

ROYAL BURGH OF WICK COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Location: Meeting held via Zoom.

Date: Monday 1st March 2021

Time: 7:15pm.

Present:

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| Elected members: | Joanna Coghill (<i>JC</i>). | Chairperson |
| | Allan Farquhar (<i>AF1</i>) | Vice chairperson |
| | Kimberley Miller-Rosie | Treasurer |
| | Wendy Campbell (<i>WC</i>) | |
| | Alastair Ferrier (<i>AF2</i>) | |
| | David Dunnett (<i>DD</i>) | |
| | Doreen Turner (<i>DT</i>) | |
| | Allan Bruce (<i>AB</i>) | |
| | Frances Purves (<i>FP</i>) | |
| Co-opted members: | Claire Mackenzie (<i>CM</i>) | |
| Ex-officio members: | Cllr Raymond Bremner (<i>Cllr RB</i>) | The Highland Council |
| | Cllr Willie Mackay (<i>Cllr WM</i>) | The Highland Council |
| In attendance: | Jayden Alexander (<i>JA</i>) | Secretary |
| | Jodie Wilson (<i>JW</i>) | Community Works Officer (HC) |
| | Jane Davidson (<i>JD</i>) | Pulteney Centre CEO |
| | Roy Mackenzie | |
| | Alan Hendry (<i>AH</i>). | NOSN (Press reporter) |

Police Sergeant Brian Hamilton (*BH*)

Police Scotland

Apologies:

- Cllr Andrew Sinclair

1. Welcome and apologies.

JC welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked members for joining on Zoom. JC gave a vote of thanks to BH for being able to join on behalf of the local Police, and to RM and JW for joining to assist with local issues and also to JD who is the newly appointed CEO for Pulteneytown People's Project to get an insight as to what RBWCC do.

Apologies as per listed.

2. Minutes of previous meeting.

All were happy with the minutes of the previous meeting, subject to one amendment. It was mutually agreed that AB and FP are classed as co-opted members until they are actually elected.

Proposed by: DD / Seconded by: DT

3. Matters arising and outstanding actions.

No items on the correspondence for December required a response, however several to be discussed (as below).

Spring clean

This is now on hold, there will be no action taken until we exit lockdown, although a meeting is to take place regarding this.

NHS Near Me

Cllr RB is to send an update to JA.

Wick Grizzly Park

AF1 confirmed that no progress has been made, although he is to contact Evan Sinclair.

Breakdown of RBWCC accounts

KMR confirmed this has been done.

Letter to Michelle Johnstone (NHS)

This was completed and submitted. A response is awaited.

Letter to MSP Gail Ross, MP Jamie Stone and NC500 company

This was completed and submitted. A response was received from MP Jamie Stone and John Thurso on behalf of NC500. A response is yet awaited from MSP Gail Ross.

Letter to Highland Council (HC) and BEAR Scotland regarding recent work on Francis Street

This was completed and submitted. A response is awaited,

4. Correspondence.

No items in the correspondence for January required a response. All were happy.

5. Highland councillors' report.

Cllr RB gave a lengthy report on various topics (report attached).

6. Treasurer's report.

The current account bank balance currently stands at £32,981.37

The bank balance for Happy is currently £732.76, Wick Flower Baskets account currently stands at around £5265.00. The account for Wick Christmas Lights currently stand at £1,969.31

7. Wick Christmas Lights.

CM stated that huge amounts of "slagging" was still appearing all over Facebook due to the Christmas lights remaining up. HC have stated that it is not necessary to take these down due to the current restrictions. Sadly, many lights have been damaged due to the prolonged time they have been up, this includes damage to the Santa Claus which sits beside the Town Hall.

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8. HAPPY.

Nothing to report.

9. Wick Flower Baskets.

Nothing to report.

10. Wick Paths Group

A report was received from group secretary, John Bogle, in advance of the meeting:

“ The Paths Group continues to be restrained by the Covid restrictions, only work involving 2 people can be undertaken, however, a start has been made on additional drainage on the North Head Path, more has to be done followed by laying additional stone on the path when restrictions allow, this is being funded by a grant of £1,000 from the North Highland Initiative. The Group would also like to install a collapsible bollard in the middle of the track just past the entrance to the Waste Water Treatment Works, this is to prevent unauthorised vehicles from accessing the path and damaging it - there were reports of campervans using the area last summer and some rather unsanitary practices. There is a waste bin at the North Head which would be repositioned to near the WWTW entrance. We would welcome the RBWCC views on this. Three interpretive panels will be installed or transferred to sites alongside the North Head Path when restrictions allow. The start of the North Head Path at the bottom of Scalesburn is also the access road to the North Baths and the WW2 Pillbox, it was badly affected by stones thrown up in winter storms and this has now been cleared by Paths Group member Willie Watt using a machine loaned free of charge by High Simpson Contractors Ltd and a puncture was repaired free of charge by Caithness Tyres, the support of local businesses is greatly appreciated. However the North Baths access road is in grave danger of being washed away by coastal erosion, urgent action is required to stabilise it and it would be appreciated if the RBWCC could lobby Highland Councillors to get the roadway protected.

The Paths Group has also undertaken advanced planning for 2 projects at the Riverside - in conjunction with the Fountain Restoration Group, the Paths Group will take responsibility for upgrading the path in front of the fountain alongside the river. A separate project is planned to upgrade the path around the caravan park including the untarred section of road used by campervans to access the site. We are also considering improving the drainage of a very wet section of ground beside the tarred section of the access road.

Last but not least on the 4th February the Wick Paths Group was joint winner of the Highland Third Sector Initiative award in the Community Initiative category for our work on the Coghill Bridges. “

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11. Wick Community Campus and Noss Primary School.

CM mentioned that there were reports of mice in the campus building, and that pest control was a HC matter. Facilities had a look but never identified where mice could be entering the building, however, there were reports of mice droppings being found in cupboards.

AF1 stated that works on the boulevard were nearly complete, part of the works was delayed due to contaminated ground but it is all underway. CM explained that when the pandemic broke out the nursery children had to eat in their classrooms, so there is now a plan in place to remove a cupboard to make room for a kitchen serving area.

JC questioned the fact that when the swimming pool re-opened, there was a material flapping around on the roof. CM confirmed this material was placed there as a solution to find out why there was water ingress in the building, and to prove condensation.

HC have also appointed a contractor to carry out bird egg removal to ease the bird issue.

12. Common good fund.

RM stated that most land in the Royal Burgh was owned by various different families, so all of the land being recognised as common good is what is now being claimed back. There is a huge-amount of historical items missing which RM is looking into along with RBWCC. RM has spoken with ex-librarians to see if anyone can remember anything or have any information. AF1 suggested putting an appeal in the local press. RM is to keep RBWCC in the loop and will correspond with JA should anything arise.

13. Dog fouling campaign.

JW introduced herself and explained that she is the assistant community works officer for the county and works for HC. JW explained that as part of her role she regularly patrols different areas in the county, she can issue fines (£80) if she witnesses anyone not picking up their dog's mess, however, JW confirmed that to issue a fine then there must be two people who actually witnessed the person not picking up the mess. CCTV can count as proof. AB suggested putting together a campaign which can be published in the local press, on social media and RBWCC's website. JW felt this would be a good way to tackle the issue and she is to send details to JA about the green dog walkers scheme which could be beneficial.

14. Caithness club corner and Riverside fountain project.

JC explained that there was nothing else to report apart from what was mentioned at RBWCC's previous meeting and that everything is currently on hold due to current restrictions. JA said that he had been in contact with John Bogle regarding quotes for the photographic panels and that John had provided him with contact details for the company who had supplied quotes previously. JA is to contact the company to receive a new quote for the panels.

15. AOCB

North Head Memorial Tower

RM mentioned that surveyors did a full report in October 2017.

It was agreed that RBWCC will correspond with Alex Paterson to gain some more clear information, make a "fresh start" on the project in co-operation with the Wick RBLs branch, and RBWCC will assist the branch in whatever needs to be done in order to see the long-standing matter brought to an end. JA is to compose a letter to Alex Paterson.

Street lighting and FixMyStreet

JC mentioned that various streets in the town are very dark due to poor street lighting. Cllr WM suggested contacting Kyle Mackie (HC) who would be able to explain the street lighting situation clearly.

AB stated that FixMyStreet has been very beneficial but suggested to Cllr RB that there should be a link provided within the confirmation email to allow people to follow up the progress being made on their complaint.

North Baths Access Road

JC said that Willie Watt in co-operation with Wick Paths Group recently carried out works at the access road to the North Baths. This has made a huge improvement- JA is to compose a letter of thanks to the Paths Group in response to this.

Camps Car Park

Cllr RB stated that the car park has now been partly cleaned, with bits and pieces still awaiting removal.

Land at Old Wick

JC stated that AF2 was recently in contact with Graham Begg who is now re-levelling the land and will sow grass seed to improve it. This is currently a work in progress but it will make a big difference to the area.

Memorial bench

His daughter of the late David Morrison has enquired about placing a plaque on a bench overlooking the harbour, at Braehead. The bulk of the benches there were donated by MM Millers, so these are not suitable. There is one other bench at the MS Centre, however, Alan Tait has advised the family it would be a better idea for them to purchase their own bench with a plaque, have it sited. He has not heard back from them.

Kinderspeil Bridge

JA mentioned that it was suggested for Wick Paths Group to contact a local blacksmith to look at repairing the steel handrails on the bridge. JA is to contact John Bogle for an update to see where the matter currently sits.

JC thanked everyone for their attendance and the meeting was brought to a close.

Date of next meeting

Location: Meeting held via Zoom.

Date: Monday 5th April 2021.

Time: 7:15pm.

| ACTION NO. | DESCRIPTION | RESPONSIBLE | COMPLETED |
|-------------------|--|--------------------|------------------|
| OCT 20/01 | List to be composed of tasks to be taken on during the next big clean of town (on hold due to COVID-19). | Cllr RB / Cllr NS | |
| OCT 20/02 | Update to be sought on NHS Near Me (RB awaiting response from NHS). | Cllr RB | |
| OCT 20/07 | Investigations into Wick Grizzly Park to be carried out to find out what can be done with a view to re-open the park (officially). | AF1 | |
| MAR 21/01 | Update to be sought from John Bogle on the current situation regarding damage to Kinderspiel Bridge. | JA | 05/03/2021 |
| MAR 21/02 | Letter to be composed to A. Paterson regarding North Head Memorial Tower. | JA | 05/03/2021 |

REPORT FOR RBWCC

FROM CLLR RAYMOND BREMNER

AS AT 15.03.2021

Big Spring / Summer Clean 2021

Whilst we acknowledge a lot of the transformational projects that we have kick started, we are also committed to a general tidy up of the town to really make it much more presentable – to particularly enjoy a walk around the town and to feel good about the place looking nice and tidy. Whilst the Council doesn't have a lot of the time and money, we are sure that we can all contribute to help make it this way.

We have taken a lot of images around the town centre in the autumn of last year after walking all around the area noting issues and ideas that, together with the Council's help, we could transform the appearance of.

We had intended to do this last year but COVID put a halt to all the plans.

The tasks are easy and we are sure many of our community would like to give a hand in some small way to show their contribution to a better place.

I should have the itinerary complete within the next couple of weeks and will be happy to share it with the RBWCC. Also, I'd be happy to give a short overview of it at the next RBWCC meeting.

Town Centre Regeneration

Whilst COVID has caused some delays for lots of recognised reasons we continue to make progress despite the impact:

Nos 30 and 126 High St – at the time of this report, it is likely that No 30 High St (Pavilion Cinema) will now have been handed over officially to the Highland Housing Alliance and will be transferred to Wick's Heart. No 126 High St – contractors are back on site having had to await appointment for additional remedial works following the demolition of the old Sloan's building. It is expected that this site will also transfer officially to the Highland Housing Alliance in the very short future and then on to Wick's Heart.

Whitechapel Rd Public Toilets – we currently await the update from Debbie Sutton at Highland Council following the budget being agreed. We should have a good idea of what works can be undertaken and when very soon. We'll let you know any updates as we get them. In the meantime, the Norseman Hotel are still part of the Highland Comfort Scheme.

Riverside Car Park

Currently the testing centre for COVID is located in the car park. There are still finishing remedials to be done to that car park but there won't be an ability to do that until the testing centre is not longer required there. I brought the matter up in email communication with the Executive Chief Officer responsible at Council and she has reported that Tim Allison, Clinical Director at NHS Highland says they still require the site. The ECO has said she is happy to meet with us to see if we can identify an alternative site. In any case, the new signage and other works is ready to follow through once they have been relocated or once they have ceased the need for their presence. I have already highlighted that the car park will come under more intense pressure to be used in the summer months as we exit lockdown and a conflict of interest may arise. We'll keep you up to date with developments as we hear more from the Scottish Government on their plans.

CCTV and Electric Vehicle Charging

Upgrade of the existing system – I am advised the the purchase orders in the process of being issued and the contractor has already ordered materials for the upgrade works. Officers don't have the exact timescale yet but work is due to start in both Wick before the end of March. The Wick upgrades are being part funded by the Town Centre Regeneration fund and also by the Lighting service capital budget.

New installations – at the moment we are not sure on the progress on these – we believe the EV charger installs and surfacing may be delayed as we think there are issues with wayleaves for SSE cable to power the chargers – they need to be taken under the car park at the side of the supermarket and the Council needs to discuss with the owners of that piece of ground. Officers are seeing if they can find out any more details on progress with the EV chargers which will affect the timescales for delivery of the surfacing and other works in the area. We'll keep you up-to-date with progress on this and the two new CCTV cameras that will be additional to the upgrade works.

Wick Common Good Land and Fund

As you are aware this is out to consultation at the moment and there are no updated following the previous discussion with RBWCC

Village Officer Fund

You'll be aware that the Village Officer Fund is administrated by the Association of Caithness Community Councils. At a Ward Business Meeting today, 15th March, it was agreed that the towns should also receive an amount equal to the villages to spend in a similar manner. There will also be the opportunity for the Community Councils, including the two town community councils, to have this topped up by an additional £500 each for any small improvements as a result of COVID. The previous amount of Village Officer Funds to the ACCC was £7,000. This is therefore now increased to £8,400 to include the towns and the additional funds from the COVID fund will be £6,000 increasing the funds being made available to community councils to £14,400. I'm really, really pleased about this.

Tourism

Given the notes in the minute of the last RBWCC and the reference to the concerns raised in writing to various representatives including those responsible for marketing the NC500,

the following is an update that I have recently put on my own social media page because I really believe we need to make sure we as best prepared as possible for the season.

I'm a member of the Highland Council's Tourism Committee. I also attend two other Community Councils in Caithness that have to deal with the biggest concentration of tourists in our County - Sinclair's Bay Community Council and Noss Head / Girnigoe Castle and Dunnet & Canisbay Community Council who have several areas - Duncansby Head and Stacks; John O' Groats, Dunnet Head, Dunnet Beach, the Caravan Site and Forest. There are other considerable tourist attractions that the Council have some relationship with - Camster Cairns, Whaligoe Steps, etc.

Two main things we need to be aware of:

1. The Tourism Committee of the Highland Council meet on the 17th of this month (March)
2. The results of the draft Tourism Infrastructure Plan is included in the agenda and this reflects the consultation that has been undertaken over the winter period, including our own Caithness Area Infrastructure Plan which I've attached in the images for your ease of reference.

The main items in the Tourism Infrastructure Plan are:

1. Parking
2. Electric Vehicle Charging Points
3. Public Toilets
4. Motorhome Waste Disposal Facilities
5. Public Wi-Fi
6. Paths and Trails

Other points that will be considered will be other support services including bin provision, bin collection, dog-waste, accessibility etc

There is a real challenge facing us and we need to get the timing right. Firstly, the budget is providing for £1.5M tourism infrastructure investment.

How will it be spent? Here's how:

Improved passing places and lay-bys, road signs, road verge protection and road traffic orders = £280,000

Install charging at tourist dominated car parks (not enforced until TRO in place). Improved signs & regulation, more officers for fee collection & enforcement = £245,000

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10 seasonal access rangers = £300,000

Public Toilet access = £60,000

Waste services - Increase service, frequency and capacity = £180,000

Motorhomes: To increase campsite and waste servicing guidance, and provision of sites (expedite Council project design and implementation). In addition, a small bid in grant scheme for commercial caravan campsites will assist a temporary solution. Commercial operators can bid for funding towards additional costs whether this is for additional emptying of tanks, changes to circulation areas to accommodate non-resident vehicles etc. = £200,00

Park & Ride Provision to visitor sites = £60,000

Cairngorms National Park = £175,000

TOTAL = £1.5m

It's obvious that we can't wave a magic wand and deliver all of that within 8 weeks between now and the end of April so, one of the main discussions needs to be what will be delivered in a phase 1 - immediately and in expectation of visitors as soon as a tourist season gets the go-ahead.

It's also obvious that we need to ensure that we know sooner, rather than later, what the plans for lockdown easing are. We also need to know that our communities and their well-being will be protected during that easing period.

I have asked the Council Leader to arrange discussions with the Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Aileen Campbell MSP, as soon as possible to understand the Scottish Government's plans and for us to know that the Scottish Government are fully considering the concerns and thoughts of Highland Communities.

There is a huge amount of work that we need to be sure is in place - a lot of which needs to be planned before the Tourism Committee.

As soon as I get clarification of most of the points I've just covered and once you have read the information I've linked here (and there is a lot), I'll let you know.

You'll see from the links and the information in those links that a lot of groundwork has been covered since last year and lessons need to be proven to have been learned. There are a considerable number of partnering agencies that have been involved and continue to be involved.

The investment funding is essential and welcome and the whole consultation programme that has been going on for months has also been welcome. Now we need to ensure that we get all the immediate services required in place, even if it is temporary whilst we plan and implement the longer term infrastructure.

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The main point is to let you know what is all in hand up to this point. A lot of practical work is already underway - extra bins and requests from Community Councils are already being delivered or are under active consideration.

The link to the Tourism Committee minutes can be found here and the agenda for the meeting on the 17th March can also be found here:

https://www.highland.gov.uk/.../com.../148/tourism_committee

Wick JoG Airport

Since the last meeting, you'll be interested to know that the Highland Council approved £0.3M towards the creation of a Public Service Obligation (PSO) for Wick Airport following the commitment from the Scottish Government of £4M over the next 4 years. We await the outcome of discussions with the UK Government and there is an expectation that they would at least match the Scottish Government's commitment. The best scenario PSO that was hoped for was estimated at a cost of £3M. On confirmation of final funds we will be looking at what we can put in place in the form of a PSO. This was updated at the Wick John O' Groats Airport Joint Consultative Committee this past week of which I'm a committee member.

Spaces for People – Wick

You'll have seen the dropped kerbs throughout the main thoroughfares in the town being put in place. This is part of the plans to make travel safer and more accessible for folks. Councillors and the local community were consulted on this and you can read what's in the plans here:

https://consult.highland.gov.uk/.../c19_active_travel...

At the monthly roads meeting in February we were informed that the drop kerbs from St Fergus Church (Old Parish) to the Industrial Estate were being installed at the time. All the pedestrian crossing equipment for Wick has been ordered - there will be a total of five pedestrian crossings in Wick at River St, Bridge St, North Rd at Hill Avenue, the industrial estate entrance and South Rd at Lidl. The works for the widening of the foot path from 30 mph signs to Milton were going out to tender, so we should see some progress on that soon. These are the immediate works in progress. Other works will be updated after the initial progress is complete.

It was reported in the Groat on January 30th before the works were under way and you can read that story here:

<https://www.johnogroat-journal.co.uk/.../work-on-wick.../>

Play Parks Inspection Schedule

The RBWCC should be aware that the play parks inspection schedule is underway just now and this should be complete in Caithness by June this year. This will identify any issues with equipment or safety.

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NHS Monthly Meetings

We continue to meet with the NHS Management on a monthly basis. This has been in place for quite a long time now and we are glad that this continues – it gives us a regular change to raise any issues and receive updates on numerous matters. Whilst I still don't have a full update from NHS in respect of Near Me, a copy of the latest report is here:

CAITHNESS COUNCILLOR'S MONTHLY MEETING WITH NHS MANAGEMENT

Some of you may recall when I mentioned about a young member of my family who went through a horrendous experience in an area of Caithness General Hospital where, because of the design of the place, by necessity, the examination and scan room is in the wrong place - where outpatients are. This area was also at the back of accident and emergency. The outpatients area is also badly laid out and not suitable for purpose - we sit on a few chairs facing the door of the consultant's room just three feet in front of our face in a corridor!

The consultation on the redesign of the hospital has been ongoing for months and it's great to see the culmination of some of that now coming to pass.

We have been keeping up with progress at our monthly meetings with NHS. The full update of all the matters discussed at recent meetings and in the Highlights Report that we also get is shown below. A further update on how NHS Near Me is going will be at the next monthly meeting and I'll share that with you then also.

VACCINATION PROGRAMME

The current figures of those being vaccinated are in relation to care homes, NHS social care, residential homes and those being vaccinated in COVID assessment centres. There is a key list according to national guidance.

GPs will give appointments to their case load and housebound will be vaccinated through NHS community nurses.

GPs are obtaining their vaccine stocks through different routes and require to set up their own clinics.

Figures of those vaccinated by GPs are collated by them and submitted to the Scottish Government through Public Health Scotland; the NHS are not involved in this.

In respect of the number of vaccines "available" for a particular area of the NHS, this could be related to anywhere in the pipeline – from leaving the factory, to being in storage, transit, on premises or being administered.

Primary care is managing the vaccination programme by phone call or letter.

CAITHNESS REDESIGN

Covid-19

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Covid 19 is impacting on project delivery, as operational teams are very busy with remobilisation plans which limit ability to progress the project. It is a very busy period for the NHS and they are all pushing things on as much as they can. That said the following items have been progressing:

Business Case Process:

The initial agreement (IA) is progressing slowly, partly due to covid impact on operational teams required to input, but also due to it being a very complex document which is trying to describe a huge programme of work with many interdependent projects. It is nearing completion with work still to be concluded on financial benefits and a final update and review by project leads.

The Project Programme (Timeline) was approved by the Project Board in June 2020. The current focus is on the initial agreement and service model. High level milestones will be included in the Business Case and can be shared for information.

By last November, cost estimates for the building elements had been reviewed. These are still at an early stage and will be refined in future stages as more detail is known. Current estimates are approximately £20m per hub and approximately £15m for the refurbishment of Caithness General Hospital.

Caithness General Hospital – Phase 1

Following a visit by the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport earlier last year NHS Highland was allocated funding of £800k in this financial year to carry out work at CGH. This includes development of a Community Midwifery Unit (CMU), improvements to the Emergency Department (ED), relocation of the Outpatients Department (OPD) and improved privacy and dignity at the main entrance including the introduction of a new service corridor route for “back of house” traffic. The architectural design is being done in-house and early OPD works were undertaken last summer to support the remobilisation of services.

The first stage tender for the main works were complete by last November and four companies were shortlisted for the next stage.

At that point NHS Highland prepared the detailed information required for the second stage and were seeking to appoint in January with a view to works taking place in February and March.

The two-stage tender process was chosen to provide local contractors with an opportunity to bid for the work, rather than using pre-existing frameworks which would limit it to larger companies.

All this information was publicised last May in the local press, announcing that a “state-of-the-art” midwifery unit and an extended accident and emergency department would be taking place. This is a continued part of the process that was restarted in late 2017 and is now delivering on the outcomes of the public consultation.

Following this, the focus will be on the hubs and community services. NHS Highland are committed to continuing the ethos of the local care model. Where a member of staff leaves for any reason, replacement staff will be brought in reflecting the workforce needs for the future. It is planned to appoint a Complex Care Manager for frailty and they will oversee the care provision at the Town & County and the Dunbar. They will be the clinical decision makers and will oversee staff management and training. The management of these care services will be separate from the management of Caithness General Hospital.

During the options appraisal the airport site was the most preferred. A copy of the appraisal will be sent over to Councillors.

There is still consideration to be given to where best locate a “safe space” i.e. cafe and whether this would be best located where people would be living. Safe spaces need to be available 24/7 – we have been talking about having a community garden / cafe environment. This can be looked at and something can be developed along these lines.

Other considerations include looking at the Orkney model where they have chairs that convert into beds that people can sleep in.

Pulteney House

A bid for funding has been made to the Adult Social Care Capital Projects Group to introduce two “step-up” beds to support the local care model. Providing support overnight, the aim of these beds would be to prevent hospital admission. The bid was viewed favourably and NHS Highland have been asked to submit a short Business Case for consideration.

BREXIT

This is causing uncertainties which are yet to be quantified. The movement of labour – especially band 2, 3 and 4 staff where visas are issues based on a points system. There is no clarification yet on how Brexit will affect this.

CARE AT HOME

The Care at Home service is very busy with very little additional capacity both in terms of the “in-house” service and with external providers.

The service has worked throughout the pandemic and continues to do so. The Manager for the Service in the North Area (Caithness & Sutherland) has stated how proud she is of all the staff working in the Care at Home services for the commitment they have shown to the service and their clients in these unprecedented times.

CARE HOMES & DAY CARE

Visiting

Bayview is fortunate in that it has a front porch/conservatory for visits and residents who wish are having visits fortnightly. Given the time of year it is becoming a bit chilly in that area therefore NHS Highland is very grateful for the donation of two heaters from the Royal Burgh of Wick Community Council

Dounreay Employees Charity Fund. Dounreay are also gifting a large Perspex screen which it is hoped will assist in hosting visits for residents who have a hearing impairment. Outwith these pre-arranged visits residents are also keeping in contact with family via Skype, WhatsApp etc. Where support is required to use social media staff are there to do so.

Pulteney House like Bayview is managing visiting both indoor and outdoor in line with legislation from government and reports that it is going well. Again similarly to Bayview it has been noted that as the seasons change it is becoming a bit chilly for the outdoor visiting but the Estates Department of NHS Highland are looking at the potential for providing a canopy and again Dounreay have offered to assist in providing heaters.

Staff Testing for COVID continues on a weekly basis.

Staffing

Bayview has some staffing vacancies and some shortages due to sickness. The vacant posts are being advertised.

Pulteney has recently recruited relief staff and are due to put further adverts out in the next week or so.

Generally both homes report that despite the restrictions residents are upbeat and that they [the homes] continue to work with the Care Inspectorate to ensure that they are doing all they can to ensure that the homes support their residents and families during the pandemic

COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

First Contact Practitioner, Mental Health: This is a new post which will work in general practice with the three salaried practices in Caithness (Riverbank, Riverview and Lybster) in an Advanced Nurse role. The new post-holder was appointed from within the team and took up her new role in late October.

Staff vacancies

General Adult Team: There are two vacant Band 6 (senior staff nurse level) posts in the general adult team. One in the East Team and one in the West Team. These posts are out to advert at present.

Drug & Alcohol Services: There is a vacancy for one Band 6 in the Drug and Alcohol Team and this is out to advert.

Psychiatry: Locum cover has been secured to provide consistent cover to Caithness providing clinical support to both patients and staff within the CMHT

The team are doing a good job with the plans they are trying to put in place and support. First contact will be a great help as well as the consultant that comes up for regular weekly clinics.

DUNBAR HOSPITAL

Staffing: The post of Senior Charge Nurse has not been filled. The requirements are being reviewed in line with the development of the local care model and the redesign more widely. The Rural Support Team Lead (North) is continuing to provide leadership support to the team at Dunbar. There is an opportunity to review the charge nurse post for the two community hospitals to develop a post of Complex Case manager frailty to oversee both sites.

Out to advert currently are a fixed-term full-time Band 6 post (six months) to backfill a staff member who is currently working at the CAC. A full-time permanent Band 2 (HCSW) post is also out to advert.

Minor Injuries Unit: The MIU was closed earlier last year as part of the response to Covid. Staff who would previously have worked in the MIU formed part of the staffing compliment for the CAC. The team at Dunbar are looking at options to open albeit on a limited basis.

Integrated Team Base: West: Staff from the West Integrated Team (Administration, Care at Home, Community Nursing, District Manager, Learning Disabilities Nurse, Occupational Therapy, Rural Support Team Lead and Social Work) moved into William Smith House at the Thurso Business Park last April. Some additional works (layout incl. floor boxes) in order to take account of social distancing was required. This was completed over the first weekend of November. Thurso Community Health Centre (at Davidson's Lane) has now been boarded up and closed down

East: Space pressures in current buildings have been exacerbated by Covid. We are looking at options to co-locate the community teams (as per the west) in the interim until the new Hub is built.

Rural Support Team (North): The Rural Support Team as has been noted previously is not operational at present. There are three full-time permanent vacancies at present. Forward planning is underway re the role and function of the team; posts will be advertised in the coming months.

Staffing Appointments and Vacancies:

Advanced Practitioner/Professional Lead, Community Nursing (West): The appointment has been made on a fixed term basis covering maternity leave of the substantive post holder.

Advanced Practitioner, Podiatry (North Area): The post holder retired from the post of podiatrist/advanced practitioner for the North Area (Caithness and Sutherland) at the end of September. The post was advertised and interviews took place in November and the post has now successfully been filled.

Integrated Team Lead(s): The Integrated Team Lead (East) and Mental Health Team Manager and the Integrated Team Lead (North & West Sutherland) are between them jointly supporting the West Integrated Team following the resignation of the post holder for Integrated Team Lead in West Caithness.

GP Riverbank, Thurso: Two doctors have recently joined the team at Riverbank on a permanent basis. One previously worked at Riverbank as a locum while the other was previously a GP in Riverview in Wick.

As Vice Chair of the Council's Redesign Board, as part of the budget, I've requested that the whole infrastructure and management of our roads is referred to the Council's Redesign Board. The next meeting of the Redesign Board is on 23rd of this month (March). I have covered a lot of the issues in respect of the roads infrastructure on my social media page. It is not easy to give a brief summary so I have included all the relevant information to date in the following report for you to read at your leisure.

Roads and Roads Infrastructure

WINTER ROADS ISSUES

I've seen a number of comments and concerns online and in the press in respect of the number of potholes and roads issues that are being experienced in places in Caithness. This is a real problem and it hasn't gone away. Every year we say that it is worse than the year previous. The Council has said that they simply do not have the amount of money to repair all its roads but that doesn't help resolve the problem.

Some will say they don't want to know all the figures, they just want the roads fixed. So do I, absolutely. However, if we don't understand the figures, we won't possibly be able to understand the challenge.

Lets have a look at the figures first then we will have a look at the seasonal and resource challenges that we have to manage.

The figures show that for 2019/20, the budget for revenue and capital for roads in Highland was £19.5m. That figure is split to £13.3m for revenue spend and £6.2m for capital spend.

What is the revenue spend? Our winter gritting programme is part of this. Almost £5m of the £13.3m, nearly 40% of the revenue budget, is spent on the winter resilience programme. Other revenue spend includes cyclical maintenance of £6.5m - nearly half the budget (potholes), gully emptying, bridge inspections and repair, safety barriers, watercourse maintenance and asset management.

What is the capital spend? Nearly all of the £6.2m gets spent on resurfacing - inlay, overlay and surface dressing, accounting for £5m of that amount.

So, whilst the most important thing on everyone's mind is pot-holes, it's important to see what else needs to be looked at.

All the money has to be divided up for the eight areas of the Highland Council. There is a formula applied. It's not simply the case that if most of the roads are in a state of disrepair in West Lochaber or North-west Skye, then they get most of the money. Regardless of the overall state of roads in the whole council area, each area gets an amount according to a formula that takes into consideration a number of factors including total road length in the

area, urban road length (number of streets etc in Wick and Thurso), number of bridges, gullies, population etc.

For Caithness, and the year shown, we received £1.3m (12%) of the whole Council revenue budget with nearly £0.5m of that for winter resilience (48% of the Caithness revenue allocation) and £700k for potholes and similar works. We received £600k of the Council capital budget (9.7%).

So, now we know the figures and generally what it is spent on, let's look at how the money is put to use in Caithness.

Roads engineers survey the roads and record issues they have on a data system at Council (CRM). All the matters sent in by the public are recorded here also, including those from Community Councils. A lot of the time, there will be numerous reports loaded for the same issue – especially potholes. At any given time in Caithness, I have seen the CRM with between 3,000 and 5,000 individual pothole issues. These are prioritised with a balance of risk and cost/benefit for the resource applied in fixing – a focus on the most dangerous as well as fixing 10 pot-holes in one area rather than 10 areas fixing one pot-hole. Obviously, not all the potholes can be fixed at once, so, one area may receive initial attention while another area awaits their turn. There are 13 Community Councils that rightly expect all their issues to be attended to but it is knowing where in the list of issues their particular request sits. We'll come to that later.

The roads management team will determine the priority and nature of the repair – whether it is a revenue issue or a capital issue. They then create a programme for the year. That programme is then presented to the area committee where area Councillors will discuss and, usually, approve. This usually happens shortly after the Council's budget is agreed – late February / early March. A copy of that programme is in image 5 of the attached photos. Folks will see that potholes are right at the top. Also, whilst the whole listing of the capital programme is presented, be aware that the money that we are allocated can only manage to do a fraction of that list. The list is reported in full to acknowledge what we know needs attending and also to cost it so that at any point in time, we know how much we would need to spend to fix ALL our roads. In Highland Council, as stated previously, we spend approx £20m on our roads annually. That figure, assuming we could fix ALL our roads in a single year, is likely to be in excess of £170m! Maintaining these area lists allows us to know what that figure is!

In implementing the programme, there are a number of operational issues that have to be managed. Throughout the Highland Council area and here in Caithness, nearly all of the road crews that we have are also HGV drivers. They are employed fixing roads during the summer and throughout the winter if the winter period weather conditions are favourable. At any time during adverse weather conditions or in preparation for frost, ice or any other weather condition that affects ability to drive on the roads, they are all employed delivering the winter resilience programme.

During the winter there are a number of other factors that have to be considered; freeze-thaw-freeze conditions on the road surface properties and in particular on patched pot-holes; blading and the affect on patched pot-holes and other vulnerable road surface areas and salt/water/grit effect on road surfaces amongst others. It is impossible to deliver a winter resilience programme AND fix the road's issues at the same time – the Council can either do one, or the other and every Councillor knows this, or ought to know this. This is not unique to Caithness or the Highland Council amongst other local authorities – indeed,

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some local authorities do not have the same commitment in terms of winter maintenance that Highland Council has. In some areas of the Highland Council, however, we need to bear in mind that a bigger percentage of their road mileage is maintained in the winter by BEAR Scotland because there is a greater percentage of trunk roads in their area whilst some areas like Sutherland have hardly any trunk roads!

That aforementioned approach provides for full-time all-year-round jobs with folks that have the retained knowledge of the local area rather than seasonal, temporary employees with no consistency of guarantee of retained knowledge in service provision. It also provides for the best cost-benefit for the tax-payer.

Considering everything that has been said, annually and in normal times, the potholes issue in Caithness and everywhere else becomes exacerbated over the winter for the reasons stated.

We move now to the quality of the repair. You can have two main types of repairs – a cold-tar repair or hot-tar repair. You can have a simple clean out and inlay of a patch of cold-tar or we can take the time to clean the area out, cut the area out with the appropriate machinery and fill. The latter obviously taking a considerable longer period of time and attending to less potholes and, more-than-likely, requiring more employees, more machinery and more resource than the budget allows to attend to the amount needed.

In Caithness, management and employees have stated that hot-tar repairs need a hot-box. A piece of equipment that allows the tar to remain hot from source (somewhere like Gunn's quarry) while being transported to the area in Caithness it is required and remains hot for the time it is needed. Caithness has never had one for various reasons. Some time ago I argued for one and pursued it. Nearly 20 months later we now have one, it arrived in the county short ago, at the cost of over £20,000. That will provide for a better quality repair in the coming months however, we still have to think about the number of potholes and how we patch the sheer volume we have. Talking about getting hot tar from source - think about the amount that has to be made. Small amounts for a quarry to make cost more in real terms than large amounts; another factor needing to be considered when the Council looks to ensure the most for the spend of public money. If the community had a choice to have as many potholes filled as possible in a short period of time for a fraction of the cost, it will expect that to be done. We now have the ability in the coming months to balance that with how many we can do more permanently with a hot-tar patch. So, to me, this will be progress from where we were in Caithness with our options.

Right now, given the unprecedented circumstances we have, there is a commitment to increase the resilience programme. This is because folks need to be able to exercise more locally and safely. Paths and roads teams have been busier ensuring this and the sustained temperatures below freezing have meant that our teams cannot consider any roads maintenance even though we know that the very issues they are carrying out resilience against are more likely to be causing a greater amount of roads issues that will need to be attended to. It's about getting the balance right and quickly when there is a break from the current weather and as we head into the traditionally better weather period. It's important that, as frustrating as it is, our communities are fully aware of the challenges we face just now.

Also, last year, because of the current unprecedented circumstances, the capital maintenance programme wasn't delivered. Fewer potholes were complained about,

possibly because of reduced travel at that time and the fact that was the sole focus of the road's crews in the main however, that has now changed for the reasons stated in this brief.

The irony of the matter is that Council agreed INCREASED funding for roads infrastructure of £20m PLUS £2m per annum in the last budget and didn't get the chance to carry that out.

As an SNP Councillor, you'd think I was making the case for the Council's administration here, I'm not. Dealing with the issues in our local community like this is not a political matter, its a matter that we all have to tackle, in every area throughout the Highland Council as well as here in Caithness. What I CAN do as an SNP Councillor is ensure that the administration commit to the capital programme that was promised last year and ensure that we increase our focus and attention on delivering that at every opportunity but every Councillor has the ability to inform the community of the facts. Promising that certain bits of road will be attended to in their area is no use because you're denying someone in another area their chance to be attended to in accordance with the acknowledged priorities.

We need to continue reporting the issues – don't just complain about them online. Let me our your local Councillor or Community Council know about them so that we can include them in the programme and, if there are particularly dangerous issues, highlight those in particular. I've had a fair amount of representation and this is included in the listings that we discuss with roads personnel at our monthly meetings – I have asked for that meeting to be brought in by a week so that the issues recently highlighted can be discussed this week.

Finally – our road's crews, who are also our gritting crews, doing the best job they can. I, for one, appreciate the job that they do and support the ability to make it easier for them to do a better job with the money available and provide an improved roads condition for the area in the future. Remember to let us know about any issues. Drive safe and keep safe and I hope you found all of that useful.

£20M HIGHLAND COUNCIL BUDGET INVESTMENT - ROADS EXPENDITURE AND INFORMATION ABOUT LOCAL ROADS REPAIR PROGRAMME IN CAITHNESS

There's been a lot of frustration in the Caithness area and, indeed, all over the Highland area, given the conditions of the roads infrastructure. A number of factors have been impacting our roads - prolonged freeze-thaw conditions and adverse weather, winter gritting and COVID restrictions throughout the last year. At the start of the pandemic Highland Council personnel were impacted with many having to shield or not being able to work due to social distancing factors. Also - you can't repair roads when supply tar plants are closed down because of COVID - remember, even when they are open, it's a minimum order of 40 tonne - and the hot-box has a capacity of 9 tonne unless we are doing a fairly sizeable area. So, the supplier's tar plant may only be able to make tar when there is more than one customer (including the Highland Council) requiring tar!

So, you can throw all the money you care to at the problem but, at the moment, we can only implement repairs in respect of resource and material supply.

The Council's capital programme was severely hit because of COVID. Given the fact that the road crews are also the gritting crews and the adverse weather with cold temperatures don't provide the correct conditions for road repairs, it is only now that the road crews have

the ability to start repairing the roads which they have been doing for the past couple of weeks.

Some time ago I let folks know that we were after a hot-box for Caithness. We didn't have one - all our repairs of potholes were with cold tar. That, as many know, doesn't last long. It took some time but we got our hot-box. It arrived over the winter and we are only now getting the use of it. We are also looking to obtain other capital machinery.

The Council's budget was agreed on 4th March. In the section detailing the Recovery, Improvement and Transformation section, it refers to the extra £10m that will be invested in roads this year on top of the funding normally provided in the annual budget, with another extra £10m to be invested in roads next year.

The reserves of Council will be monitored continually throughout the year and if there is an opportunity to agree to more investment, then we will.

Here in Caithness, the repair will now be with hot tar where appropriate. Cold tar will still be a solution - for instance, where there is a need to make a temporary repair where a more permanent, larger repair section needs to be undertaken later, cold tar may be the more cost effective method. Where the repair needs to be a longer lasting permanent repair, hot tar may be more appropriate. With the hot-box, we have that ability now.

There's been plenty online photographs of potholes and newspaper articles but it's good to see the repairs now being undertaken. The images in this post let folks see the hot box in action in Bower and Hastigrow on the B876 road, Wick - Thurso. Over the next two weeks we have a detail of the programme so that folks know where repairs are being undertaken. It will take some time to attend to all the major repairs however, at least here, communities can see where they will be and where we might need to wait a little longer but I'll be happy to update progress. We also need to understand that, in being provided this information, emergency repairs and other factors can cause an immediate alteration to the programme - but hopefully this at least gives an indication.

The road crews have already been at Gerston (Halkirk - Scotscalder road) and Barrock.

Last week the road crews concentrated on the B876 - Hastigrow/Bower/Granton Mains/Lochshell & Tesco doing hot tar permanent patching where areas may be planed out or they may be cut out depending on the nature of the repair required.

This week they will be concentrating their focus on the B874 - Bridge at Halkirk, then on the A846 at Gills/Canisbay/Kirk to Mey

Then, at the end of next week, they will move their attention to the A882 - Haster to Watten; Watten to Oldhall; Laurel to Clayock where, currently, there are 30 mph speed restrictions in place because of the road surface. Please take care driving whilst they get round to attending all the road surfaces as quickly as possible.

The programme planned will use 1,000 tonne of tar.

Other works that folks will be interested in knowing about is the work that will be done on the offlets (letting water off the road, reducing roadside flooding) at Dunnet and Haster; ditching around Keiss and Barrock and other emergency patching.

Finally, our roads infrastructure definitely needs a more holistic approach given the sheer volume of repairs work needed which will cost a lot more money. As Vice-Chair of the Council's Redesign Board, I've asked the Chair of the Redesign Board to add this to the redesign programme. I hope all of this information is helpful and I'll continue to update the programme as it progresses so that you all know what's happening.

A big thanks to all the road crew guys and officers for providing the photographs and information - it is much appreciated and we appreciate the work you all do.

MORE ABOUT HOW THE COUNCIL IS MANAGING THE ROADS IN CAITHNESS

Following my earlier post, I thought I'd share a little more on how the information in respect of our roads is collated and managed.

Remember, in all of this, I'm just as frustrated as all of you having to drive on poor road surfaces just now. I also read the article in the Groat this morning and note a few comments that were worth considering here. So, let's have a look at them:

SUBSTANTIAL INVESTMENT REQUIRED

Yes, absolutely. That's a well established and a known fact. Folks will know if they've read the post from earlier this year that to fix all the roads in the Highland Council area we would be stopping all the traffic using them and spending over £180m to get them repaired to a suitable standard everywhere. A reminder also that the revenue and capital budget for 2019/20 was only £19m. So - a stand-still position would be up to 10 years to fix the roads without a vehicle moving. More about how we can address that later in this post.

SUGGESTIONS THAT IT IS DUE TO RECENT BAD WEATHER

A lot of it is. Without a shadow of a doubt, and we would be unwise not to acknowledge that as a major factor. Yes, our roads need attention in any case but we need to acknowledge that every winter brings real challenges when you are dealing with finances. For instance, what happens if you set millions aside for winter gritting maintenance that you can't or don't spend because it's a favourable winter? You get accused of hoarding money and not spending it on other essential services including turning revenue spend into capital and fixing the roads themselves instead of throwing salt on them. You simply can't spend the money on actual roads maintenance until after you know what you've got at the end of the winter and even then it may be that bad a winter that you actually overspend on your winter resilience - because winter lasts right up until the end of March - the Beast from the East is a good example when we were gritting right up to near the end of March in 2018. No-one that I know has said that it is ALL due to recent bad weather. However, without a shadow of a doubt, the recent bad weather has greatly exacerbated that and bad weather greatly exacerbates the same issue every winter that we have adverse conditions.

Why is that?

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Well, every winter that we have favourable weather conditions and temperatures, FOUR things are on our side - firstly we can undertake physical repair of our roads. Secondly, our roads crews are not driving grit lorries so are available for roads maintenance. Thirdly, the salt, lorry blades and whole gritting process isn't adversely affecting our road surfaces and, lastly, the adverse temperatures are not having an affect on the roads surface including previous pot holes repaired with COLD tar!

And that happens every year we have a FAVOURABLE winter - we don't necessarily have to have tons of snow - prolonged cold-freeze-thaw conditions as well as snow is all that's needed to adversely impact the road infrastructure. It's the simple laws of physics!

A number of our road surfaces have been a challenge in any case, no one is denying that, but when, on top of it all, you have COVID, as explained in a previous post, and where you don't have the ability to spend anything like the money on the roads that you want to, to fix issues caused by the previous winter, you have a greater challenge in front of you and that's a fact. We spent all the time spending the revenue monies fixing pot holes last summer - that's all that could be done with the restrictions in the main, with cold tar, most of which will need redone plus all the other issues over the winter just past, plus the previous issues, you kind of get the picture.

GATHERING FIGURES DETAILING EXACTLY HOW MUCH IS REQUIRED TO RESTORE THE ROADS TO A "PROPER, SAFE STANDARD"

Well, that shouldn't be difficult for any Councillor. If you've read my previous posts re roads, you'll know we get the information reported to us - it's available - telling us what's planned. It is also costed. So, I've posted the first section of the capital list to June last year for your information. Remember - this does NOT include spend on pot-holes - that's revenue spend. The list was available at a time where we were in lockdown unable to attend the roads programme. Our recycle centres were shut. We were barely able to manage to collect bins!

So, all the roads issues we know about that need capital repairs over and above the revenue spend of pot holes - is included in that list. Now, first of all - I should caveat by saying that this list is currently being updated because of the impact of the winter we have been through. That's another point - we simply cannot ignore the winter effect - in any year! Councillors will receive an update in any case at the Caithness Area Committee in April.

So, the list as it was nearly a year ago (which is what I've shared here) will have been updated by then. I'm just sharing it as was so that you know that Councillors have access to this at any time. It is how I know I can tell you that, if I were to take the first 10 items on the list, it would cost us £0.5M of capital to fix those areas. The whole Caithness capital budget for the period 2019/20 was £0.6M so that gives you an idea of what would be possible in a year. Now, that's only the first ten lines! To fix the whole list (which is not an exhaustive list) it would cost nearly £3.0M! Sure, the roads engineers and officers can tell you what is emergency repairs for a "proper and safe job" but we ALREADY KNOW the challenge in respect of cost! Remember, that's £3.0M in capital - you have the revenue spend of road surface maintenance on TOP of that in Caithness - all the potholes! We know what the financial challenge is for Caithness! What we need to do is admit it and tell the people what we are doing about it. I will support any campaign - no problem, but we need more than supporting a campaign - we need to be channelling our energy to helping officers and road men to fix the problem - getting hot boxes, going for additional capital machinery and better equipment - like a JCB Pothole Pro - wouldn't that be great!? Seen

here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0_-wzdhpK8 - the only thing is, yup, you've guessed it - they all want one - Skye, Ross & Cromarty, Sutherland.

I hope that all this information helps the folks who claim to be perfectly aware of the financial issues but may not be perfectly aware of the specific financial issues and the numbers we are talking about.

I absolutely support getting our roads improved and have been committed to learning about the issue before knowing the challenge I'm committing to as a responsible Councillor - I'm not going to promise to do something that simply can't be delivered in the here and now - it is something that has to be worked at - and that's my focus. I hope I have been making that clear. It's one of the reasons I organised a monthly meeting with the roads teams over 18 months ago. It's how we got our hot box. It's also why we have been inviting the Chair and Vice Chair of the Association of Caithness Community Councils to our monthly roads meetings and why we are hoping to get the updates from the monthly roads meetings out to all the Community Councils on a regular basis, SOON 😊

Finally, as I've mentioned in previous posts, there is an increased financial commitment to this year for Highland itself - it was £7.2M but has been boosted to £17.2M (the first additional £10M of the £20M budget reference - and an additional £10M next year will also be spent). If you want to read more about this you can do so here, downloading the report at the Economy & Infrastructure Committee on 4th February - it's the report at Item 9: Roads Capital Spend:

https://www.highland.gov.uk/.../economy_and...

As I've mentioned in previous posts, I'm joint Vice-Chair of the Council's Redesign Board and I have asked the Convenor of the Council, who is Chair of the Redesign Board, to have the whole holistic approach to the future of our roads referred to the Redesign Board as part of the collaborative budget discussions that took place prior to the budget being agreed yesterday.

Apologies for all the long posts but it is really important to know the information that paints the picture accurately in order that we can fix it effectively.