

Stephen Clackson's Letter from School Place

Orkney's only regular councillor newsletter—reporting back to North Isles Ward constituents since 2012.

Like the whole of Orkney, I was shocked and saddened to learn of the sudden passing of long-standing BBC Radio Orkney presenter, Dave Gray. In the days immediately following his death, it was somewhat spooky still to hear his voice making the safety announcements on the ferries, which, in a sense, immortalises him, as does his Orcadian dialect recording for the MRI scanner at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. Dave had remarkable insight into the political machinations at School Place, and he agreed with many of my own observations over the years. As a councillor, it could be a bit of an ordeal being interviewed on air by Dave—he could give you quite a grilling! In the March 2021 edition (*issue 442*) of *The Sanday Sound*, there was a role reversal when he was the interviewee “In Conversation with Ute”. This interview with Dave can be found at this URL: <https://clackson.info/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Sanday-Sound-442-Dave-Gray.pdf>.

Having received a sufficient level of funding from the Scottish Government, at our General Meeting we ratified a decision not to raise the council tax level for the forthcoming financial year. However, apart from those entitled to the council tax “Isles” discount exception of 50% for maintaining employment that I defended last month (see [last month's Issue](#)), a surcharge of 100% will now be applied to second homes. Our General Fund revenue budget for 2024/25 has been set at £112,424,000. Up to £20,000,000 will be drawn from our Strategic Reserve Fund.

There was considerable discussion about discontinuing the tradition that we stand to speak at General Meetings. I supported maintaining the tradition (embarrassingly forgetting to stand myself!), but the amendment was defeated 11 to 9. My previous suggestion, that we circulate a bottle of port around the chamber during General Meetings (in the clockwise direction, of course), was regrettably not included in the amendment. You never know, had it been, it might have made all the difference!

Orkney has been allocated £20,000,000 by the UK Government through its Levelling Up Fund. Although Kirkwall is named specifically, it has been confirmed that the money can be used over a wider geographical area, so I hope to see some of it used in the North Isles. The fund, which is for capital projects, will be spread over 10 years, and, as I understand it, a board will need to be set up involving the community to determine how the money will be disbursed. We await further details.

I attended a talk, hosted by the Orkney Heritage Society, by Howie Firth to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the *Orkney County Council Act 1974*. This Act is what has enabled us to build up our Strategic Reserve Fund. Howie explained how the council at the time had the foresight to work with the oil industry to come up with proposals of mutual benefit and then apply political persuasion at Westminster. Howie suggests, by analogy, we should be doing the same now vis-à-vis the renewable energy industry. A recording of the talk is available on-line at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1GDV9_TWKSQ.



Some excellent and impressive work was on display at the exhibition *Perspectives—Orkney's Recent Art Graduates* at the Pier Arts Centre (see photograph above) alongside which was a showcase of the work of senior school pupils from KGS and Stromness Academy. Among the exhibitors, I recognised a few names from the North Isles. What talent we have here!

I travelled to Inverness to participate in a meeting of the University of the Highlands & Islands Foundation at their new HQ at UHI House on the Raigmore Hospital campus (see photograph below), and on the evening of the following day I was in Thurso for a meeting of the Dounreay Stakeholder Group. I am OIC's representative on both of these organisations.

Other meetings I have attended this month include a special Policy & Resources Committee meeting, meetings of the Orkney & Shetland Valuation Joint Board, a seminar on the ferry replacement programme (which I had to leave before the end of so I could catch a ferry), and a seminar on our local transport strategy (which I had to leave early in order to take transport south).

Since my last [Letter](#), I have been to community council meetings in person at Sanday and Eday, but an attempt to attend Papay's virtually by “Teams” failed miserably.

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

