

# Stephen Clackson's Letter from School Place

*Orkney's only regular councillor newsletter—reporting back to the folk of the North Isles since 2012.*

*The winter is past and the flow'rets are springing,  
They are freed from the grasp of a hard, icy hand;  
Sweetly warble the birds, 'tis the time of their singing;  
And the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.  
Who can choose in the sadness of winter to stay?  
O awake, ye beloved ones, arise, come away!*

Clearly inspired by the *Song of Solomon 2:11-13*, these lines are from *The Winter is Past*, the first of the *Sanday Revival Hymns*, published in Edinburgh in 1861 for “the members and adherents of the Sanday Free Church Station by one of their deacons”—assumed to be the folklorist Walter Traill Dennison (1825-1894). Despite a promising start to this month, the flow'rets were soon in the grasp of a chilly, rainy and windy hand. (T.S. Eliot maybe had a point when he opened his modernist poem *The Waste Land* with “April is the cruellest month”!) I have heard starlings warbling (no doubt publicly announcing their intention to build a nest under my car bonnet), but whereas the turtle [dove] may frequently be heard in the unhappy Holy Land, its voice in Orkney is limited to that of the few migrant individuals which end up here each year.

After my meetings of the UHI Foundation in Inverness and the Dounreay Stakeholder Group in Thurso (see [last month's Letter](#)), the weather cut me off from Orkney for two days on the other side of the Pentland Firth.

For the first time in my experience, there was no “Education” at our Education, Leisure & Housing Committee meeting. Under “Leisure”, we agreed to a short-life member/officer working group being set up to consider the findings of a consultant-led review into the provision of sport and leisure services across Orkney. The group will comprise 21 members, of which 4 will be respectively representing each of the Isles (North & South) swimming pools (representation of which I wholeheartedly approved). Cllr John Ross Scott and I have also been appointed to this group, which will be meeting over the summer.

We did get some “Education” in the Monitoring & Audit Committee meeting in the form of a rather poor internal audit report on Kirkwall Grammar School. Staffing issues seem largely to have been to blame.

I went along to the Stromness & South Isles Ward by-election count (see photo below by Ross Cunningham). This is the first election count I've ever attended—not being a candidate myself making it undaunting. Congratulations to Janette Park on her win, which brings the number of female councillors on OIC up to one third (33%). For comparison, 22% of Shetland Islands Council are women, and only 7% of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. 52% of the population of Scotland comprise women and girls.

I was at a rather “robust” development trust AGM. I have been around long enough, and have been to the AGMs of enough island development trusts (indeed I was once a trust director), to be aware of some of the pitfalls that trusts can drop into if they are not careful. One of these is not assessing proposed projects adequately in order to identify at an early stage potential dis-benefits to sections of the very community the trust exists to serve. And related to this, is not properly engaging the public and local businesses in partnership and utilising their expertise and local knowledge to help resolve issues and seek solutions. Development trusts have an enormous responsibility towards their respective communities. They have access to funding and tax relief not available to any local business, and, as such, a development trust has the power to skew an island's economy in not-necessarily favourable ways. An exemplar of good practice in community engagement in decision-making is Westray Development Trust's *Project Evaluation Group*, which involves a number of island residents who are not trustees of the Trust.

Professor Peter Higgs died on the 8<sup>th</sup> April. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics in 2013 after the existence of the fundamental sub-atomic particle he'd predicted in 1964 (now known as the *Higgs Boson*) was confirmed 49 years later using CERN's Large Hadron Collider. In 2018, a prize was inaugurated in his name, sponsored by the Orkney International Science Festival, to be presented each year to the best science student at Kirkwall Grammar School. (In May 2021, my younger daughter received a 2020 runners-up medal.) Professor Higgs visited Orkney and KGS in both 2015 and 2017.

Congratulations to Professor Donna Heddle, founder and director of the UHI's internationally-renowned Institute for Northern Studies, on her election to Fellowship of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (an honour Professor Higgs also held). Fellowship (FRSE) is conferred upon people judged to be “eminently distinguished in their subject”. Primarily based at UHI Orkney (formerly Orkney College), Professor Heddle's recognition is indicative of the high calibre of academics associated with OIC's college, and OIC should ensure that it appreciates, values and supports them. It would be unforgivable to lose them.

At the Policy & Resources Committee meeting, I requested that we proactively push for the geographical area benefitting from “Kirkwall's” Levelling Up money to include the whole of Orkney. In the item on our British Sign Language Plan, I suggested BSL be taught in our schools to a level to compensate for the depleted selection of foreign languages nowadays on offer.

Other meetings in which I have participated, in this unusually un-busy month, include: a seminar to do with the Scapa Flow deep water quay; members' briefings with the Chief Executive; and a meeting of Sanday Parent Council. In May, I am booked to travel to Shapinsay and to Papay to attend their respective community council meetings in person, and I shall be taking up the invitation to come along to the REWDT Community Showcase.

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**Letter from School Place** is also available on-line at [clackson.info](http://clackson.info)  
(Be aware that my SSL certificate is awaiting renewal.)

