

Stephen Clackson's Letter from School Place (currently West Manse)

Keeping the folk of the North Isles ward informed — with Orkney's only councillor newsletter

The anniversary of our first going into “lockdown” was on the 23rd March. On that day in 2020, we councillors held our last meeting in person in the Council Chamber at School Place before moving over to remote “Microsoft Teams” meetings.

At midnight on 31st March, compulsory housing measures for poultry and captive birds were lifted. However, the nationwide *Avian Influenza Protection Zone* stays in place, and bird keepers are advised to remain vigilant for signs of disease.

At Sanday's West Manse, just past noon on a snowy, blowy 9th April, we hoisted the Union Flag and lowered it to half-mast to mourn the death at Windsor Castle of our Queen's husband, HRH Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. The flag remained at half-mast, as it did on OIC buildings (following the protocol of “Operation Forth Bridge”) until the morning of the 18th. In the Council Chamber, a black ribbon was affixed to his portrait. The Duke was a reassuring bulwark against political correctness, a god to the Kastom people of Yaohnanen village on the island of Tanna in Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides), a refugee, Gordonstoun School's 10th pupil, a serving Royal Navy officer, a World War II veteran, a Fellow of the Royal Society, President of the Royal Society of Arts, *et cetera, et cetera*, plus he was founder and patron of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme, from which so many young people in Orkney and the World have benefited. Often a man ahead of his time, Prince Philip gave up a promising career to support his wife's, and was an early champion of environmentalism and conservation. He visited Orkney with The Queen in 1960, inspecting the lifeboat crew in Stronsay and driving the new school bus in Westray.

I think the Arctic weather over Easter answers my Candlemas question (see February *Letter*). It put me in mind of the opening words of *The Waste Land* by T.S.Eliot: “April is the cruellest month ...” With our domestic geese hunkering down on their nests to save their eggs from freezing, and our bees having to return to their winter dormancy, it certainly seemed that way.

The 12th April marked the 60th anniversary of the first man in space, Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin (Юрий Гагарин), who completed one orbit of the Earth in Vostok 1 (Восток-1). In contrast to this futuristic feat, on landing back in the Soviet Union, he had to be taken to the nearest telephone by peasants in their horse and cart! He died in a plane crash on 27th March 1968.

On the 19th April, all pupils in Orkney (with the exception of those “shielding”) returned to school full-time.

The Scottish Government has announced that Orkney will remain at Level 3 for the time being, but that travel to/from Scotland will be opened up on the 26th April. It is planned that all Scotland (including Orkney) will drop to Level 2 from the 17th May.

Since my last *Letter*, I have attended a meeting of Members and the Chief Executive, had a North Isles Ward catch-up, been to a Special General Meeting to consider OIC's reaction to HIAL's proposed remote air traffic management system, participated in an urgent Members' session with the Council Leader, been involved in meetings about RET and revising Orkney Ferries' fares, engaged in meetings of the Education, Leisure & Housing Committee, Orkney Heath & Care Committee and Policy & Resources Committee, and was at a meeting of the Papa Westray Community Council (all “virtually”, of course).

I was in attendance at the AGM of the Stronsay School Parent Council, which will be Headmaster Andrew King's last. I would like to pay tribute to all that he has done at Stronsay School over the years and for facilitating physics teaching further afield.

At a second Special General Meeting, we discussed wind-farm planning, and it is anticipated that OIC will be submitting a planning application for a wind-farm development on Faray in May. Also on the agenda was the Council's Covid-19 Recovery Development Grant Scheme. I asked if any categories of business are not being covered by the scheme. The response was that if any businesses feel they are being left out, they are invited to get in touch (see <https://www.orkney.gov.uk/Council/C/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-businesses.htm>).

After interventions by me and Cllr Heddle, the Monitoring & Audit Committee rejected the internal audit report on the Orkney Harbours Masterplan Phase 1 Approval Process, which claimed that OIC governance and control were “comprehensive and effective”. Back in April 2020 (see May 2020 *Letter*), I supported an amendment calling for the “Masterplan” to be referred back for proper scrutiny by all councillors rather than going through on the approval of merely the six members of the Harbour Authority Sub-Committee, but the Chairman of D&I (Cllr Sinclair) refused to take it back, and our amendment failed. I fail to see how scrutiny by fewer than one-third of the councillors can be interpreted as “comprehensive and effective”, and the perception could be that this was a way to push through the expensive and controversial “Orkney Harbours Masterplan Phase 1” (which does nothing for any harbour in the North Isles!) without any awkward questions being asked!

The last meeting outwith Orkney that I attended physically was the Dounreay Stakeholder Group AGM held on the 11th March 2020 (see March 2020 *Letter*). This year's AGM was organised remotely. I also remotely participated in a meeting arranged to introduce the members of the University of the Highlands & Islands Foundation to the new UHI Vice-Chancellor & Principal.

On the 23rd April, I became eligible for a National Entitlement Card.

Keep well and carry on,



Cllr Dr Stephen Clackson,
West Manse, Sanday
stephen.clackson@orkney.gov.uk

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R.I.P. Your Royal Highness, Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh