

Stephen Clackson's Letter from School Place

Championing the communities of the North Isles, both the ferry-only-linked and the air-linked.

There has been a lot going on at Orkney Islands Council in the run-up to Christmas. Since my last [Letter](#), I have attended members' briefings with the OIC Chief Executive, a budget-setting consolidation seminar, a seminar on the Orkney World Heritage Gateway and Islands Growth Deal, a seminar about strategic offshore energy development, two all-day meetings of the Policy & Resources Committee, refresher training for the Monitoring & Audit Committee, a General Meeting, and a Special General Meeting (on our Strategic Offshore Energy Development Strategy). In addition to these "real" meetings, I've had "virtual" meetings of the UHI Foundation, the Orkney Housing Market Partnership, and the Dounreay Stakeholder Group. I've also chaired the Orkney end of a "blended" meeting of the Orkney & Shetland Valuation Joint Board.

Our big task early in the new year will be to set the Council's budget for 2025/26. This becomes an ever more onerous task as finances tighten. Provided their budget proposals are approved, there is some good news from the Scottish Government, with extra funding for our ferries and free travel on those ferries (the Isles' buses) for the under-22s in the offing. However, OIC will still need to balance its own budget by a combination of increasing income and making cuts. To help inform our decisions, the public is invited to complete the "Our Budget Challenge" survey (deadline 12th January), a link to which can be found at the top of the Council website or directly at <https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/AA8ROT/>. Just like the many ward constituents who have contacted me, I recognise the shortcomings and biases of this survey. Sanday Community Council made some cogent comments about it in their letter to *The Orcadian* (19th December, page 32). There are several proposals in the survey that would chip away yet further at the sustainability of our island communities were they to be adopted: charging for pupils to stay at the Papdale Halls to attend extra-curricular activities; charging for Hall placing requests; charging for our rubbish bags; removal of home-based registrars. So I urge North Isles residents of all ages to make their views known by completing the survey and making copious use of the comments boxes. I need the evidence of public opinion to champion our communities and defend their services.

Incidentally, I find the recently in-vogue term "ferry-linked isles" a misleading one, as it does not distinguish between the "ferry-only-linked isles" and the "air-linked isles" whose respective challenges differ. So, like the term "internal ferries" (which separates our ferries and their funding from the overall Scottish ferry network), I would like to discourage the use of this term.

Over the years, since the early 1990s when I lived in Aberdeen, Robbie Shepherd occasionally indulged my requests to play Harry Gordon's "Inversnecky" songs on his Sunday lunchtime "Reel Blend" programme on BBC Radio Scotland. And on the 7th January 2019, when my "Musical Milestones" were broadcast on BBC Radio Orkney, one of the twelve tracks played was Harry Gordon singing "The Bells of Inversnecky". Where is Inversnecky? I hear you ask. When I posed this question to an esteemed professor of the UHI's Institute for Northern Studies, the response was "Inverness". However, I remained firmly of the school that "Inversnecky" is a coastal village near Aberdeen—nothing at all to do with Inverness. So it was reassuring recently to come across the following confirmation in the book "The Granite City" by Robert Smith: "When people asked where it was, Buff Hardie and his colleagues [*Scotland the What?*] reeled off a list of North-East villages—Maud, Methlick, Udny, Rhynie, Foggie and so on—and then said it wasn't any of them. But, they added, it **could** be one of them."

I wish all readers of my *Letter*, from Seal Skerry to Inversnecky, a happy, healthy and prosperous 2025.



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

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