

Minutes (draft) of Torridon and Kinlochewe Community Council (TKCC)
Meeting held in person at Torridon Community Centre at 7pm
Wednesday 20th March 2024

Present: Caroline Hamilton (Chair), Sue Whiting (Secretary), Alpin Stewart, Tom Forrest, Colin Stevenson, Maud McIntyre,
4 members of the public.

Apologies – Steve Schnabel (Treasurer), Councillor Chris Birt.

1. Minutes of meeting on 21st February 2024

Approved.

2. Matters arising from meeting on 21st February 2024

SRN/Maree Todd – Maree Todd has copied us on a letter she received from Richard Lochhead, Scottish Minister for Small Business, Innovation and Trade in response to her concerns about the Shared Rural Network. Mr Lochhead said it was nothing to do with the Scottish Government as telecoms is a reserved matter for Westminster.

Local Place Plan (LPP) – The Steering Group has now produced a first draft. This has been circulated to TKCC members and a working group is meeting next week with SCDC to go through it. The draft will then be circulated to stakeholders for input before being put to the community for comment.

MM and Chris Johnson attended a workshop on the process of Area Place Planning run by Wester Ross Biosphere (WRB) with University of Highlands & Islands and Edinburgh University. This provoked some useful discussions, and helped to clarify what Area and Local Place Plans are about. It included discussing WRB's vision for 2034.

Possible Ward 5 Roads meeting – SW wrote to HC as agreed to request a meeting and list the priority actions for our area. No response yet in relation to a meeting – SW will chase. In relation to the priority items, HC responded as follows:

- Newly repaired parapet to the bridge near Wester Alligin on the C1083 from Torridon to Diabaig has been damaged again this winter. Request revised repair with metal crash barrier – HC structures team will look at this, HC is considering straightening the bridge.
- Many blocked, silted up drains on both sides of the C1083 in Fasaig from the Community Centre, past Fuaran and down to the village shop – this has been logged, they are on the HC roads team gully tanker programme.
- Highly dangerous, large area of reoccurring potholes radiating across centre of road down the hill on the A896 between Annat and Balgy – roads team hope to get more money for their capital schemes (2024/25) and intend to include Annat in their amended surfacing programme.
- Rutted and deteriorating road surface over the Coire Mhic Nobuil bridge adjacent to the NTS carpark on the C1083 from Torridon to Diabaig – roads team intends to put this section onto this coming year's capital programme, for the councillor's approval.
- Huge potholes, degraded edges at Incheril, Kinlochewe on road down to the cemetery and primary school area – no response, SW will chase.

Action: SW

Since HC is very short on manpower, TKCC members agreed it is essential to keep pushing in order to get things done. Members of the public can help by continuing to write to HC, reporting potholes etc.

Torridon village sign - SW has written to request a replacement to Eric Morrison of HC, copying HC roads team. No response yet.

Action: SW

Fire Scotland – As requested by Fire Scotland, SW has made contact with Ben Liversedge. It was agreed it was useful for TKCC to have direct contact with the fire service, especially since it seems likely the HC ranger service will not be operating during the tourist season this summer.

Scottish Ambulance Service – CH has not yet written but will do so.

Action: CH

3. Treasurer's report

No changes since the last report. Bank account balance remains £1,723.80.

4. Shared Rural Network (SRN) update

CH was pleased to report that TKCC seems to be making some progress towards getting the developers and UK government to consult with the community.

We had a meeting with WHP Telecoms, also present were representatives of their client, Virgin Media O2, including Liz Redfearn (LR) who is VMO2 SRN Programme Lead. She appeared willing to engage with us:

- We reiterated that the community is very much in favour of improved connectivity for residents and businesses (which is the stated aim of the SRN), and there are properties and roads which still need better signal. We said the arbitrary 95% geographic target makes no sense in the Highlands, therefore the government risks wasting £500 million of taxpayers' money putting up masts that will benefit almost no-one.
- LF said the government is receiving similar feedback from elsewhere in the Highlands, and that VMO2 is passing on the same concerns from multiple areas. She said she thought the volume of objections was such that the government was starting to listen.
- Building Digital UK (BDUK, the government agency involved with SRN) had asked LF what she would have done differently. LF told them she would have started by establishing where the areas of need are, what people want, and where to put masts in order to provide the most benefit.
- WHP/VMO2 showed us some existing coverage maps, together with coverage maps for 11 of the proposed masts in our area. We pointed out that the existing coverage maps were wrong - for example, there is 4G coverage at the Coire Mhic Nobuil site, also around Beinn na h Eaglaise. These are not Total Not Spots (TNS), therefore masts for these areas may not be necessary, certainly they should not be paid for by the government/ taxpayers. Partial Not Spot (PNS) masts are required to be paid for by the mobile operators.
- We also said one of the proposed masts appeared to be in the same place as a proposed emergency services mast in Glen Torridon, in which case why did they not share that?
- WHP/VMO2 were interested in all the above and agreed to investigate.
- LF said the mobile operators (MNOs) are required to share TNS masts and Home Office EAS masts. Since all the masts in the TKCC area are TNS masts (though this isn't true, see above), they will be shared by all 4 MNOs.

- LF said the government cannot compel MNOs to share PNS masts, and most of these are either EE masts or are being shared by the other 3 MNOs. This is because EE has effectively blocked sharing of their masts by seeking to charge the others too much.
- We asked about maintenance. LF confirmed the cost of servicing and maintaining the TNS masts would be paid for by the government for 20 years, and was part of the £501 million that the government has committed.
- CH asked whether this budget was tight. LF said it was “more than tight”. The cost of building masts has increased substantially, due to increases in steel/ fuel costs etc – in urban areas the cost has doubled, in remote rural areas she expects it to have quadrupled. The cost of maintaining remote masts – with helicopters etc. – is also immense.
- As a result, LF expects some of the masts in the Highlands will not be built. However, she said the first stage of the process for each mast was to get through planning. Only then would they would look at the building and maintenance costs and decide whether it is too expensive to go ahead.
- CH said this means that at a time when HC is having to cut services to residents due to a lack of cash, the UK government is forcing HC to spend money reviewing large numbers of planning applications, when it knows that not all those applications are necessary. [TKCC members agreed this was absurd, and that it would also result in communities being put to a large amount of work unnecessarily.]
- LF said the points we had made concerned all the MNOs. She therefore suggested arranging a meeting between us and the minister in charge, Julia Lopez, all the MNOs, BDUK, and Digital Mobile Spectrum (the SRN joint venture owned by the MNOs). We agreed this would be very useful and suggested bringing a couple of other community representatives from other areas.

Following the above meeting, TKCC wrote a further letter to Julia Lopez, the UK minister in charge. The letter asked again for a meeting and referred to a recent report on the SRN from the National Audit Office (NAO). This states that the government has not clearly articulated the benefits of the programme, including of increasing connectivity in sparsely populated areas.

The letter to Julia Lopez followed up on the letter in January written by TKCC as part of a coalition of community councils and outdoor organisations. So far there has been no response to either.

John Muir Trust (JMT) and Mountaineering Scotland (MS) have been pushing as well. They helped to get articles in the Sunday Herald and on Good Morning Scotland, the NAO report also featured in the Independent.

JMT and MS have reported having similar meetings to ours with developers/MNOs. In the last few days, the government has also asked them to help with prioritising masts. JMT and MS agree that any consultation of this sort must involve communities, that communities can help identify existing coverage deficits, and any new masts must be in places where people actually need and want them.

TKCC members were all very pleased and hoped the above will lead to progress.

5. Correspondence received

- HIE – commercial property study
HIE has launched a study into demand for commercial property in the region. They are looking for responses from any business or organisation with land or property plans. Link to the study here: <https://www.hie.co.uk/research-and-reports/propertydemandstudy/>

This has already been forwarded to the community development plan team.

- NHS Highland – telecare survey
The Telecare Team would greatly appreciate a few minutes of local people’s time to complete their survey. Your feedback will help them better understand needs and improve their service. Whether you’re new to Telecare or an expert, they want to hear from you. Click here to visit the survey: <https://forms.office.com/e/720E9h8Hup> Deadline 31 March.
- Wester Ross Biosphere (WRB) – Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Area Place Plan
WR Consulting, operating under WRB, has been appointed by HC to develop a community-driven Area Place Plan (APP) for HC Ward 5 highlighting the region's future priorities. This is intended to incorporate insights from previous consultations and align with existing plans, strategies, and projects, including Local Place Plans.

Community participation is fundamental to the process of creating the APP and WRB intend to consult with residents and stakeholders throughout the Ward. They are also inviting TKCC’s and other community councils’ active participation.

MM agreed to follow this up and find out more.

Action: MM

- Parish Online – Community Map Scotland
Community Map Scotland is a powerful mapping tool. TKCC signed up last year for 12 months’ free access and the subscription for next year will be £50. It was agreed that whilst we have not made much use of the software so far, it could be very useful for the Local Place Plan and for projects associated with the community development plan. We will therefore pay the subscription to continue with it.
- Cape Wrath Ultra
Dates for this year’s race are 21-23 May.

6. Planning applications

24/00769/SCRE New 33kv Overhead Line Spur for connection to New Communications Mast. Land 1400M SE Of Stattadale Loch Maree Achnasheen

MM explained this was a screening application requesting confirmation from HC that an environmental impact assessment will not be required as part of the applicant’s upcoming planning application. HC has confirmed this.

7. Any other business

TF raised the issue of parking for the Bealach Mor cycle race that is being held as usual in September. It was agreed that TKCC would contact the organisers if people in Kinlochewe felt it was a problem. MM will ask around.

Action: MM

Date of next meeting: Wednesday 17th April 7.00am on zoom