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Donna Manson
Chief Executive, Highland Council

Please respond to:

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Dear Donna

Caithness and Sutherland Ward Support

Through conversations at Dounreay Stakeholder Group (DSG) and with other stakeholders it has been brought to our attention that Highland Council is currently reviewing its Ward manager structure and may be considering further reducing these posts. This letter is to express concern at this prospect and put on record the DSG's support for maintaining, at the very minimum, the current Ward manager support for Caithness and Sutherland.

Caithness and Sutherland cover a large geographic area which is mainly sparsely populated. The relatively small population in this area face many challenges not replicated in more urban areas including: - distance to major services, exacerbated by poor transport links; difficult access to healthcare; poor childcare availability; increasing fuel poverty; lack of affordable housing and local employment availability. All these factors lead to the prediction of significant downward population pressures and increasing demographic imbalance between the young and old.

The DSG is painfully aware of these challenges and encourages Dounreay/NDA to invest in projects around the region through their socio-economic work via CNSRP working alongside the key local economic development partners. This has resulted in significant investments in the region, with the most recent example being £5 million invested to upgrade the St Ola pier at Scrabster harbour, supported by a further £3 million from Highlands & Islands Enterprise.

The Scrabster investment and the continued collaborative approach has led to the restart of flights from Wick to Aberdeen supported by a Public Service Obligation (PSO). This would not have been possible without input and resources from all the relevant partner organisations. There has further been recognition that additional resources are

needed to ensure the success of this service and as a result the NDA has committed to support 50% of the employment costs of a PSO contract manager.

The dispersed nature of the population means that the numerous small and few larger communities have challenges that are unique to their own locations. This requires a place-based approach to dealing with these issues and many complex needs requires resources to enable solutions to be sought. To further dilute the support available to local councillors who are attempting to work with these communities to find solutions would be damaging. Even with the increase in online meetings since COVID-19 it is already challenging for two ward managers to cover such a huge area. If this were to be further reduced, it would become impossible. Any such reduction in resources therefore has a large knock-on effect for some of the most fragile communities. It would undermine the investments and reduce the opportunity to maximise developments of current opportunities.

We would therefore re-iterate our support for maintaining support at, the minimum, the status quo. We would further suggest that in any review of Ward support resources these additional needs should be taken into consideration with a view to the potential of increasing resources to support the diverse communities of Caithness and Sutherland.

Yours sincerely

Sent electronically without signature

Davie Alexander
DSG Vice-chair / Socio Economic sub group chair