be monitored.

3.4 Sandown consultation. As agreed at the 28 March meeting, a further letter had been sent to the Council about the inadequacies of the second consultation exercise, since the explanation provided so far had been unsatisfactory. A reply was still awaited.

3.5 Harbour Street toilets. No new information. No reply had been received to the NW&SCC letter of 31 March seeking clarification and assurances on the restoration and reopening of the toilets. The toilets had not been brought back into use. This was regrettable, given that the visitor season had already begun.

Action: reminder to be sent to Ward Manager (BS)

3.6 Cycle-training at the Links. No response to the specific concerns raised earlier. No alternative venues had been considered. The Council's approach, as outlined by the Ward Manager and Councillors, was to "wait and see" whether any problems arose. In brief discussion the question was again raised as to why the existing facility at the Riverside was not being used, with upgrading if necessary. Examples elsewhere (eg Boat of Garten) showed funding was available.

3.7 Jubilee events and activities. The CC welcomed initiatives (tree-planting, Viewfield picnic) to mark the Queen's platinum jubilee, but had confirmed that the CC was not a grant-giving organisation and had no funds available to help towards the costs of such events.

3.8 Seamens' Hall. The CC was supportive of action to retain and use the Hall, an important part of Nairn's heritage. It was open to any interested group to put forward proposals; but the trustees were apparently only willing to consider the Green Hive offer. The Community Planning Partnership had apparently been told that a further £190,000 was being sought for additional architectural consultancy work, and up to £1.7 million thereafter to refurbish the building. Given that there were a large number of other possible projects in the town, the question remained as to whether this was the highest priority for the use of the limited public funds on offer.

4. Financial report

4.1 In the absence of the Treasurer, the Chair reported that the Zoom licence (£143.88), the insurance premium (£86) and the website subscription (£78) had been paid but that these expenses would only be brought to account when the bank procedures for change of signatories were completed. Payments (3 x £32) would also need to be made for Community Centre meeting-room hire. Meanwhile the current balance remained at £2219.16.

5. Nairn Common Good and HLH management charges

5.1 JN provided an update in the light of the most recent information provided under FoI requests. The contractual arrangements between THC and HLH were clearly stated in the legally binding 2011/2017 Service Delivery Contract. However uniquely among the hundreds of facilities and services included in the contract, Nairn Common Good was also separately invoiced by HLH to manage the same facilities (Links and paddling pool/splashpad). HC had stated that charges were being raised against Nairn's Common Good under a "long-standing arrangement" which the FoI proved had never been formally drawn up, approved or signed. THC also averred that the separate charge was because it was a common good property, but FOI information showed that it was the only one of seven Common Good properties in the contract being charged a second time for HLH management.

5.2 It had also emerged that only Nairn was being charged for the provision of HLH-managed leisure and recreation facilities where the assets did not belong to HC. Of a long list of third-party owned assets in the 2011/17 contract, not one was paying HLH for their management services.

5.3 NWSCC had previously raised the issue that in other areas where Highland Council occupied or used Common Good properties or assets as part of their statutory provision, rent was paid into the Common Good Fund or maintenance provided in lieu of rent; and in communities without CG assets, THC met the costs of providing leisure and recreational facilities from Council budgets. Once more Nairn CG was being treated differently and being uniquely disadvantaged.

Action: it was agreed that this situation was unreasonable and unacceptable, and that new incoming Councillors be asked to review and change the present unsatisfactory arrangements.

6. Local health services and vaccinations

6.1 As agreed, a letter had been sent to the NHS Highland CEO on 31 March about the withdrawal of vaccination services from Nairn and Nairnshire. The reply, of 14 April, had stated that – in response to local concerns – NHS Highland was *"in the process of reinstating locally accessible vaccination clinics in areas out-with Inverness as a priority, and this includes Nairn."* [A clinic was arranged in the Community Centre on 20 April].

6.2 The reply added that vaccination services were being withdrawn from GP surgeries and local health centres and would instead be *"managed by NHS Board-delivered models under a national Vaccination Transformation Programme...via larger urban vaccination centres, and locally accessible venues."*

6.3 In vigorous discussion, several points were made very strongly. It made no sense to deploy staff to set up ad hoc clinics in the Community Centre or to expect elderly and infirm patients to travel to an Inverness shopping centre. Nairn had a modern, up-to-date, purpose-designed health centre easily accessible to the local community, a GP practice willing and able to deliver the service as they had done very efficiently over the pandemic period, and health centre staff who were familiar with the local community's needs. These assets and this expertise should be fully utilised. The alternatives being pursued by NHS Highland were less accessible and less efficient.

Action: it was agreed that a further letter be sent to NHS Highland making these points, and that the letter should be copied also to MSPs and MPs asking them to intervene in support of the reinstatement of local provision of health services using existing premises and staff. (BS/AN)

7. Proposed IMFLDP2

7.1 In a meeting with local CC members and local business representatives on 7 April, Council planners had confirmed that the Council intended to proceed with the proposed plan, which is currently published for consultation and comment by 17 June. They acknowledged however that they had not taken account of the implications for Grigorhill industry of the decision to re-designate the Nairn East site from “*non-preferred*” to “*preferred*”. This change happened to coincide with the submission of a pre-application planning submission by Springfield for that site which envisaged the construction of up to 650 houses. Officials claimed that the change reflected doubts about the viability of the other major sites at Sandown and Nairn South.

7.2 It was helpful that Ms Lackie, the Executive Chief Officer, had made clear that the Council’s “settled view” of the proposed plan was still open to amendment. The Grigorhill businesses were seeking a further meeting with HC planners to ensure that the issues they had raised were fully addressed in a revised version of the plan.

7.3. This led to a discussion about the importance of local employment and the need to ensure that the development plan reflected local priorities, in line with official policy on community-led place-planning. There was general agreement on the need to ensure adequate infrastructure, given the issues that had arisen at Lochloy over access, drainage, flooding and water supply. Questions were also asked about the validity of the Council’s targets for housing. The question of whether housing development at Delnies was still conditional on the delivery of the other elements identified in the original planning proposal had not been answered by the Council.

Action: it was agreed that a reminder would be sent on the query about Delnies (BS). The briefing which NW&SCC intended to provide to new Councillors would include key points on development planning.(BS) The local CCs would take forward plans to arrange a public meeting with HC planning officials to raise local concerns about the current draft plan. NW&SCC would prepare draft comments on the proposed IMFLDP in time for the 17 June deadline.

8. The A96 Bypass

8.1 A meeting with the Transport Minister had been arranged for 19 May. It was surprising and disappointing that the BID (who had urged that Nairn “speak with one voice”) had opted not to join with the Community Councils, local business representatives, and other community groups in a collective discussion, but were planning a separate meeting with the Minister (with the SNP Councillor-candidate in attendance).

8.2 In discussion it was suggested that the meeting provided an important opportunity for high-level engagement. A repetition of assurances of political will to deliver the bypass would not be sufficient. The Minister should be asked to recognise that the future development of Nairn was conditional upon – and therefore should await – the completion of the bypass; and she should be asked to confirm both the funding-allocation and the timeframe for delivery.

Action: CC representatives to make these key points at the meeting with the Minister.

9. New Academy, and possible Library relocation

9.1 The statement by Ms Lackie at the 9 April meeting that the location of the new Academy had not yet been decided, that alternatives were being explored, and she would seek clarification from officials (Robert Campbell) on the question of capacity and configuration, was welcomed.

9.2 In discussion, the problems with the quality, design and construction of new schools elsewhere – notably in Wick – were reiterated, and also concerns about the accuracy of HC capacity forecasts, given the evidence from Culloden and Croy, where under-provision had required the installation of portakabins. It was agreed that these issues would be pursued at future stakeholder meetings, and drawn to the attention of new Councillors.

9.3 It was also argued that the future of the Nairn Library should be considered on its own merits. It should be “decoupled” from the debate about a new school, and not regarded simply as a subordinate element in the new school planning. The local community view was clear and overwhelming: that the Library should remain in the town centre. This was also the requirement of government policy. If the Library had to be relocated from its present (leased) building, then it should be moved to alternative premises – of which there were several – in the town centre.

Action: both subjects to be included in briefing provided to new Councillors. (BS).

10. Parking scheme, tourism strategy and visitor facilities

10.1 A reply is still awaited to the joint letter of 26 January from both CCs about the legal and regulatory basis for the parking-fees scheme, and the arrangements to appropriate revenue generated from Nairn’s Common Good assets. A reminder has been sent.

10.2 Parking is an important element in a visitor strategy for the town. Council officials have acknowledged that it was inappropriate to produce a tourism strategy in private discussion with the BID (who represent only the retail business ratepayers) and without engaging also with local community groups and all tourism-related providers.

Action: relevant Council officials to be asked to meet local CCs and others with the objective of producing a revised and more comprehensive tourism strategy; and this topic will also be raised with the new elected councillors. (BS)

11. Dialogue with other CCs

11.1 Recent Zoom contacts with other Highland CCs had confirmed that many of those with local Common Good assets and funds had concerns about Highland Council’s policy and management. Parking scheme proposals elsewhere had raised similar issues to the situation in Nairn. Email contacts were continuing with the aim of developing a common position on the need for reform of CG management across the region.

11.2 The inconsistencies in funding for leisure and recreation facilities and the issues around Developer Contributions [Item 12 below] would also be of interest to other CCs in Highland region.

Action: the latest research on funding allocations would be shared with other CCs by email and/or at future Zoom meetings. (JN)

12. Developer Contributions (DCs) and L&R funding

12.1 The latest IMFLDP delivery plan (which had not been subject to public consultation) had revealed how the substantial funding from developer contributions in respect of new housing, which was intended to enhance leisure & recreation facilities in local areas, was all being channelled into the budgets of THC and HLH. This contrasted with Moray, which operated an open and transparent bidding and project appraisal process to enable local community groups and organisations to bid for a share of DCs from developments in their town.

12.2 Even more disturbing was the fact that in almost all areas, this funding was not being allocated to the improvement of local amenities where the developments were located, but was assigned to centralised locations such as Inverness and Dingwall.

12.3 This delivery plan also contravenes HC's own DC supplementary guidance policy (p17) that "*contributions [towards community facilities] will not usually be tied to the delivery of any given project*" and will "*give due regard to where these contributions have come from*".

Action: it was agreed that Council practice did not appear to comply with their own policy. The information would be shared with other CCs (JN), and a formal approach would be made to new Councillors to seek a review and change in how DC funding is allocated. (BS)

13. Place Based Investment Funding (PBIF)

13.1 In a very brief discussion it was agreed that the procedure recently adopted for the distribution of PBIF money – which was essentially decided arbitrarily and at short notice, and channelled to selected recipients by the Chair of the NNCPP and the Ward management with no public bidding-invitation or consultation – was unsatisfactory. Future funding should be assigned under an open, transparent procedure and on the basis of considered project-appraisals.

Action: another issue to be included in the briefing submission to new Councillors in May.(BS)

14. Questions/comments from the public

14.1 It was suggested that the CCs should take a more pro-active approach to use of social media, in order to raise awareness of local issues and mobilise popular support for changes. This was generally agreed: online platforms and websites were now as important as traditional press outlets and public meetings. It was however pointed out that significant time, capacity and resources were necessary to operate a website or engage on social media, especially where administration and moderation of public comment was required. CC members were all volunteers, many with full-time jobs. While some other Councils provided funding, facilities and support for CCs to sustain an online presence, Highland Council had declined to do so.

14.2 Given the numerous subjects which the CCs had to address, it was argued that there was case for being selective over which issues to pursue. It was not possible to fight every battle. Similarly, there was perhaps merit in picking specific causes (the Library was mentioned as an example) with the aim of focusing effort, and public support, on a few selected projects. This was challenged, on the grounds that Nairn had long suffered from the piecemeal pursuit of separate individual project initiatives, with no joined-up thinking or planning, no serious assessment of priorities and no consistent vision.

15. AOCB and next meeting

15.1 No other relevant matters were raised.

15.2 Next meeting will be at 7.00pm on Monday 30 May.