

# **Kinlochbervie Community Council**

## **'Save our Toilets' Public Meeting**

**19 June 2018**

### **Invited Attendees:**

Councillor Kirsteen Currie, Ward 1

Councillor Hugh Morrison, Ward 1

Councillor Linda Munro, Ward 1

Andy Summers, Highland Council, Head of Environmental & Amenity Services

Debbie Sutton, Amenities Manager

Phil Tomalin, Ward Manager (Ward 1)

### **Minutes Summary of main points**

#### **HC Staff presentations**

##### Debbie Sutton

- HC (Highland Council) operates around 90 public conveniences and employs 80 staff
- The work was done by a private contractor but last year HC brought the work back in-house
- There was a £400,000 overspend last year as a result of costs and work inherited from the contractor
- Savings need to be found
- The list was arrived at through looking at footfall, building condition, proximity to other services and availability of private conveniences in the area
- HC staff didn't talk to a lot of people in the local areas and that was a mistake – DS apologised for that
- In the budget, HC approved closing 29 toilets.
- HC staff are trying to achieve the savings but because of issues, the decision has been made not to close the toilets until 31<sup>st</sup> October.
- HC staff are currently looking at a number of options – asset transfer and the Highland Comfort Scheme where community groups or businesses can receive a monthly grant of £100, £200 or £300 depending on the facilities offered.

- Staff make up the greatest cost to HC. They pay the Scottish National Living Wage of around £8.75 per hour but additional costs mean that the actual cost to HC is £17.50 per hour.

#### Andy Summers

- When HC took the toilet contract back in-house they inherited many problems
- The overspend was unsustainable
- The objective is to have a network of public toilets in the Highlands
- HC recognises the contribution of toilet provision to tourism
- There is a lot of anger about the lack of consultation on toilet closure but at the time they were focussed on cleaning up the mess left by the previous contractor
- HC would like to create permanent full-time employment and keep the money in the Highlands

### **Ward Councillor's presentations**

#### Linda Munro

- Apologised for poor communication.
- Considered toilet closure was the "lesser evil" in making budget savings
- Roads, grass cutting and cemetery budgets had been "saved".
- Stands by her choice
- The communities must work with us to get the best solution

#### Hugh Munro

- The toilets must be kept open.
- There were communication problems from the top down.
- Charging for toilets could be a possible solution.
- Must work together

#### Kirsteen Currie

- Disagreed with the decision to close the toilets.
- Committed to working with communities to find a way forward. Other ways that services could be protected and savings made elsewhere. Revenue rather than capital was the problem.
- Trying to find a new revenue source.
- Only 2 toilets in Sutherland that are fully accessible to the disabled.
- Need to work together to find solutions and where the money can come from.
- Want toilets but the provision must be sustainable.

## Questions, Answers and Statements

- Community ownership not sustainable – existing examples run at loss. Andy Summers - claims they can be profitably run by nearby businesses and Community groups but couldn't give examples of where this had been successful yet. Tongue and Rogart Community Councils questioned sustainability of community ownership – businesses would already be doing it if profitable
- Time frame for implementation far too short – should have been considered years ago given increasing visitor numbers. Need “strategic thinking” for the long term rather than knee jerk reactions. Can damage tourist economy and have serious environmental impacts (Kylesku Hotel)
- Decision has already been made – lack of democracy in process – elected officials irresponsible in not representing views of constituents - we will be forced to accept their proposals and will pay in one way or another
- Example of Larkhill toilets (KLB Minister Andrea Boyes) which had been taken over by the Church of Scotland - a lot of volunteer effort and positive “business model” but were never sustainable and had to close
- Public health issue
- How are decisions made for comfort scheme payments? Debbie Sutton outlined process and said can be changes to original lists – back to local area committees - if can be shown that savings can be made in other ways
- “Wild toileting” problem. Andy Summers - criminal prosecution. Brora rep – disgraceful to put this onto police. Local policeman would not prosecute where facility closed or deal with resultant pollution. Legal liability of council for forcing people to defecate illegally.
- Proper “impact assessment” should have been made before proceeding (Brora) – (Helen - Elphin) said that an impact assessment had been done and it had said that impact on vulnerable people would be high but still went ahead anyway
- Why a deadline? (Helen - Elphin) – work on solutions for as long as necessary. Debbie Sutton - one year budget model requires deadline.
- Use HC school cleaners with extended hours as cleaners
- Comfort scheme announcements without consultation with people involved! Example of Achmelvich
- School pupils on fieldtrips disadvantaged – adding to the existing difficulties faced by remote rural schools
- Andy Summers cited Lairg as an example of community considering toilet take over – refuted by Lairg rep who confirmed they would not be doing so!
- Following question about designation of toilets as seasonal or all year – with particular reference to Rhiconich, Scourie and KLB – Debbie Sutton made this statement “If no alternative community proposal exists then the toilets will remain open” – HC would not

close them. Pointed out (by Mike KLB) that communities should then stand in solidarity and not consider take overs thus forcing HC to keep toilets open.

- Find savings from costs in other areas; follies along River Ness, Town House, etc.
- Andy Summers: Doing that is a political decision for Councillors not staff.
- Disabled people with mobility problems could be become housebound (testament from local disabled person)– disadvantaging a vulnerable group
- Ambulance service – problems for patients on route to Raigmore needing to make toilet stops
- Examples of mismanagement of council funds which could be better spent on toilets
- Treasury fund contains enough to postpone this decision until next year – just needs a political decision
- Various calls to take the issue back to Council and re-evaluate priorities
- Public health and environmental pollution issue – could not only destroy good image of Highlands and harm industry (mussel farms)
- Linda Munro: Sensing audience mood was not for communities taking on responsibility for toilets LM asked “Will you help us?(HC) “. Strong audience reaction of “No” - it’s your responsibility as elected reps to take our decision forward – we won’t take toilets on – you need to represent this
- West Coast not being treated fairly – disproportionate impact. Inverness interests too dominant
- Volunteers in small communities are already doing a huge amount – they can’t take on more (example of Scourie)
- Donald Fisher, Chair, Scourie Community Council – emphasised that the meeting clearly demonstrated that HC should respond to their constituents and keep toilets open. Not a wish but a “requirement” that they do this.
- Charging for toilets scheduled for closure. Debbie Sutton - Cost implications installing mechanisms so limited potential, but communities could get old parking metres from HC for honesty boxes. Stoer Lighthouse £700 for coin operated “lock”.
- Councillors challenged on decisions- responded
  - Hugh Morrison - Independent Group - Councillors not properly advised or given proper information on which to base vote – not properly consulted or briefed. Going back to Council will push to change decision and find other ways to make savings
  - Linda Munro - No conclusive statement over going back to council to change decision
  - Kirsteen Currie - Take it back to Council to change decision even if voted down again at least try
- Kirsteen Currie - Highlife Highland run toilets in Invergordon. Investigate if this model can be spread to rest of area

- HC staff could identify potential outside funders as they are more experienced at this
- Figures regarding toilet running costs don't seem right – with reference to Tarbet. Seem too high.  
Andy Summers - Summaries include “overheads”; however he admitted that the original figures at budget time were “sketchy” and there are problems with them.
- Logic of some toilet decisions Clachtoll and Achmelvich and Melness – no alternatives
- Tongue CC (Michael) Captured mood of meeting by reiterating that the mood of the audience shows the issue won't go away. The process is flawed and perhaps open to legal action and shows an apartheid between urban Inverness and remote rural areas
- Question to Councillors and staff: When will they respond to the issues raised at the meeting by reporting back?
- Answer: They will rethink the closure programme in NW Sutherland and come up with alternative proposals in a couple of months' time