

Stephen Clackson's Letter from School Place

A regular report from your councillor on what he is doing on behalf of the folk of the North Isles

We have, at last, chosen a new Council Chief Executive. His name is Oliver Reid, and he is currently Head of Communities and Public Protection at Renfrewshire Council. He is expected to take up the post at OIC sometime early in 2023. Mr Reid said to the press that he'd been struck by the range of services that Orkney Islands Council provides; the incredible innovation that takes place in Orkney; and the energy, vision and enthusiasm that he had seen from elected members. I just thought I'd mention that, because Orkney Islands Council is no ordinary council. Of course, no organisation is perfect, and there is always room for improvement, but I sometimes wish the Orkney public were more appreciative of what we do.

Primary care in the Isles is something I have been exercised with lately, both concerning first responders and out-of-hours cover. North and South Isles' councillors and community councillors from these areas have been involved in various meetings with Orkney Health & Care, NHS Orkney, and others to address the issues. In common with everybody on the Isles I have spoken to (and I suspect practically everybody I haven't spoken to), I'm totally against NHS Orkney's proposal to rely solely on the NHS24 (111) telephone service for cover out-of-hours (i.e. 6pm to 8am on weekdays, all weekend and on public holidays). Anyone can already use NHS24 if they really want the frustration of explaining our geography and waiting an average of an hour-and-a-quarter before getting to speak to a clinician. Particularly as we currently have a sterling service provided by the Balfour Hospital Switchboard (01856-888000), where, typically, a local clinician will call us back within 10 minutes and is on the spot to assist as necessary. I will be resisting any attempts to terminate the Balfour Hospital Switchboard service.

In the past, I have suggested resurrecting the North Isles District Committee, which existed at Orkney County Council from the late 19th century. A modern form for this forum could comprise all three North Isles Councillors together with representatives from each of the eight community councils in the North Isles ward. I would welcome views on this idea.

Work continues on our Council Development Plan, and I continue to push for the priorities outlined in my manifesto. We are also beginning the process to set our budget for the financial year 2023/24.

We now have a full complement of church representatives on the Education, Leisure & Housing Committee, and I belatedly welcome Mrs Marie Locke of Stronsay, representing the Church of Scotland. It's good to have a representative from the Isles.

I have attended several council seminars recently on topics including outdoor access and "active travel" (by walking and cycling, but not on horseback), Orkney Islands Regional Marine Plan, and the Islands Growth Deal. Other meetings I've participated in since my [last Letter](#) include those of: the Orkney College Business Review Short-Life Working Group (by invitation); Sanday Community Council (special and ordinary); Monitoring & Audit Committee; and the Scottish Councils Committee on Radioactive Substances (as OIC's representative).

Our latest Policy & Resources Committee agenda was so long that the meeting had to be spread over two days !

It is interesting what one can find on the Internet. The other day, I stumbled across this statement made by Rhoda Grant MSP (Labour) at a [meeting of the Scottish Parliament on the 18th January 2017](#): *'The Scottish Government must recognise that it has no support for the plan. The Government cannot tell us who supports scrapping the HIE board, but I can give a lengthy list of those who totally oppose it. For example, Dr Stephen Clackson from Orkney Islands Council told me: "Before long, with a single police force, single ambulance service, single fire and rescue service etc, this country will have come to resemble a large English county. The SNP will have transformed Scotland into Scotshire!"'* My contribution to the debate does seem to have been successful, as Highlands & Islands Enterprise was saved by 64 votes to 63 and continues to exist to this day.

Weather and ferries permitting, I intend to be in Shapinsay for the meeting of their community council on the 24th November, and in Westray on the 28th November for theirs.

The festive season has already begun in the shops (even though there are weeks to go), and I've already started receiving Christmas cards, so, echoing the words of Tiny Tim (the character in Charles Dickens' story *A Christmas Carol*, that is, not the ukulele-playing, falsetto singer of *Tiptoe Through the Tulips*), I shall say: A merry Christmas to us all; God bless us, every one !

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Letter from School Place is also available on-line at clackson.info

