

REPORT TO HIGHLAND COUNCIL FINANCE HOUSING AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE ON 26 FEBRUARY 2014 RECOMMENDING THE CLOSURE OF 23 SERVICE POINTS THROUGHOUT THE HIGHLAND AREA.

Response from Community Councils representing South Skye and Lochalsh prepared at a specially convened meeting on 24 February 2014

INTRODUCTION

The Community Councils expressed concern at the lack of consultation on this important issue and the fact that these proposals only came to light from a leaked report. Community Council represent their areas at local level and in terms of the Scheme of Administration would expect to be consulted prior to such a far reaching proposal being recommended. The lack of consultation and the short space of time available for response does not accord with the nine principles of public life

THE REPORT

The report states that the closure of these service points would enhance and improve the customer experience, increase choice and increase the number of services available. It also states that customers are demanding something different from the Council and that the shift of resources from a face to face service to electronically delivered services is what customers expect.

COMMENT

It is difficult to understand how the closure of 23 Service Points and doing away with face to face contact can be portrayed as improving and enhancing the customer experience. It is also highly questionable whether these proposed closures are driven as the report says by customers demanding "something different from their Council."

The source of these statements and the methods of recording customer preference are not clear and the Community Councils do not accept these statements as a proper reflection of the aspirations of customers in this area regarding delivery of Council services.

THE EFFECTS OF CLOSURE

The effects of these closures will be immediately felt by the elderly ,disabled ,those who are not computer literate and those without their own transport. The Access Panel has already expressed grave concern. Some parts of this area do not have mobile phone cover and internet access can be patchy. These closures and reliance on electronic communications will result in a serious loss of service to many of the most vulnerable in our communities. Costumers will in some instances have a round trip in excess of 120 miles to the nearest Service Point and public transport is minimal or non existent. The report mentions the risk of some customers having to travel longer distances to a Service Centre. This is not just a risk-it is a fact. This can in no way be portrayed as increasing choice, enhancing customer experience or increasing the number of services available. The Points recommended for closure record some 760 events per week and closure will lead to a significant loss of service for these users

COSTS AND SAVINGS

The proposed savings described at para 19.1 do not appear to take account of all the costs associated with these closures. e.g para 18.3 recommends that a sum of up to £193000 be made available to fund the transfer of resources from the closing service points to the remaining hubs and service centres but this sum does not appear in the table at 19.1. Mention is made of Highlife Highland staff supporting self serve to Council Services. Presumably any such staff will require changes to their job description and contracts of employment and remuneration. The precise functions which they will perform are unclear described only as “a facilitated self service function”

WEST COAST REGISTRATION SERVICES

The statement that Service points at Ullapool Portree and Fort William “ will support the registration and passport interviews along the west coast and the isles” displays an astonishing ignorance of the geography of the west coast and the distances involved, and where appropriate public transport is virtually non-existent. It is a matter of concern that Councillors are being asked to make decisions based on information which does not reflect the reality of distance and geography on the west coast.

Registration requires face to face contact and the need to travel up to 120 miles for this essential service is unacceptable

IMPLICATION FOR EMPLOYMENT

The proposed closures will lead to significant loss of employment in the affected areas, and resources hitherto allocated to the rural communities will be shifted to the centre. This will reduce employment opportunities in the future and inevitably lead to loss of young people and families and further depopulation. These will also reduce spending power in the affected areas with a knock on effect into other parts of the local economy

EQUALITY ACT 2010 AND HIGHLAND COUNCIL EQUALITY PLAN

The removal of the option for face to face contact would appear to breach the Equality Act, the Council's own Equality Plan and Article 8 of the Human Rights Act. As far as we are aware no impact assessment has been carried out to measure the effects which these closures will have on elderly and disabled people throughout the Highlands. Estimates show that in Scotland 81% of the population will be over 75 by 2031, while the figure for Skye and Lochalsh is 143%. More than half the population aged 75 and over would be considered disabled within the Disability Discrimination Act although they may not consider themselves disabled

CONCLUSIONS

The Community Council representing South Skye and Lochalsh strongly advise the Committee not to approve the recommendations in the report on Service Point Closures for the following reasons:-

The loss of these Service Points in the remote rural areas will be highly detrimental to the users and the provision of telephone or internet services will not constitute an appropriate substitute for face to face contact. Closures could also be in breach of Equality and Human Rights Legislation

The distances which users will have to travel for Registration and other services in an area of little or no public transport are unacceptable. This will require significant additional fuel costs and increase the carbon footprint

The loss of employment opportunities in the remote rural areas will lead to further loss of population , particularly young people and the loss of spending power which these posts currently generate will impact adversely on the local economy

The Community Councils demand that Highland Council engage with the communities concerned and the Skye and Lochalsh Access Panel to ascertain their aspirations for Council service provision and how these service can be enhanced locally

Community Councils

Sleat, Broadford and Strath, Kyleakin and Kylere, Kyle, Plockton, Stromeferry & Achmore, Glenelg, Lochalsh, Loch Duich Sconser Dornie