

Sandness & Walls Community Council

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Draft minutes for hybrid meeting of the Sandness and Walls Community Council on Tuesday 3rd September 2024 at 6.30 pm held at the Walls Hall

Present: I Walterson (Chair)
F Macbeath (Vice Chair)
M Forrest
E Johnston
S Johnston
J Puckey
J Laing
M Macgregor
Cllr L Peterson

In attendance: D Forrest (Clerk), E Park (Transport and Contracts Operations Officer), H Budge (Director of Children's Services)

1. Chair's Welcome

I Walterson (Chair) chaired the meeting and welcomed all those present. He also requested that Members should show courtesy to speakers by not interrupting or speaking over them. He also requested that during Q&As, Members be restricted to two questions each given the time restraints facing each of the visitors.

2. Apologies:

C Venus, R Smith, J Haswell, L Rendall

3. Declarations of Interest

S Johnston declared an interest in relation to item 8, Funding request from Sandness Community Development.

(M Macgregor and F Macbeath entered the meeting.)

4. Visit by Ms Elaine Park (Transport and Contracts Operations Officer)

4.1 Overview of Next Round of Bus Service Contracts

Ms Park began by explaining that Mr Craigie, who had been scheduled to visit, was indisposed and that she was deputising. She began by distributing a set of slide printouts that supported her presentation entitled Stakeholder & Community Engagement. She indicated that Stantec had been commissioned to support Shetland Islands Council in the development of the business case for the next round of passenger transport services including school transport for Shetland. Ms Park went on to describe the timescale for the generation of the business plan and stated that the intention is that, at the end of the process, contracts be awarded to operators for approximately five to ten years depending on the decisions made by Councillors. She stated that the purpose of this consultation phase was to identify any existing problems with the current services and to highlight opportunities for improvements.

4.2 Consultation

Ms Park stated that the current consultation process involved a public survey, public meetings at locations throughout Shetland and an invitation for people to phone in their comments. She went on to say that they were as keen to hear from people who do not regularly use busses as those who do.

4.3 Bus Service Statistics

A brief synopsis of user numbers was provided. This indicated a marked increase in user numbers since 2019/20 especially in the youth category. The majority of users were those holding concessionary passes.

4.4 Bus Services on the Westside

A list of operators providing public transport services including Dial-a-Ride on the Westside of Shetland was presented. The point was made that all Dial-a-Ride services have to be pre-booked by 4pm on the day prior to travel.

4.5 Consultation Opportunities

Ms Park concluded her presentation by highlighting the various means by which stakeholders can express their views on Shetland's public bus network.

4.5 Q&A

The Chair thanked Ms Park for her presentation and reminded the Members that he had asked that they restrict themselves to two questions each. The following questions were asked:-

Q- Will the recently announced reduction in Scottish Government spending affect ZetTrans' future services?

A- The only Scottish Government support received by ZetTrans is for 55% of the cost of concessionary fares so it should not have a discernible effect on how ZetTrans delivers its services.

Q- Will there be less SIC funding for public bus services?

A- Various cost options will be included in the business case that goes before the SIC. It will be for the Councillors to decide which option to adopt.

Q – People who use Dial-a-Ride can't always anticipate that they will need to use the service a day in advance.

A- it would not be possible to make a booking on the day of travel because the operator may have made other arrangements for that day if they are not required.

Q- It is not possible under the current schedule for Sandness children to travel to the West Mainland Leisure Centre in Aith to take part in activities unless someone drives them there.

A- A dialogue between Leisure Centre managers and ZetTrans is taking place with a view to resolving this problem where possible.

Q – There is no Sunday bus service for the Westside of Shetland. Would it be possible to introduce a limited service on Sundays?

A- This could be considered, possibly for a trial period.

Q- Can the scheduled feeder service to Sandness be the early evening run?

A- When this was previously the case, there was a very limited demand. Given that population demographics may have changed it can be looked at again.

Q- Is it possible to consider installing bike racks on busses?

A- I have noted this and will include it in the survey.

Q- Can a Dial-a-Ride service be introduced for the 9am ferry from West Burrafirth to Papa Stour?

A- This can be considered especially for the Summer Timetable.

Q- Can the 07.55 No. 9 service to Lerwick go round the Tesco roundabout in order that people who work in that area of town get to work on time?

A- This can be considered.

- Q- Given that the Foula Ferry cannot always run to the Tuesday and Thursday schedule, is it possible for the bus to link up with the ferry on unscheduled days?
- A- It should be possible for the ferry operator to liaise with ZetTrans and make this happen.
- Q- Is it possible to make block bookings for the Dial-a-Ride service?
- A- Yes.
- Q – Is it possible for people who have not booked to use the Dial-a-Ride service provided the transport is running?
- A - Yes
- Q- Is it possible to run more environmentally friendly busses?
- A- This does not form part of the plans for the immediate future. A lot will depend on what turns out to be the most sustainable energy source for busses in rural areas.
- Q- Is it possible for busses that are being driven from a driver's home to his/her first pickup point to be able to pick up passengers on this part of its journey?
- A- This should be possible.
- Q- Can people stop and board a bus at the side of the road rather than have to go to the nearest bus stop?
- A- This should be possible provided it is at a safe place for the bus to stop, but this is not always easy given the driver turnover.

The Clerk was asked to submit any other points via email.

Action: The Clerk to Email Ms Park with any other bus related issues.

The Chair thanked Ms Park for her presentation and her responses.

(Ms Park left the meeting and Mrs H Budge entered.)

5. Visit by Mrs H Budge, Director of Children's Services

5.1 Reason for Visit

The Chair welcomed Mrs Budge and thanked her for coming to Walls in her last week prior to retirement. He stated that the reason for inviting Mrs Budge to the meeting related to concerns over the falling roll at Happyhansel Primary School.

5.2 Mrs Budge's Response

Mrs Budge provided an overview of the situation in Shetland as a whole in relation to school rolls and stated that in recent years families have tended to be smaller with the consequence that schools throughout Shetland are experiencing falling rolls. She supported this argument by quoting statistics for Shetland's primary school numbers and stated that, overall, primary school numbers had fallen by 15% over recent years. This, she stated, would have a knock-on effect on secondary school rolls in the next few years. She then went on to demonstrate that the fluctuations in Happyhansel's roll was not inconsistent with previous years' figures. However, she indicated that in the next two years Happyhansel would have its two largest classes moving to secondary school leaving a considerably smaller school roll.

5.3 Staffing Issue

The Chair raised the matter that there had been a recent staffing issue at Happyhansel which was connected to placing requests for some pupils to attend another school. Mrs Budge acknowledged that this subject was very sensitive and could not be discussed in detail. She stated that the staff were settling in well to the new term and that regular monitoring of teaching and learning was taking place through the quality assurance staff.

5.4 Mothballing Policy

Concerns over mothballing small rural schools was raised. Mrs Budge began by stating that making financial savings was not part of the mothballing policy. It would simply be done when a school was no longer considered viable. She indicated that this formed part of the Local Authority's Mothballing Policy. She also spoke about how the Scottish Government's Learning Estate Policy meshed in with the SIC Mothballing policy.

5.5 Concerns regarding the SIC Mothballing Strategy

Cllr Peterson raised several concerns regarding mothballing with particular reference to how it was recently conducted at a Westside School. They were as follows:-

- She felt that the consultation process was flawed in that where a family had not respond to the consultation, it was assumed they were in favour of mothballing the school.
- She had not been provided with a satisfactory definition of what it meant for a school not to be viable.

- A school's physical capacity appeared to be one of the deciding factors in relation to whether or not it should be mothballed, but it is unclear as to how this capacity is measured.
- Given the fluidity of Shetland's population, numbers in any given part of the county can fluctuate rapidly.
- Some SIC elected Members are concerned about saving money therefore they do not object to small schools being mothballed.
- She considers it to be impossible to un-mothball a school given that it would take a full academic year. She made the point that any interim measure made for a child who is waiting for a school to become un-mothballed would, in all probability, become permanent.
- Cllr Peterson went on to say that insufficient stakeholder consultation takes place with the wider community and the local Community Council is excluded. She stated that she had proposed that a widening of the scope of the consultation process be included in the policy but had this had not received the backing of her fellow Members.
- She concluded by describing how mothballing a school is a traumatic process for all concerned especially children.

5.6 The Northern Alliance and Mothballing

In response to a question regarding links between the Northern Alliance and the mothballing of schools, Mrs Budge stated that Aberdeenshire had devised a mothballing toolkit which had helped to inform the SIC Mothballing Policy. When asked if any schools had been un-mothballed, Mrs Budge stated that one in Orkney had been un-mothballed. Cllr Peterson pointed out that it was now used as a teacher resource facility and not as a base for teaching children.

5.7 Advice on how to support a school against Mothballing

S Johnston was concerned that when a mothballing process is started it would be necessary to know what actions a school and community can take to prevent it happening. Mrs Budge responded that not too many schools faced mothballing in the next three years. Cllr Peterson quoted from the Borders Local Authority's Mothballing Policy which stated that it should happen if the Authority and/or the Community are in agreement about mothballing a school. Cllr Peterson considered that the educational attainment of the pupils should also be taken into consideration when contemplating mothballing a school.

5.8 Supporting Rural Areas

Cllr Peterson made the point that the SIC has many policies which aim to support and regenerate rural communities, but this is not adhered to in practice. Such issues as the provision of new affordable housing or the development and support for businesses in rural areas is not always of concern to some of the elected Members. The point was made that there is a need for greater joined up working between the SIC Departments to regenerate rural communities in Shetland. The current Mothballing Policy runs the risk of operating against rural populations and communities. Finally, it was proposed that Sandness and Walls should seek ways of working together to prevent the risk of their schools facing the prospect of being mothballed.

The Chair thanked Mrs Budge for her visit and wished her a long and happy retirement. This sentiment was echoed by all those present. Prior to departing, Mrs Budge commended Cllr Peterson for her tenacity and endeavours in standing up for the Westside. (Mrs Budge left the meeting.)

6. Minutes from 6.8.24

The adoption of the minutes from 6th August 2024 was proposed by M Macgregor and seconded by J Puckey.

6.1 Matters Arising

Re: 17.3 of 8/24 Ham Footbridge on Foula

The Clerk stated that the photographs he had received from R Smith have been forwarded to the Outdoor Access Department.

Re: 13 of 8/24 Local Place Plans

The Chair indicated that he and J Haswell had attended a meeting on Local Place Plans at the Bixter Hall on Monday evening. Mr Peter Mogridge and a visiting advisor had spoken on the subject. It was agreed to defer this matter to the next meeting.

7. Planning Consultation Ref: 2024/177/PPP

After a brief discussion it was agreed unanimously to recommend approval of this application to erect a wooden lodge on Papa Stour.

Action: The Clerk to email the Planning Department to state that the Members of the Sandness and Walls Community Council recommend approval of this application.

8. Funding Request from Sandness Community Development

The Chair referred Members to an attachment that had been sent out with the papers for this meeting. S Johnston was asked if there was anything to add to the application. He reiterated that it was Sandness Community Development that was running the film nights. S Johnston's Zoom link was shut down for the duration of the discussions after which the application was approved unanimously.

Action: The Clerk to send a cheque for £300 to Sandness Community Development.

9. Requests to Visit the Community Council

9.1 Request by Thea Groat (SSEN Transmission)

Members considered this request but given the amount of time that has been requested for a presentation and discussion (1.5 hours), it was decided to request more information and possibly hold an additional meeting.

Action: The Clerk to email Ms Groat to request additional information on what the presentation would be about.

9.2 Request by Mairi Kieth (Childcare Info Funding)

Cllr Peterson stated that the project that Ms Kieth was going to present to the Members was just at its initial stages. Members agreed that they would need more information prior to inviting Ms Kieth to a meeting.

Action: The Clerk to email Mairi Kieth to request more information about her proposed project.

9.3 Request by Tanya Riley (Marine Restoration and Enhancement Projects)

The Chair stated that Ms Riley will be meeting with senior staff from the Shetland Fishermen's Association to discuss the projects. He suggested that Members wait to hear the outcome of this meeting before deciding whether or not to issue an invitation.

(Draft Minutes of S&WCC September 2024 meeting subject to approval at next meeting.)

Action: The Chair to report back on the outcome of the meeting between the Shetland Fishermen's Association and Ms Tanya Riley.

10. Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting was set for Tuesday 1st October 2024 and will be a hybrid meeting which is scheduled to commence at 7.00pm.

The Chair thanked everyone for their attendance.

The meeting closed at 9.15 pm.

(Draft Minutes of S&WCC September 2024 meeting subject to approval at next meeting.)