

North, West & Central Sutherland Ward Forum
Kinlochberrie Hotel
Saturday 28 November 2009, 11 am

Present

Cllr Robbie Rowantree, Chair

Cllr Linda Munro

Cllr George Farlow

Ian Hargrave, Corporate Manager CSER

Andy Mackay, Ward Manager NW & CS

Chief Inspector Mathew Reiss

Constable Ian Sutherland

Donald Fisher, Scourie CC

Tony Gibbs, Ardgay & District CC

Graham Wild, Kinlochberrie CC

Russell Taylor, Creich CC

Roger Glover, Assynt CC

Janette Mackay, Strathy & Armadale CC

Sandra Munro, Altnaharra, Strathnaver & Bettyhill CC

John Booth, Melvich Portskerra & Halladale CC

Colin Simpson, Highland Council Tourism Coordinator

Scott Armstrong, Visit Scotland Regional Director

Roy Kirk, HIE, Area Manager

Jill McNicol, North Highland Tourism, Marketing Manager

Apologies

David Walker, Lairg CC

Introduction

Cllr R Rowantree welcomed everyone to the Forum, he welcomed Roy Kirk, HIE Area Manager for Caithness and Sutherland for joining today.

Note of Last Meeting was accepted as a true record and there were no **Matters Arising**.

Police/Community Safety

Cllr Rowantree introduced Chief *Inspector Matthew Reece* who gave a brief summary of his 24 year service and said how pleased he was to be back in the Sutherland area. Challenges facing him are budget cuts, police numbers, technology improvements and operational policies. Full information and statistics are available if requested by anyone from this meeting. He then opened up to questions from the floor.

Bettyhill CC raised the issue of lack of police presence during local events, even when Police had been informed – MR would look into this.

Cllr Munro commended the new shift system and reiterated the need for policing at local events.

Creich CC were worried about the loss of local information if police officers no longer live locally.

MR requested specific enquires can be directed direct to himself, or via Ward Manager AM.

Discussion Break Out

Rather than have two break out sessions to discuss Community Council Review and Tourism separately, it was agreed to remain in one group.

Ian Hargrave (*title*) began by saying that 2 Sutherland HC employees had recently received HC Quality Awards – Henry Flett and John McLeod, both of TEC Services.

Community Council Review

This is a 3-stage process, the first being community council boundary discussions. Current boundary maps were posted around the room today and IH invited discussion and comments by the end of December. He reminded everyone that a change to one boundary line will have an impact on at least one other one, and this should be borne in mind. He then opened the discussion up for questions.

Creich CC had been requested to add Spinningdale to their area. This presents problems as Spinningdale is not part of this Ward and ward boundaries cannot be changed. Cllr Farlow said there is a similar issue with Ben Mhor Assynt as it is part of Creich CC rather than Assynt CC. Ian Hargrave asked for comments to AM or Cllrs. He also stated that all Council meetings are open to the public, therefore CC reps are able to attend.

Tourism

Andy Mackay stated that each speaker in this group would present, and invite questions from the floor at the end.

He then introduced the first speaker – Scott Armstrong, Corporate Director Visit Scotland. Scott gave a brief summary of Visit Scotland and its remit; it is a non-membership organisation that gets much of its funding from the Scottish Government, employs 800 staff half of which work in Visitor Information Centres (the new name for Tourist Information Centres), and it has 4 main divisions – visitor engagement, business engagement, strategic partnerships and corporate services. Events Scotland (responsible for Homecoming) is a separately-run division. Marketing is the priority role with information and quality assurance following. 85-90% of visitors are from the UK, of the other 10% one quarter are from North America; they have a database of 4 million in the UK. It is envisaged they will close 3-4 visitor centres per year due to the change in ways people are accessing information and booking holidays. So far there has been good seasonal feedback with an increase of 10% in numbers to the Highlands.

Colin Simpson, Highland Council Tourism Manager was next to speak, and he outlined that tourism is a small section in the HC and is part of Planning and Development. They are extending their cruise liner development to Ullapool/Lochinver as well as further development in Invergordon. They are also involved in projects and local groups, like the Northwest Highlands Geopark. They offer a small tourism grant scheme but are mainly a facilitator between community groups and the Council. Planning & Development are also involved with the Rangers, Paths, Trails etc which all relate to tourism. They were involved in the successful project of getting Lufthansa flights between Inverness and Dusseldorf.

Jill McNicol, Marketing Manager stated that North Highland Tourism is a membership body, currently with 120 members, and they cover the Caithness, Sutherland and Ross-shire areas,

with 6 Directors. They hope to increase tourism by 50% with targeted marketing campaigns. They are developing target destination markets as well as improving the website. They have launched a business website and undertaken a product audit which will be included.

Roy Kirk, HIE Area Manager Caithness and Sutherland was last to speak in this section. HIE focus on sustainable economic growth working with companies with big ambition rather than big business. Tourism in Caithness/Sutherland is very important to the area and offers vast opportunities.

AM then opened the floor for questions to any of the speakers.

Roger Glover mentioned the importance of visitor centres to rural areas and worried about the potential closure of Lochinver/Durness VIC and maybe loss of Ranger Services.

Mary Mackay wondered about changes to Quality Assurance if it is no longer to be paid membership.

Graham stated he had been told by Quality Assurance inspectors when he would be visited, usually at peak times, which was not convenient for his business.

Sandra said she recently did a 68 mile round-trip with visitors and 5 hostellers in the area were closed, so no opportunity to stop for refreshments etc. She also said the Bettyhill Ranger is to cover Caithness too and worried about the loss of his time to Bettyhill area.

Donald Fisher reiterated the importance of the NW Highlands as a world class geological site and should be used to promote the area to visitors.

Q from the floor asked about campaigns targeting out of season times.

KLB want to promote the area as a whole rather than individual smaller areas.

Cllr Munro worried that Highland hospitality is not renowned any more and work needs to be done to rectify that.

Scott Armstrong responded – there are no discussions at present on non-closure of VIC's in Sutherland; Quality Assurance will continue and encourage businesses to be involved, but spot checks should be undertaken at a time to suit the business, he acknowledged the fact that cost has implications on businesses taking part or not.

Colin Simpson responded – there are restructuring changes taking place in the Ranger Services, Donald Mitchell will move into the Tongue area as well as Durness, many rural VIC's are also used as HC Locality Offices.

After Lunch, the meeting continued with the Ward Discretionary Budget. AM pointed out the variety of beneficiaries and wanted to highlight the KLB School was commended on the Robert McBeath memorial project during the recent HMIE inspection. Feis an Air was also held up as a good example. The Councillors are keen to support as many community projects as possible. The Sutherland Summit helped influence how the Budget is distributed. Their draft report is currently being undertaken and will be available for discussion at a forthcoming stakeholders meeting.

Community Council Matters

Graham Wild mentioned that the whole KLB catchment area was involved with the Robert McBeath project, not just KLB children. Patient Transport continues to be an issue in the area.

Action Note – Cllr Rowantree to arrange a meeting with SAS to progress.

Mary – Transport for Tongue initiative working well

Russell – thanks to all involved in the Migdale Hospital project, but is worried that some clinical groups want the name changed from Migdale.

Tony – Ardgay Post Office now closed

Roger – Active Schools Co-ordinator issue discussed at Ullapool High School PTA meeting, Cllr Farlow will be monitoring

Donald expressed thanks to AM for the help to him as a new CC member and he praised the format of Ward Forum

Cllr Farlow informed that Scourie Primary School now has a permanent Head Teacher

John – no interviews being held for the Melvich Head Teacher post, the long process seems to be off-putting. However, the speed limit at the school is proving successful.

Sandra – new projects seem to be becoming bogged down in self-help regulations and is offputting to groups. AM stated that any problems should be forwarded to himself or any of the Councillors.

Jeanette – reiterated the Melvich Head Teacher issue and wonders if anyone will be in place before the summer holidays!

Themes and Venues for future meetings

It was agreed that the current format of 4 meetings (rather than 6) per year worked well.

Dates were then agreed as –	Jan 30	Lairg – CHANGED TO 27TH FEBRUARY
	April 24	Bettyhill
	Sept 18	Scourie
	Nov 27	Melvich

The one theme for the January Forum will be HC Budget Review. The Chief Executive and Leader of the Administration hope to attend as many different Forum during next year so it was decided to invite them to the next one in Sutherland.

Sandra requested Bill Alexander from Social Work and it was agreed to invite him for the April Forum.

Cllr Rowntree closed the meeting by congratulating Assynt on their nomination into the Lottery Project public vote and wished them well.