

ARGYLL AND BUTE COUNCIL EXECUTIVE MEETING: 4th November 2010

1.0 Video Conference with Richard Lochhead - Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment, Highland and Western Isles Councils, UHI and Others regarding The Crown Estate, Monday 13th September 2010

The above meeting confirmed that there was currently a new window of opportunity for working more closely with The Crown Estate to the benefit of local communities; in particular those adjacent to developments involving The Crown Estate. This would be of particular benefit at this time, given the likelihood of new projects resulting from renewable energy innovations around our coastlines. It was reported that this window of opportunity existed as a result of the new UK political will; in particular, the new coalition government's commitment to "The Big Society" and resulting interest in people taking responsibility for their own communities.

It was agreed at the meeting that these potential benefits would need to be acted on quickly to ensure that our communities have an opportunity to secure real monetary benefits rather than token gestures, such as football strips etc.

It was agreed that it would be important for all parties involved in these negotiations to reach consensus on a way of working together in a coordinated way to apply the right sort of pressure to ensure that funds raised remain in the Highlands and Islands area and, in particular, the communities involved.

To this end it was important not to sign The Crown Estates Commissioner's Memorandum of Understanding as it contained too many vagaries with the potential, if signed, to affect stakeholders' future influence/leverage.

It was agreed that sound consideration should be given now on the best ways in which to invest any monies acquired to ensure that communities derived lasting and meaningful benefit.

All present agreed to look at the development of an action plan to take account of all of the above.

Members will be up-dated of any further developments in this regard.

2.0 Launch of the CPD Framework for Elected Members, Rosebery House, Edinburgh, 21st September 2010.

The purpose of the above launch which I attended on 21st September, was to reveal and explain the Continuing Professional Development Framework for Members which has been developed by the Improvement Service in consultation with local authorities and piloted in six Scottish Councils.

The seminar discussed the background and the underpinning principles of the framework, the processes involved and the potential benefits to elected members.

In addition to the above, the costs of adopting the process were explained; there would be a £2k initial payment to cover programme development costs and this would be matched by £2k from the Improvement Service. Annually, there would be a further £2k charge for the use of the “Brightwave” platform upon which the CPD software sits.

The Councils which were involved in the pilot all agreed that the CPD Framework was a very beneficial and interesting system and I noted that it seemed to be a very good product, an on-line tool, that could lend itself well to the geographic circumstances of members in Argyll and Bute and allowing them a greater involvement in their own personal development.

At the seminar, members were also up-dated on the development of the LAGGAN Members’ Portal and it was most gratifying to hear how Argyll and Bute Council had taken such central role helping to drive this project forward.

3.0 COSLA Leaders Meeting, 24th September 2010

The Agenda of the above meeting was as follows:-

Items Taken in Private Session

1. Spending Review
 - a) Update
 - b) COSLA Media Work
 - c) Police & Fire
2. Secure Care
3. European Structural Funds Employability
4. Councillor’s Remuneration
5. Universal Home Insulation Scheme

Items Taken in Public Session

6. Welfare Reform
7. Self Directed Support
8. LUPS Programme Monitoring Committee – Nominations

I am, unfortunately, unable to report on above items marked “Items taken in private session” although detailed information is contained within the Leader’s Report Pack. I have however reported on items 6 – 8. Please see below.

3.1 Item 6 - Welfare Reform (21st Century Welfare)

Purpose

The purpose of this paper was to gain Leader’s endorsement for the COSLA response to the UK Government consultation on welfare reform, called 21st Century Welfare.

Recommendations

Leaders were recommended to:-

- i. Endorse the main principles of the COSLA consultation response outlined in the paper.
- ii. Approve the development of a COSLA position on the wider issue of welfare benefit cuts through elected members short-life Tackling Poverty Working Group which reports to the Community wellbeing and Safety Executive Group; and
- iii. Seek a further report to Leaders on welfare reform and benefit changes.

Outcome

Leaders agreed to the recommendations in the report.

3.2 Item 7 – Self Directed Support*

Purpose

The purpose of this paper was to inform Leaders about the development of a national strategy on Self Directed Support (SDS).

Recommendations

Leaders were invited to :-

- i. Note the position on the Independent Living Fund.
- ii. Comment on an issue relating to and arising from the Draft National SDS Strategy.
- iii. Endorse the view that the pace of change will be dependent on resource constraints and Councils' capacity to develop an infrastructure that can accommodate SDS; and
- iv. In the absence of any proposed amendments, endorse the Strategy as a joint publication with the Scottish Government.

Outcome

Leaders agreed to the above recommendations

**Self Directed Support is an expression of the principles of personalisation and the term is used to describe how people with social care needs can exercise choice and control over the support mechanisms in their lives.*

3.3 Item 8 – LUPS (Lowlands and Uplands Scotland) Programme Monitoring Committee – Nominations

Purpose

The purpose of this paper was to note and respond to the invitation from Scottish Government to refresh the COSLA representation committee

Recommendations

Leaders were asked to agree one of the following:-

- i. To agree to re-nominate members to this impartial arrangement as we currently do, with Group Leaders confirming or changing their nominations; or
- ii. To agree to establish different governance arrangements based on the concordat style of working with the Scottish Government.

Outcome

Leaders agreed to i. above; to re-nominate the following members; David O'Neill, David Berry and Kate Dean.

4.0 Meeting with MPs/MSPs; 28th September 2010.

The Chief Executive and I invited MPs and MSPs to join us for briefings on the above date; Jamie McGrigor – MSP and Alan Reid – MP accepted the invitation and were each met on a one to one basis.

The main purpose of these arranged meetings with MPs/MSPs was to share with them information detailed in the Council's leaflet "Difficult Choices for Difficult Times" and discuss with them the proactive steps the Council is already taking to mitigate the impacts of predicted funding reductions through the work of the Transformation Board

and Modernisation Programme.

It is hoped that having had open and constructive discussions, that this will enable Messrs McGrigor and Reid to be aware of some of the difficult decisions facing our Council.

5.0 Up-dates

5.1 Local Tax Collection

Collections of Council Tax to 30 September 2010 are 57.41%; up by 0.29% on last year's at this time. This is better than at end of August which was up by 0.14%. The improvement is due in part to better Sheriff Officer collections (0.10%) and higher overpays (0.03%) It is also partly due to September being a 5 week period for weekly payers whereas last year there were only 4 weeks (with 5 weeks falling in October) so some of this "improvement" will disappear next month. Collections of Council Tax for 2009/10 year are 96.74% which is up 0.31% on the previous year's at this time.

Collections of Non-Domestic Rates to 30 September 2010 are 68.59% - down 0.51% on last year at this time which is very similar to last month's position which was down by 0.53%. Collections for the 2009/10 year are 98.97% - up 0.72% on the previous year at this time, which is an improvement on last month's position.

5.2 Revenues and Benefits update

The Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Subsidy 2009/10 Audit is still in progress, and is due for completion by end of November. So far one error has been found where a service charge cost element was wrongly treated as eligible for Housing Benefit when it should have been ineligible. All claims for that service provider have been reviewed and will be corrected. Other similar claims will also be checked.

The announcements in the Spending Review have significant implications for the future of Housing and Council Tax Benefit. The proposals are to start to replace Housing Benefit from April 2013 with universal credit administered by HMRC/DWP, and for Council Tax Benefit to become a local scheme administered by local authorities. These proposals undoubtedly will have major impacts on local authority benefits staff, as well as on benefit claimants.

5.3 Exchequer Services update

The annual Procurement Capability Assessment was carried out on 4th October 2010 and our provisional score has increased from 21% last year to 36% which is a big improvement. We are awaiting the full assessment results and will then put in place a further improvement plan.

We have been short-listed for two "Government Opportunities (GO) Procurement Award" categories – The "GO Innovation or Initiative of the Year Award", which celebrate original and innovative concepts that have made a genuine difference within Scotland's commissioning and procurement sector. The Council's graduate recruitment and training programme for Procurement Officers has been short listed for this category. This project emerged as part of the Process for Change programme. Five Trainee Purchasing Officers, who each have a specific remit and role across the Council, are now in post. The second category we have been short-listed for is the "GO Sustainability/Corporate Social Responsibility initiative of the Year" for the Bute Food Contract Project. The key innovation was to link the supply of food into the educational curriculum, involving teachers as well as catering staff from the Council in development of the sourcing strategy

for butchery, meat, eggs and cheese. The pilot resulted in a number of achievements including: a 25% increase in school meals take up; a reported 30% increase in pupil satisfaction with school meals; overall economic benefit to the catering service (despite additional food costs from the pilot contracts); high levels of sustainability – taking into account social, environmental and economic factors. Winners will be announced at the Excellence in Public Procurement Awards event on 26 October.

The next tranche of the Cycle to Work scheme has been completed. Employees have the option to extend the hire period at no additional cost in order to reduce termination values – this change was made in the light of new guidance from HMRC.

A contract for two single-manned jet patchers has been awarded – single manned equipment proved to have better whole of life costs than the double manned equipment from alternative suppliers. We are leading on a contract across the Highlands and Islands for civil engineering consultancy. PQQs (pre-qualification questionnaires) are being evaluated and the full tender documents are being finalised.

Local three year contracts have been awarded for fruit and vegetables split between East and West Argyll, fresh meat contracts for Bute and Tiree (which were not covered by the Scotland Excel contracts), and for inspection and maintenance of mobility equipment (hoists, stair lifts etc).

5.4 Commissioning

The review of all the direct payment contracts has been concluded and findings reported to Adult Services. An action plan is being agreed to put improvements in place by April 2011. This has been done to ensure that we are well prepared, should volumes of such contracts increase in the future.

Following evaluation of tender responses, a 2 year contract for overnight response services has been awarded to Carr Gomm.

5.5 Customer Services

Nearly 89% of enquiries were dealt with at first point of contact through the Customer Service Centre in September and the percentage of abandoned calls was 5.8%. 32 complaints were recorded through the customer service centre using the new complaints process which went live on the 1st September. The percentage of abandoned calls was about double the usual number, due to a telephone fault which commenced on 4th August and was not fully resolved until 12th August. This was due to a tree having been planted which interfered with the radio-based transmissions. The tree was removed which resolved the fault.

Good progress is being made on business process re-engineering for social work enquiries and blue badges. However the go-live for these has been put back to January as the immediate priority is to complete the upgrade to Lagan version 7.0.

The mystery shopping outcomes have been analysed and are broadly encouraging across most channels, with the main exception being performance in responding to emails. A set of improvement actions has been agreed by the HR/ Process for Change Board and will be progressed. This provides a robust benchmark for future comparison.

5.6 IT

Following the award of the ACHA IT services contract, ACHA has now asked us to

quote for two further services – printing and support for the Academy system.

The Oracle upgrade has had to be postponed until November due to some technical difficulties which should be resolved shortly.

Our new fleet management system went live in September. This is now fully populated with details of the all of the Council's fleet vehicles, including pool cars and should improve the Council's ability to manage its fleet more proactively.