
LEADER'S REPORT: 30 January- 30 February

ARGYLL AND BUTE COUNCIL EXECUTIVE MEETING: 19 March 2009

1. Launch of National Books of Scottish Connection, 6th February

I was delighted to be able to give the official welcome to everyone who attended this historic day at Kilmartin Museum on Friday 6th February and together with Jim Mather, Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism, launch the national Book of Scottish Connections.

The Book of Scottish Connections will record the; births, deaths, marriages and civil partnerships; involving Scottish people, that take place outside of Scotland. Lolita and David Lavery from Campbeltown were presented with the first ever certificate from the book by Jim Mather MSP, following their marriage in South Africa.

Lolita is originally from Cape Town and moved to Scotland to trace her roots, meeting David in the process. The couple had since set up Kintyre's only 5-star guest house and are expecting triplets in July.

It gave me great pleasure to present David and Lolita with a commemorative bottle of Springbank Whisky, which was very kindly donated by the distillery.

I feel that The Book of Scottish Connections is an extremely important document and to be able to launch it at Kilmartin was a great honour, especially during this Year of Homecoming Scotland. It was a most fitting location for such an event given the historic significance of Dunaad.

The book will enable the Scottish diaspora to establish their link to Scotland in a new public record and to obtain a copy of the entry for commemorative purposes. Although the Book of Scottish Connections will have no legal standing, applications will be rigorously checked to ensure their authenticity and will help generations to come to trace their Scottish roots.

I was so pleased that the very first entry in the newly created register would feature an Argyll and Bute family and felt proud that one of our historic locations had been selected for the launch

2. Process for Change Up-Date, High Level Design, 24th February

I was pleased to introduce the update seminar for the Process for Change, the purpose of which was to share the results of the high level design phase of the process and consult on which of the seven identified themes should be progressed to the next "detailed design phase".

The Council received £150,000 at the end of last financial year towards completing the National Shared Services Diagnostic. This was completed and reported to Council on 2nd October 2008. The Council decided to take forward 7 themes for further investigation, as an integrated programme and allocated funds of £221,000 for this high level design stage. This programme was branded "Process for Change" with myself as Sponsor for the overall programme along with the Chief Executive.

The high level design stage has now been completed and the results of this were disseminated at the seminar. The Project Managers discussed their respective themes in turn giving an overview of what the future design would look like and showed us their re-worked business cases.

After hearing about each theme, members were asked to decide which of these they would like to have progressed to "Detailed Design". This would be the stage of the process in which; process maps for service redesign would be produced identifying which posts would be affected, developing criteria for any new system specifications, and determining any changes required to premises, etc.

Having decided which themes we would like to take forward to detailed design, we would then have to; consider the costs involved, how we would fund this further work and ensure we have the capacity to go forward from detailed design to implementation.

The Process for Change is not just about service delivery and where monetary savings can be made. It is about how we as representatives of Argyll and Bute Council can provide a better services to the people we represent.

Now that the themes have been discussed at this forum, there is a short time available to review and amend proposals before they go to Council formally for consideration on 5th March.

Members were asked to consider if this was sufficient time or whether we needed longer to consider the issues.

3. Economic Summit 2009

On 25th February, I gave the welcome at the Argyll and Bute 2009 Economic Summit, which was hosted in our own Council Chamber.

The attendees on the day were a broad representation of businesses from across the area who had come together to listen to our speakers, share thoughts and discuss the challenges and opportunities facing businesses in Argyll and Bute.

Since the previous Economic Summit, just over a year earlier, a lot had changed in the national and global economic arena with the result that everyone now faced financial challenges. This was reflected in the presentations from the speakers who included; Liz Cameron (Chief Executive, Scottish Chambers) David Douglas,

(Regional Director, Clydesdale Bank Plc) and David Sutherland (Chairman, Tulloch Group Plc). Our Chair for the day was Mr. Michael Levack, Chair of the Scottish Building Federation, the leading trade body for the Construction Industry in Scotland.

I described how Argyll and Bute was doing everything possible to work with partners to remain in-tune with the needs of communities and businesses and respond positively to this sudden and increasing downturn in the prospect for growth and jobs.

I spoke about how Argyll and Bute Council had welcomed the recognition given to Local Government by Scottish Government, especially the acknowledgement of the important part that we play in the governance of Scotland and the potential that we have to influence the economic health of our area.

I described how Argyll and Bute Council values partnership working, as we see it as the only way forward for the development of our communities and businesses in such times. Also our overall approach this year being to deliberately align our budget processes with opportunities for delivering sustainable economic growth.

I continued in some detail with the specific examples of the investments the Council had committed to including:-

- our £30m+ programme of major realm works which would be delivered through the CHORD programme,
- our future in the retention and development of wind energy manufacturing processes for Kintyre with announcements likely in march,
- £50m already spent and £34.7m to be invested on road and transport related infrastructure improvements in Argyll and Bute (egg through the development of Airport and Harbour projects),
- and our commitment to the establishment of the new in-house Business Gateway service proposed for April to act as a key means for improving our engagement with the local business community through a “one door approach” to business advice and information.

I explained that it would be most important, looking to our shared futures, to maintain dialogue with Chamber of Commerce, the Federation of Small Businesses and other key partners in order to promote services more effectively and adjust them to meet business need where possible.

In the area of planning, which was highlighted as an issue at the previous Economic Summit, I explained how we had been working to influence the government’s Planning Reform Agenda and remain committed to improving the processes and timescales for planning approvals and the production of our Local Development Plan.

I confirmed the Council’s commitment to pursuing the six elements of the Government’s wider economic recovery programme:-

- Reshaping capital spending plans
- Ensuring all government activity, including on planning regulation, supports economic development
- Intensifying activity and support for tourism and homecoming 2009
- Intensifying work around energy efficiency and fuel poverty
- Increasing advice to business and individuals
- Improving advice to vulnerable individuals.

In addition, I explained that we are ensuring that we access maximum external funding, especially from Europe, for Argyll and Bute's continued development.

I concluded, my presentation by explaining that Argyll and Bute Council views investment in the local economy as being crucial to supporting local business, as well as in supporting and developing communities. The Council's actions to date, clearly demonstrate that we have initiated imagination as well as innovation and that;

- We have the determination and the in-built flexibilities to succeed,
- That we are in-tune with all that the Government's Economic Recovery Programme requires and that we have responded appropriately,
- And importantly, that what we propose meets with the needs of our communities and businesses

We are clear, as a council, we can only be successful in achieving our goals by continuing to work in partnerships that include a broad range of local businesses.

4. Dunoon - Gourock Ferry Crossing Meeting between Inverclyde Council, Argyll and Bute Council and Scottish Government, Friday, 20 February 2009

I attended the above meeting at the Municipal Buildings, Greenock. Also in attendance on the day from Argyll and Bute Council were; Councillor Duncan McIntyre (Transport Spokesperson), Moya Ingram (Transportation Manager), Robert Pollock (Head of Economic Development & Strategic Transportation) From Scottish Government were; Graham Laidlaw (Transport Directorate), Judith Ainsley (Transport Directorate), Alan McPherson (Transport Directorate). From Inverclyde Council were; Councillor Terry Loughran, Councillor George White, Councillor Ronnie Ahlfeld, Aubrey Fawcett (Corporate Director, Regeneration & Resources). We received apologies from Jim Mather MSP, Councillor Jim Clocherty and Councillor Robert Moran

Graham Laidlaw outlined the roles and responsibilities of the other Scottish Government staff in attendance; Alan McPherson would be leading on policy development and dealing with the Commission and Judith Ainsley would be leading on Ferries Review and tendering. He also updated the meeting on action taken; meetings and correspondence, since the previous meeting, including some detail on the broader Ferries Review issue.

I took the opportunity of emphasising the importance of any tendering process specifying a combined vehicle and foot passenger service and asked if this could

now be taken forward. Aubrey Fawcett endorsed my view, indicating that he had concerns about the matter being delayed any further, stating that the two Councils were looking to the Scottish Government to be proactive on this matter. I asked that the Scottish Government consider an options exercise.

The main outcomes from the meeting were as follow:-

- Councils would provide an economic overview to the Scottish Government within next 2 weeks. Robert Pollock and Aubrey Fawcett would liaise accordingly.
- Scottish Government would consider how a tender brief could be developed and would organise a follow-up meeting with officers from the two Councils to discuss.
- Scottish Government would arrange for all to meet again in late March after a planned mid March meeting between the Commission and the Scottish Government.
- That all of the above actions would be carried out in a manner supportive of a fully open tendering process

Another meeting is to be arranged by Graham Laidlaw and held in Inverclyde.

5. Older people and learning disability project board at SNH Boardroom

I chaired a meeting of the Project Board with responsibility for oversight of the reviews of Learning Disability, and Older People's Services which the Council has agreed should be carried out.

The Project Board includes; representatives from Health, service users and their carers. A considerable amount of work has been carried out in recent months, in terms of developing options/proposals for both service areas.

There was considerable discussion at the Project Board, about the need for good communications in relation to these matters, and briefings on progress will be put in place for Members, and indeed for other interested parties, over the next two to three months.

6. Demonstration Project Board Meeting- Harnessing the Potential of the 3rd Sector to Help Achieve Council's Corporate Objectives, HIE Office, 26th February 2009

On the above date, I chaired the first meeting of the second phase of the Demonstration Project Board. There were two main items discussed on the day; Dialogue with Partners Brief and the Demonstration Project Action Plan.

The Demonstration Project has finished its first phase of research and we are now ready to have a dialogue with our partners on findings from Phase 1 of the Project and the proposed follow-up actions. This dialogue will take place through the

months of May, June and July 2009. The resulting feedback will be incorporated to ensure that the proposed actions are fit for purpose. The first stage of this work will be to look at our own internal processes by speaking with Officers and others within the Council who work with the Third Sector, to find out what tools and information they use to engage with the Third Sector. Likewise, we will also be speaking with our colleagues in Health, Enterprise and Third Sector Intermediaries. This information will then be used to further inform the Project's work.

A number of milestones, roles and responsibilities were agreed at the meeting and the project's progress will be reported to the board on an on-going basis.

An unscheduled item which arose as a result of an earlier meeting with Kate Braithwaite of the Carnegie UK Trust was the possibility of Argyll and Bute participating as one of five UK National Third Sector Flagship projects. I hope to be able to bring more information to the Executive Committee in a future next Leader's Report.

7. Council Tax

Council tax collections to end of January for 2008/9 are 94.84% - now exactly the same as last year. By contrast at the end of January we were down 0.07%. The improvement in December was in part due to re-instatement of discounts which had been removed at the end of November and adversely affected that month's stats. Overpaid accounts are still lower than the previous year's so we actually have a very slight increase in performance. Current year sheriff officer payments are still up on last year's now equating to c 0.13%.

We are now monitoring collections on a weekly basis and as at 6 March 2009, for 2008/9 they are now at 95.12% up 0.34% on last year's. This is encouraging. Statistics over the last few weeks are quite volatile as payments start to come in for the new year following annual billing – in the past payments via post offices all defaulted to the current year. We have gone live with a new cash receipting system which we believe will not have this particular problem. No doubt there will be others instead.

Collections for the 2007/08 year are now 96.92%, down 0.03% on last year's at this time. Sheriff officer collections for February for all years were £186,788 – down £19,000 on last February's. For January and February together, we are now down £77,000 of the previous year's – a reduction of nearly 17%.

A presentation to prospective tenderers in respect of the sheriff officer tender was held on 26 February. Responses are due by 26 March.

Collections of Non-Domestic Rates to the end of February for 2008/9 are 103.89%, 6.91% up on this time last year. This is due to overpayments of £1,676,091 the majority of which relates to NBC Clyde Properties as they have asked us to retain these monies to offset against next year's rates. Excluding overpayments, collections would be 97.25%, an increase of 0.27%. Collections for 2007/8 are 104.60%, again overstated by overpayments majority of which also relates to NBC Clyde Properties. Substantial overpayments will be a continuing feature of the NDR

statistics over the remainder of the year. Across all years back to 1 April 2005 the overpayments due to NBC Clyde Properties amount to £5.2m. plus interest. They have now requested that we make the repayment to them in respect of Faslane, but not for Coulport or Glendouglas. A repayment of £2.87m will be made.

Councillor Dick Walsh
Leader of the Council
12 March 2009