

Getting to grips with a wide portfolio

by Rhoda Grant MSP

The parliament is in recess this month and the pace has changed a bit – I have been out and about in the Highlands and Islands and this has allowed me to spend more time in areas where, due to distance, only brief visits are possible at other times.

I have also been getting up to speed on my new portfolio as a member of the economy, energy and tourism committee, and it is pretty wide – the economy and tourism parts of it are very pertinent to this area.

For years I have campaigned, alongside many others, for improvements to John O'Groats.

Plans which are now in the pipeline will lead to great improvements and the ability to capitalise on tourism not only for John O'Groats but the wider county.

The Wick RBLs Pipe Band are doing their own bit to promote the county having returned from a successful trip to Germany where they have a long-standing friendship with a local band, the Highland Pipes and Drums of Waldsee – good to see that friendships are being built with our European cousins and that Caithness is being promoted abroad.

Another aspect of my new job is energy and again there is a great focus on Caithness.

HIE has invested in the harbour at Scrabster and I believe that there is also potential for development at Wick harbour too.

We need to do more to harness the energy capacity of the Pentland Firth and make sure that we retain as many of the jobs created as possible in the area.

We have always been ground-breakers with regard to energy – Dounreay was a leader in its field in its day. I was interested to read that it continues to lead in innovation; the development of a specially designed retrieval arm which was built to reach deep into the fast reactor and remove breeder metal rods is a prime example.

It is also good news that Aberdeenshire-based engineering firm AMC plans to create about 10 jobs at a new plant at Smerlie. The move is partly funded by a grant from HIE for £76,250.

I recently received a letter from HIE with a breakdown of its investment in business in order to assist the area to replace the jobs that will be lost over the decommissioning of Dounreay. It makes impressive reading.

While it is not helpful that this decommissioning is happening during a time of economic downturn, we need to make sure that there is more investment.

I see wave and tidal energy being part of this but the technology isn't there yet.

It is also clear that we need jobs from a range of sources – it is not good for an area to be totally dependant on one industry.

If a problem occurs or there is a downturn in that industry it leaves the whole area very vulnerable.

THERE are also a couple of interesting initiatives to improve the town centres of Wick and Thurso.

Traffic-calming measure are proving to be controversial in Wick.

Sleeping policemen are never popular, and can be very noisy and as annoying to the local residents as speeding cars.

Re-engineering the road may be more helpful, putting in chicanes and single-lane sections can be an alternative.

However, on a road that is busy during the day not always practical.

It would be good to look at alternatives as well as opening up a dialogue with the nuisance drivers – are they aware of the danger and annoyance they are causing?

It never ceases to amaze me that drivers appear absolutely unaware of the lethal consequences of their driving.

On a less controversial note, it's good to see that the Chamber of Commerce is looking to have two town-centre champions for Thurso and Wick.

It was sad to see that the last joint champion had to leave his post due to ill health so soon after his appointment.

I think we all recognise that the post is very much needed and having one for each town will ensure that the post holders can concentrate their efforts.

These posts have proved valuable elsewhere.

A vibrant town centre improves business and tourism in the area and this can only be a good thing.

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web link : Rhoda Grant MSP : <http://www.rhodagrants.org.uk>