



North Ayrshire Council
Comhairle Siorrachd Àir a Tuath

Meeting of the Council

Wednesday 16 December 2020

Responses to Questions

Question

(1) a question by Councillor Marshall to the Leader of the Council in the following terms:

“The SNP conference recently passed a motion in favour of a four-day week, which would cost Scotland’s public services at least £2.5 billion in the middle of a pandemic.

What would it cost North Ayrshire to enact this plan without cutting salaries or services if not funded in full by the Scottish Government and what percentage would the Council Tax need to be increased to fund this?”

Response

“Councils are complex organisations, with thousands of employees working across different departments, with a mix of frontline and office-based staff and therefore there will be many different models that could apply to a four-day working week. In the absence of any detail on any proposed model, we can only make assumptions on what a model may entail. If any member wanted to ask officers to estimate costs for any one model, they would be more than happy to undertake such calculations on their behalf.

I should make Council aware, in the interests of openness and transparency, that in recent months, the Four Day Week campaign had requested meetings with myself and officers to discuss their campaign and test the Council’s appetite for working on a pilot scheme. The think tank Autonomy were represented on those meetings. It is the case that whilst we recognise the potential benefits of a four-day working week in areas such as a better work-life balance, there are no proposals at this time to run a pilot nor have we asked officers to calculate the costs of a pilot. The complexity of the Council, as referred to earlier, means that any pilot would likely require different models across the workforce and there would be a requirement to recruit additional staff to deliver frontline services which we could not fund from our ever-reducing budget. We are however keen to learn any lessons should any council in the UK participate in a pilot and would volunteer to take part in a pilot should the Scottish Government decide to fund one.

At this present time, our focus remains on our Renewal approach from Covid, including the workstream on new ways of working. The trade unions are engaged as part of that work.”

Question

(2) a question by Councillor Murdoch to the Chair of Planning in the following terms:

“Does the Chair of Planning think that his constituents, our constituents, constituents in general in the North Coast and across North Ayrshire deserve the right to be represented by their Local Councillor at Planning Meetings?”

Response

“Councillor Murdoch refers to representing constituents at the Planning Committee. His question misunderstands the role of the Planning Committee and appears to propose that lobbying by individual councillors on behalf of either applicants or objectors, should be prioritised over other submissions received by the Planning Committee.

The starting point is that the determination of planning applications is a quasi-judicial process. In determining applications the Committee are legally bound to apply a two-stage objective test:

- Does the application comply with the Local Development Plan (LDP)? If so, there is a presumption it should be granted unless there are material planning considerations which outweigh the LDP. If not, it should be refused unless outweighed by material planning considerations. Material planning considerations are those which relate to the use of the development site for the proposed use- no more, no less.
- What are the material planning considerations and do they outweigh the LDP?

The integrity of the planning process, and the trust which developers, objectors and communities have in it, depends on proper and transparent processes being followed. To support transparency, all submissions are published on the Planning website. Thereafter the planning report summarises all objections and representations, and considers the weight to be applied to each, prior to the determination of the application.

If local Members become involved in acting for, or lobbying on behalf of individual applicants or objectors, this can give rise to concern that undue influence is being applied behind closed doors, outwith the normal planning process. For that reason, the Councillors' Code of Conduct, prohibits Members from lobbying Members of the Planning Committee about applications.

The weight which the Planning Committee or officers give to the LDP and other material planning considerations, depends on the strength and relevance of that issue, not who is making an objection or representation. An individual objection or representation supported by a councillor cannot be given any more weight because a councillor is involved. To do so would be a disservice to all others who have chosen to submit objections and representations. Nor would it be fair to the other side. In other words, councillors need to be treated the same as anyone else and not given any priority

If any objectors including Councillors request to address the Planning Committee, they must frame their request in terms of the “*Guidance for Individuals Wishing To Address a Meeting of the Planning Committee*” as set out in the Guidance Notice on the Council’s Website at

<https://north-ayrshire.cmis.uk.com/north-ayrshire/Document>

As defined in Section 3 of the “Guidance” the objectors may decide up to a maximum of 3 people, who will speak, and will be limited to a maximum period of 10 minutes in total to present their case.

The applicants will then be invited to respond to the issues raised by the objectors in their presentation. The applicants will also be limited to a maximum of 3 people, who will be limited to 10 minutes in total to respond.

It is important that, given the Planning Committee is a *quasi judicial* body, both the applicants and the objectors get a fair and balanced hearing. It is also important that any Member who wishes to make representations on planning applications is aware of the rules and tests which the Council as Planning Authority has to legally follow.”

Question

- (3) a question by Councillor Murdoch to the Leader of the Council in the following terms:

“Does the Leader of the Council think that there is an appropriate investment proposal from the Ayrshire Growth Deal in the established and recognised tourist destinations around North Ayrshire and can the Leader please state how much of the Ayrshire Growth Deal will be invested in tourism and improving the visitor experience on the Isle of Arran, Isle of Cumbrae and Largs areas?”

Response

“The Ayrshire Growth Deal commits a total of £251m to an agreed portfolio of projects across Ayrshire. It is important to recognise that the Deal is based on the achievement of an inclusive economy for Ayrshire with a clear focus on addressing the issues of innovation and productivity, and inequality across the regional economy. AGD funding is granted for projects which are longer term game-changers. To attract UK and Scottish Government funding, proposals had to meet their strategic priorities

While marine tourism did not satisfy the criteria for UK Government funding, the Council successfully made the case for its inclusion in the Growth Deal, with funding of £18.5 million by Scottish Government, and a further £5 million from North Ayrshire Council.

The investments provide a geographical spread of investment, including at key locations around North Ayrshire’s coast and our islands, that will provide the leverage and capacity to capitalise on our greatest natural asset within the region and its anticipated they will bring additional partner investment as well as secondary and commercial investments. The design of the projects at programme and project level is intended to take a community wealth building approach to providing skills development opportunities, sustainable employment opportunities and opportunities for businesses and communities to participate in and own the wider opportunities arising through investment, while seeking to anchor key stakeholders to the region.

In relation to the Arran and Cumbraes element of this, projects are:

A Cumbrae Transit Marina & Step Ashore Facility located in Millport Bay which will create a breakwater and transit/local berthing, coordinated with the flood defence works planned for Millport.

An Arran Transit Marina & Step Ashore Facility will be located in Brodick Bay or Lamlash Bay subject to final design studies and agreement with community sponsors.

It is important to recognise that the marine infrastructure proposed for Ardrossan, Arran and Cumbraes will not solely benefit these communities. Such enhanced facilities will increase the attractiveness of the Clyde as a sailing destination, leading to greater footfall along the entire coast, including Largs.

The member will also be aware that other AGD projects include £18million of investment in the centre for research into low carbon energy and the circular economy at Hunterston.”

Question

(4) a question by Councillor Stephen to the Leader of the Council in the following terms:

“I am sure that most, if not all, of my Councillor colleagues will have been contacted by business people at their wits end because they are falling through the gaps in Scotland's Covid financial support system. The initial Covid support structures were put in place in a hurry so that money could get out to support businesses and jobs, and there have been tweaks to the systems over the months. However, there are still significant numbers of businesses that are getting either no support or totally inadequate support. Without some prompt action these businesses will fail, taking with them the jobs and livelihoods of all involved.

There is a light at the end of the tunnel with the vaccines which the UK has already committed to and are now starting to come on stream. But for many businesses, such as coach operators, restaurants, and hotels - in fact any business that normally has people close to one another, it will be many months if not years of trying to keep going with hugely reduced capacity.

We need to ensure that the fabric of our society remains intact during the Covid crisis so that jobs and livelihoods can be saved.

Last week the Fraser of Allander Institute estimated that the Scottish government is still sitting on-around £1billion of Covid support money from the UK Government, which would indicate that it has the wherewithal to provide further help.

So my question is could you tell us what opportunities is the Council taking in its dealings with the Scottish government to highlight the harm being done to jobs and livelihoods by the failings of the current Covid business support system, and how can the Council encourage the Scottish government to undertake a full review of the support system to ensure that money is being directed to where it is needed both now and into the future?”

Response

“Whilst no place has been immune to the economic impact of Covid-19, it is clear that regions that were already fragile will need specific and enhanced support to recover and renew. That is why the Council has taken a proactive approach to outlining the support required to ensure an inclusive and green recovery in North Ayrshire.

Our Economic Recovery and Renewal Approach published in September outlined a series of asks to the Scottish and UK Governments to support North Ayrshire's recovery given our fragile economy and the stark levels of regional inequality in Scotland. We included most of these asks in our submission to the Scottish Government's Advisory Group on Economic Recovery and a Scottish Parliament inquiry into economic recovery as well as evidence on the impact on the local business base and the labour market.

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Throughout the duration of the pandemic we have worked in partnership with COSLA, SOLACE and SLAED to influence the development of business support grants with Scottish Government. We have long argued for the need for discretionary business grants to support local priorities and those most in need. A Local Authority Discretionary Fund of £30 million was announced on the 17 November , however we still await the details of any criteria or restrictions on its allocation and payment and COSLA Leaders have unanimously agreed that £30million is not enough with COSLA continuing to lobby Scottish Government for additional funding to support the many businesses impacted by the pandemic.

There have been a number of business support programmes throughout the pandemic, all of which have been implemented in a short space of time, with the Council playing a leading role in administering business grants with over £25million disbursed to local businesses since March.

Our islands have been uniquely impacted by Covid-19, that is why we commissioned the Fraser of Allander Institute to look at the specific impact of Covid-19 on the Arran Economy, and why the Council Leader wrote to the Scottish Government in June to seek financial interventions to support island businesses and the creation of a bespoke Island Fund aligned to Community Wealth Building.

It is important that the Scottish Government also supports the future resilience of the North Ayrshire economy and therefore the Council has written to the Scottish Government to ask for a Ministerial Taskforce focused on Hunterston given that the Hunterston B power station will cease operation two years earlier than previously announced.

And most recently we have been raising the need for support for businesses during our discussions with Ministers on Scotland coronavirus tier system.”

Question

- (5) a question by Councillor Hill to the Cabinet Member for Post Covid Renewal in the following terms:

"Following the excellent work done by NAC staff and volunteers from our Hubs across the council area throughout the pandemic, can the Portfolio Holder outline proposals for the future use of these facilities?"

Response

"North Ayrshire staff and volunteers have worked effectively together since March to establish a network of Community Hubs across North Ayrshire. They proved a lifeline for many of our residents, providing essential services such as a prescription delivery service, hot meals, mental health support, befriending and foodbank distribution for those unable to access food due to shielding, self-isolation or financial issues.

Our partners in community-led hubs in Fullarton, Vineburgh, Whitlees, Woodwynd, Garnock Valley Café Solace and Cranberry Moss worked with us to serve communities and the teams together included over 600 current and new volunteers, the third and private sectors and the NHS. Their contribution is a credit to North Ayrshire.

From 31st March to 30th September, 27,387 calls were received; 66,753 food deliveries were made through Community Hubs (in addition to NAC Food Hub figures); and 12,407 prescriptions were delivered.

We have also distributed Scottish Government funding to support local community food larders and fridges, helping with fuel poverty and other poverty-related needs.

Through this collaborative approach, we have learned more about the needs of communities and the effectiveness of working together in different ways.

These outcomes, as well as ongoing discussions with volunteers, community groups and staff, continue to inform our renewal planning within the current Tier 3 Covid-19 conditions and beyond.

Further discussion with elected members and communities will resume early in 2021."

Question

(6) a question by Councillor Hill to the Leader of the Council in the following terms:

“Can I ask the portfolio holder what discussions have been had with Peel in terms of Ayrshire Growth Deal proposals or any other proposals for the site? What projects have been suggested or proposed? What plans does the council have to ensure the early and full consultation with the local community takes place on any uses of the site?”

Response

“Discussions are currently underway with Peel Ports Group (PPG) and Scottish Enterprise (SE) to form a tri-partite agreement to create an innovation parc principally to support proposals around the blue economy. The funding from the AGD is via the UK Government whose principal focus is to support innovation and research and development led economic activity that would be of impact at a UK level as well as locally. The discussions are at a very early stage and appropriate consultation will be put in place.

In terms of any other proposals for the site, if these require planning permission, any application is published online and representations can be submitted as part of the planning process. The Hunterston Liaison Committee, set up in terms of a previous planning condition, also provides an opportunity for local community members to find out information and ask questions of Peel on potential and proposed uses.”

Question

(7) a question by Councillor Billings to the Leader of the Council in the following terms:

“There was a recent announcement that the Scottish government was making £30million available to local authorities to enable Councils to make discretionary payments to support local jobs. I was recently made aware that the Scottish government has changed its eligibility criteria for the Strategic Framework Business Fund, the effect of which is to remove payments from hotels, restaurants and food-based pubs not in Tier 4 that have been forced to close or severely limit their trading due to the Covid tier restrictions. Whilst the payments from this fund were totally inadequate they did at least offer at least a crumb of support. However, I am led to understand that at least some of these payments will continue because North Ayrshire will use its discretionary fund, and if that is the case then that is very much to be welcomed.

It would, therefore, appear to me that the £30million is not actually new money but rather that the Scottish government is recycling money its no longer giving to businesses. The worrying aspect of this is that it is almost as if the Scottish government appears to think that businesses in Tiers 2 and 3 which have closed without being forced to were 'at it' and happy to survive on state funds. The Scottish government does not seem to realise that there are many businesses that just don't have any customers due to the Covid restrictions and are closing as a last resort in order to survive. On Arran the majority of the island's hotels, pubs and restaurants are closed. Not because they fancy a bit of break, but because there are no customers due to the Covid restrictions of Tier 3 and temporarily shutting the doors is a painful survival strategy.

To enable us all to have a better understanding of this situation, could the Member tell me how many businesses in North Ayrshire will no longer be automatically eligible for a support payment under the Strategic Framework Business Fund, what proportion of the £30million has come to North Ayrshire for its discretionary use, and finally could he confirm how the Council is intending to use this discretionary fund to support local jobs?”

Response

“The Strategic Framework Business Fund was launched on 2nd November and since then North Ayrshire has been in Tier 3. This provides support for those businesses required by Law to close under this tier and qualify for a payment of either £2000 or £3000 every four weeks dependant on Rateable Value. Those businesses not required to close by Law but specifically required to modify their operations due to the new Tier restrictions will receive a payment of either £1400 or £2100 based on their Rateable Value again paid every four weeks. (An example would be a pub that continues to serve food but restricts its operating hours and serves no alcohol would be eligible for this payment).

To clarify the position and clear up any confusion that may exist for those businesses temporarily closing their doors, officers have sought guidance from Scottish Government on their criteria that a business needs to be actively trading and they confirmed that as long as the business is not in Administration it will be eligible for support. This then clarifies that every business who meets the eligibility criteria in North Ayrshire will receive the appropriate payment every 4 weeks.

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Separate to the announcement on the tiered support the Government announced on 17th November that a new Local Authority Discretionary Fund of £30m would be created and shared out amongst the 32 Local Authorities. We still await a formal offer on our allocation from Scottish Government and details on timescales.

Although the fund has been promoted by the Scottish Government as a local discretionary fund, no clear guidance has yet been received on the extent of the discretion that can be applied locally. When received, that guidance will inform and shape our arrangements locally.

Subject to the levels of local discretion, officers will develop a proposal that will deliver the greatest impact giving consideration to other funds that are available and local businesses and jobs most at risk. It is intended that the proposals for the local discretion fund will be considered by Cabinet in the new year.

With regard to businesses on Arran, the council is very aware of the significant economic challenges being faced on the island. These were set out quite starkly in the Fraser of Allender Report that the council recently commissioned. A meeting is scheduled in the new year with Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands, Paul Wheelhouse in January and these issues will be discussed with specific asks of support for our islands to support recovery and renewal of the local island economy.”