

Assynt Community Council
25th January 2018
Lochinver Community Hall
7.30pm
Minutes (Approved February 22nd)

1) Present:

K Anderson (KA), A Dickson (AD), M Hutchison (MH), P Jones (PJ), R Kerr (RK), D McBain (DM), D Slator (DS) (Chair), L Taylor (LT), J Thomas (JT)

Others Present:

Kirsteen Currie - Highland Councillor (KC), B Alexander - CALLP (BA), M Kelly, K Macleod, F Saywell, M Scott (MSc), M Stringer (MSt), M Sutherland - SSE (MS)

2) Apologies:

V Ling (VL)

3) Expressions of Interest:

There were none.

4) Minutes of November Meeting and Matters arising:

LT proposed the draft minutes be accepted and DS seconded.

Matters arising were as follows:

i. Late Bus:

DS has informed David Summers that despite the position of bus-driver being re-advertised, there were no applicants. David Summers was unable to confirm what happens next. LT knows someone who is still interested in being considered for the vacancy.

Action: LT to contact David Summers asking that the post be advertised again so this individual can apply.

ii. War Memorial:

A quote has been obtained for scaffolding and a decision is to be made on the next step, once funding is in place.

iii. ACC Website:

Action: Following VL's request that the position of web-site designer and administrator be advertised, JT to post this vacancy in the Assynt News and LT to do the same on the ACC's Facebook page as soon as VL draws up the ad.

Action: PJ also to add this item to the agenda for February.

iv. School Heating System:

LT gave an update on the situation. The oil heater and fan heaters have now been repaired and provide adequate heating, but HC are looking at an upgrade once the April budget figures are available. Given the upheaval this will cause, it is likely any major work will have to be carried out over the summer break

v. Litter Bins:

Action : MH to follow this up again with George Farlow. If the ACC or proposed new Community Group contribute to the cost of new litter bins in Lochinver (similar to those in Ullapool), there is still the matter of deciding who will empty them.

vi. Allocation of ACC funds:

The ACC has funds available for local causes - partly as a result of the annual grant received from the Maldie Burn project. VL is still to produce a pro forma application form along with a set of explanatory notes for anyone requesting funding from the ACC. In the meantime, applications can still be sent to the ACC before this new procedure is in place, and each request will be given full consideration subject to available funds and merit.

Action: PJ to include this item on the agenda for February.

vii, Deer in Lochinver:

MH reported progress has been made since the last ACC meeting. Mike Sutherland (Project Manager for SSE) and his team have cleared trees from some of the ground adjacent to Culag Park and there are lengths of timber now available for use in constructing the proposed fence. MH and DS thanked MS and his team for their contribution.

AD has been in touch with Elaine Macaskill and she has already looked in detail at controlling the issue in the Southern section of the village.

Action: PJ to invite Elaine to give an update to the ACC.

MSt has been in touch with BEAR Scotland with a view to obtaining the same type of deer-scarers they have erected along the road near Leckmelm.

viii. Parking at Raigmore Hospital:

DS has raised this issue with all four Highland community councils and has received a detailed response from Raigmore.

Action: DS to publish this reply in the Assynt News once permission is given from all concerned for their responses to be shared with the public.

5) CALLP Update

DS had been approached by BA requesting a letter from the ACC supporting CALLP's latest funding application and it was felt it would be useful for BA to address the meeting before this request was acted upon.

BA gave a brief report on CALLP's activities over the last 18 months, including the crofting project in Assynt and various training courses run locally. Every £1 raised unlocks a further £1.50, but there is still a shortfall of £250,000 against their target figure. 32 local contractors have already benefited from work they were invited to carry out on behalf of CALLP (to the tune of £219,000).

JT asked that in future any advertisements for potential contractors should be placed in the local press and noticeboards as well as on-line since not everyone in Assynt has adequate internet access.

BA then left and the meeting agreed that a letter of support be sent.

Action: MH to forward the letter, given that DS will be away and incommunicado for the next few weeks.

6) Gritting Issues and HC's Response:

DS felt sure that all present are already aware of the background to this issue. Numerous complaints have been passed on to HC regarding the condition of the roads in Assynt whenever there is snow or ice. Graham Mackenzie (Roads Operations Manager - HC) has promised to investigate the situation and has already been sent the relevant information including photographic and anecdotal evidence suggesting the service being provided in Assynt is far below the expected standards.

RK pointed out that this has been a contentious issue for the last five years, even before the fleet of gritters was reduced. AD added that the situation would have come to a head much sooner had there not been two relatively mild winters recently.

It was suggested that HC provide information to the ACC regarding the mileage covered by the two Lochinver gritters (along primary, secondary and tertiary routes) compared to the mileage the Ullapool fleet covers along the same types of road. It would appear that the Lochinver-based gritters are scheduled to treat a much greater distance. It would also be useful to know how many blade-rubbers are replaced on the Lochinver fleet each year (compared to other ploughs in the Highland region).

Much discussion followed on the difference between the gritting techniques employed by the Lochinver gritters and the Ullapool gritters. Again, photographic evidence clearly shows that the roads South of Ledmore are cleared of snow and gritted in a timely fashion while the roads West and East of Ledmore only have the snow skimmed and polished by the ploughs and the amount of grit being spread is miniscule.

AD has been led to believe that there is a standing instruction that drivers running between Lochinver and Craggie only apply grit on the return journey. Regardless of the amount of grit they actually spread, this means only one side of the double-track road from Ledmore to Lochinver is gritted - and again the photographic evidence proves this to be the case.

DS asked KC to obtain answers from the higher echelons of Highland Council since the ACC no longer has any confidence in those officials responsible for maintaining the roads. All complaints have been ignored or been met with the same feeble excuses time after time.

KC has recently joined the EDI Committee (HC's Environment, Development and Infrastructure Committee) along with Councillor Hugh Morrison, and will pursue this matter. She has also approached Transport Scotland who already cover the trunk roads and they have agreed to help out in emergencies. One problem already highlighted is that the Lochinver salt dump is exposed to the elements. When the grit gets wet, it clumps together and clogs the conveyor belt resulting in irregular application onto the road. But the general consensus was that resources and manpower are not being used correctly or effectively.

DM is concerned that no one on the Highland Council will even acknowledge there is a problem despite the deluge of complaints passed on since December and the press coverage highlighting the issue. Graham Mackenzie continues to side-step the issue when it's clear the working practices in place need addressing. There is also the matter of vehicle breakdowns - 12 during the last six weeks, suggesting there's an ongoing maintenance issue as well.

DM suggested it would be of benefit for HC to publicise breakdowns of the Assynt ploughs on social media (such as Facebook) so that travellers intending to use the roads surrounding Lochinver are able to delay or cancel their journeys. LT pointed out that 800 fish wagons are despatched from Lochinver each year and they rely on the roads being kept clear.

MSP pointed out that HC refused to send gritters outside of normal hours for police emergencies. AD has also asked John Clark to inform drivers to grit and clear the entry to the fire station as and when necessary but this request is not being carried out. If there had been an emergency, such as a serious road traffic accident caused by the icy conditions, the Lochinver fire engine would not have been able to leave the station either because banks of snow and slush had been piled across the exit by a passing snow-plough. AD added that SSE engineers working locally for the last month or so were amazed at the poor state of the roads in Assynt compared to the rest of Scotland following the recent snowfall.

Local schoolchildren were unable to attend school because the road out of the village had not been properly cleared, and there has been an issue with the designation of the route to the primary school as a tertiary route (resulting in no ploughing before 11.00am). There has been some adjustment to the timings involving the gritting crews now starting at 05.00, but there is little evidence on the ground to show the benefit of this early start since the roads are no better after being ploughed or gritted.

DS believes Graham Mackenzie should be asked to attend a public meeting to address these criticisms. But, based on assurances he has given in the past regarding several other outstanding issues, the overall impression is that the ACC and the community of Assynt no longer has confidence in him or the other HC officials responsible for maintaining our roads.

JT asked for clarification on one simple point. Are the local drivers taking it upon themselves to apply less grit than necessary and to drive with the blades clear of the road surface, or are they following instructions given by their managers. There is an overwhelming feeling that drivers are afraid to use their initiative or to carry out their duties to the standard expected by the public for fear of being disciplined.

Action: KC to email the responses she receives from HC to MH in time for the next meeting.

DS suggested that William Gilfillan be invited to further explain the situation if the answers we are given are unsatisfactory.

AD asked that it be minuted that PJ has carried out a great deal of work recently collating complaints and other relevant evidence and passing it on to all concerned.

7) Financial Report:

Business Current account - £188.82 - Business Instant Access Reserve Account - £7228.28
£33.39 had also been credited to the account in lieu of incorrect charges.

8) Correspondence:

There was none other than various items relating to gritting.

9) Litter along Lochinver Foreshore:

It has already been agreed this is a local community issue rather than a HC one, and it was felt a beach-clean should be carried out, possibly involving local schoolchildren.

Action: MH to look at this more closely. One problem is disposing of any litter once it's been bagged - especially plastic waste. KC pointed out that if this is organised properly, a skip can be used and taken away by the waste handling crew when full.

Other matters relating to litter in general were also discussed, including the maintenance of the village recycling area where broken glass is allowed to remain on the ground, the condition of the gutters along certain sections of road through the village following winter gales, and the increase in dog poo on the pavements.

Action: LT to find out who is responsible for keeping the bottle bank area clear.

Action: JT to place a reminder in the Assynt News regarding responsible dog ownership.

Action: PJ to put dog poo bags on the February agenda.

AD has taken up the matter of clearing the footpath at the rear of the Deli and Caberfeidh with John Clark.

10) Response to Jim McGillvray's email:

Councillor McGillvray has recently written to the Northern Times regarding the way HC funds are shared. He felt that the allocation spent in each area should reflect the size of the population of each constituency and was asking that each community council give a breakdown of all capital spent.

The consensus was that he is in a better position to obtain this information direct from HC.

Action: MH to reply to this effect.

11) Community Services:

i. Lochinver Public Toilets

AD has held a site meeting with Ewan Marsh and any minor work will be scheduled for completion as soon as possible.

ii. Playpark Equipment

Mr Marsh also indicated the playpark equipment awaiting installation will be in place by Easter, but obtaining bark for laying on the play surface is still a problem and the Kirk Road climbing frame will have to be taped off for the foreseeable future.

KC referred to the latest round of HC budget talks and pointed out that there are plans to reduce costs even more next year by closing 2/3 of all Highland playparks, charging for parking in 81 car parks owned by HC, cutting all community council grants by 23%, reducing spend on grass cutting by 30% and looking at closing down any toilets that are under-used. With this in mind, she felt that the ACC should be aware of these proposals and should look at a possible transfer of assets so that the local community can take charge of certain facilities like public toilets and playparks. There is a real fear that any assurances given by Community Services for work to be completed beyond the end of the current financial year will not be adhered to.

AD was confident the work for the refurbishments to the toilets will be carried out before April using this year's funding. The same applies to the relocation of the salt dump as the cash for this project is already in place and will be lost if the work is not completed as promised.

iii. Achmelvich Road and Clashnessie Cattle Grid

All work has now been completed.

iv. Kirk Road Footpath

This is still being looked at.

v. Street Lighting

The squad has now reprogrammed the street light timings so they are all in sync with each other and with local lighting-up times.

vi. Car Park Signage

Action: LT and AD to look at tis again

LT expressed his concern at local signage in general. Following recent storm damage, two large road signs at Skiag Bridge and at the approaches to Lochinver have blown down and to date no action has been taken to pick them up or replace/repair them even though John Clark and his road crew must be aware of the problem since they regularly travel along this road.

PJ pointed out that the same lackadaisical attitude applies to the use of roadside warning signs whenever road repairs are being carried out. Once the work is completed or the hazard has been removed, the signs are usually left in place for months until they either rust away or are eventually removed.

Action: AD to discuss the above with John Clark.

It was agreed that pursuing these issues with Graham Mackenzie would be counter-productive since any promises he might give to enquire further could draw his focus away from addressing the ongoing gritting problems.

12) AOCB:

i. Rockfall between the Culag Hotel and the Leisure Centre

LT confirmed that this has now been cleared from the road and the rockface has been stabilised.

ii. Clashnessie Beach Access

RK has met with Matt Dent, the official in charge of paths, and has been given blueprints for the proposed walkway and a guarantee that the timber required for the work will be provided. But it will be up to the local community to organise the construction.

MS offered to pass on details of their 'be the difference scheme'. His SSE team has already agreed to fit a ramp and walkway allowing disabled access to a fishing pier in Drumbeg, but they are likely to have left the area before the materials arrive for the Clashnessie project.

iii. Garry Cameron

Temporary Ward Manager Garry Cameron's departure to a new role within HC is imminent and DS has passed on the ACC's thanks for his work.

iv. Insurance

HC will continue to pay the insurance premiums but it will now be the responsibility of each community council to check it has sufficient cover. DS will give the go-ahead for HC to pay for the current policy unless anyone else wishes to scrutinise the documentation more closely. There were no volunteers.

v. Petrol Pumps

AD has been informed that one of the fuel pumps operated by Assynt Trading (Spar shop) is scheduled to be converted to a 24-hour self-service card-operated pump before Easter.

vi. Electric vehicle charging points

AD is to meet with Robin Pope and SSE regarding the best location for a charging point in the car park be-

hind Cruamer. This will be subject to available funding following next year's budget.

vii. Cruamer bench

This is now rotten and falling apart.

Action: Its removal or replacement to be discussed at the next meeting.

viii. Cruamer Fencing

AD asked permission to request quotes for painting the metal posts for the fence along the foreshore once replacement panels have been fitted (some 105 in total being supplied by HC) using the funding available from the ward discretionary budget.

Action: AD to go ahead with obtaining quotes.

ix. Rory Matheson

Rory from Drumbeg is taking part in the finals of this year's BBC Radio Scotland Young Traditional Musician 2018 competition. All present at the meeting wish Rory every success.

Action: PJ to publicise this on Facebook.

x. Christmas Lights

KA asked that the ACC pass on their thanks to those concerned for last year's Christmas lights and tree.

xi. ACC Noticeboard

PJ apologised for being unable to post notices on the ACC noticeboard due to the scaffolding outside the Spar store. The work appears to be near completion, but there is no sign of the scaffolding being taken away.

MSc added that this also presents a Health and Safety issue as the defibrillator is currently inaccessible.

The meeting closed at 21.10.

The next ACC meeting will take place on Thursday, February 22nd 2018 at Lochinver Village Hall.

PJ January 2018

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Proposed dates for 2018 ACC meetings (subject to change):

February 22nd	Lochinver Village Hall Committee Room
March 29th	Lochinver Village Hall Committee Room
April 26th	Elphin Community Hall
May 25th	Lochinver Village Hall Committee Room (including AGM)
June 29th	Drumbeg Village Hall
July	<i>No meeting</i>
August 31st	Lochinver Village Hall Committee Room
September 28th	Stoer Village Hall
October 26th	Lochinver Village Hall Committee Room
November 30th	Lochinver Village Hall Committee Room
December	<i>No meeting</i>