

## The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Community Services Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Thursday, 20 August 2015 at 10.30am.

### Present:

Mr R Balfour	Mrs L MacDonald
Mrs J Barclay	Mr G MacKenzie
Mr A Baxter	Mr K MacLeod
Mr B Clark	Mrs B McAllister
Mrs G Coghill	Mr H Morrison
Mr N Donald	Mr B Murphy
Mr G Farlow	Mr G Phillips
Mr A Graham	Mr A Rhind
Mr R Greene	Mrs F Robertson (substitute)
Mr A Henderson	Mrs J Slater
Mr D Kerr	

### Non-Members also present:

Miss J Campbell	Mrs I McCallum
Mrs M Davidson	Mr D Millar
Mr B Gormley	Mr R Saxon
Mr K Gowans	Dr A Sinclair
Mr B Lobban	Ms M Smith
Mr D MacKay	Mr B Thompson
Mr T MacLennan	

### In attendance:

Mr W Gilfillan, Director of Community Services  
Dr C Clark, Head of Environmental and Regulatory Services  
Mr R Evans, Head of Roads and Transport  
Mr D Goldie, Head of Housing  
Ms C Campbell, Performance and Building Maintenance Manager  
Mr M Mitchell, Finance Manager  
Mr J MacLennan, Senior Service Support Officer  
Mr D Summers, Transport Development Officer  
Mr S Graham, Project Manager, Chief Executive's Office  
Miss J MacLennan, Principal Administrator, Corporate Development Service  
Ms A MacArthur, Committee Administrator, Corporate Development Services  
Mrs R Daly, Committee Administrator, Corporate Development Service

**An asterisk in the margin denotes a recommendation to the Council. All decisions with no marking in the margin are delegated to Committee.**

**Mr A Henderson in the Chair**

**Business**

## 1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr J Rosie and Mr H Wood

## 2. Declarations of Interest Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt

The Committee **NOTED** the following declarations of interest:-

Item 8 – Mr B Murphy (financial)

Item 11 – Ms M Smith (non-financial)

Item 12 – Mr B Murphy (financial)

Item 13 - Mr B Murphy (financial)

Item 15 - Mr N Donald (non-financial)

Item 17 – Mrs L MacDonald and Mr R A C Balfour (non-financial)

In terms of the general dispensation granted by the Standards Commission, Mr G Farlow declared a financial interest in any items which might arise during discussion in regard to Council housing on the grounds of being a Council House tenant.

## 3. Recess Powers Cumhachdan Fosaidh

The Committee **NOTED** that the Recess Powers granted by the Council at its meeting on 25 June 2015 were exercised in relation to committing capital expenditure from the £350k annual programme for Bridge Maintenance as follows:-

Project	Estimated Cost	
	2015/16	2016/17
Allt Graad in Ward 7, Cromarty Firth (Parapet replacement)	£210,000	£5,000
Kerrow Burn in Ward 13, Aird & Loch Ness (Culvert replacement)	£140,000	£3,000

In relation to the parapet replacement on the Allt Graad Bridge, it was expected that a third party claim would be made to the operators of the lorry which had caused the damage with a view to recovering costs.

## 4. Good News Naidheachd Mhath

### Timber Transport Fund Award

The Polloch Road Upgrade in Lochaber had received the following:-

- Scottish Timber Transport Fund Award: £125,000
- Total Project Value: £431,000
- Co-finance: The Highland Council and Forest Enterprise Scotland

This project would upgrade a 2.4km length of the life line public road along the south side of Loch Doilet serving the village of Polloch and maintain a panel bridge.

The Scottish Timber Transport Fund helped address damage to roads incurred as a result of use by heavy timber lorries and a list of projects that had been carried out in the past 18 months and projects planned for the next 18 months was requested.

#### Corran Ferry Skipper

Jess Connolly, Ardgour had gained her skipper licence following months of hard work and training.

#### Nairn War Memorial

Nairn War Memorial and its grounds had come out on top in a contest run by the Royal British Legion to find the best memorial garden in Highland. It would now go forward to the Scottish finals with the result being announced in September.

The Committee **NOTED** the Good News items and **AGREED**, in relation to the Scottish Timber Transport Fund, to provide Members with a list of projects carried out in the previous 18 months and scheduled to take place in the next 18 months.

### **5. Presentation on Shared Apprenticeship Scheme Taisbeanadh mu Sgeama nam Preantasachdan Co-roinnte**

The Performance and Building Maintenance Manager made a short presentation on the Highland Council Apprenticeship Scheme and a new initiative which the Council was supporting: the Shared Apprenticeship Scheme.

Building Maintenance had a long running Apprenticeship Programme with 24 Apprentices posts across all building trades. For the first time, to promote the programme, Social Media had been used and a positive step forward had been the rise in number of female candidates applying. The programme promoted learning and introduced modern ways of working while delivering a quality repairs service to tenants and users of public buildings. It also had the benefit of retaining young people in rural areas and examples were provided of successful apprenticeship experiences.

The Shared Highland Apprenticeship in Construction was a new initiative for the Highlands and a first in Scotland and had been established in recognition of the need to reinvigorate apprentice schemes. It involved collaboration between Highland Council, the local construction industry, CITB Construction Skills, the Scottish Building Federation and a management company. Its aims were to provide opportunities for young people to work in the construction industry, obtain a full modern apprenticeship qualification, support local contractors and tackle the growing shortage of skilled construction workers in the Highlands. The target was for 15 new apprentices this year to work with multiple employers over the training period.

During discussion, comments were made as follows:-

- in recognising this excellent piece of work, the scope to expand the scheme to train heating engineers was supported. This would benefit the Council insofar as it had been necessary, due to the lack of qualified heating engineers in the Highland, to use contractors from outside the area to repair Council house heating systems, leading to delays;

- clarification was sought, and received, that the training provided to apprentices was a combination of college and “hands-on”; and
- North Highland UHI had provided a similar apprentice scheme and this had resulted in a multi-skilled workforce in the local area.

The Committee **NOTED** the presentation.

**6. Revenue Budget – Final Outturn 2014/15 and Monitoring 2015/16  
Buidseat Teachd-a-steach – Fìor Shuidheachadh Deireannach 2014/15  
agus Sgrùdadh 2015/16**

There had been circulated Report No COM/34/15 dated 6 August 2015 by the Director of Community Services inviting Members to approve the revenue budget outturn position for the year ended 31 March 2015 and the revenue monitoring position for the period 1 April 2015 to 30 June 2015.

During discussion, comments were made as follows:-

- referring to the underspend in financial year 2014/15, clarification was sought on an incomplete Roads Innovation Fund project in Dornoch. Assurance was sought that the project would be completed during the next phase of the Innovation Fund;
- car parking revenue had repeatedly failed to meet forecasts with only one third of the expected revenue for last year having been achieved. The anticipated income in the current year was double the revenue achieved in the last two years and it was queried how realistic this forecast might be;
- reductions in car parking charges in Inverness should not be made at the expense of charging in other areas. In this connection, there had also been parking metre failures in Portree and it was suggested that spares for the older model of metre should be held or the supplying company be contracted for repair;
- clarification was sought, and provided, on why car parking and airstrips were combined together in the budget;
- referring to the pressures on the homelessness budget, it was suggested that, as a spend to save measure, empty properties could be made suitable to provide temporary accommodation for homeless individuals;
- there were overspends on housing voids due to the length of time taken to re-let houses and vacant garages and it was queried why vacant garages could not be declared surplus to requirements;
- staff vacancies had started to impact on service delivery and workforce planning should now be given priority. As an example, the underspend on building maintenance, together with a reduction in the use of contractors, had resulted in a reduced service;
- while it was reassuring to hear that there was no recruitment freeze, it was suggested that when recruiting drivers for short to medium term contracts, help should be offered to them to obtain the specialist licences required;
- further explanation was sought on why targets had not been achieved in the Non-Housing Revenue account, particularly in relation to slippage in completing the Scottish Housing Quality Standards (SHQS) projects. Clarification was also sought on the numbers of properties being missed from assessments. There were concerns that reducing this budget by 10% to fund environmental issues would further impact on meeting SHQS targets;

- further explanation was requested on the failure to meet rental targets on account of the number of new builds not achieving the assumption built into the rent model;
- it was a concern that overspends on aspects of the budget impacted on roads maintenance – this was an area of great concern to the public;
- there was a transformational saving applying to marine fuel sales to change the commercial approach to supply and to rationalise arrangements for procurement. It was a concern to read that there had been a reduction in the margin achieved and it was queried whether the target of £410,000 saving would be met;
- the overspend and pressure on the public bus contracts raised concern, particularly since the service between Ardersier and Nairn was being cut. This emphasised the importance of filling staff vacancies in the Integrated Transport Service;
- with reference to verge maintenance outside village boundaries, constituents, tourists and residents in Wester Ross had expressed their appreciation. It was also queried whether “flailing” would be carried out in the autumn and it was important that ditches would not be filled with the residue; and
- confirmation was requested on the expenditure for repairs to the Council Headquarter car park; who had made the decision; whether consideration had been given to media coverage and whether the repair had been blocked by the previous administration as an unsuitable use of money.

The Committee **APPROVED**:-

- i. the revenue budget final outturn position for the year ended 31 March 2015; and
- ii. the report and the attached monitoring statements which showed the revenue position for the period 1 April 2015 to 30 June 2015 and the actions put in place to manage the budget over the remainder of the financial year.

**7. Capital Expenditure – Final Outturn 2014/15 and Monitoring 2015/16  
Caiteachas Calpa – Fìor Shuidheachadh Deireannach 2014/15 agus Sgrùdadh 2015/16**

There had been circulated Report No COM/35/15 dated 7 August 2015 by the Director of Community Services inviting Members to approve the capital expenditure outturn position for the year ended 31 March 2015 and the monitoring position for the period 1 April 2015 to 30 June 2015.

During discussion, Members made the following comments:-

- clarification was sought, and received, as to the issues relating to the provision of single bedroom properties;
- the Council were sometimes tied into long lease arrangements with developers and, while this provided housing in the short term, this was only a temporary solution. A call was made for Central Government finance to properly address the matter, based on need;
- clarification was sought if the delay surrounding the extension to Portree burial ground was a result of issues around extending the speed limit on the trunk road. Reassurance was sought that the work to the burial ground would take place in 2015, bearing in mind how quickly the remaining lairs would be used;

- in relation to heating upgrades in Council houses, Members asked that work take place in the summer months and not during the winter;
- confirmation was sought, and received that the Council was still on target to build 688 new Council houses by 2017;
- it was hoped that the 13 houses proposed for Belhaven, Fort William could be used for the elderly given facilities available in close proximity. However, if the Housing policy did not allow for such prioritisation, the feasibility of allocating some houses to police personnel was requested, especially as lack of housing was cited as an issue in recruiting to the police service locally;
- carrying on from the above and the shortage of suitable housing for the elderly and disabled in Lochaber, the problem had been further exacerbated when pellet boilers had been installed into the housing stock. This rendered such properties unsuitable for those unable to lift the bags of pellets;
- sometimes properties could be adapted for those with mobility issues by installing lifts to developments;
- difficulties surrounding the re-letting of houses was sometimes as a result of a lack of maintenance;
- disappointment was expressed that the SHQS project was nearly £13 million underspent. Reasons had been provided to Members at Ward Business Meetings for this and which had raised questions about procurement management. Members asked for reassurances that this slippage would be caught up within the next year, that a report be prepared detailing how this had arisen and that regular progress reports be submitted to future Community Services Committees to track the delivery of the project; and
- clarification was sought as to why there was a significant underspend in the South Area for housing adaptations whilst there was an overspend in the North.

The Committee:-

- APPROVED** the capital expenditure outturn position for the year ended 31 March 2015;
- APPROVED** the capital expenditure monitoring position for the period 1 April 2015 to 30 June 2015; and
- AGREED** that a progress report on the Council's delivery of SHQS be provided at the Committee's next meeting on 5 November 2015.

**8. Community Services Performance Report – 1 April 2015 to 30 June 2015  
Aithisg Coileanaidh nan Seirbheisean Coimhearsnachd - 1 Giblean 2015  
gu 30 An t-Òg mhios 2015**

**Mr B Murphy declared a financial interest in this item on the grounds of being the provider of homeless accommodation and left the room.**

There had been circulated Report No COM/36/15 dated 6 August 2015 by the Director of Community Services providing information on how Community Services performed in relation to performance indicators during the first quarter of 2015/16.

During discussion, the following points were made by Members:-

- the possibility of breaking down the information contained in the tables to area level should be investigated;
- disappointment was expressed that the number of Grounds Maintenance inspections and breached standards had increased at the beginning of 2015 and assurance were sought that appropriate action had been taken to resolve this. It was suggested that the Service responded to complaints about grounds maintenance rather than managing its delivery and a move towards more proactive supervision was sought;
- reference was made to a recent issue which had been highlighted relating to a pothole in Ullapool and it was questioned whether the aim had been to minimise bad publicity. Furthermore, it was questioned why two teams had dealt with the issue, one addressing the graffiti and the other the pothole itself, while one team should have been sufficient;
- 378 pothole instructions had been completed outwith response times and, to help analyse this statistic, information was sought as to how much the targets had been missed;
- the successful trial of the jet-patcher to fill potholes was highlighted but the main issue was the cost of tarmac to fill the holes. However, to maximise use of the new machinery it was important to re-examine resource allocation to allow work to continue;
- whilst welcoming the progress in gully cleaning, there were still a lot of gullies that had not been cleared. The reduction in street cleaning had also increased the amount of the leaf litter going into the gullies;
- surprise was expressed that only one Enforcement notice for dog fouling had been issued and the reasons for this were explained. In addition, it was pointed out that many instances of dog fouling took place in the evening/early morning when dog wardens were not working;
- It was recognised that the evidence required to bring a prosecution through a Procurator Fiscal, as opposed to Fixed Penalty Notices, was somewhat onerous and it was suggested that the Government be lobbied with a view to changing this;
- in relation to medical adaptations, the reason why the figure had doubled in the first quarter was sought;
- there needed to be an increased focus on the re-letting of void properties. Reference too was made to “hard to let” areas but, given the pressure on Council housing, it could be argued that there were now no such areas. However, it was acknowledged that the Caithness figures, where relets took longer than elsewhere, were skewing the results and it was therefore suggested that a separate table be provided taking out the long-term void factors to illustrate the average re-let time instead;
- the average re-let time for Albyn Housing was 19.5 days whilst the Council target was 35 days. To allow a proper comparison to be made, comparative trends from elsewhere would be helpful;
- concern was expressed that all universal credit claimants had to wait 5 weeks before they received their first Universal Credit payment, during which time arrears would accrue. This would cause significant difficulties to many tenants and it was important to ensure people did not get further into debt;
- the average time to complete emergency repairs in Council houses had improved but it was hoped performance could be equalised across Highland;
- disappointment was expressed that the number of Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) cases resolved was now flagged as red. The effect of ASB on other tenants was significant and clarification was therefore sought as to how progress could be made;

- the improvements which had been made in relation to recycling were welcomed. However, it was requested that, where recycling bins were marked as contaminated, bins still be removed when refuse was collected. It was explained though, that this would result in the Council incurring penalties;
- with landfill sites reaching capacity, incineration should be considered as an option; and
- contract supervision was proving to be an issue with public conveniences.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the information on Community Services performance from 1 April to 30 June 2015; and
- AGREED** to investigate the possibility of breaking down the data provided in the charts to Area level.

#### **9. Community Services Workforce Planning 2015-2018 Dealbhadh Sgioba-obrach nan Seirbheisean Coimhearsnachd 2015-2018**

There had been circulated Report No COM/37/15 dated 30 July 2015 by the Director of Community Services setting out a summary of the Community Services Workforce Plan 2015-2018.

The Committee **NOTED** the Community Services Workforce Plan for 2015-2018.

#### **10. Communications Survey Outcomes Toraidhean an t-Suirbhuidh Chonaltraidh**

There had been circulated Report No COM/38/15 dated 6 August 2015 by the Director of Community Services informing Members that, as part of a proactive change management process for the integration of the Transport, Environmental and Community Service and Housing and Property Service (in 2014), the Community Services Senior Management Team developed a Staff Communication and Consultation Plan. As part of that plan the Service undertook a survey to help improve two-way communications throughout the Service. The report provided an analysis of the results of the survey which would be used as part of continued Service development along with the Service's Workforce Action Plan and the action plan developed to address results of the corporate Employee Survey. This would help to ensure that Community Services had a workforce that felt able to engage with management for the betterment of the new service.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- the work of the Service to engage with staff and provide for effective communication and consultation with staff; and
- that a report would be presented to the November Community Services Committee on the results of the Corporate Employee Survey that would include an Action Plan to address the key issues from the Employee Survey and the Service's own internal communications survey.

#### **11. Housing Revenue Account Capital Plan 2016-2021 Plana Calpa Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais 2016-2021**

**Declaration of Interest**



**Ms M Smith declared a non-financial interest in this item on the grounds of being a Board Member and Company Secretary of Albyn Housing Association but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that her interest did not preclude her from taking part in the discussion.**

There had been circulated Report No COM/39/15 dated 16 July 2015 by the Director of Community Services outlining the resources required to undertake capital investment to the Council's housing stock and recommending capital investment priorities for the next 5 years. It also commented on the impact of capital investment on future Housing Revenue Account (HRA) revenue estimates and on future Council house rents.

During discussion, Members commented:-

- the capital investment priorities were welcomed but environmental improvements accounted only for 5% rather than 10% of the annual programme as quoted in Administration's Highland First programme. Priority should be given to completing SQHS. There was a budget in each Area for environmental improvements in housing estates but there had been no coordination of effort. A more integrated approach to sourcing workforce for this work would be welcome and there should be flexibility to send teams out on foot to reach areas inaccessible to machines;
- attention was being directed to tidying gardens and improving the overall appearance of some estates in Inverness and it was hoped this would lead to a higher uptake and increased respect for the area. However, the environment around some estates in other areas was poor and there still appeared to be a demarcation between budgets which should have been eradicated with the integrated service. A request was made for the Director to visit Mansfield Estate in Tain to investigate the conditions;
- the priority given to heating and replacement heating systems was welcomed and external funding options should be pursued for renewable heating. In particular, there could be many benefits from pursuing a waste to heat scheme, particularly for areas where mains gas was not available;
- mistakes had previously been made regarding the types of heating systems installed which had left some tenants in fuel poverty. It was essential to investigate new heating systems carefully and be certain that they would be economical for tenants;
- windows and doors over 30 years old were now needing to be replaced but this could have been mitigated if they had been maintained;
- £1m had been set aside for adaptations and it was disappointing that solutions could not be found in some cases. In particular, associated administration costs were high and impacted on the budget even when applications for adaptations were refused; and
- with reference to external wall insulation, there had been no confirmation whether this was being carried out. Clarity of communication about the programme of work for the Capital Programme with Members and tenants was essential for the rest of the financial year.

The Committee agreed to:-

- i. **APPROVED** the HRA Capital Plan 2016-2021 as the basis for future programme planning;

- ii. **AGREED** that consultation take place with Ward Members on local HRA Capital Programme projects for 2016/17 and that the final programme for 2016/17 be reported to Committee in November; and
- iii. **AGREED** that Members and local Housing Teams be kept informed of what and when capital works were taking place in their local Area.

**The Committee adjourned for lunch at 1.20pm and resumed at 2pm.**

## **12. Update on Homeless Initiatives Fios as Ur mu Iomairtean Dìth Dachaigh**

**Mr B Murphy declared a financial interest in this item on the grounds of being the provider of homeless accommodation and left the room.**

There had been circulated Report No COM/40/15 dated 16 July 2015 by the Director of Community Services providing an update on current initiatives which aimed to improve the lives of homeless people in Highland. The report also highlighted the impacts of Welfare Reform on the way the Council currently provided temporary housing for homeless people and made recommendations on changing the model of provision to ensure it was both appropriate and affordable for homeless people in the future.

During discussion, Members gave consideration to the following:-

- work on homelessness and housing support initiatives was welcomed but the statistics were unclear on the percentage of individuals who presented repeatedly within the homeless system and a multi-agency approach would be helpful to enable these individuals to progress successfully through the system. Support packages to assist people with multiple and complex needs were costly and, as some people were not making progress through the system, it was queried whether this was good value;
- there might be benefit in exploring innovative solutions to address homelessness e.g. splitting larger properties into smaller units, shared tenancy units or providing modular accommodation;
- support services for homeless clients were delivered through 7 independent providers. Information was provided about CCAST Highland, based in Tain, who, although not formally classified as an independent provider, had become involved in the Homeless Housing Support Services Review. It was asked whether this organisation would be involved in the trial of a new housing support service along with current providers and the procurement process in 2016. In addition, CCAST Highland was a voluntary organisation and it was suggested that they also might receive funding to cover their costs. Confirmation was also sought as to whether the Council would be going back out to Tender and when this might take place; and
- it was not just single people that presented as homeless, there were also a number of families in that position. Further information was sought on what was being done to provide assistance to families.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the progress of the Temporary Accommodation Re-provisioning Project;
- ii. **AGREED** to the trial of a new housing support service specification with the Council's current providers with a view to beginning a formal procurement process in early 2016;

- iii. **NOTED** the impacts of welfare reform on temporary accommodation; and
- iv. **APPROVED** a review of current provision aimed at:-
  - reducing the reliance on leased properties and identifying more HRA properties for use as temporary accommodation;
  - reviewing the future requirement for bed and breakfast type rooms to inform future procurement beyond 2016; and
  - considering how the Council provides accommodation for young people with more complex need including greater use of “exempt” accommodation.

### **13. Homelessness Appeals Dìth Dachaigh Pròiseas Ath-thagraidhean**

**Mr B Murphy declared a financial interest in this item on the grounds of being the provider of homeless accommodation and left the room.**

There had been circulated Report No COM/41/15 dated 14 July 2015 by the Director of Community Services recommending changes to the current appeals process in relation to homelessness decisions, aimed at streamlining the process and making it more consistent with the Council’s Complaints Process.

During discussion, the following points were made by Members:-

- the role of Elected Members in the Homelessness Appeals process was invaluable and it was important to retain their involvement;
- there was a need for a sufficiently sized pool of Councillors dealing with Homelessness Appeals to provide flexibility and assure availability. Also, a larger pool could accommodate Members’ preferences to attend Appeals either within or outwith their own wards; and
- it was important to retain involvement of Elected Members in the Appeal process but it was also important that Appeals should not be delayed. On that basis, the Leader of the Council offered to discuss this further with Officers and Members with experience in this field to ensure that Members could be involved when appropriate and possible.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** changes to the current homelessness appeals process that would involve:-
  - a two stage appeals process consistent with the Council’s complaints process;
  - increasing the scope of the appeals process to consider whether offers of housing made to homeless households are reasonable; and
  - when Appeals were heard by officers, a Children’s Services Manager was involved in cases where households included children.
- ii. **DEFERED** determination of Member involvement in Appeals to consider how this could best be accommodated.

### **14. Waste Management – National Initiatives Rianachd Sgudail – Iomairtean Nàiseanta**

There had been circulated Report No COM/42/15 dated 24 July 2015 by the Director of Community Services summarising two national initiatives: Waste Brokerage Service and the outputs from the Zero Waste Taskforce which was jointly led by Richard Lochhead, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Food and

the Environment and Councillor Stephen Hagan, CoSLA Spokesperson for Development, Economy and Sustainability. Both initiatives were being worked on at the present time and both might influence Members' view on how and when a strategy for Highland proceeded.

During discussion, Members made the following comments:-

- there appeared uncertainty regarding provisions to quit the Waste Brokerage Service arrangement and, although it had been running for some time, its benefits were still not evident, with little information available from other Councils or CoSLA;
- it was still unclear whether the Waste Brokerage Service included collection of waste and whether recycling centres would continue to be provided by the public or private sector;
- referring to the Zero Waste Plan, there appeared to be some inconsistency between Government targets being set (missed for 2013 and likely to be missed also in 2020) and an associated voluntary Charter;
- the Waste Management Strategy, which included energy from waste, had not come to fruition given changes in legislation and targets. While there was a limit to the materials that could be recycled, this now presented an opportunity to bring forward properly modelled and costed proposals for an energy from waste scheme; and
- it was unclear why the report had been submitted to Committee at this stage since there were no immediate implications for the Council. CoSLA would not be considering the Waste Brokerage Service until 28 August and its impact on the revenue budget and on service delivery was not yet known.

The Committee **NOTED** the contents of the report.

## **15. Ground Maintenance Service Delivery Strategy Ro-innleachd Lìbhrigidh Seirbheis Cumail Suas nan Raointean**

### **Declaration of Interest**

**Mr N Donald declared a non-financial interest in this item on the grounds of his son being an employee of a grass cutting contractor used by the Council but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that his interest did not preclude him from taking part in the discussion.**

There had been circulated Report No COM/43/15 dated 5 August 2015 by the Director of Community Services presenting an assessment of the option for the delivery, supervision and performance monitoring of grass cutting. The Committee was asked to approve the strategy for the delivery of grass cutting activities from March 2017.

Prior to discussion, the Chairman explained that a cross-party meeting was to take place in the near future relating to verge cutting and any concerns that Members might have in that regard could be taken on board at that time. In relation to the strategy for delivering ground maintenance, Members made the following comments:-

- assurances were sought that major cemeteries would continue to be maintained in-house and not contracted out to contractors;

- the review of standards at Ward Business meetings was scheduled to take place between August 2015 and March 2016 but the review of specifications was to be considered by the Community Services Committee at its next meeting in November. Confirmation was sought that consultation at Ward level would still take place;
- monitoring of service delivery was predominately complaint based, relying on feedback from the public, but this was inadequate and greater supervision should be carried out by the Council itself;
- concern was expressed that the aim of amending specifications for grass cutting was to find savings. However, the Council had an obligation to maintain its land to a reasonable standard;
- access to more mechanical brushes would make a huge impact;
- full use should be made of Community Wardens and Estate Operatives to ensure grass cutters were not hindered by shrub and tree growth encroaching onto public amenity areas. In addition, they could also ensure areas of ground were kept clear from fly-tipping;
- in the past, problems had been compounded where pockets of land were owned by different services. Issues had also arisen surrounding what types of foliage could be cut and it was important that these historic practises were addressed;
- consideration might be needed to using grass cutters for a longer period of time given that the growing season was now significantly greater; and
- the possibility of prohibiting price increases within the timeframe of contracts should be investigated.

The Committee **AGREED** to:-

- i. complete the on-going review of existing services to reduce costs where practicable during 2015/16 in advance of retender by agreement at Ward Business Meetings; and
- ii. progress the retender for grass cutting services in accordance with the timescale set out in the report with commencement in March 2017.

## **16. Review of Winter Service Ath-sgrùdadh air Seirbheis Geamhraidh**

There had been circulated Report No COM/44/15 dated 5 August 2015 by the Director of Community Services presenting the results of the benchmarking exercise to establish how Highland Council's winter service compared with other rural authorities within Scotland.

During discussion, Members made the following comments:-

- the report was more of a benchmark exercise than a review as there were no alterations proposed. However, it was suggested that consideration needed to be given to starting gritting earlier, particularly in rural areas, where people had to leave home earlier to get to work. This had been requested two years ago and had still not been addressed;
- concern was expressed that some primary footways were not treated within the timescale set out in the Council's policy and, while a delay of 48-72 hours could be understood, longer delays were unacceptable. A review of such circumstances should form part of the review;
- disappointment was expressed that Highland Council was the only Council not to have some sort of arrangement in place to call upon farmers to assist with snow clearing and a review would have identified why this was

the case. It was suggested that farmers would welcome the opportunity to assist and that efforts be made to proactively engage with them in time for this coming winter;

- information comparing how much money Highland Council spent in relation to other local authorities on winter maintenance service would be beneficial and would allow Members to gauge if the Service was properly resourced;
- it was suggested that the Council was ill-prepared for a bad winter and within some urban area there were some pavements which were never gritted due to a lack of resources. While recognising that it was labour intensive, a plea was made to how gritting of such pavements could be improved and which could include measures such as increasing the number of salt bins;
- the budget reduction of £500K had undoubtedly had an impact and it was necessary to look at that in detail. Meantime, it was important to do the best possible within existing resources;
- if a review was carried out, it was important that Members and Community Councils were involved;
- although Highland Council had 48 mini-tractors tasked with treating the primary footway network, information was sought as to how many were based in each area. It was also important that they were all fully serviced and ready for winter; and
- a section in the Review should consider winter tyres being used on school busses etc.

**At this point the Committee adjourned at 3.30 pm and resumed again at 3.35 pm.**

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the findings of the benchmarking exercise; and **AGREED** a full review of the Council's Winter Maintenance Policy, including starting some routes at 5 am and an assessment of how the current route policy was implemented, be brought to a future Committee meeting.

## **17. Transport Programme Prògram Còmhdhalach**

**Ms L MacDonald and Mr R A C Balfour declared non-financial interests in relation to this item on the grounds of being Directors of Local Minibus Associations but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that their interests did not preclude their involvement in the discussion.**

There had been circulated Report No COM/45/15 dated 20 August 2015 by the Director of Community Services informing Members that as part of the Council's Transport Programme, mainstream school transport and public bus service contracts had been retendered in Sutherland. The report presented the outcomes of the retendering process and outlined the intended process for conducting the tendering of such services across the rest of Highland; the intended process for determining future community transport grants; and the current position with regards to the Lochaber action learning project's principal initiative, the Lochaber Transport Advice and Bookings Service.

During discussion, comments were made as follows:-

- appreciation was expressed to officers for their hard work and the positive result in Sutherland of the retendering of the contracts;
- arising from an Audit report in 2011, which had identified a lack of joined up thinking in terms of transport for health and social care services, an integrated transport scheme had been set up in Lochaber. The scheme had worked well and support was sought for funding agencies to commit to roll this out Highland-wide;
- the Lochaber Area Committee was to consider the consultation process for the retendering of bus service contracts and Members had a responsibility to highlight issues such as ensuring there would be a service provided to the new Council offices;
- information was sought, and received, as to the effect on the ground of the variance on the Tain Royal Academy school transport routes; and
- confirmation that the Integrated Transport Team would soon be fully staffed was welcomed given the information and support voluntary community transport groups would need to see them through this process. Concern was expressed however that the 1 April 2016 target for groups to prepare themselves for changes to their grant circumstances would be insufficient.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the interim Sutherland retendering process out-turns;
- APPROVED** the outline timetable and key steps for the rest of Highland school and public transport tender process;
- AGREED** that local transport organisations were kept informed of proposed changes;
- APPROVED** the approach being proposed for the community transport grants process; and
- NOTED** the efforts being made to secure a future for the transport hub concept being trialled presently in Lochaber.

## **18. Electric Vehicle Charging Cosgais Charbadan Dealain**

There had been circulated Report No COM/46/15 dated 6 August 2015 by the Director of Community Services providing an update on progress within Highland. Proposals for recovering costs from drivers would be forthcoming from Transport Scotland in anticipation of starting to collect income in 2016.

During discussion, the importance of consulting with Members in relation to the siting of charging points was emphasised. Furthermore, with the range of a charge lasting approximately 100 miles it was recognised that many more charging points were required and specific information was sought as to proposed points between Fort William and Glasgow and in central Sutherland.

The Committee **NOTED** the progress made and that Transport Scotland was expected to make proposals for recovery of electricity costs by Councils starting next year.

## **19. Roads Collaboration Programme - Governance First Prògram Co-obrachaidh Rathaidean – Riaghladh an Toiseach**

There had been circulated Report No COM/47/15 dated 5 August 2015 by the Director of Community Services presenting the background to the "Governance

First" approach to collaborating and sharing services between Councils. The report also sought the nomination of two Councillors to work on the short life Northern Roads Collaboration Forum.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the development of the North area Governance First group and the methodical approach undertaken to develop the case for creating a new joint committee governance body of Elected Members to oversee the development of collaborative activity within the roads service;
- ii. **NOTED** that this collaboration might provide a framework for future collaborative activity across the whole range of Council functions; and
- iii. **AGREED** to appoint Mr A Henderson and Mr R Green to work on the short life Northern Roads Collaboration Forum.

## **20. War Memorials Improvement Programme Prògram Leasachaidh nan Carraighean-cuimhne Cogaidh**

There had been circulated Report No COM/48/15 dated 6 August 2015 by the Director of Community Services providing an update on progress with the War Memorials Improvement Programme.

During discussion, Members welcomed the support Community Services had given to communities in refurbishing war memorials, much of which had gone unrecognised. It was suggested that there were community groups with financial reserves and the Council could look at how they could be encouraged to take over the responsibility of local war memorials and the ground around them.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. progress on the war memorial restoration programme;
- ii. that a programme for the remaining war memorials would be shared with Members in November; and
- iii. that a publicity campaign programme would also be shared with Members in September.

## **21. Environmental Health Operational Plan Review 2014/15 Ath-sgrùdadh Plana Obrach Slàinte Àrainneachd 2014/15**

There had been circulated Report No COM/49/15 dated 11 August 2015 by the Director of Community Services inviting Members to approve the review of the Environmental Health Team Plan for 2014/15.

During discussion, comments were made as follows:-

- appreciation was expressed to Environmental Health staff for their extremely helpful and courteous approach;
- Environmental Health Service did not always get the prominence that it should. The Service needed to be safeguarded and the numbers of Environmental Health Officers could not be cut any further; and
- the difficulties in the past in recruiting Environmental Health officers were acknowledged and it was suggested that there was merit in UHI looking at providing a training course.



The Committee **APPROVED** the review of the Environmental Health Team Plan for 2014/15 as detailed in Appendix 1 of the report.

**22. Cemetery Extension Update**  
**Cunntas às Ùr mu Leudachadh Chladhan**

There had been circulated Report No COM/50/15 dated 5 August 2015 by the Director of Community Services providing an update on the need for extension of cemeteries along with a progress report on extensions prioritised by the former Transport, Environmental and Community Services Committee.

Appreciation was expressed that Dores Cemetery had been included in the list but it was hoped a response would be received timeously from SEPA in relation to ground testing.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the programme of extension work presented; and
- ii. **AGREED** that pre-selling of lairs would not be allowed in burial grounds with less than 5 years capacity.

**23. Appointments to Sub-Committees, Working Groups etc**  
**Cur an Dreuchd gu Fo-Chomataidhean, Buidhnean-obrach is eile**

The Committee **APPROVED** revised Memberships as follows:-

- Harbours Management Board

Mrs L MacDonald	Mr K MacLeod
Mr H Fraser	Mr H Morrison
Mr R Greene	Mr B Murphy
Mr A Henderson	Mr G Phillips
Mr G MacKenzie	Dr A Sinclair

- Education Transport Entitlement Review Sub-Committee

Mr A Christie  
Mr A Henderson  
Mrs E McAllister  
Mr G Farlow  
Mr J Rosie

**24. Exclusion of The Public**  
**Às-dùnadh a' Phobail**

The Committee **RESOLVED** that, under Section 50A(4) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, the public be excluded from the meeting during discussion of the following item on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 7A of the Act.

**25. Roads and Transport Structure**  
**Structar Rathaidean agus Còmhdhalach**

There had been circulated to Members only Report No COM/51/15 dated 4 August 2015 by the Director of Community Services seeking approval for an

adjustment to the Roads and Transport management structure in the Fleet and Workshop team.

The Committee **AGREED** the recommendations as detailed in the report.

The meeting ended at 4.10 pm.