

Stephen Clackson's Letter from School Place

A reliable analogue report on what your councillor is doing on your behalf in a dubiously digital world.

On the 16th March, folk in six of Orkney's North Isles discovered just how vulnerable new technology has made them, when damage to the subsea cable between Evie and Westray cut off their Internet connection. Anyone who had migrated to fibre broadband suddenly found themselves disconnected, and this included their home telephone if they had opted for a "Voice over Internet Protocol" (VoIP) or "Digital Voice" service. (Those whose landline was still attached to the trusty old copper-wire network were spared, and they are probably very glad they'd not made the change yet!) This outage (or "outrage" as I branded it in *The Orcadian* of 26th March, page 6) has affected telecare, web-based registrations, tax submissions, remote working, on-line study, card-payment systems, Internet banking ... We have all been lured into becoming so reliant on digital services. With proper strategic resilience planning this outage would never have happened. A single point of failure is not acceptable for a service on which we all now depend so much. The Orkney Local Emergency Co-Ordination Group (OLECG) met from time to time to co-ordinate the response and recovery, although this primarily concerned Council facilities such as schools and Kalisgarth, and GP surgeries. I am disappointed they were unable to do more to assist the residents and households affected. I am also unhappy that they did not engage better with our community councils, who are our elected community representatives. In the vacuum created, our Island development trusts must be congratulated for stepping up to the crease. The photograph immediately below shows me able to carry on my council work thanks to Sanday Development Trust's NorseNet wireless Internet connection at Heilsa Fjold. The broadband service was eventually fully restored on the 20th April, but it's come to my attention that during this lengthy outage, BT has nonetheless been billing affected customers for their broadband packages as if their service had never been interrupted. As your ward councillor, I have been in touch with BT about this and have also asked about compensation, but they tell me they require every customer to contact them individually. To save time and frustration hanging on the telephone, you can contact them by e-mail at consumer-resolutions@bt.com



Owing to the Easter break, there have not been too many Council meetings this month, so I have taken the opportunity to get out and about engaging with other organisations. For example, I was invited to attend an evening meal with Scottish Government representatives from the National Planning Hub, and I received a warm reception at Warmworks to discuss constituent concerns. I also arranged a meeting with station commanders at Kirkwall Fire Station to talk about bolstering recruitment to the Scottish Fire & Rescue Service (SFRS) in the Isles, and how I might assist. Almost all the islands (most notably Eday, as recently reported in the press) need more on-call firefighters to boost resilience. Remember, this is a paid position, so not only will you be doing your bit for your community, your bank balance will benefit too. More information can be found at <https://www.firescotland.gov.uk/careers/on-call-firefighter/> or speak to a member of your local crew.

At the Meeting of the Education, Communities & Housing Committee, I noted how in 5 of the last 7 years, the National 5 examination pass rate in our Isles junior high schools has not only exceeded the pass rate in our two senior high schools, but also exceeded the Scottish average. I asked what our island schools are doing right. Although a clear explanation was not forthcoming, long may it continue! We were presented with the draft budget for UHI Orkney (formerly Orkney College), which can only be balanced by means of loans from OIC, thus incurring the additional cost of interest for the College. Given we agreed as a council to take responsibility for our college (the only council-owned partner left in the UHI), I proposed it is time we look into a deficit funding model along the lines of how OIC supports Orkney Ferries. I brought this up again at the meeting of the Policy & Resources Committee, and we have been promised a report on alternative funding models.

Other meetings I have attended at School Place include: a seminar on the mid-term review of our Council Plan 2023-2028 and our Delivery Plan 2023-2028; a confidential members' briefing; and a meeting of the Monitoring & Audit Committee.

In the Isles, I've been along in person to meetings of Shapinsay Community Council and the Rousay, Egilsay, Wyre & Gairsay Community Council. Whilst in Rousay, I was kindly given a tour of "The Space". The photograph below shows me sitting in a first-class railway carriage compartment installed there by the previous owner, the inimitable "John Shuttleworth".

Stephen

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

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