

Item: 9

Policy and Resources Committee: 21 June 2022.

International Engagement.

Report by Chief Executive.

1. Purpose of Report

To consider International Engagement of Orkney Islands Council over the next three years.

2. Recommendations

The Committee is invited to note:

2.1.

That, in October 2021, the Council approved attendance at the 2021 Arctic Circle Assembly, with the event considered to be very successful, including the opportunity to promote current research, innovation and investment opportunities in Orkney to international delegates.

2.2.

That, in parallel with attendance at the Assembly, additional invitations were received for the Orkney delegation to attend other fruitful meetings, including with HM Ambassador in Iceland, the Director of the British Antarctic Survey and potential investors in green and blue economy ventures.

It is recommended:

2.3.

That the Council continue to develop and enhance relationships with Arctic and Nordic Countries to maximise the ongoing promotion of potential economic and cultural opportunities for Orkney.

2.4.

That the Council should continue to send representatives to attend the Arctic Circle Assembly in 2022, 2023 and 2024, with attendance reviewed thereafter to ensure that it is worthwhile and providing tangible value for money opportunities.

2.5.

That a budget, up to a maximum sum of £100,000, be established, to fund ongoing international engagement over a period of three years.

2.6.

That powers be delegated to the Corporate Director for Enterprise and Sustainable Regeneration to identify the necessary funding from within existing resources for 2022/23 and thereafter that the budget requirement be submitted as a growth bid as part of the budget setting process for 2023/24 onwards for this purpose.

3. Background

3.1.

The Council considered the refreshed Political Engagement Strategy in December 2020 which included changes in national and international political circumstances impacting on the Council.

3.2.

The aim of the strategy is to achieve maximum focus in respect of national and international political engagement to ensure that the Council's key strategic priorities are promoted and achieved and additional strategic opportunities identified. This facilitates the pursuit of local, regional, national, and international strategic alliances, typically for the purposes of generation and optimisation of economic opportunities for Orkney, the nurturing and maintenance of cultural, educational and/or historic relationships and the sharing of good practice.

3.3.

In October 2021, the Council considered and agreed representation at the Arctic Circle Assembly 2021 consistent with previous years, to promote potential economic opportunities for Orkney with the Arctic Circle Countries.

3.4.

In addition, the Council is also considering exploring and developing further areas of co-operation with Vestland, Norway as part of the existing Twinning Agreement and a separate report on the agenda will consider this proposal.

4. Arctic Circle Assembly 2021

4.1.

The Arctic Circle Assembly is the largest annual international gathering on the Arctic and there are many potential economic and cultural opportunities to be pursued with our northern international neighbours. The Assembly is attended by many foundations, organisations, universities, corporations, research institutions, governmental bodies, indigenous people, and public associations around the world.

4.2.

The 2021 Arctic Circle Assembly was held again in Reykjavik, Iceland and was attended by the Chief Executive, the Leader, and a representative from the private renewable sector to showcase and promote the economic opportunities in Orkney

and further develop previously established relationships and networks. Attendance was formally approved at the General Meeting of the Council in October 2021.

4.3.

The Orkney representatives had been allocated a session to make a formal presentation to Assembly delegates on the past, present, and future of Orkney including investment opportunities which was well received by those attending. The majority of the opportunities to identify and discuss investment prospects and learn what is happening in other countries occurred primarily through networking outwith the formal sessions and there was a great deal of interest in Orkney.

4.4.

In addition, the Orkney contingent were invited to a private meeting by Dr Bryony Mathews, HM Ambassador at the British Embassy in Reykjavik to advise her of Orkney's history, research, innovation, and investment opportunities to enable her to promote Orkney's interests when appropriate situations arise. The Orkney delegates were also invited to attend a meeting with senior cabinet level politicians from the governments of Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroes in their capacity as Members of the West Nordic Council. Many issues were discussed and the West Nordic Council Members were extremely interested in the green energy developments that had taken place in Orkney over many decades and considered what good practice could be shared for mutual benefit. There was also great interest in Orkney's unique archaeological services.

4.5.

Furthermore, Orkney's representatives were invited to a breakfast meeting with Professor Dame Jane Francis, Director of the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) which is the United Kingdom's national polar research institute. The BAS has a dual purpose; to conduct polar science, enabling better understanding of global issues, and it aims to ensure that UK Polar (Antarctic and Arctic) research and innovation operational activities comply with internationally agreed standards of best practise. Professor Dame Francis proposed that because of the globally significant research and innovation work continuing to be progressed in Orkney, consideration should be given to developing a Memorandum of Understanding to formalise the positive relationship between the BAS and Orkney Islands Council.

4.6.

As a result of previous work and an introduction to the Prime Minister of the Faroes at the Assembly, a delegation led by their Deputy Prime Minister visited Orkney after the Assembly in November last year and subsequently issued an invitation to the Leader for a return visit to the Faroes. The mains topics explored included green energy generation, future fuels, fixed links development and the prospect of enhancing Orkney's digital coverage in partnership with Faroese Telecoms.

5. Continued International Engagement

5.1.

Attendance at the Arctic Circle Assembly in 2021 was a great success because it provided an ideal platform to showcase Orkney and promote the internationally recognised global research and innovation that is taking place here together with the opportunities these can offer to Nordic counties and beyond. Attendance offers the chance to build new and enhance existing relationships. To ensure a consistent, regular approach to investigate and develop these opportunities in the most efficient way a three-year plan to attend the Arctic Circle Assembly event annually is proposed. A delegation would attend in October 2022, 2023, and 2024 after which attendance would be reviewed to ensure that it is worthwhile and providing tangible opportunities and value for money.

5.2.

In addition, there may be other international relationships to develop. For example, representatives from businesses and governments in other Countries visiting Orkney occasionally highlight innovative projects or best practice in their own country which could be relevant for Orkney and may benefit from further exploration. Similar to the Faroese Government.

5.3.

In addition, the contacts and relationships made during the attendance at international events and from international delegations to Orkney provide a network to tap into and build upon should Orkney Islands Council determine to hold a conference to further showcase investment opportunities in research, innovation, and strategic projects locally. The proposal for an Orkney conference would be considered at a future meeting of this committee at the appropriate time.

5.4.

It is therefore proposed that an International Engagement programme is developed, which includes the annual visit to the Arctic Circle Assembly and other such countries as appropriate. This programme will be delivered over the next three years to March 2025 and thereafter reviewed.

5.5.

A budget of £100,000 is proposed to fund the three-year international engagement programme.

6. Links to Council Plan

The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the Council Plan strategic priority of Enterprising Communities.

7. Links to Local Outcomes Improvement Plan

The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the Local Outcomes Improvement Plan priorities of Connectivity and Sustainable Recovery.

8. Financial Implications

8.1.

The cost of conferences of this nature are in the region of £500 per delegate, with travel and subsistence approximately £2,000 per delegate.

8.2.

With respect to further international engagement, it is envisaged that a budget of up to a maximum of £100,000 will be required over 3 years and the Corporate Director for Enterprise and Sustainable Regeneration be tasked with identifying appropriate funding for 2022/23 from with existing resources and as part of budget deliberations for 2023/24 onwards for this purpose.

9. Legal Aspects

There are no direct legal implications arising from the recommendations contained in this report.

10. Contact Officer

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