

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

Useful sources of information and contact details for these unprecedented times

Orkney Islands Council website: <https://www.orkney.gov.uk/> Orkney Islands Council central telephone number: 01856-873535

Orkney Ferries: <http://www.orkneyferries.co.uk/> or ring 01856-872044

Loganair inter-island flights: <https://www.orkney.gov.uk/Service-Directory/T/internal-air-services.htm> or ring 01856-872494 / 873457

Business support: telephone 01856-886666 or e-mail business.gateway@orkney.gov.uk

NHS Orkney Covid-19 information: <https://www.ohb.scot.nhs.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-latest-information>

Covid-19 testing: telephone 01856-888211 British Red Cross Coronavirus Support Line: 0808-196-3651

Scottish Government Covid-19 guidance: <https://www.gov.scot/coronavirus-covid-19/>

OIC's Homelessness Service: ring 01856-873535 or 07921-582962 (out of hours)

EU citizens' helpline: 0800-916-9847 Orkney Citizens' Advice Bureau: 01856-875-266

I received my first dose of the AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccination at the Sanday Surgery on the 3rd March, injected into my arm by Dr Neal Gillespie. (See photo below, kindly taken by the receptionist, Tina Brown.) Gathering outside the surgery, waiting to be called in, was the nearest we've had to a community event for a long time! Someone said they felt it was "historic". And it will be historic if this marks the beginning of the end of the pandemic. So don't hesitate to get your jab/jag when called.

Covid restrictions (currently "Level 3" for Orkney) are due to continue until at least 26th April (unless changes arise from the Scottish Gov't's newly proposed "lockdown route map"). From the 22nd February, pre-school children and P1-P3 (and higher in composite classes and in the smallest schools) were able to return to the classroom in our Isles' schools. On 15th March, P4-P7 were also able to return, and secondary pupils were able to receive some in-school teaching each week, the Papdale Halls being re-opened to facilitate this for those at KGS. It is expected that all secondary school pupils will be back in school on a full-time basis after the Easter holidays. This is all rather complicated, and schools will contact parents/carers directly with details of when individual pupils should attend school. If you're having difficulties with any of this, please get in touch with me.

I was given a guided tour of Sanday School (next door to me) by the headmaster, Stewart McPhail to see the extensive Covid-prevention adaptations that have had to be made to allow all Sanday pupils to return to classroom learning and to accommodate the Eday pupils on the days they come over. It has taken a lot of effort, and I congratulate all those involved.

OIC has funding to provide "Spring Hardship Payments" to families on low income eligible for free school meals. Applications can be made online at www.orkney.gov.uk/School-Benefit or call 01856-873535 for a paper application form.

Owing to an essential hospital visit, I had to miss the Special (Budget & Council Tax) Policy & Resources Committee meeting. These days, this is largely a formulaic meeting, the budgetary decisions having been thrashed out in advance at budget-setting seminars. I am pleased to say that the push I made at the final one of these (see my last *Letter*), for more spending on roads repair and maintenance, succeeded, with the Council Leader proposing a contribution of £2.1 million to our "Repairs & Renewal Fund" specifically for this purpose, this being taken from the non-earmarked General Fund balance. It was agreed to allocate a total of £89,392,500 this year to running Council services, with no increase in Council Tax, and with £7,470,000 drawn from our Strategic Reserve Fund. All this was ratified at the subsequent General Meeting (which I was able to attend). For the 2021/22 financial year, we've received a specific grant allocation of £7,855,900 towards running our ferry services.

A special Monitoring & Audit Committee meeting was held to scrutinise the internal audit report on our quarry procurement procedures—a matter of public concern that has been covered extensively in the press. The audit found "fundamental weaknesses in the framework of governance ..." This was presented in the report as a failure of internal control in council management, but I posed questions on where the role of councillors sits in this framework of governance, particularly whether the chairs of the service committees carry (or should carry) a level of accountability. In my opinion, they should. Otherwise we have chairs who behave like literal chairs, being sat on by the officialdom rather than exercising due governance over it.

At a meeting of the Board of Orkney Ferries, I brought up the desire by many passengers for some form of catering facility to be reinstated on the Outer North Isles sailings. At my suggestion, there is going to be a detailed press release about this, but meanwhile here is an excerpt: "Given the current regulations still in force in respect of social distancing and the geography of the vessels, it is not possible to do this [catering] at present. We have followed guidance from Environmental Health and the Scottish Government in taking this decision and must stress that this is a temporary situation until social distancing is relaxed."

Other meetings I have attended "virtually" this month include a North Isles Ward catch-up; meetings of the Orkney College Management Council (we used to get sandwiches at the College when these meetings were "real", but "virtual" sandwiches are just not the same!); and community councils for Stronsay, Westray, Sanday, Shapinsay, and Rousay/Eglisay/Wyre/Gairsay (where I was pleased to lend my support to the "Trumland Safe Harbour and Marina" project).

Keep well,
get vaccinated (when called),
and carry on,

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You can download *Letter from School Place*
from lfsp.pbworks.com

