

Community engagement event, Macduff, Wednesday, May 15

Over 40 residents gathered in Macduff Town Hall on Wednesday, May 15, to meet with Aberdeenshire Council's senior management team as part of a series of community engagement events.

The session focused on looking at Aberdeenshire as an area, building pride in the places we live and work and looking forward to where we want to be in 2050.

Chief Executive Colin Mackenzie opened the meeting by looking at some of the highlights and key issues affecting the council at the moment.

He talked about the council's improvement process and the positive inspections it had recently received through the Best Value Audit 2, and the Assurance and Improvement Plan.

He also reflected that Aberdeenshire had been recognised as the best place to live in Scotland with the highest quality of life for the fourth time, as well as the most peaceful place on mainland Scotland.

He explained how creating a sense of place was a key objective for the council, and that the session was to get a sense of what communities thought Aberdeenshire should look like in 2050.

The audience then spent 30 minutes discussing three key questions –

- What do you think makes Aberdeenshire a quality place to live and work?
- What are the challenges of living somewhere with the best quality of life?
- What do you think Aberdeenshire should look like in 2050?

The feedback from the discussion groups has been summarised below:

What do you think makes Aberdeenshire a quality place to live and work?
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- Not too densely populated
- Scenery
- Easy going and friendly people
- The variety of employment opportunities and high employment rate
- Strength of the economy, its research and development opportunities
- Education
- Tourism – from its harbours, heritage sites, outdoor pursuits and Scottish culture
- Quality of built environment
- Access to services – health services under less pressure
- Tolerance of culture
- More natural Scottish woodlands

What are the challenges of living somewhere with the best quality of life?

- Necessary to recognise that North Aberdeen is different from South Aberdeenshire.
- Raising education attainment
- Local employment opportunities
- Maintaining infrastructure e.g. Harbours
- Engaging with local issues with local councillors
- Engaging with senior officials
- No sense of urgency
- Remoteness- road/rail links
- The area's "qualities" are not broadcast to a wide enough audience, tourism particularly
- Investment good in "centre" but diminishes as you move "out" to the more remote areas of Aberdeenshire
- Sense of being comfortable so no drive for change
- People are not being listened to

What do you think Aberdeenshire should look like in 2050?

- Better standard of living for all
- Improved leisure facilities
- Investment in Property/ Housing
- Introduce one way systems for safer pedestrian and vehicular access
- Wind turbines –Introduce policies
- Transport/ parking – Traffic wardens, policing of bus stops, improve train links and get people out of their cars
- Clear pavements - no wheelie bins left out to block pavements
- Introduce a café culture along the coastline
- Introduce inspirational role models to build aspiration into the community
- For the communities to have pride in the area

- Control “drug” problem
- Improve the Banff and Buchan area
- Increased number of shops and businesses
- Improved connections between towns not just Aberdeen
- High education attainment
- Sustainable communities
- Highest quality of development
- More self- sufficient
- Taking advantage of resources such as tourism.
- Valued town centres
- People choosing to live here
- Better access to broadband
- Good strong community spirit
- Mobility vs. accessibility
- Community-based education

One of the main topics which was raised by the discussion groups was the issue of wind turbines, not just in Banff and Macduff but across the whole of Aberdeenshire.

Many of the audience members who spoke expressed negative views about the presence of wind turbines in the area, which they felt was spoiling the landscape and culture heritage of the north-east and putting off tourists from visiting.

The issue of councillors going against the recommendations of council officers was also raised, which led onto a discussion about the democratic process.

Other points raised in relation to turbines was whether the council had a policy in place for the disposal of carbon fibre rotor blades and if there was a required minimum distance between a wind turbine and the nearest dwelling.

The discussion on turbines was then brought to a close by Colin Mackenzie, and the floor opened to other questions.

One resident raised the issue of the A947, stating that it was essential that it was improved to a suitable standard in order to attract people into the area.

The council’s head of roads and landscape services, Philip McKay, responded by saying that Aberdeenshire has around 10% of Scotland’s entire road network, the maintenance and repair of which the council invested £26 million towards every year.

He also highlighted that Aberdeenshire has the second best roads in Scotland in terms of condition and explained the work that was being done to educate drivers and enforce the law, with more lay-bys being added to the A947 in order to allow a greater presence of speed camera vans. The council has

carried out work on some bends of the A947 but key issue is in educating people to drive sensibly.

Mr McKay explained that the development of the Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route (AWPR) would have a knock-on effect on the volume of traffic using some Aberdeenshire roads, including the A947, by an estimated 12% to 14%.

Moving on from the issue of roads, another resident told the audience that he felt the council would not benefit from looking at Aberdeenshire as a whole and that the north and south of the area were very different and should be treated as separate entities.

The discussion then turned towards town centres and the pressing need to regenerate and reinvigorate these by making the most of the area's natural assets – its stunning coastline and natural beauty.

The resident continued to say that the focus had to be on not only drawing visitors into towns but offering them enough of an incentive to stay for a couple of days, rather than an afternoon.

One member of the audience asked whether the council could look at reducing business rates and Aberdeenshire Council Leader, Cllr Jim Gifford, explained that this was something outwith the local authority's control.

Another resident raised the issue of Banff Bridge and whether the council could do anything to widen the structure for traffic.

Head of roads and landscape services, Philip McKay, said that a number of options were being considered such as removing the pedestrian walkways and re-routing them in some way in order to create more space for vehicles. He mentioned the possibility of building an entirely separate pedestrian bridge.

The need for wider provision of public facilities in Banff was raised as something for the council to look into.

Another audience member then raised concerns about a planning application that was submitted for a Gypsy/Traveller site at King Edward, stating that in her opinion the village didn't have the infrastructure to support it.

Cllr Gifford said that Gypsy/Traveller sites were a major issue and the council had to look at developing official stop oversites which could be properly regulated and would then lead to a decrease of unauthorised sites.

Mr Mackenzie added that it was a huge challenge to the council as to how to deal with Gypsy/Travellers and ensure that their needs are catered for.

A resident then raised his concerns about the state of Banff town centre, saying that it was symptomatic of an area in decline, and that he wanted the

council to dedicated some of its underspend towards dealing with these issues.

Cllr Gifford explained that a proportion of the underspend has already been earmarked for this purpose, with £500,000 allocated to Banff town centre. He explained that a tender had been issued by the council for a consultation to take place about Banff, Macduff, Peterhead and Fraserburgh which aims to engage with local residents on what they think the council can do to breathe new life into the towns.

Mr Mackenzie then gave residents an update on the progress of the Tesco project in Banff, saying that the S75 agreement had now been signed and planning consent was in the process of being issued.

He said it was likely that the garage on Carmelite Street could likely be demolished by September, with work on the replacement community facilities able to get underway by the end of the year.

One audience member expressed her disappointment in the length of time that the project had taken to come to fruition and questioned why the council had not built a replacement community centre in the interim. Mr Mackenzie assured her that the project was moving forward.

There were no more questions from the audience at that stage and Cllr Gifford drew the event to a close by thanking everyone for coming along and wishing them a safe journey home.