

Stephen Clackson's Letter from School Place

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As if the world's woes weren't bad enough already with the Covid-19 Pandemic (cases in Scotland soaring, and Orkney's the worst!), Vladimir Putin decides to launch another global crisis with his invasion of Ukraine. After OIC lobbying, in the nick of time, on 28th February, the UK Government denied access to UK ports for Russian vessels, so the Sovcomflot tanker *NS Champion*, due to dock at Flotta on 1st March, had to turn back. At our last General Meeting of this Council, we agreed to support Ukrainian refugees with resettlement to Orkney. We also agreed to allow the Cathedral to be lit in the Ukrainian colours (Azure and Or) for three nights, but I urged that we must make it clear to Russians resident in Orkney, that this is not an expression being made against them, as they are no more responsible than any of us for what the Russian leader is doing.

On the subject of leaders, at the same General Meeting, my notice of motion to reduce the initial term of the Council Leader from 5 years to 2 (with eligibility for re-election) was defeated 14 votes to 5 (with the current Council Leader abstaining). I believe this was a very unwise decision, as I think it is risky to choose a Leader to serve for such an extended period, particularly when new councillors, elected for the first time, are unlikely to be very familiar with the candidates standing for the position and will find it hard to judge their potential. My seconder, Cllr Steve Sankey, made some very pertinent comments about accountability and said that "a 'rain-check' at 2 years on the Leader, as all other senior councillors have to go through, is essential." Like me, Steve advocates that all councillors should be subject to a "skills audit" so that we all know where the skills and experience lie before we are called upon to select from among us the senior councillors at the Statutory General Meeting following the election. My other supporters were Cllr Tierney, Cllr Scott and former Convenor Cllr Dr Heddle.

At a Special Policy & Resources Committee meeting, we set this year's budget and council tax levels. By drawing £8,727,900 from our Strategic Reserve Fund, we were able to keep the rise in council tax to a below-inflation 3%. Moreover, the Scottish Government will be giving households living in Band A to Band D properties a £150 council tax rebate, so that should help keep the increase affordable for most people. Furthermore, if you need a second dwelling in order to work on the Mainland (or other Orkney island) because daily commuting is not possible, don't forget to apply for the discount I succeeded in getting brought in from April 2019 (see the February 2019 issue of my *Letter from School Place*).

At the normal Policy & Resources Committee meeting, when our Corporate Risk Register was discussed, I brought up once again the difficulty we would face in the North Isles should a cruise liner get into trouble here and have to be evacuated. This is not a hypothetical risk; such an event happened on 26th May 1861, when *Johannes*, a ship carrying emigrants from Bremerhaven to Baltimore, ran aground between Newark and Tresness, temporarily swelling Sanday's population by 143, at a time when Sanday's population was four times what it is today. How would the current population of around 500 folk cope with housing a cruise liner's passengers and crew numbering over 4000? And what about North Ronaldsay?

Other meetings I have attended this month include: confidential meetings of members and the Chief Executive; various seminars; behind-the-scenes meetings on our island swimming pools; a meeting of the Orkney College Management Council; an Orkney Health & Care briefing session; and a meeting of the Board Orkney Ferries Ltd.

I attended (by "Teams") the meeting of the Rousay, Egilsay, Wyre & Gairsay Community Council, but since the "Notice of Election" was published on 14th March, marking the start of the "Pre-election Period" (or "Purdah"), we are not permitted to attend community council meetings in the capacity of councillors, therefore I regret I have not been able to attend others.

I was delighted to be invited to say something at the Sanday Duke of Edinburgh Award (DofE) ceremony in appreciation of Rosemary and Martyn Newton (stalwarts of the Sanday Duke of Edinburgh Open Award Group for approaching 30 years) and to add to the tributes and video messages from former Award recipients, from Helen Anderson (Director of DofE Scotland), Liam McArthur MSP, and Walter Gorman (OIC Community Learning and Development Officer). Rosemary gave out the Bronze Awards to the latest batch of young people to achieve them. It is said "it takes a village to raise a child", and I made the observation that on Sanday it takes an island to do a Bronze Duke of Edinburgh Award, for not only do the young people give up their time to do it, but Rosemary has, over the years, tenaciously recruited adult mentors from our community, who deserve our appreciation too. The demanding role of running the DofE Group has been taken over by Helen Porter, Lorna McPhail and Ruth Hansard. Doing a DofE Award has such a positive impact on the lives of the young people doing it, that I would encourage communities on other islands to follow Sanday's example and to set-up their own open award groups.

Keep well and carry on,

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