

# Local Voices | Highland Choices Guthan Ionadail | Roghainnean Gàidhealach



The Highland Council Programme  
Prògram Chomhairle na Gàidhealtachd

2017 - 2022

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# 1 Introduction – A listening council

'Local Voices Highland Choices' is a new approach to delivering a Programme for the Highlands. It sets out our high level goals and priorities but also provides the opportunity for all councillors, local committees and communities to translate these into reality at a local level. For the first time, enabling real choices to be made about the way in which council resources are allocated on an area by area basis. We are only just embarking on our journey to embed local decision making at the heart of what the council does, and so this will be an evolving process. But we will be led by the guiding principle that to be an effective council, we need to be a listening council, and the planning and delivery of services across Highland must be done in a collaborative and inclusive way.

We also need to be realistic about what can be achieved. The Programme needs to be flexible and responsive in the context of ongoing and deepening Scottish Government cuts to council budgets and uncertainty around the impact of Brexit. We do not know what our financial settlement is going to be for the coming year, yet alone for the next five. Consequently, while the high level programme has a 5 year planning horizon, we need to recognise that it may only be possible to develop detailed plans for the next 1-2 years with any degree of certainty. However, what is clear is that we will be most effective working collaboratively across the chamber, with our partners and communities in the best interests of all our citizens.

As a consequence, we will be going out to our local committees over the coming months to begin the process of developing local plans.

Margaret Davidson  
Independent Group Leader

Alasdair Christie  
Liberal Democrat Group Leader

Jimmy Gray  
Labour Group Leader

## 2 Strategic goals

Put our communities at the heart of the design and delivery of services at a local level

Work collaboratively to drive economic growth and ensure our infrastructure meets the needs of expanding businesses and population

Support children to learn and thrive by delivering a whole system approach to education and integrated children's services

Protect the vulnerable in our communities, promote fairness and welcome diversity

Be innovative and imaginative in our approach to budget constraints

Make Highland a stronger and more resilient region

Protect and enhance Highland's influence and reputation nationally and internationally

# 3 Priority themes

The council will deliver its strategic goals by focusing on a number of high level priority themes.

1. A place to live
2. A place to learn
3. A place to thrive
4. A welcoming place
5. A redesigned council

We will develop and agree the outcomes and measures to deliver the priority themes and from these establish a Corporate Plan to monitor delivery.

## 3.1 A place to live

The Council's first priority is to the people of the Highlands: the people who live and work here, those who grow up here, have settled here and grow old here.



We want to make the Highlands an even better place to live. For that to happen we need attractive and sustainable communities. Working with others we need to attract more people to make the Highlands their home and encourage our younger residents to stay here.

Highland has some of the cleanest air, purest water and most renowned unspoiled natural environments in the world and we must ensure these precious commodities are protected and enhanced for future generations.

### **Key priorities**

1. Provide homes across the Highlands so that both young and old have a secure roof over their head. We need affordable homes for younger generations; housing in areas where attracting professionals is a challenge; and homes where the elderly and vulnerable can be supported to live independently.
2. The Council and its partners will aim to build 500 new affordable homes every year for the next 5 years
3. Improve the quality and condition of the housing stock and minimise fuel poverty.
4. Identify and recognise the unique challenges of living in rural and remote areas of the Highlands and ensure council policies and the provision of services have local people in mind. Work with the Scottish Government to do the same.
5. Encourage growth in all our urban centres across the Highlands, whilst balancing and responding to the demands this will have on local infrastructure and services.
6. Work with communities and partners to mitigate against and adapt to climate change whilst raising awareness around sustaining and improving our natural, built and cultural environment.

## 3.2 A place to learn

Schools are at the centre of the lives of our citizens and local communities and the democratic control of schools is at the heart of local government. We will continue to fight to ensure it remains so.

We are committed to ensuring **all** children reach their full potential. This includes our determination to close the attainment gap for those from more disadvantaged communities and meeting the needs of all children including those with additional support needs.



Everyone should be given the opportunity to develop their knowledge, skills and experience, regardless of age or background.

### **Key priorities**

1. Strive to achieve the highest standards in all our schools, so every young person has the opportunity and skills to succeed by supporting an accessible and broad curriculum for all.
2. Promote the wider use of technology and blended teaching approaches to support the way our children learn.
3. Develop new provision for early years, continue the refurbishment of Primary Schools and complete the upgrading of Secondary Schools, while addressing the need for additional capacity.
4. Protect the delivery of education in our schools by implementing an ambitious school's management programme to support our Head Teachers and staff, securing long-term sustainability, especially in our rural communities.
5. Continue to promote and support Gaelic Medium Education.
6. Deliver an ambitious Modern Apprenticeship scheme and work with partners to expand and support further and higher education to grow and retain our own skilled workforce in Highland; making it an exceptional place to come and study, and to remain to work.

## 3.3 A place to thrive

We will work for a Highland that includes and supports all children and adults to lead fulfilled and productive lives, free from poverty and discrimination. No matter where they live or whatever their needs, all of our citizens should always know what support is available, where they can find help, and whether that help is right for them.



We recognise that economic growth is critical to enabling our communities not just to survive, but to thrive. We will do all we can to strengthen our infrastructure; support the growth of new and existing businesses; and the creation of new jobs

### **Key priorities**

1. Seek new, faster, and better ways to ensure superfast broadband and digital services are provided to all communities across Highland.
2. Build on the work of the City Region Deal to help businesses to fully cultivate commercial opportunities including the development of international markets.
3. Promote and support all Highland business from traditional sectors like agriculture, forestry and fisheries to newer technology-driven businesses.
4. Continue to attract and provide investment in our transport infrastructure.
5. Work with Government, HITRANS and others to deliver improvements to our key transport links and make the case for additional resources to deliver a much needed infrastructure investment programme throughout the Highlands.
6. Work with partners to ensure fewer people experience transport as a barrier to accessing opportunities, including working with communities on community transport schemes.
7. Work with NHS Highland and others to grow and invest in community based services for adults across Highland.
8. Support children to be protected, healthy, safe and responsible by delivering a whole system approach to integrated children's services.
9. All people should live a life free from poverty and discrimination and benefit from good mental health and wellbeing. We will work with partners to achieve this.



## 3.4 A welcoming place

The Highlands is a safe and friendly place. Our natural environment is famous for its beauty as well as for supporting a wide range of sports and leisure activities. We have an increasingly diverse population and we welcome people of all faiths, nationalities and backgrounds who wish to live, work or visit here. We also welcome people who wish to create businesses and those that can work in key sectors where we have skill shortages.

### **Key priorities**

1. Work with businesses and partners to actively promote the Highlands as a desirable and welcoming place to invest and create businesses.
2. Develop strategies to attract and retain young people to live and work in the Highlands and to encourage young people to return after studying away.
3. Tourism continues to be of massive importance to our economy and we will work with business and partners to promote and develop the Highlands as a world class tourist destination.
4. Continue to seek additional resources from the Scottish and UK Governments to support our infrastructure to the benefit of tourists and locals alike. This will allow us to work with local communities to reap the benefits of the continued increase in visitor numbers and reduce pressure on local resources.
5. Work with partners to ensure people in Highland benefit from stronger, safer and more resilient communities.
6. Continue to introduce 20mph speed limits and work with partners to improve road safety on all our roads.



## 3.5 A redesigned council

The council will be more open-minded to new ways of delivering services; more commercially-minded, raising income to sustain services and jobs across the region; and more community-minded by listening locally. The council will also support community bodies to do more and target support to particular people and places in most need.

Staff are central to identifying and making the changes needed and they will be empowered to do this.



### **Key priorities**

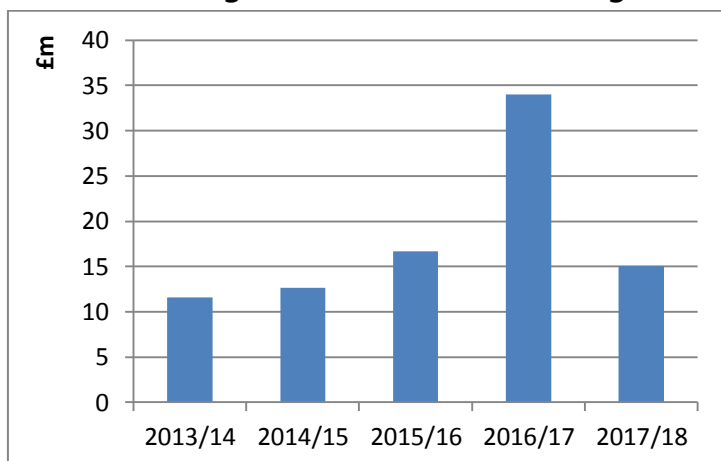
1. Accelerate work to bring decision-making to local areas.
2. Work with partners to ensure people in Highland will be more involved in decisions that affect their lives.
3. Develop new ways to deliver services that are affordable, efficient and local.
4. Consider the key recommendations from the Commission on Highland Democracy, which seek to reinvigorate local democracy.
5. Adopt a commercially minded approach to generate income to support council services and jobs across the region.
6. Communities across the Highlands are increasingly ambitious to control more assets and land with increasing interest in local service delivery. The council will work with other public agencies to simplify our processes and work with our communities to innovate and spread good practise.
7. Align strategic and financial priorities with our partners.

## 4 Key risks and challenges

The council faces a number of external risks and challenges, including:

### **Financial – sustained and deepening cuts to our funding**

In recent years the public sector across the UK and Scotland has faced sustained budget reductions with local government being particularly



Highland Council budget savings 2013-2018

hard hit. We expect this to continue over the coming years. Our plans need to be flexible to respond to this situation and we must demonstrate sound financial management in the face of such uncertainty.

### **Centralisation – continued dilution of local accountability**

The council will resist the continued diversion of services and jobs away from Highland through the regionalisation and centralisation of vital functions. Our greatest immediate challenge is the Government's intention to remove local control of education.

The Highland Council has a strong track record in delivering high quality education to children and young people of all abilities and backgrounds. We are justly proud of all who work in Highland's children's services to ensure our young people can achieve their potential and enjoy happy and fulfilled lives. We will make the case in the strongest possible terms for the council to continue to lead on the delivery of education in Highland as the only body that can deliver truly integrated services to children - not just focused on what happens in school but on the whole child, their family and the community in which they live, learn and thrive.

### **Brexit – the socio/political and economic effects**

Uncertainty around future funding, the supply of skilled and unskilled labour, interest rates and exchange rates will undoubtedly impact on the UK and Scottish politics, economy and society. This underscores the need for the council to be responsive as the situation unfolds.

