

Stephen Clackson's Letter from School Place

A report from your councillor, shortlisted “Community Champion”, corporate parent ...

Six years ago, I brought up the problem of what our care-experienced youngsters are supposed to do with their stuff when they leave their care home to go away to study. Without storage facilities back in Orkney, they have to take their entire worldly estate with them wherever they go. In my [Letter](#) at the time (Sept 2019), I said I'd been told “OIC is looking into this.” I am gratified to say that when I asked again at our recent Policy & Resources Committee meeting (P&R), we were informed that such assistance is now being provided. If any care-experienced person wishes to contact me about any aspect of the support they are receiving from the Council, please do not hesitate to do so—I am, after all, as a councillor, your corporate parent.

Also at P&R, I was in full agreement with the recommendation not to progress implementation of an overnight visitor levy. All along, because of the significant number of Orkney residents travelling within Orkney for whom it would be appropriate to be exempted from such a charge, I've felt it would be unreasonable to burden our accommodation providers with the additional bureaucracy and responsibility of policing who would be required to pay and who not.

On our British Sign Language Local Plan, I asked if the BSL courses being delivered at KGS and Stromness Academy could also be rolled out to our junior high schools. I was told this is planned, along with Makaton and Sign Supported English.

In the item on Orkney Health & Care's revenue expenditure outturn, there was a lot of discussion about our reliance on agency staff because of the perennial difficulty in recruiting that we are experiencing (a nationwide problem). An idea I have been floating around amongst colleagues is that OIC should set up its own agency, which would not only serve us but would be a facility for other local authorities to outsource to, thus solving our recruitment crisis and providing OIC with an additional income stream at one stroke. I am not sure whether the provisions of the *Orkney County Council Act 1974* would permit us to do this, or whether we'll have to wait until the Scottish Government grants local authorities “General Power of Competence”.

The Rousay, Egilsay, Wyre & Gairsay Community Council, whose meeting I attended virtually, was presented with the figures for the income OIC derives from dues paid by visiting cruise liners. For the 2024/25 financial year, this came to £4,690,626.04 divided into £3,620,845.54 harbour dues, which can only go towards harbour-related expenditure, and £1,069,780.50 passenger dues, which are paid into the County Fund. (The County Fund arises from the provisions of the aforementioned *Orkney County Council Act 1974*. I won't go into legal and financial detail, but, in terms of this Act, money from this fund may be used “for any other purpose which in the opinion of the Council is solely in the interests of the county or its inhabitants.”)

Back in May, I wrote a letter supporting Egilsay Community Association's application for funding from the Scottish Land Fund to purchase the Community Centre and adjoining schoolhouse. I am delighted they have been successful in their application.

It was reported to the Monitoring & Audit Committee that, during the period 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025, OIC received 327 compliments and 150 complaints (over twice as many compliments as complaints!). I sought reassurance that those members of staff who are complimented are made aware of the fact, and I am pleased to say that we were told that they are.

I attended a seminar on the proposed designs for the 3 new ferries to serve Eday, Sanday, Stronsay & Westray—updated to incorporate key points and suggestions made by the public during the recent consultation events. And I was invited to sit in on a Special Development & Infrastructure Committee meeting at which it was unanimously decided to approve the general design arrangement and commence the procurement process for building them. As I said at the latter, this is a big step towards transforming our ferry fleet into one fit for the 21st Century, however we are already a quarter of the way through that century! We will have to rely on continuing support from the Scottish Government to see this project through to realisation.

We welcomed to Kirkwall our colleagues from Orkney's “parallel universe” (Shetland) to join us for a Valuation Joint Board meeting and training session. It's always a grand opportunity to exchange experiences from our respective domains.

The Sport & Leisure Member/Officer Working Group meeting I attended was dedicated to our swimming pools. Refurbishment of the swimming pools and other recreational facilities in the North Isles was one of the priorities I listed in my 2022 manifesto.

At the Sanday School Parent Council meeting, I was shocked to learn how few of the Outer North Isles pupils were able to participate in the 4-day instrumental course in September in Kirkwall owing to lack of accommodation provision. If your child has been affected by this, please could you get in touch with me (contact details below). I don't want any child left behind.

Other meetings I attended before the start of our short autumn recess included a budget-setting seminar, a meeting of Sanday Community Council, and a General meeting of the Full Council (which, at just under 6 minutes, was the shortest I can remember; the longest, on 4th July 2023, was about 17 times as long, taken up with fanciful notions of self-determination).

In the presence of Orkney's Lord Lieutenant, I was honoured to lay a wreath on behalf of OIC at the HMS Royal Oak memorial at Scapa and drop a bouquet of flowers over the wreck in the Flow (see photograph below) for the 86th anniversary of the sinking of the battleship by the German submarine U-47. I am often asked to do this on behalf of the Council because of my family connection, as my Uncle Ronald was one of 835 who went down with the ship on that fateful night 86 years ago.

Stephen

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

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