**Black Isle Partnership (BIP) – Black Isle Communities Meeting**

**Zoom Meeting 1000 24 August 2021**

**Present:** Cllr**.** Gordon Adam (Highland Council and BIP),Jon Palmer (BIP), Julian Paren (Minute taker and BIP), Ann Jefferson (Fortrose and Rosemarkie Community Council), Anne Mackay (Killearnan Community Council), Nigel Shapcott (Cromarty Development Trust and Cromarty Care Project), Anne Phillips (Fortrose and Rosemarkie Community Council), Vanessa Halhead (BIP), Cllr. Jennifer Barclay (Highland Council), Megan Mackenzie (Black Isle Cares), Neil Cameron (Resolis Community Council), Sheila Currie (Transition Black Isle), Peter Ratcliffe (Cromarty Community Council), Becky Richmond (BITT), Alison Petch (Culbokie Development Trust), Helen Robinson (Rosemarkie and Fortrose Trust), Nicola Sinclair (Press & Journal and ex- Chair of Caithness Area Committee of Highland Council)

**Agenda 1: Minutes of the BIP - Black Isle Communities Meeting on 17 August 2021**

The Minutes of the meeting on 17 August 2021 had only recently been circulated and Julian Paren said there were useful comments from Sarah M-T and Bruce Morrison. Additionally Anne Philips had provided a transcript of what she had put in the Chat facility. Julian agreed to circulate the fuller Minutes before the next meeting.

**Agenda 2: Strengthening local democracy on the Black Isle: Discussion with presentation from Nicola Sinclair**

**Gordon Adam** introduced Nicola Sinclair ex-Chair of the Caithness Area Committee. He said Nicola had experience of how structures needed to change so that local issues were addressed properly. The new Black Isle Area Committee could learn from her leadership as she addressed what she felt had been wrong with the Caithness Committee.

**Nicola Sinclair** said that in Caithness most residents felt that all decisions were made in Inverness and most were unaware the Area Committee existed. The Committee met for half a day irregularly to note reports from Education and Police that were compilations of data. Such a Committee was not proactive in any way. Nicola had been elected to the Committee on the back of a campaign to get a Maternity Unit in Wick but found the Committee had no mandate to discuss anything but Highland Council business. She wanted the Committee to be more relevant to the local area and to get results, and not be a box-ticking exercise for Highland Council.

Change came through Covid. The Councillors became more aware of events within the Community and so the Committee became more meaningful. The Committee began accepting motions. One concerned the future of Wick Airport which did lead to the Area Committee making a case to the full Highland Council. At the time Highland Council criticised the Area Committee for overstepping their role. A further scrap with Highland Council concerned the need for a Car Park, which was only resolved when the Area Committee refused to endorse the Transport Capital Budget.

The Caithness Area Committee changed the rules about the public role at the Area Committee Meetings. In normal times, Area Committee Meetings are open to the public but they can play no role. In Zoom times the Chair took the initiative to suspend the Meeting and then gauge opinion from the public, decide on the wording of motions, before reconvening the Meeting with a Tabled Amendment from the Community to be taken to the vote by the Councillors.

Before Covid, the Area Committee would rotate the venue of its meetings and then use the venue as a focus for local concerns. At each meeting they would also ask a local teacher to attend. The Community Planning Partnership also attended the Caithness Area Committee meetings.

Members of the Area Committee met weekly to discuss issues and all tasks were delegated - each meeting led to Actions. Vice Chairs for Wick and Thurso were appointed by the Committee. Weekly meetings were themed (Job Creation, Dounreay etc) to be as useful and relevant as possible. The Committee was no longer a rubber-stamping facility for Highland Council. In one sense Nicola Sinclair said her “lived experience” of the meetings was that they were now a forum for local initiatives rather than Council initiatives.

Nicola accepted that the Area Committee was now ahead of Highland Council. They had themed meetings and reported back to Highland Council so it was aware of the concerns. It was important that the Area Committee had greater access to funds to become more effective. She believed Council Officers were more receptive and responsive because the Area Committee members met regularly with the officers off-line. The Ward Manager had been very anxious that protocols were being broken, but later became helpful on how to interact.

**Jon Palmer** asked Nicola whether she felt the progress in Caithness of being “up for a fight” had spilled over elsewhere and beyond the Black Isle. Jon thought said the Sutherland 2045 Vision looked as if it would be following a similar path.

**Nicola** agreed that expectations were becoming ever higher but enhanced funding would be crucial to satisfy them. On the question of the relationship between Development Trusts and Community Councils, Gordon Adam wondered whether rivalries had surfaced or whether both groups had worked collaboratively.

Nicola said that the Highland Third Sector Interface coordinated the Tuesday calls with the Community Trusts and Community Councils. The Community Partnership also attended. Nicola said she saw the Community Councils as the voice of the communities while the Community Trusts deliver projects.

**Nigel Shapcott** congratulated Nicola on what had been achieved and emphasised her point about lack of funding. He asked whether the Caithness Area Committee had the ability to raise funds independently of Highland Council. Nicola said that she had had the hope to put in place Low Interest Business Loans that would need to be paid back. It was an idea that did not materialise. However Caithness did gain Community Benefit from the wind farms. Gordon Adam wondered who would manage local funds. The Ward Manager?

**Sheila Currie** congratulated Nicola on all she had learned and wondered if she thought just three Councillors would not be diverse enough to make an Area Committee work. Nicola said that not all the 8 Councillors on the Caithness Area Committee were fully engaged. They got on well enough – Party Politics did not enter the discussions – all acted in a true cross-party spirit.

**Gordon Adam** agreed for the Black Isle three members of a Committee were too few for a real discussion. There had to be more in these meetings. He also ventured that Area Committee Meetings were a waste of time for paid officers who attended, but who knew in general their reports would be agreed without revision. Gordon had suggested at the first Area Committee that he would revisit the frequency of such reports.

**Vanessa Halhead** thanked Nicola emphasising that the structure of local government was not good, and it was great that Nicola had made the best of a bad job. Vanessa also mentioned Local Place Plans but the mechanism for funding had not been determined.

 Nicola agreed she was working within a broken system. Community Planning Partnerships were good in principle, but had no funds. Local authority areas needed to be smaller. National priorities in Edinburgh were often against local issues. The Rural Infrastructure Fund was difficult to access, but it was revenue not capital that was most needed.

**Nigel Shapcott** thought all Area Committees should take heart from Caithness and learn what can be done to get some momentum and not reinvent the wheel first.

**Anne Mackay** pointed out that Parish Councils in England were budget-funded while Scotland’s Community Councils received little. Lack of consultation by Highland Council was just one issue. She said that areas of Scotland were becoming less and less empowered, but this was no criticism on local councillors. Community Councils needed money.

**Vanessa Halhead** said the powerlessness of Community Councils was an old issue. A review of local democracy is underway by the Scottish Government, but it will not deal with Community Councils. Because only the Scottish Government can reorganise this level of government it was essential that those concerned ramped up pressure on MSPs and Ministers.

**Nicola Sinclair** agreed completely. Community Councils fulfil core statutory functions. Much more power should be delegated and be fully funded. Highland Council could take months to tackle a problem, and it was always the Community Councillors who got the criticism.

**Agenda 3: Update from the Communities**

**Becky Richmond** (BITT) reported her interactions over Chanonry Point. She had had a reply from Kate Forbes (MSP) who insisted she filled in a further form. There was a lack of response from the other addressees. Becky was annoyed that Council Officers were keeping the Golf Club updated on the issue, but not Becky or the Fortrose and Rosemarkie Community Council. This was an appalling lack of courtesy and unacceptable in neglecting the statutory line of communication. Gordon Adam said he would take up the matter with Shane Manning.

**Ann Jefferson** (Fortrose and Rosemarkie Community Council) said the FRCC was always out of the loop in communications. After two years there is money for a Visitor Manager at Chanonry Point, but why did it take two years? There was also a lack of information on empty Council Houses in the district and after pressing for years, why was Rosemarkie 67th on the list for a local 20mph Speed limit? Could not the Ward Councillors been more forceful in arguing the case? Now there was the saga of the Rosemarkie bollards. What went wrong?

**Gordon Adam** said there was a lack of labour available to Highland Council and concerns like Ann’s he had heard from across Scotland as Chair of the Tourism Committee. He was sorry the work at Rosemarkie had not gone well and he would inspect the bollards.

**Ann Jefferson** mentioned the signage on Marine Terrace that she had taken up at a Senior Level. Jennifer Barclay informed that the two Council Houses Ann referred to were to be sold.

**Becky Richmond** said she was aware of how much work the Councillors did behind the scenes. She thought an opportunity should be given to Gordon to tell us what he is hoping to achieve. If he is hitting brick walls, then with more transparency all could be more sympathetic and positive.

**Anne Phillips** also complained about a lack of communication mentioning it took three years of persistence to be eventually told that one issue was not the responsibility of Highland Council.

**Anne Mackay** asked why Ward Councillors had lost control of their scrutiny. Killearnan CC was not getting clear answers and being fed misinformation. The latter point was related to a licensing permit for an event in the area.

**Gordon Adam** admitted that CCs needed a better two-way exchange with HC officers. At times there was not as much oversight as was needed.

**Jon Palmer** said it was inexcusable for Highland Council Officers not to copy in the relevant Community Council when dealing with issues, such as had been highlighted by the Rosemarkie bollards and operations at Chanonry Point. If Highland Council recognised Community Councils as important they should be included automatically as addressees in local issues.

**Neil Cameron** (Resolis Community Council) thanked all for the excellent meeting. However his personal view was that unless Highland Council took immediate action to deal with the excessive number of potholes in Resolis, then nobody would take Highland Council seriously.

**Vanessa Halhead** said there was urgent need for pothole filling in Cromarty, Ferintosh and Resolis CC areas. There were massively deep potholes which were too dangerous for health and safety. She thought the three Community Councils should make a joint pitch for action.

**Alison Petch** (Culbokie Community Trust) said The Trust now had Planning Permission for the Village Green and Hub and there had been the sale of the plot of land for the six Cairn Trust houses. There were no turf wars between the FCC and the Culbokie Development Trust.

**Peter Ratcliffe** (Cromarty Community Council) commented that all was well in Cromarty and he thought the meeting with Nicola Sinclair had been excellent.

**Nigel Shapcott** (Cromarty Development Trust) said the Reeds Path Loop had been recut and had been paid for. The campsite was not progressing. New plans had been submitted by an architect.

**Nigel Shapcott** (Cromarty Cares Project) said the Community Larder was closing and all the families who had benefitted from it were being helped by other means.

**Anne Mackay** (Killearnan Community Council) said she was concerned by the lack of groups consulted in the A9 Survey prepared by WSP. The stakeholders did not include the Tourism industry, Haulage industry, the Farming lobby, Forestry operators or Transition Black Isle. Anne requested that Highland Council convene a Teams Meeting with Transport Scotland and all relevant parties. **Gordon Adam** thanked Anne and said he would alert Transport Scotland to the wider group that Anne had proposed, as he would recommend that they be involved.

**Agenda 4: Any other business**

**Jon Palmer** said he had had very few responses to his suggestion for an event with a purpose to answer 'How can we take advantage of the new Black Isle Area Committee to better reflect democratic decision-making for the benefit of all residents?'

Two questions: Are we taking steps the right way? Do we need a broader event at this stage?

**Jennifer Barclay** thanked volunteers for cutting the hedge in Ness Road so people could walk the pavement.]

**Sheila Currie** said she was sorry there had been no time to discuss participatory budgeting and she had sent some links to the group ahead of any future discussion.

The meeting closed at 11:17.