

**Item: 8**

**Policy and Resources Committee: 17 June 2025.**

**International Engagement.**

**Report by Director of Enterprise and Resources.**

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## **1. Overview**

- 1.1. In July 2022 the Council agreed to continue to develop and enhance relationships with Arctic and Nordic Countries to maximise ongoing promotion of potential economic and cultural opportunities for Orkney representatives. Specifically, it resolved:
- i. To continue to develop and enhance relationships with Arctic and Nordic countries to maximise the ongoing promotion of potential economic and cultural opportunities for Orkney.
  - ii. 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 was worthwhile and providing tangible value for money opportunities.
  - iii. That a budget, up to a maximum sum of £100,000, be established, to fund ongoing international engagement, including but not limited to the Arctic Circle Assembly, over a period of three years.
  - iv. 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 the budget requirement be submitted as a growth bid as part of the budget setting process for 2023/24 onwards.
- 1.2. Within the body of the report it stated that, ‘the proposal for an Orkney conference would be considered at a future meeting of this committee at the appropriate time’.
- 1.3. In May 2023 the Council entered into a memorandum of understanding with the Nordic Atlantic Cooperation. This followed the decision by Council in December 2022 to establish a Nordic Atlantic Cooperation project development fund, with an opening balance of £20,000, to be met from existing resources within the

Enterprise and Sustainable Regeneration revenue budget for 2022/23. The purpose of the fund being to support organisations in Orkney partner with regions represented through the Nordic Atlantic Cooperation, namely coastal Norway, Faroes, Iceland and Greenland.

- 1.4. Prior to this in 2022 the Council agreed that a delegation visit Vestland in Autumn 2022 to further develop the proposal for a co-operation agreement; and that proposals for a co-operation agreement and action plan be presented to the Council. Within the report it highlighted young people, re-establishment of exchange visits and co-operation on sustainable communities and tourism as being key areas of focus.
- 1.5. Since July 2022 a briefing has been provided for the Corporate Leadership Team providing an update on engagement. Members' briefings have been provided following attendance at the Arctic Circle Assemblies and a members' seminar held to update members on activity.
- 1.6. The support for international engagement has resulted in greater promotion of Orkney with new relationships being formed including across the UK and within Scotland at project and service level, whilst also providing opportunities for political engagement.
- 1.7. Opportunities for the wider community are starting to emerge aligned with areas such as sustainable development, research and innovation, maritime infrastructure/oceans, culture and heritage.
- 1.8. Less than half of the original budget has been utilised during the three year period and the full £20,000 has been allocated to organisations to engage with regions across the North Atlantic on areas of value to the community.
- 1.9. This paper reviews activity over the last three years and sets out recommendations for continued international engagement.

## **2. Recommendations**

- 2.1. It is recommended that members of the Committee:
  - i. Continue to support the development and enhancement of international relationships with a specific focus on engagement across the North Atlantic and Arctic, in line with the Nordic Atlantic Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding and the Twinning agreement with Vestland.

- ii. Approve the International Engagement Plan, attached as Appendix 1 to this report, noting that international engagement would be included within any future updates of the Council's Political Engagement Strategy.
- iii. Approve a budget of up to a total of £50,000 to support international engagement over a period of three years to March 2028 enabling the attendance at the Arctic Circle Assembly in 2025, 2026 and 2027 and attendance at/hosting of international related events.
- iv. Approve a budget of up to a total of £20,000 to March 2027 to enable the continuation and development of the Council's Nordic Atlantic Fund aligned with the Memorandum of Understanding between the Council and the Nordic Atlantic Cooperation, extending the region to include Canada, a strategic partner of the Nordic Atlantic Cooperation.
- v. Delegate powers to the Director of Enterprise and Resources to identify a source for the funding noted above from within existing resources over three financial years to March 2028.

### **3. Current Position**

- 3.1. Following the approval of £100,000 to support international engagement over a period of three years, a total of £46,271.73 has been utilised, less than half of the allocated budget.
- 3.2. This has been allocated towards travel, accommodation and subsistence/hosting of visitors linked to the following:
  - i. 2022: Learning Journey as part of the Twinning Agreement, Vestland.
  - ii. 2022: Presenting at the Arctic Circle Assembly, Iceland.
  - iii. 2023: Presenting at the Arctic Frontiers Conference, Tromsø.
  - iv. 2023: Hosting an event with NORA at UHI Orkney Facilities, Kirkwall.
  - v. 2023: Hosting the Nordic Atlantic Cooperation, MoU signing, Orkney.
  - vi. 2023: Observing at the West Nordic Council, Iceland.
  - vii. 2023: Attending the Scottish Government Arctic Frontiers Abroad, Edinburgh.
  - viii. 2023: Attendance and participation in the Arctic Circle Assembly in Iceland.
  - ix. 2023: Hosting a visit by Vestland, Orkney.
  - x. 2024: Attending and facilitating the launch of the UNESCO North Atlantic Trail Project in conjunction with Faroese Flag Day, Edinburgh.
  - xi. 2024: Attendance and participation in the Arctic Circle Assembly, Iceland.

- 3.3. Other international events have also been attended/held with the support of external funding including:
- i. 2023: Hosting local discussion on Arctic, Stromness.
  - ii. 2023: Hosting online meeting with NORA and representatives from Orkney.
  - iii. 2024: Presenting and facilitating at the Sisimuit I Conference which brought together representatives from UNESCO sites across the North Atlantic seeking to establish ways to respond to increased tourism associated with UNESCO sites, Greenland.
  - iv. 2024: Arctic Session at the Orkney International Science Festival.
  - v. 2025: Accompanying the UK National Commission for UNESCO as part of the Sisimuit II Conference held in Quebec linked to the Islands Growth Deal Orkney World Heritage Site Programme and engagement with partners across the North Atlantic on the UNESCO North Atlantic Trail Project.
- 3.4. It should be noted that this does not represent all the international engagement the Council undertakes as many services/projects have existing connections and will engage positively and proactively with colleagues from other countries to help inform and develop services for example through Marine Services, UHI Orkney and the Culture and Heritage service.
- 3.5. There are also a number of facilitated visits through the Council and other organisations. For example, this year the University of the Arctic held their Board meeting in Orkney and last year the Grand Chief Mandy Gull Masty, the first female Grand Chief of the Cree Nation, visited Orkney.
- 3.6. The Arctic Circle Assembly, which is the largest annual international gathering on the Arctic, held in Iceland every year is a key event in the calendar for countries across the world and specifically those based in the northern hemisphere. Orkney has attended and presented at this over a period of 6/7 years.
- 3.7. It places value on face-to-face meetings and does not provide the opportunity to participate online. In its inception it sought to create an opportunity to share information and exchange ideas similar to the old-fashioned market square.
- 3.8. Across the north and further afield organisations use the Arctic Circle Assembly to arrange annual meetings, share information and debate key issues whether that be at a project level for municipalities, businesses, universities and community organisations through to senior management and politicians.

- 3.9. The Council has prioritised attending the Arctic Circle Assembly to meet with international representatives focussed on challenges and opportunities similar to those in Orkney. It has resulted in opportunities to meet and discuss these issues with representatives from across the UK and Scotland as there is strong representation from UK and Scottish Government and parliamentarians.
- 3.10. Events have been attended by both officials and members helping showcase the breadth of business activity and innovation within Orkney.
- 3.11. On some occasions representatives from organisations have also attended, participating in events or representing their own organisations. Examples include the John Rae Society, Aquatera Ltd, Orkney Research Innovation Campus, Robert Gordon University, Heriot Watt University and University of the Highlands and Islands.
- 3.12. Priority has been given to aligning and integrating opportunities with key strategic projects and services building on Orkney's strong cultural and heritage links as well as its geographical position. An example includes the links with the Islands Growth Deal Projects, specifically the Orkney World Heritage Site programme which is focussed on responding to the challenge of increased tourism in and around the World Heritage Site.
- 3.13. The Orkney World Heritage Site programme is also a vehicle to strengthen links with Vestland. With an agreement to focus on sustainable tourism, links have been established between Destination Orkney, Visit Faroe Islands and Nordhordland UNESCO Biosphere Reserve to learn about the opportunities around Voluntourism and Regenerative Tourism and how these can be applied in Orkney.
- 3.14. International networks are important when seeking external funding and establishing partnerships to realise this funding, as it helps to illustrate the potential impact and value of the funding in terms of its reach and replicability in other areas beyond that of the organisation in direct receipt of the funds.
- 3.15. There are many organisations and communities that are interested in re-establishing links and working with Orkney partners. Orkney has been invited to host a UNESCO focussed event in Orkney and the potential to host an Arctic Circle Forum event is being explored, a smaller event similar to the Arctic Circle Assembly.

- 3.16. Discussions to date indicate a desire from different organisations in Orkney to help showcase what Orkney has to offer and connect them with others where there are links and opportunities, something that is hard for many organisations to do due to the current financial climate.
- 3.17. The Nordic Atlantic Fund was established to help facilitate this engagement. It also sought to maintain connections on the back of previous European funding that is no longer available now that the UK is out of the EU, for example the Northern Periphery and Arctic Fund.
- 3.18. The Council's Nordic Atlantic Fund was established as a pilot and has led to the allocation of funding to four Orkney based organisations who are working with other partners across the region that the Nordic Atlantic Cooperation covers.
- 3.19. The Council's partnership with the Nordic Atlantic Cooperation has also resulted in Orkney's participation in the North Atlantic UNESCO Trail Project, through the Sisimuit Network bringing together partners from across the NORA region, along with Scotland and Canada. This is aligned again with the Orkney World Heritage Site programme.
- 3.20. Looking forward a plan for international engagement is set out in Appendix 1 with the following key themes:
- i. Promote Orkney
  - ii. Create benefits, attract funding and investment
  - iii. Collaborate and communicate
- 3.21. The plan is high level and aims to provide an overarching framework to support and prioritise efforts. However, it should not stop engagement with other international stakeholders where partnerships and opportunities arise.

## **4. Next Steps**

- 4.1. Should the recommendations be approved steps will be taken to:
- i. consider the opportunities for international engagement including internal resources in light of the Council's restructure.
  - ii. explore sources of external funding.
  - iii. progress with commitments including continuation of the Council's commitment to the existing relationships with the Nordic Atlantic Cooperation and Vestland.

- iv. support the development of any future political strategies to maximise the opportunities through international engagement.
- 4.2. The Corporate Leadership Team and Members will be briefed on outcomes and opportunities along with the wider community through events, social media, the local radio and newspaper.

**For Further Information please contact:**

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**Implications of Report**

1. **Financial** – The report is seeking continuation of the Nordic Atlantic Fund of £20,000 to be available over a 2 year period and a further £50,000 over a 3 year period. The Director of Enterprise and Resources has suggested that this can be met from existing revenue budgets within his service.
2. **Legal** – There are no significant legal implications arising from the recommendations contained in this report.
3. **Corporate Governance** - None
4. **Human Resources** – None.
5. **Equalities** - None
6. **Island Communities Impact** – None
7. **Links to Council Plan** – The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the following Council Plan strategic priorities:
  - ☒ Growing our economy.
  - ☒ Strengthening our Communities.
  - ☒ Developing our Infrastructure.
  - ☒ Transforming our Council.
8. **Links to Local Outcomes Improvement Plan** - The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the following Local Outcomes Improvement Plan priorities:
  - ☐ Cost of Living.
  - ☒ Sustainable Development.
  - ☐ Local Equality.
  - ☐ Improving Population Health.
9. **Environmental and Climate Risk** – None
10. **Risk** - None
11. **Procurement** - Procurement processes should be followed as standard practice.

12. **Health and Safety** - Travel risk assessments should be undertaken for any travel associated with Council business as per normal process.
13. **Property and Assets** - None
14. **Information Technology** - None
15. **Cost of Living** - None

#### **List of Background Papers**

None.

#### **Appendix**

Appendix 1 Draft International Engagement Plan



## **Appendix 1    Draft International Engagement Plan**

### **Introduction**

As the last port of call for ships heading north Orkney has a strong heritage of exploration and international trade that is evident through our culture and heritage as seen through our street names, buildings and museums. International engagement is as important today as we look to create new opportunities for people to work, study and live in Orkney.

We have established unique connections and trusted relationships with representatives across the northern hemisphere. There is a desire to work together to find solutions to shared challenges and opportunities that can create benefits for the wider community and other national and international stakeholders.

An international network is key to support funding applications, particularly larger scale growth projects involving and attracting partners/funders across the community including business, academia, third and public sector.

The following are recognised as key priorities:

#### **Promote Orkney**

- Host and encourage Arctic related events to be held in Orkney
- Continue to attend the Arctic Circle Assembly for the next three years 2025-2027 participating in sessions and other key events where appropriate.
- Encourage and support other organisations to represent Orkney internationally

#### **Create benefits, attract funding and investment**

- Collaborate internationally where it can create benefit, has the potential to/will attract funding and investment that will help with the delivery and improvement of projects and services i.e. growth deal/ infrastructure projects, and/or support businesses and the wider community
- Integrate and align opportunities with existing activities and commitments
- Engage with universities to maximise their ability to attract funding and create impact that will benefit Orkney, working with others across the Arctic/engaged in Arctic activities, for example through collaboration, exchanges and research projects in/for Orkney working with the community
- Identify and progress strategic opportunities that could create benefit/are aligned with national policy
- Seek external funding to support international engagement activities where possible

**Collaborate and communicate**

- Prioritise Orkney's Twinning Agreement with Vestland and the MoU with NORA
- Create opportunities for knowledge exchange involving for example the Council(s), universities, businesses and the wider community
- Update officials and members regularly on international engagement
- Work collaboratively with the UK and Scottish Government
- Communicate outcomes