**Black Isle Partnership (BIP) – Black Isle Communities Meeting**

**Zoom Meeting 1000 28 September 2021**

**Present:** Jon Palmer (Chair of Meeting and BIP), Julian Paren (BIP and Minute Taker), Ann Jefferson (Fortrose and Rosemarkie Community Council), Anne Phillips (Fortrose and Rosemarkie Community Council), Vanessa Hallhead (BIP), Cai MacIver (Highland Council), Peter Ratcliffe (Cromarty Community Council), Sheila Currie (Transition Black Isle), Nigel Shapcott (Cromarty Development Trust)

**Apologies:** Cllr**.** Gordon Adam (Highland Council and BIP) Helen Robinson (Rosemarkie and Fortrose Trust), Alison Petch (Culbokie Community Trust), Megan Mackenzie (Black Isle Cares), Helena Macleod (RANK and Kessock Kindness), Sarah Macdonald-Taylor (Avoch and Killen Community Council)

**Agenda 1: Minutes of the BIP - Black Isle Communities Meeting on 14 September 2021**

The Minutes of the meeting on 14 September 2021 were approved,

**Agenda 2: Democracy on the Black Isle**

Jon Palmer reflected that there were few present to discuss the important item that Gordon Adam had laid out in a pre-meeting brief:

*The discussion will focus on making democratic accountability work on the Black Isle – in other words how to put into place a structure which will allow more people to influence how money is spent, what it is spent on, and how additional money can be raised to do what we feel is needed for the good of the Black Isle as a whole. The formation of the Black Isle Area Committee gives us the opportunity to do just this, and the 3 Councillors are in favour of three groupings – the Black Isle Community Councils, the Black Isle Parent Councils and the Black Isle Partnership being the principal influencing organisations on the Area Committee decisions. Just how they can directly voice their views at Area Committee is something that needs to be worked out with Council Officers.*

*This is work in progress, and this is your opportunity to discuss the pros and cons of this broad idea, and perhaps come up with others of your own. What’s more you will be doing it in my absence – I can’t be with you on Tuesday so you won’t risk offending me by any critical reactions. Jon will chair the discussion and Julian will take his usual painstaking minutes so I will have a full account after the event!  I hope you are able to take part in the discussion – it may seem a bit of a dry subject, but it could be an important one for establishing how decisions affecting the Black Isle are arrived at in the future*.

**Jon Palmer** repeated the three strands of Gordon’s ideas and reminded all that the Black Isle Partnership could represent the trans-Black Isle organisations, such as Black Isle Cares, Transition Black Isle, which lay outside the community Council structure. He asked for comments.

**Cai MacIver** reminded all that the scope of the Area Committee’s work was quite limited.

**Ann Jefferson** said she was ignorant of why the Dingwall, Seaforth and Black Isle Committee was broken up and sought an explanation. She saw a smaller Area Committee as a great opportunity, but only if the Black Isle’s concerns would be better heard at the heart of the Highland Council. Ann sought honesty on how the voice of the Black Isle could be made more powerful. She also thought that the type of issues FRCC regularly raised with Highland Council would not be covered in Cai’s new role.

**Cai MacIver** responded by saying that her area was both the Black Isle and Dingwall/Seaforth. She was meeting local groups such as Black Isle Cares and MoO Food and trying to build links to improve resilience. The job was new, and work was in progress.

**Jon Palmer** responded to Ann by saying that he only had scanty knowledge. He understood the final straw was when emergency funding was approved for the Cromarty to Nigg Ferry at a meeting in which Dingwall/Seaforth councillors were absent. All had accepted that the requirements of Dingwall were so very different to the more rural community of the Black Isle.

**Sheila Currie** said the format of a more open Area Committee Meeting was important to get right because only then would the Committee be able to work effectively. There had to be meaningful access to money and decision making with few constraints. Invitees must have an opportunity to speak rather than just be sidelined as listeners. Without adequate resourcing at Community level, nothing much would be achieved. Sheila mentioned the successful operations of both the Highland Community Planning Partnership and the Mid-Ross Community Partnership. See <https://www.highlandcpp.org.uk/mid-ross-community-partnership.html> and <https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/591/council_and_government/369/community_planning>

**Jon Palmer** reminded all that there was a legal requirement for 1% of the Highland Council Funding to be available for participatory budgeting.

**Peter Ratcliiffe** said that participatory budgeting was an agenda item for the evening’s Cromarty Community Council. He agreed that the CC had the job of co-ordinating the whole community, but getting feedback was always a problem. **Jon Palmer** agreed, and noted that the Culbokie Development Trust and Ferintosh Community Council had worked well together and between them did get a high level of feedback from the area. **Anne Phillips** pointed out that the latest CC constitution encouraged CC's to make local groups associate members and F&RCC were already doing this.

**Nigel Shapcott** argued that the Black Isle Partnership was seen as a non-representative group that had a direct channel to the Highland Council. He argued that the BIP was not democratic although meetings were open. Holding meetings during the day ensured that many Chairs of Black Isle organisations and Community Councils could not attend.

**Nigel Shapcott** argued that when BIP had the role of distributing money that this was not achieved properly. The Strategic Partnership Meetings were not initially minuted. He said that the BIP must position itself as working with groups, but not in competition with them. He argued that BIP must agree to make a presentation to the Black Isle Communities Council (BICC), because he saw that as the natural place for BIP to report. He agreed that there was a need for a group that represented the Black Isle well. He also wondered why Di Agnew was not representing the Highland Council at the Zoom meetings.

**Anne Phillips** said that if the Black Isle Partnership wished to work with the Community Councils then BIP must make the case by attending CC meetings and making a presentation to explain their position. She thought it right and proper that BIP wanted to be representative of the Black Isle, but should not claim it was already in that position. She reminded all that important information from Highland Council, which CCs needed to hear, was channelled through a BIP Zoom Meeting rather than direct to the CCs – and that was not acceptable.

**Jon Palmer** requested that credit be given to Gordon Adam for what he was trying to do. Jon Palmer said that the BIP presentation he gave to the Black Isle Area Committee had been misconstrued.

**Julian Paren** argued that there needed to be an opportunity for Black Isle-wide organisations to have a say on local issues. Transition Black Isle had written directly to the Highland Council and to the Ward Councillors (often with no response or an acknowledgement letter that was not followed up) but the opportunity for the Black Isle Partnership to discuss these issues on their behalf at a Black Isle Area Committee was attractive.

**Vanessa Halhead** acknowledged that Community Councils were set up to be weak with very limited powers. The Local Government Act that was currently up for public consultation but there was no intention for changing the role of Community Councils which importantly were Unincorporated Bodies in a legal sense.

The Black Isle Partnership was set up as a Trading Arm across the Black Isle to seek funds and run projects. The only reason that BIP was not representative is that few organisations join it. Its function is completely different to Community Councils. The Black Isle Partnership became an Anchor Organisation for distributing Covid funds because of its constitution. Culbokie and Cromarty (Development) Trusts were also eligible for this role, but were seen as being too localised for trans-Black Isle funding. Each group on the Black Isle must serve their own function, but all must work together, and the umbrella of the Black Isle Partnership provides a constituted way to achieve working together.

**Jon Palmer** thanked all for their contribution but reminded all of the request from Gordon Adam. Was his suggestion for the format of the Black Isle Area Committee a good start, was it workable? Or what better could be put in place?

**Nigel Shapcott** said that Gordon’s plans were “in the right direction”. He suggested that ALL Black Isle Partnership Meetings be held outside working hours and that the BIP should seek an audience at the next Community Council Meetings to outline the BIP role and the role of the Black Isle Area Committee.

**Jon Palmer** clarified that Gordon Adam would approach each Community Council directly.

**Sheila Currie** said there was now a good start in that the issues were recognised and solutions suggested. The main problem is how to include representation from the wide range of groups that exist within the community. Importantly 1% of Highland Council resources must be distributed based on local consultation. Sheila thought that the democratic groups were now in place for the views of the community to be heard.

**Jon Palmer** restated the requirements for an effective Black Isle Area Committee:

The Community Councils must be present. They must truly represent their constituents.

The Black Isle Partnership should have a role. It seeks to be a genuine partnership and can be a holding body for funds for the Black Isle. If both CCs and BIP work together the Black Isle is stronger once personal agendas are put aside and all work collaboratively. The informal Black Isle Community Councils group could provide the forum for all Community Councils concerns to be channelled to the Black Isle Area Committee. Jon felt that there needed to be more dynamism in the Community Councils to ensure their role was understood by residents.

Jon Palmer reminded all that the Black Isle Partnership had devised a Black Isle Strategy centred on six key themes, and these had been developed through consultation with representatives from the key groups that joined the Black Isle Partnership/Black Isle Communities Zoom Meetings. The strategy saw the need for paid coordinators to further the strategy on three broad areas: 1/ housing, energy, waste and recycling, 2/ employment, business support, travel and infrastructure (incl. digital), 3/ food, recreation and leisure, wellbeing. The three coordinators would be proactive rather than reactive and assist the work of the Community Councils. The strategy was for the coordinators to be funded independently of Highland Council and retain the independence of their roles.

**Cai MacIver** explained that her role was not broad enough to be a Development Officer. She believed the Black Isle to be resilient and her role was to link up people but she needed guidance on where she could help.

**Anne Phillips** agreed that the Community Councils needed to do more to associate with local groups so that there was a greater spread of local organisations in close contact with the Community Councils.

**Ann Jefferson** thanked Vanessa Halhead for explaining the background to the Black Isle Partnership and noted that she understood its role far better. She thought the main drawback to the current way BIP was communicating with the other groups was by having meetings at a time when many were unable to attend, and there was a lack of continuity of those attending. She welcomed the news that BIP could hold funds but wondered why it was not a Development Trust.

**Vanessa Halhead** explained that Development Trusts worked at a very local scale while BIP had a broader remit for the Black Isle as a whole. BIP was constituted as an inclusive organisation, to represent in some way the diverse groups of the Black Isle. Ideally BIP would like to be a home for Scout Groups, Scottish Women’s Institutes, Churches and other social groups, plus the businesses that make up the Black Isle to be one voice representing the wishes of the many. What was to be avoided was the emergence of elite groups, meeting in secret, that did not really interact with their constituents.

**Vanessa Halhead** reminded all of her recent e-mail that gave details of a modest Rural Development Fund for both funds to £3k and £3k to £50k to invest in local needs. The closing date was October 8. **Jon Palmer** said BIP would be open to further dialogue on any collaboration for this funding opportunity. **Jon Palmer** noted again that 1% of Highland Council’s money should be available for participatory budgeting and that was real money. He could see that bringing in £200k a year for giving the Black Isle and its Community Councils some real initiative to be imaginative.

**Jon** concluded the meeting by saying that Gordon Adam was to be applauded for his wish to strengthen local democracy and that his proposal may not be perfect, it was from the discussions of the morning seen to be currently the best way forward to get the best representation from our communities.

**Jon Palmer** agreed that the BIP/Black Isle Communities Zoom Meetings be held at two week intervals on Tuesdays, with a morning meeting followed by an evening meeting two weeks later. He agreed to talk to Di Agnew about the published timetables of CC Meetings. **He anticipated that the next meeting would be on Tuesday 12 October in the evening**

The meeting concluded at 1110.