
LEADER'S REPORT: 1st September – 30th September

ARGYLL AND BUTE COUNCIL EXECUTIVE MEETING: 20th October 2009**1. COSLA Resources and Capacity Executive Group, 9th September 2009**

I am, unfortunately, unable to report on the items covered at the above meeting due to a "Private and Confidential" marker which is being enforced due to the reported recent leakage of information from COSLA. The detailed information, however, is contained in the Leader's Report Pack.

2. Official Opening of Port Askaig Pier, 10th September 2009

Port Askaig Pier was officially opened by Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal on 10th September. I was delighted to make the welcome speech at this event which was a wonderful celebration of achievement, marking a special day for the people of Islay.

This redevelopment project represents a huge financial commitment not only from the council but from other funding organisations, is an excellent example of strong partnership working. This was also our first opportunity to officially thank to our partners; the Scottish Government, HITRANS, the Public Transport Fund and the European Regional Development Fund for their part in making possible what was initially a vision for this island community.

Investment on this scale demonstrates the Council's vision and determination to; maintain and support its island populations, create infrastructure, improve access, maintain communications and ensure the long term sustainability of the island. It is also another positive example of the Council's commitment to economic recovery.

Port Askaig now has a modern port facility capable of dealing with mainland and Jura ferry traffic long into the future.

This celebration allowed for all of those involved in the project to meet for the first time, to take pride in their achievements and to give the council the opportunity to thank them all for their efforts and support.

3. Highlands and Islands Conveners Group Meeting on 24th September

I attended the above meeting which was held in Edinburgh.

The agenda items included items:-

1. Convention of the Highlands and Islands Agenda
2. Climate Change
3. Europe – Highlands and Islands European Partnership
4. HITRANS
5. Rural Filling Stations
6. Scottish Islands Federation and the 2011 Island Year of Culture
7. Crown estate/Community Benefit.

I have provided, below, a brief summary of these agenda items. Full detail is available in the Leader's Report Pack.

Item 1, Convention of the Highlands and Islands Agenda.

This item was included in order that members had an opportunity discuss the agenda for the forthcoming Convention in Dunoon on 26th October.

Although the final agenda and papers have not yet been released, we are advised that the agenda will be as follows:-

- Health in the Highlands and Islands (led by NHS Highland)
- Climate Change in the Highlands and Islands (led by Scottish Government and the Highland Council)
- Skills Agenda (led by Skills Development Scotland)
- Economic Recovery (led by Highlands and Islands Enterprise)

Further detail regarding the above will be available after the Convention, in the November Leader's Report.

Item 2, Climate Change, considered a report by Highland Council advising members that Highland Council had been asked to jointly develop a paper for consideration at the Convention of the Highlands and Islands. The completed paper, including our contributions and those of other Councils etc will be included in October's Leader's Report Pack.

Item 3, Europe – Highlands and Islands European Partnership, considered a report by Officers of the Highlands and Islands European Partnership (HIEP), which provided members with an up-date on the work undertaken by the HIEP Officers group since the last meeting and set out the options for the future staffing and location of HIEP. At the meeting, Conveners were given a verbal up-date on matters relating to the operation and governance of the HIEP Officers Group and it was agreed that an early meeting was required with Chair of HIE and his senior officers to clarify their role in this matter, as they are the employing agency.

Item 4, HITRANS.

Members considered a report by the Highland Council on the current organisational and funding role of HITRANS and options for the future. Members were invited to take the opportunity to consider these options. It was also agreed that appropriate members would seek a meeting with John Swinney, Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, to discuss this matter further.

Item 5, Rural Filling Stations and Fuel Costs.

The meeting considered a report by the Highland Council. This provided members with the detail of the findings from a study which was commissioned jointly by HIE, HITRANS and the Highland Council. The paper considers issues such as; sustainability, the reduction in rural filling stations and the challenges facing those which remain.

Conveners noted the contents of the report and asked that a further report be presented to the Convener's Meeting in November and this was to be co-ordinated by the Chief Executive of Orkney Council.

Item 6, Scottish Islands Federation and the 2011 Island Year of Culture

I provided Conveners with a verbal up-date regarding the Scottish Islands Federation (SIF) and the 2011 Island Year of Culture. The main aim of the up-date was to outline current funding arrangement advice and initiate discussion and to this end it was recognised that a further Officers' Meeting was required.

Item 7, Crown Estate/Community Benefit.

The Leader of Highland Council provided a verbal up-date on recent communication with Crown Estate and discussed the contents of an action note taken from a meeting held on 2nd September between; the Crown Estate, Orkney Islands Council, Highland Council and Highlands and Islands Enterprise. The main purpose of that meeting had been to discuss Offshore Renewable Energy Projects (community benefits, opportunities and arrangements). Members discussed this item and noted the detail. For the meeting which is to take place at the end of November consideration was to be given to extending invitations to; Alex Neil and Crown Estates. Our Council will be represented at future meetings.

4. COSLA Leaders Meeting 25th September

I am, unfortunately, unable to report on the items covered at the above meeting due to a "Private and Confidential" marker which is being enforced due to the recent leakage of information from COSLA.

Much discussion took place regarding this issue and the problems that now exist with the circulation of papers. Leaders expressed their concerns and the issue will be monitored.

5. South African Visit Welcome Event, Oban High School, Monday 28th September 2009.

I was delighted to have been invited to give a short welcome presentation to the staff and pupils of Butterworth High School from South Africa who were visiting Oban this month.

The purpose of the visit was to forge a school partnership as part of a “Dreams and Teams” programme which links teachers and pupils across the globe through sporting interest and leadership development.

The welcome event celebrated this new and exciting partnership and gave recognition to this unique opportunity to share interests, cultures and correspondence in a way that will break down barriers and open new channels of communication in a spirit of mutual respect. I am sure that a linking of teachers from a variety of nations and agreeing a partnership plan will provide benefits to all through the sharing of experience and practice. The programme aims to facilitate the achievement of positive social and educational change, both within the schools and the wider communities.

Within my welcome, I described how the development of young people to become motivated and confident adults is a theme that is close to my heart and those of my Council colleagues. I spoke about how important it is for young people to be stretched and challenged and have opportunities to use their energy in a way that will help their communities through active citizenship. For this reason I wished the programme every success and I hope to be kept informed of any good news stories, which I am sure will follow.

6. UP-DATES

6.1 Council Tax Collections up to End September 2009

Collections of council tax to 30 September 2009 are 57.12%, down 0.17% on last year's at this time compared to last month's increase of 0.01%. These figures have been affected by a review of exemptions which has resulted in a net decrease in exemptions granted of £23k. In-month sheriff officer collections are down by £19k on last year's at this time and cumulatively they are down by the equivalent of 0.11% on in-year collections.

Collections for 2008/09 are 96.43%, down 0.09% from last year's at this time which is a little better from the position last month which had shown a 0.11% decrease at the same time last year.

The council tax base return was run at 7 September 2009, which gives the number of households by council tax band, and shows the number receiving various categories of discount (disabled band, single person, second home, long term

empty, or full exemption). This shows:

| Council Tax Base return | @ 7/9/09 | @1/9/08 |
|---|-----------------|----------------|
| No of households | 46,446 | 46,306 |
| Exempt households | 1,916 | 1,915 |
| Disabled band reduction | 300 | 301 |
| Single Person Discount | 15,112 | 14,972 |
| Second homes | 4,033 | 3,860 |
| Long Term empty homes | 578 | 571 |
| Households only occupied by disregarded persons | 25 | 22 |
| Households with no exemption or discount | 24,482 | 24,665 |
| No. of Band D equivalents | 38,983 | 38,933 |

The number of Band D equivalents has increased by 0.13% - the smallest increase seen for a number of years.

Collections of Non-Domestic Rates to the end of September for 2009/10 are 69.10%, down 0.52% on last year, further reduced from last month's decline of 0.89%. You will recall that the August statistics were affected by large backdated rateable value increases on two telecommunications subjects which came through at the end of the month, amounting to over £600,000 and these have only recently been re-billed. The revised bills for the accounts affected by the NDR 3% deferral scheme have been issued. The amount deferred is £107,413. If it were not for the deferment scheme, collections would only have been 68.82% - down 0.80% on last months. Ratepayers were advised to keep up with instalments until the revised bills were issued. Most did keep up with these but we have delayed reminders on a small number of accounts.

Collections for 2008/09 are 98.17%, up 0.08% on last month's figures. The NDR snapshot software was received this week and is being tested. This is required for a new return due to the Scottish Government later this month which will provide interesting summary statistics on all reliefs granted.