

**CAITHNESS & NORTH SUTHERLAND
REGENERATION PARTNERSHIP (CNSRP)**

**MINUTES OF ADVISORY BOARD MEETING HELD 17th JUNE 2008 AT
NORTH HIGHLAND COLLEGE, THURSO**

Present:

Cllr AS Park (Convenor of THC - Chair)
Rosemary Thompson (North Highland College)
Frances Gunn (Association of N&W Sutherland Community Councils)
William Manson (Association of Caithness Community Councils)
Cllr David Flear (THC)
Cllr David Bremner (THC)
Alastair MacDonald (Dounreay Stakeholders' Group)
Anna MacConnell (The Caithness Partnership)
George Bruce (Caithness Chamber of Commerce)

In attendance:

Roy Kirk (Area Manager, HIE)
Stuart Black (Director, Planning & Development, THC)
Alistair Dodds (Chief Executive, THC)
Ian Hargrave (Area Corporate Manager, THC)
Eann Sinclair (Programme Manager, CNSRP - Minutes)

1 Welcome and Introductions

The chairman welcomed members to the inaugural meeting of the Advisory Board and asked members to briefly introduce themselves.

2 Apologies for absence

John Thurso MP, Jamie Stone MSP, Cllr A Hendry (THC)

3 To note remit of Advisory Board

Ian Hargrave circulated a copy of a Highland Council paper submitted to the full Highland Council in March 2008 entitled "The Socio-economic aspects of Dounreay Decommissioning". The paper describes the purpose of the proposed Advisory Board. Also circulated was a copy of a paper submitted by John Thurso MP, with a number of discussion points on the remit and composition of the Board.

It was widely agreed, following discussion, that the Advisory Board was the "stakeholders' group" referred to in previous written descriptions of the Regeneration Partnership's structure. The word 'stakeholder' had been replaced by 'advisory' in its title in order to avoid confusion with the Dounreay Stakeholders' Group (DSG). The lack of representation from the business sector was acknowledged, and it was agreed that the revitalisation of the Caithness Chamber of Commerce would be an ideal mechanism for securing business representation. David Flear questioned the need for so many Highland Council representatives. Alistair Dodds stated that the representation at the meeting emphasised the strategic importance of this Partnership

to THC and that it was important for elected members and officers to gain direct feedback from this first meeting of the Board. Rosemary Thompson agreed, adding that it was good to see a presence from THC and HIE in such a forum, where the Action Plan could be interrogated.

Alastair MacDonald emphasised the need for wider representation in the regeneration process, and said that this did not necessarily need to come through the Advisory Board. Billy Manson said that the wider community did not know that progress was being made. Cllr Flear suggested that at future Advisory Board meetings a member of the press should be invited, as was currently the practice at meetings of the DSG. Eann Sinclair emphasised that a key part of his role was to ensure that the wider community was able to get clear and regular access to information on progress. The Chairman suggested that an early opportunity would be a press release following this meeting. **ACTION – E SINCLAIR** It was suggested that the principle of inviting the press should be forwarded to the Executive Board. **ACTION – E SINCLAIR**

George Bruce stated that there was no direct Caithness representation on the Executive Board, and that an elected representative should be considered – perhaps either the MSP or a local Caithness Councillor. John Thurso's paper referred to the potential for non-executive Directors from local bodies being represented on the Board. However, it was emphasised that the Executive Board does receive its reports from Caithness-based officers, and that the Senior Officers' group features locally-based officials. Again, it was suggested that such issues should be put before the Executive Board. **ACTION – I HARGRAVE**

4 Caithness & North Sutherland Action Plan

Eann Sinclair referred to the previously-circulated Draft Plan (entitled "Snapshot 3"). He described how the Plan was the direct result of the public consultation process led by the group chaired by John Thurso MP, and how the publicly-issued Strategy document (<http://www.caithness.org/regeneration/Strategy%20Document.pdf>) had been turned into a 50-point Action Plan. This is updated and republished on a quarterly basis. The current draft has separated out all the completed actions, showing progress that is being made.

However, there was now a need to prioritise the remaining actions, and make them much clearer, so that both agencies and the community know what needs to be done and who will be responsible for delivering it. At present most actions have too many responsible partners. A prioritised version of the Plan will be available by September, but in the meantime progress continues to be made.

Cllr Flear emphasised the key value of health and educational infrastructure to the regeneration process. Alastair MacDonald pointed to the attraction of the National Nuclear Archive as an excellent example of joint working across a range of bodies (public and non-public). But he then pointed to the current threat to the Wick Tax Office and its staff as working directly against the objectives of the regeneration process. There was unanimous agreement on this point. A local campaign to avert the job losses has begun, and THC, HIE and John Thurso MP have all made representations to HMRC.

Alistair Dodds stressed the need for a positive local outlook to back up a co-ordinated course of action to overturn such proposals. He emphasised the potential for adverse press coverage to influence potential inward investors to the area.

Anna MacConnell asked about the potential effect on the new LEADER Programme in the area of HIE's new policies, and specifically about the non-fragile designation given to Caithness. Roy Kirk stated that HIE's refocused role is in delivering the Government Economic Strategy by focusing on the potential of high-growth businesses and projects with a transformational impact. Cllr Flear stated that small amounts of money to communities can still be transformational. Frances Gunn agreed, and pointed to the value of previous small-project funds. Roy Kirk said that ultimately it had to be about prioritising the resources available. George Bruce suggested that there was a large part left of the additional £12 million allocated to Caithness, and that perhaps some of that could help establish a small fund for projects.

5 Inward Investment Update

Roy Kirk stated that recruitment was already underway to find his successor. He outlined the activities that he continued to focus on until a new post-holder was in place. These were in 5 key sectors:

Service Industries: this focuses mainly on the areas of financial and business services. A key aim is to attract “knowledge economy” jobs offering particular potential for the younger end of the labour market. He used the recent example of the BT “Home-shoring” Pilot project, which offers IT-related jobs from a home base at initial salaries of around £15,000 per annum.

Energy: 25-30 companies have so far come to look at the area through a series of Inward Missions involving a range of local businesses. At least 5 of the external companies are showing a serious interest in locating their business here. In terms of energy in the Pentland Firth, The Crown Estate is currently working hard on the mechanism for leasing out the seabed to potential developers, as this will be a crucial step in progressing interest from developers.

Engineering: discussions are taking place regarding the creation of an engineering consortium for the area, possibly through the revitalised Chamber of Commerce. This will help in the development of new business for local engineering companies.

Tourism: a scoping study on the proposed redevelopment of John O' Groats has been carried out, and work continues towards a masterplan for John O' Groats.

Opportunities at Wick Harbour and at Castletown are also being discussed. The key to all three developments will be their sustainability.

Food & drink: the new abbattoir at Keiss is due to be completed soon, and will be an important asset for the industry. HIE is hoping to run a Caithness & Sutherland Food Fair later this year, attracting industry buyers and the general public. There are plans for a similar event in London next year.

6 Pentland Firth Tidal Energy Project (PFTEP)

Ian Hargrave circulated to members a paper on this project. He outlined the structure and aims of the PFTEP and also outlined the main issues currently before the project's Board. The area still has the opportunity to gain economic benefit from manufacturing devices, in addition to the vital research & development stage. There is currently a tension between the desire to start off with demonstration projects and the

desires of some developers to move straight to mainstream devices. A major issue is the connection to the National Grid, but there are several methods of addressing this, and they are all being worked upon by the Project Manager Louise Smith and Duncan Mackay of The Crown Estate.

Cllr Bremner supported the progress being made, and contrasted the opportunities for manufacturing and R&D with the missed opportunities from onshore wind technology. Cllr Flear stressed the importance of a DC connection if the industry was to take off in the north. Stuart Black pointed out that the constraints already discussed are being addressed, because they are also national policy issues. Alastair MacDonald asked about identifying secondary users of any generated power from the Firth. Roy Kirk said that this was being pursued, and that 3 multi-national companies were in discussions regarding the opportunities.

Alastair MacDonald hoped that The Crown Estate would be able to move quickly to announce the leasing mechanism. The Chairman also suggested that news on the Project should be made more available to the public.

7 Report from Partnership Board members

Alistair Dodds emphasised the need for a positive view to be sent out from Caithness and North Sutherland about the way ahead for the area.

8 Any Other Business

Eann Sinclair said that work was underway to organise a second Caithness conference. This year it was hoped to run it more as an “exhibition-style” event, so that the general public could visit stands from a range of local projects and talk to people involved in the regeneration process. The First Minister will be attending the event, which is a major coup for the area. The event will be held on Monday 29th September in Thurso.

Cllr Flear said that a previous meeting of the Dounreay Stakeholders’ group had requested a breakdown of funds committed from the additional £12 million allocated to the area through HIE. Roy Kirk said that just under £1 million of that had now been committed, and that he would supply a breakdown. He also hoped to announce what HIE hoped to commit the remainder of this funding to. **ACTION – ROY KIRK**

9 Arrangements for future meetings

It was felt that future meetings should where possible be held on the same day as the Executive Board meetings.

10 Date of next meeting

Friday 5th December, time and venue to be confirmed.