

ORKNEY MANIFESTO GROUP

Commitments

for the Orkney Islands Council Election
on 3 May, 2012

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The three candidates who have collaborated to produce this manifesto for the OIC election on 3 May, 2012 believe that the electorate should know what they are voting for as well as who they are voting for.

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Introduction

The Orkney Manifesto Group is a trio of candidates who are standing at the OIC election on 3 May, 2012.

We three feel strongly that local politics must address the local issues of the day.

Voters should know what they are voting for, not just who they are voting for.

At the same time, we realise there is never enough money to do everything.

This is why we are outlining where the money for our headline manifesto ideas should come from.

The key manifesto highlights follow:

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Policy Highlights

Subsidised child care

Many working parents with pre-school children struggle on a daily basis to find child-minders or to find the money to pay for child care. We would look into the options for introducing a subsidised service. This would support equal opportunity and benefit the local economy.

Lend-a-Hand Mortgage Scheme

New house-building in the private sector has been hit by the high deposits asked for by banks and building societies to secure a mortgage. Lloyds TSB is prepared to offer up to 95% mortgages if underwritten by the OIC. We would take steps to introduce this scheme.

House building programme

Funding for Council housing and Orkney Housing Association is limited. We are committed to making good the estimated unmet demand for around 300 houses and will explore sources of new funding to do this. (We would NOT rely on another rent increase!)

Openness

A more open OIC administration is to be encouraged. Web-casting of meetings would be one way of reaching a wider public.

Regeneration of Kirkwall town centre

We would follow up the current regeneration project in Stromness town centre with a similar project for Kirkwall. Cement slabs on Bridge Street and Albert Street would be replaced with flagstones and cobbles. This would enhance the experience of tourists (and us!) and stimulate commercial activity.

Landscaping of Hatston

Hatston Industrial Estate is now on the route taken by many cruise ship tourists into Kirkwall. While not exactly an eyesore, Hatston would benefit from landscaping to make it more visually attractive. We would include cycle-ways in the project too.

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“Grow your own”

We would like to see more young folk who are employed by the NHS and OIC given an opportunity to follow studies at Orkney College which would qualify them for senior positions. This would require new course design with distance learning elements.

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Current financial picture

Orkney has done reasonably well in weathering the current global and national economic downturn. However, there remains a need to stimulate the local economy, mainly, but not exclusively, through assisting capital projects. Given our significantly reduced grant from the Scottish Government, this activity needs to be funded from our local reserves.

The Scottish Government has reduced OIC's revenue budget by over £3 million in the last two financial years. This, together with inflation and increased demands on services, means that, compared with two years ago, we are trying to provide the same level of service on a budget reduced effectively by around £5 million annually.

There are indications from Scottish Government that the next two years will see a standstill budget. The implication for Orkney is that the current, reduced grant will be set in stone and the amount available to spend on services annually will be fixed for some time to come. But there will be continuing erosion from inflation and potentially increased service demand.

While Scottish Government hopes to keep up revenue spending at local government level, the amount available for capital spend will have to be severely reduced in order to balance the books. That will mean careful budgeting in the years ahead.

OIC has, rightly, utilised its Oil Reserve Fund to provide around £4.7 million per year to tackle the current shortfall from the reduced Government grants and the disadvantageous situation we are in compared with Shetland and the Western Isles Councils.

However, we think that more of our balanced funds (from Oil Reserves) could be used in a targeted way to assist, for instance, working families, which we recognise as a priority. We would call for an early report on the provision of child care in the County which matches more closely the demands currently unmet by the existing overstretched systems.

Jobs, Development and the Orkney Economy

In the current economic climate we believe the Council has an obligation to stimulate activities which support overall employment levels. While it is not a function of the OIC to be involved directly in commercial activities, the need for economic stimulus should be taken into account when prioritising spending, especially when it reinforces other council objectives.

The Oil Reserve Fund

It is often said that the Oil Reserve Fund is for a “rainy day”. We believe that the rainy day is imminent if not already upon us and that the fund should be tapped into as required. This is especially the case when it appears the size of the Oil Reserve Fund is a factor taken into account in depressing the level of the grant from the Scottish Government.

Building sector

Until the recent problems with Orkney Meat and Orkney Herring, we have been very fortunate to escape the worst of the current economic recession. This has been helped by contracts to build new schools at KGS and Stromness Primary as well as a new KGS Hostel, a Swimming Pool at Pickaquooy and an Arts Theatre at the new KGS.

Whilst these contracts were won by a south company, we are pleased to see local sub-contractors being involved in many parts of the construction.

These contracts are due to end in 2014. Some of the slack will be taken up by the new £70 million Balfour Hospital project, which should be expedited by removing any obstacles within the power of the OIC. In addition, given the current slump in private house building, we would argue that there is a good case for the Council to introduce initiatives to stimulate growth, such as Lend a Hand where £1 million has been set aside to assist first time buyers through a guarantor scheme. All initiatives should be considered in conjunction with Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) Orkney.

We support the Council’s recent decisions to build new harbour facilities for the renewable energy sector, particularly since these projects will also go some way to helping local tourism and inshore fishermen.

Agriculture

Although agriculture is benefiting from high beef prices right now, there are uncertainties surrounding CAP reform, which are beyond the scope of the council to influence. Short and long-term resolution of the abattoir situation is also crucial to the local community.

Support at a local level, such as for the BVD eradication scheme in cattle and Johne's disease in sheep, should continue to be examined by the new Development and Regeneration Committee, in consultation with the farming community.

Regeneration of Kirkwall town centre

Tourism is a vital and growing sector of the Orkney economy. The Council can and should support it - without direct involvement in commercial activities. A regeneration project for Kirkwall's main streets, similar to the recent project in Stromness, would enhance and reinvigorate the town centre, improving the experience of visitors as well as stimulating commercial activity. To that end we would argue for resurfacing Bridge Street and Albert Street with a flag and cobble mix to replace the concrete slabs currently in place. When the Stromness Town Centre Heritage Initiative ends in 2013 we would create a similar scheme, on the same funding basis, in Kirkwall. The funding would come from the Regeneration Fund. An application for Lottery funding could also be made.

Hatston landscaping

Hatston Industrial Estate would also benefit from a facelift, especially since it is now on the route which many cruise-ship visitors take into Kirkwall. Soft landscaping, which was proposed as part of the Kirkwall Urban Design Framework 2009, should be actively pursued now. We would include provision of cycle ways as one element of this project. It is also time that the redundant ice plant at the head of the pier be taken down; it does nothing to enhance a first impression of our capital.

Other projects

There are other projects which the Council could look at: for example, developing a winter garden with training links through Orkney College; establishing a pitch and putt course like the one which used to exist at Brandyquoy and further developing the work of the Youth Cafe.

Business development

Business is not the business of councils - providing services is. However, Orkney is in a unique position to lend assistance where it does not contravene existing EU state aid legislation. We support the current practice of allocating £1 million a year from balances (Oil Funds) for community development. However, we would like to see an even closer and more interactive partnership with HIE Orkney, to encourage the best in entrepreneurial start-ups throughout the County.

Housing

We would continue to promote the construction of new dwellings, both for sale and for rent. We would also consider the needs of current homeowners in respect of the improvement and maintenance of their own homes especially as Orkney continues to have well above the Scottish average of below tolerable standard.

Social and affordable housing

The joint waiting list for social housing and affordable homes in Orkney currently stands at around 600. This probably translates into an actual unmet need of about 300 houses.

Housing allocation can be a vexed area with much of it governed by Scottish legislation. However, we need to address local need including the needs of students and key workers.

It is arguable that the current organisations delivering housing services, OIC, Orkney Housing Association Ltd (OHAL), Orkney Islands Property Developments Limited (OIPDL) could be brought more closely together, thereby eliminating potential duplication and promoting efficiency and cost effectiveness.

That said, we support the social housing activities of the current Council where money has already been promised from the Reserve Fund, and would maintain and extend the build programme where possible. We would also continue to support OHAL in its objectives of making available affordable housing.

Although the Scottish Government's changes in funding OHAL now mean a drastically reduced building programme, we feel it is vital to investigate channels whereby the OIC could secure funding to continue its own building programme. New house building addresses local housing need and has a positive impact upon the local economy with much of the build being done by local builders. Further increases in Council rents to fund new build are not an option.

Private sector

Let's also explore how homeowners and landlords might be helped to ensure that housing conditions, especially for our older folk and those in the smaller communities, enabling them to stay in reasonable comfort within their own homes for as long as possible. The ambition to deliver care in the community rather than in institutions places an additional emphasis on the need for habitable housing.

We need to address the situation where Orkney still has a higher proportion of unsatisfactory housing and fuel poverty than almost any other part of Scotland. We would look to introduce an initiative to support upgrade of the private housing stock, especially in the rental sector.

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Let's offer incentives to homeowners to improve the condition and appearance of their homes, especially in conservation areas. Let's make Kirkwall more attractive to visitors, given the importance of tourism to our economy.

The Council can only go so far in directly assisting new build in Orkney, for example through the provision of serviced sites, and although OIC has provided areas for new build, private and social, a lot of this can only come about through a change in the larger economic climate throughout the UK and Europe.

Lend a Hand mortgage scheme

A neglected area, where the Council potentially could promote home ownership but currently does not, is in giving assistance to aspiring homeowners who are unable to find the deposit now required to secure a mortgage. Under the Lend a Hand Mortgage Scheme (LAMS) up to 95% loans can be underwritten through an arrangement potentially negotiable with the Lloyds TSB. A previous OIC initiative to put this in place stalled. We believe it should be reinitiated.

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Education and childcare

Provision of schools

Provision of schools in the County is now in good shape, particularly in Kirkwall and Stromness. We recognise the central role of schools in rural communities and support the current level of provision. We would be very reluctant to see any closures.

Childcare

We need to provide support to parents who are unable to balance caring for children with working outside the home. Too many are unable to secure appropriate child care at a cost they can afford, thus limiting equality of opportunity and impacting family wellbeing. Provision should include earlier and extended hours of opening for parents with pre-school children. This would not only be an advantage to the economy of the County, for instance to Orkney Health and Care which will need staff to work their care at home option, but would also relieve the burden of constantly looking for where to go for child care for hard-pressed parents.

We would call for an early report into the provision of child care in the County to establish the level of unmet demand and the options for extended provision. We anticipate that this would not be free but would, in conjunction with existing schemes, be subsidised in the first instance.

Career development with a link to Orkney College

The Council and NHS Orkney are the County's two largest employers. More needs to be done to provide employment opportunities within these organisations for local youngsters. A "grow your own" professionals scheme linked to Orkney College and distance learning facilities would encourage more young Orcadians to pursue a career in the islands and, in the longer term, reduce the need for expensive recruitment campaigns in the South. Reintroducing the graduate recruitment scheme could be financed from the Training Fund in the first instance

Social Services/Health and Care

Health & Care subcommittee

We feel it is appropriate now to review the working of the new joint approach to health and care through the Orkney Health and Care subcommittee (OHAC), which was set in 2012. Does the current structure ensure the very best service delivery across the medical and social care sectors?

We would like to see a greater democratic representation on OHAC, where only half of the current board is elected.

New Kirkwall Care Home

The new Balfour Hospital project has no direct input from the OIC but it does have implications for health and welfare through OHAC. We agree the idea of having a new care home/rehab unit built alongside the projected new hospital. Delay in choosing a site for the new hospital has stalled OIC plans for provision of extra care housing as well as building a new care home.

Capital and revenue monies have been identified for a new Kirkwall Care Home for over two years now and we have yet to see any real progress in this. This needs to be addressed this year.

Protection of care places

Care must be taken to ensure that NHS Orkney remain fully responsible for primary health care and do not rely on OIC to fund ongoing care beds of an indeterminate type

Voluntary sector

We support the continued delivery of services through the voluntary sector as well as through statutory bodies and recognise the immense contribution made to Orkney society by the third sector. We would continue the Council support for this sector.

Transport Infrastructure

We would like to build on the recent work to see a more integrated approach to all aspects of transport within Orkney, be it by air, sea or road. And we welcome the prospect of road equivalent tariffs for Orkney, although this has to be handled with care where it adversely affects carriers, for instance.

Orkney Ferries

Orkney Ferries needs major investment to reduce operating costs. Whilst we welcome the involvement of the Scottish Government in the Orkney Ferries situation, we are committed to local control of services. Removing accountability to Edinburgh or elsewhere is not the answer to this problem; in fact it is likely to exacerbate it. New ferries are required and these will most likely have smaller crews to reduce operational costs. As an alternative to looking to the Scottish Government to take control of the service we would investigate the feasibility of outsourcing to a commercial provider, who would be contracted to the OIC under a service level agreement with a controlled fare structure.

We would welcome stationing vessels in the Isles for operational and socio-economic reasons. Any planning for changes to Orkney Ferries should take into account the impact on Loganair.

Loganair

We recognise the importance of the Loganair service to the North Isles and, although subsidised costs are now approaching £1 million a year, we think the current balance is about right.

Churchill Barriers

The issue of the second barrier has not only taken far too long to resolve it has also shown the council in a bad light with the ongoing dithering involved. We look forward to the latest consultant's report but we feel that delays due to outside bodies, for instance in the renewable sector, are probably unacceptable. We would press for a resolution of this issue within the next two years.

Bus services

Bus services across Orkney are arguably better than they have ever been but we still see possibilities of more co-operation and integration in setting routes and services between the main subsidised operator and other agencies such as Dial-a-Bus and Octobus. Services should be trialled where necessary, including exploring green energy solutions,

with the correctly sized vehicle for the job and with adequate publicity directed to potential users. This is especially important at a time when fuel costs are at an all-time high.

Fixed links

The issue of fixed links to and between the isles is an aspirational one, which perhaps merits a closer look in the new Council. But, if current technology is not up to inclusion in our transport 'fixes' then this should not delay projects indefinitely. We are doubtful that fixed links are financially viable for the Council to consider alone. We would follow up suggestions for outside assistance from, for example the EU, in this. Similarly, the issue of an all-weather pier for North Ronaldsay should be re-examined as to its viability since the current estimated costs of over £10 million are, we would suggest, too much for the Council alone to carry.

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Renewable Energy

Benefit to Orkney from renewables development

We need to ensure that the Council is well-placed to maximise any economic and social benefits that developments in green energy may bring with early talks with, for instance Scottish and Southern Energy, on community benefit. If Orkney countryside had to accommodate the infrastructures involved then we feel it is only right that the Orkney community should benefit as well. This may require the Council to invest in in-house expertise or consultancy for the purpose. A rounded approach is required to consider the whole renewable energy agenda.

Commercial and domestic wind turbines

OIC is already looking at its current policy in relation to onshore wind turbine development. We feel this is a good time to look afresh at the weighting in favour of small turbine growth. Searches for areas of development for larger turbines needs to be looked at again too before we become known solely as a windmill island. To the extent permitted by the relevant legislation, we would prefer to tightly zone the placement of commercial-scale wind turbines to avoid the proliferation of these across the Orkney landscape

The impact of reductions in financial support from green energy measures via the Feed-In Tariff regime and the Renewable Heat Incentive scheme needs to be taken into account as these are income streams for the council.

Tidal power

The future of renewable energy may lie in the predictability of tidal power more than in wind and wave-generated electricity. However, with the current limitations on the infrastructure, coupled with a reduction in the renewables obligation due later this year, we feel that the 'rush for wind' will be slowed anyway. We also have reservations about the ability of renewables to realistically tackle the issues of continuity of supply and climate change whilst at the same time being seen to be economically reasonable to the consumer.

Planning

We value Orkney's physical heritage but also recognise the right of individuals to develop their properties within the limits of planning regulations.

Recent changes to planning regulations announced by the Scottish Government are to be welcomed insofar as they remove the restrictions on many minor house alterations which would previously have been subject to planning permission. The less restrictive approach to house building in the countryside, where former derelict sites are now available, is also welcome.

We are not in favour of a free-for-all approach to planning whether it is for housing, wind turbines, commercial or public buildings. Each application must be treated on its own merits within the current Development Plan, with the possibility of Supplementary Guidance to allow for any unforeseen problems.

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Communication

Communication is arguably the most important issue. The Council must ensure it addresses misconceptions and seeks to engage more effectively with the public it exists to serve

Openness needs to be promoted more. We want to investigate the idea, taken up by other councils, of live web-casts of council and committee meetings. These could be archived for anyone to view at their leisure, anywhere in Orkney.

Regrettably the council is often seen in a negative light. The public rarely hears of the good work of the majority of staff and members. We need to find ways to make School Place and what functions are carried out there more visible.

At a time when it has never been easier, the Council is losing an opportunity to put its case across proactively, and in real-time to correct misconceptions as they appear. It is crucial to good governance to uphold the reputation of the Council and its workforce - its greatest asset. External relations should form part of the remit of a committee or sub-committee at least.

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Governance

Single Purpose Authority

We need to examine carefully the current structure of Orkney Islands Council, at elected member level, including looking at the possibility of a Single Purpose Authority (SPA) designed to deliver all aspects of public service provision in Orkney.

Broader base of representation

The role of a councillor is becoming a full-time job. Out of the 46 candidates standing at this election it would appear that 36 are either retired or self-employed. We need to broaden the base of representation by making it affordable for potential candidates to give up their employment to take on a full-time job as a councillor. A reduced number of local councillors on a full-time salary-level equivalent to the mean salary of the white collar worker in Scotland would cost no more than the current representation and would, at the same time, encourage a much wider base of potential councillors to run the gamut of local elections on a regular basis

Political representation on the OIC

We would support the politicisation of the OIC. However, this would obviously need to be initiated by the established political parties (or indeed new groupings) – and ultimately sanctioned by the electorate - rather than the OIC itself.

Costings: how would it all be paid for?

We are acutely aware that the current financial crisis means that money is scarce. So, we have put forward what we think are realistic proposals which are costed and affordable. Orkney Island Council Reserves at the end of March stood at a total of £225.8 million. Flotta Terminal Decommissioning is allocated £38.3 million of that but the rest is available.

We believe it is time to spend a bit more of this in order to tide us over until the economy recovers. We think the so called 'rainy day' is already here, and it is time for some judicious action.

The break down for each scheme is:

Child care

As this is an ongoing or revenue cost, it would have to come from managed funds, in other words, from the interest we get from the Oil Reserve Fund. Of this currently £4.7 million a year, or half, is used to support front line services. We would consider increasing this annual allocation by up to £200,000 in the first instance, depending on costings and demand.

Housing

The Council allocated £1m, in 2011/12, from its Oil Reserve Fund to support its Council house build programme. Given the level of unmet need, it is our considered view that additional resources should be provided to ensure house building continues, benefitting those in housing need and the local building sector.

We would suggest that £1m per annum, initially for three years, be allocated from the Reserve Fund to continue the build programme. The new build would generate increased rental and Council Tax

We would consider further assistance to home owners by increasing support for Care and Repair services and by increasing the loan assistance to private home owners for home improvement beyond the current £250,000 annual budget. This currently comes from the General Fund and is repaid by the applicant but it could be supplemented from the Oil Reserve Fund.

Career development

This scheme could be paid for through the training fund on a three year pilot for 10 places at an annual cost of £120k. It would then be reviewed.

Communications

Streaming of council and committee meetings would be another ongoing or revenue cost. It could be set up by using money from the General Fund Reserve and the annual running costs then coming from the Central Services budget.

Kirkwall town centre regeneration

Very little has been spent on Kirkwall regeneration recently and we would pay for a town centre face lift from the Regeneration Fund. Other sources of funding would also be pursued, including Lottery funding, as was done in the case of the recent Stromness Heritage initiative.

Second Barrier overtopping solution

EU and Scottish Government funding as well as money from the OIC's General Fund Reserves could be utilised here.

Winter garden

We would encourage Kirkwall Community Council to apply to the latest round of the Community Development Fund to source money for this. It doesn't just have to be the council who should instigate projects. Similarly for local amenities such as an improved Brandyquoy.