

Chairman's Report 2024/25

Being an elected Community Councillor today in the rural West Highlands is not easy. Spean Bridge, Roy Bridge and Achnacarry are extremely fortunate to have nine such Volunteers and two associate members who give of their time, knowledge, experience and skills to give their fellow residents a voice on many of the problems and issues that beset our lives locally. I applaud each and everyone for their endeavour and commitment over what has been a difficult year.

Unfortunately, although our representatives locally give their all that is not reciprocated by the many salaried public servants that it is necessary that we correspond and negotiate with to try and make a difference. We are constantly ignored or fobbed off with promises of jam tomorrow which never materializes.

This year has been the year of the Pumped Storage Schemes with Earba and Fearna at the Planning Stage and Coire Glas completing its exploratory works. These are massive construction projects which will take between 5 to 7 years to complete and will have a significant impact on the landscape, wild land, local services and roads. Every part of our lives will be affected and although the Developers promote opportunities, in essence just like the building of the Caledonian Canal and the Hydro Schemes much of the labour will be imported, and little of the wealth creation will come to those suffering the most disruption.

Wading through literally thousands of pages of reports, attending public information days, liaising with neighbouring community councillors, researching the various planning legislation and canvassing local opinion all takes time, and we have only a finite time to respond. Then we have to compile a submission, have it circulated, amended where necessary, agreed and then submitted to the Planning Authority and Energy Consents Unit.

In the case of Earba our central concern was the state of the A86 Trunk Road which we have been campaigning for years to persuade Transport Scotland to upgrade, and they have acknowledged that 17.5 miles from Craig Meagaidh to Newtonmore is too narrow for a Trunk Road. Yet despite this and Highland Council's endorsement Transport Scotland made no mention of an upgrade in their planning contribution and Scottish Ministers accepted their opinion. So much for the Government's acknowledge desire for more community involvement and engagement when our views are completely ignored.

Then we have Coire Glas a consented Pumped Storage Scheme which we monitor carefully. Over two years have elapsed since we made a Freedom of Information Request to ascertain why condition 19 had been

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varied, and despite Highland Council ignoring their statutory time limit obligation and failing to give us the complete version of events the Scottish Information Commissioner has still not given us a decision. Similarly, SSE Renewables gave us their interpretation of a move to remove/discharge Condition 17 relating to the 9 concrete bridges on the A82 in December 2024 which Transport Scotland disputed and despite a wealth of correspondence we are still unaware who is misleading us. We have attended all 4 of the Coire Glas Liaison Meetings, asked questions, and monitored all events.

Our Planning Sub Committee too have seen a 35% increase in applications from 52 to 70, but a disturbing trend has emerged with a small number of applicants and their agents targeting councillors individually or collectively for having the temerity to criticize developments.

Our community clearly maintains its confidence in our ability to get things done as the attendance at our meetings has increased as has the range of topics discussed and actioned. Persuading some public bodies to respond positively remains an achievement goal, but many realize that failure to reply is not an option as we continue the pursuit until we get the answer.

We secured an additional £9,109 which is the final payment from the Stronelairg Windfarm Community Fund following a successful year. The Micro Grants have proved enormously popular and we disbursed £4850 to twelve different individuals and organizations.

I am most grateful for the Spean Bridge Roy Bridge and Achnacarry SCIO for their support and publishing our Minutes on their Website together with any articles of local importance. Also to our many contributors including the community police officer who keep us informed about topics that ill affect us. My thanks to our Highland Councillors particularly Councillor Grafton who endeavours to attend most meetings, and the Community Council Support Staff for their assistance and help. Both Kate Forbes MSP and Angus MacDonald MP have also assisted us during the year and their help and advice has been invaluable.

No doubt the coming year will bring its own challenges for us to tackle, but I am confident that we have the skills, knowledge and experience available to resolve most matters if only we can persuade the decision makers to listen.

John Fotheringham
Chairman
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