

**Question Time
Àm Ceiste**

The following Questions have been received by the Head of Corporate Governance –

(i) Mr A Graham

To the Chair of the Housing & Property Committee

“What is the current balance on the Landbank Fund, the total currently advanced, total current commitments and the available Fund balance at present?”

The Highland Council and Scottish Government set up a £10million revolving housing landbank facility in 2005 to secure strategic sites for the delivery of affordable housing in areas of greatest housing need.

The Landbank Fund is a recyclable fund which is used to enable affordable housing to be delivered either through loans, grants and forward funding to our partner housing organisations or directly to part fund the provision of new council housing. The fund was originally set up using a £5m grant (repayable) from the then Scottish Executive and £5m from housing land sales. The Landbank fund is supplemented each year through income from Council Tax monies from second and holiday homes. It is a condition of both the original grant from the Scottish Government and any Council Tax income, that the funds must be used to provide additional affordable housing directly or indirectly.

- The current balance of the land bank fund (excluding outstanding loans) as at 31/8/2020 is £9.25M
- The total loans currently advanced is £17.64M.
- The total commitments is £9.85M with and anticipated spend £7.50M due this financial year leaving a net available this year of £1.75M
- Projected income to be repaid from forward funded loans is approximately £3.10M in 2020/21

Mr Graham will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Housing & Property Committee.

(ii) Mr A Graham

To the Leader of the Council

"Could you give an update on the current position with rollout of fibre broadband to the Highlands, and what the Council is doing to progress it?"

A full report detailing all of the activity related to the rollout of fibre broadband to the Highlands was reported to the Recovery Board on 24th August 2020, and the details can be accessed by following the attached link:

https://www.highland.gov.uk/meetings/meeting/4300/recovery_board

Since then things have moved on and the Scottish Government Voucher scheme has been launched and it is believed that a settlement has been reached on R100 and we can now get on.

I have a meeting with the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Scotland on 7 September to discuss how to speed up the delivery of a full fibre broadband network for the Highlands and has also had a positive response from the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands to discuss full fibre and the R100 Programme. This meeting will be held on 29th September 2020. The purpose of these meetings is to ask them to meet together along with Highland Council. And HIE to discuss their commitment to an ambitious full fibre to premises scheme that will be a key deliverable for Highland recovery.

Mr Graham will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Leader of the Council.

(iii) Mr D Rixson

To the Chair of the Tourism Committee

“A recent report to the Tourism Committee showed the degree of enthusiasm for developing local tourist infrastructure projects – often involving the provision of toilets and motor-home facilities. One of the problems which emerged was that of the 13 projects agreed under the first two rounds only 1 had actually completed. What actions do you propose to encourage the extension of the RTIF scheme and speed up delivery in the future?”

Although only one is complete the majority of the others are actually under way and a few more would have been completed in the Spring were it not for Covid. Others are well under way, such as the Bealach na Ba (pass of the cattle) viewpoints are essentially complete and just need the final resurfacing to be done and this could theoretically be done now but it's considered better to wait until after the main extended tourist season so as not to disrupt the summer visitor traffic too much.

Most of the delays have been due not to issues with the work itself but due to the time taken for the communities leading the projects to get things like leases, asset transfers or planning permission in place. To address this the scheme has already been revised and as of the 3rd round (which has a closing date of 18th October) all applications will need to have these in place (or at least have applied for in the case of planning permission) at the time of making their application. This should avoid similar delays with future projects.

Mr Rixson will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Tourism Committee.

(iv) Mr R Bremner

To the Leader of the Council

“How many employees of Highland Council took their full complement of holidays within the last holiday year?”

This information is not recorded at a corporate or service level and is not reported on. Annual leave is managed at a line management level using the Annual Leave policy which states “ *Staff will not normally be permitted to carry forward annual leave entitlement into a succeeding leave year other than in the most exceptional circumstances and following the agreement of the your line Manager or where the reason for not taking annual leave in a leave year is due to sickness absence.*”

We have agreed with the unions that staff can carry forward up to 20 days over a 2-year period.

Mr Bremner will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Leader of the Council.

(v) Mr D Louden

To the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee

“Would you confirm that in 2018/19 employees earning £50,000 a year or more numbered 300 and in 2019/20 this increased to 574 employees earning £50,000 a year or more and explain if you think this represents excellence in cost control?”
(See Annual Accounts Page 33)

As per the remuneration report in the 2019/20 unaudited annual accounts the ‘general disclosure by pay band’ identifies the total remuneration amounts paid to members of staff during the year. In 2019/20 574 employees were paid over £50,000 during the year, compared to 300 staff receiving over £50,000 in 2018/19.

An explanatory note on page 33 of the account’s states ‘Employee numbers in 2019/20 bandings reflect the 2018/19 backdated teachers’ pay award which was not agreed and paid until 2019/20’. Members will be aware that the Scottish Government took the decision to award teaching staff a substantially above inflation pay rise for 2018/19 and the time taken to agree and implement this award means that the 2019/20 figures in the remuneration report are distorted by this. The 2018/19 disclosure includes 204 teaching staff, the 2019/20 disclosure includes 474 teaching staff.

1. Once the impact of the backdated teachers’ pay award is taken into account the figures between years are consistent and reflect general pay increases for staff.

The teachers’ pay award was agreed as part of a national settlement and outwith the control of the Highland Council.

Mr Louden will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee.

(vi) Mr D Louden

To the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee

“Would you confirm that total non-specific Grant support received from the Scottish Govt in 2018/19 was £498,728,000 and total non-specific Grant support received from the Scottish Govt in 2019/20 was £523,525,000 and this represented an increase of just under £25m rather than a much quoted £4m cut?”
(See Annual Accounts Page 113)

2018/19 £000 (restated)		2019/20 £000
	Credited to Taxation and non-specific grant income	
310,870	Revenue support grant	306,184
126,537	Non-Domestic rates	145,658
61,321	Capital grants and contributions	71,683
<u>498,728</u>		<u>523,525</u>
	Credited to services	

The figures you have cited encompass both capital and revenue funding received by the Council and whilst that funding is predominantly from Government the figures do include a small amount of income from other sources.

Whilst you correctly identify an increase in funding, you also highlight the opacity of the Scottish Government's funding mechanism. As part of this funding increase the Council has had to implement a number of Scottish Government policies from within this 'non-specific' grant including those in relation to teachers' pay increases and health and social care.

The Administration maintains its position that funding for 'core' revenue activities reduced from 2018-19 to 2019-20 and encourages the Scottish Government to end the 'quasi ring-fencing' of core revenue funding and devolve more local decision making to local authorities to allow us to best meet local needs.

Mr Louden will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee.

(vii) Mrs M Cockburn

To the Leader of the Council

There are many businesses working hard to comply with Government guidelines and we must ensure that they are supported. However, I have had to report some companies for not adhering to these Covid-19 policies.

Does Highland Council have the manpower and support in the relevant team to ensure that the Highlands is a safe and compliant place in the workplace and for visitors now and the immediate future?"

Legislation was introduced at the end of March 2020 to restrict business activities and control the risks from Covid19. From the day the Regulations came into force in Scotland, the Council's Environmental Health and Trading Standards teams were ready to deal with enquiries and ensure compliance across the Highlands. The teams have worked very closely together throughout, with additional close liaison with Police Scotland. The work has been led by Environmental Health throughout, with key and ongoing support from Trading Standards.

The initial restrictions required many retail businesses to close and imposed conditions on others opening. Officers have closely followed a consultative and constructive approach known as the "4Es". i.e. "Engage, Explain, Encourage, Enforce". This approach has been beneficial and compliance levels in the

Highlands have been very high. Most Highland businesses have been very responsible and the small number who failed to co-operate with the initial closures were addressed.

Following the Routemap out of the national lockdown, the teams have worked to provide businesses sectors with advice on re-opening. This work is even more challenging and resource intensive, due to the need for detailed interaction with businesses on their operating models, the ever-developing guidance and ongoing changes to legislation. The teams have responded to over 400 queries and complaints specifically related to Coronavirus legislation. The teams have also supported other local authorities such as Aberdeen City Council when requested. Joint patrols with Police Scotland have been undertaken to monitor compliance.

As members are aware, the Environmental Health and Trading Standards teams are relatively small with a wide variety of statutory duties, and work has to be prioritised. Capacity challenges have been specifically identified with the Environmental Health team through a Food Standards Scotland external audit. A full response to the audit has been delayed due to Covid19, and further work is planned to review overall statutory demands and resources. In the interim, recruitment to vacant posts has been approved to maintain current levels of Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) and technical officers, and additional temporary support recruited including a temporary EHO.

The response to Covid19 is challenging as the environmental health team has a statutory enforcement role but also a statutory role in investigate clusters and outbreaks in conjunction with NHS Highland. The team are prioritising these two crucial Covid19 duties.

Other key priorities will include:

- Supporting food businesses in the Brexit transition to meet requirements for export and to supply export health certification;
- Follow up on other significant public health issues e.g. food hygiene complaints, private water supply failures, port health issues, non-covid19 infectious disease outbreaks, serious accidents at work, serious noise cases, wild camping issues, serious private sector housing complaints;
- Maintain key services such as animal health & welfare investigations, dog control, licensing of animal establishments, air quality monitoring, contaminated land, HMO inspections, investigation of litter, fly-tipping and abandoned.

The prioritisation will result in delay of resuming other statutory duties such as full programme of planned food safety inspections, planned animal health & welfare inspections, planned health & safety at work interventions and monitoring of private water supplies.

Mrs Cockburn will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Leader of the Council.

(viii) Ms M Smith

To the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee/Budget Leader

“Have you now arrived at a near final figure of what the Administration’s budget gap is?”

As is detailed in the budget update report which will be considered later on the agenda, the position remains uncertain. Section 12.1 of this report states

The biggest underlying factor across the current financial context is uncertainty. Circumstances have been constantly changing and nearly all these changing circumstances will impact on the Council’s budget. Officers will continue to update financial forecasts with budget update reports presented to all subsequent Council meetings. In addition, regular quarterly monitoring reports will be brought to the Corporate Resources committee.

Examples of factors contributing to this uncertain position are;

R number now above 1 again in Scotland

Local lockdowns

Second lockdown?

Speed of recovery unknown

Brexit

Adverse winter

Additional Govt. Funding

Forecasting – The situation in the first three months of this year cannot be extrapolated to determine the year end position.

Cost of responding to changing guidance and legislation as the situation changes.

Ms Smith will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee/Budget Leader.

(ix) Mr K Gowans

To the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee

“What is the Council’s budget to fund planning enforcement action?”

The Council currently has two enforcement officers who are fully engaged in dealing with enforcement complaints, working closely with planning officers. There is no specific budget to carry out direct enforcement activity, and any actions required are managed within the Service budget, with the costs reclaimed from the third party where possible.

Mr Gowans will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee.

(x) Mr K Gowans

To the Chair of the Environment & Infrastructure Committee

“Given the significant amounts of housing developments in the east of Inverness, some 4 -5,000 currently being built or planned, what progress has been made in identifying funding and securing land to build new primary and secondary schools as matter of urgency and will you agree to bring a comprehensive report advising of the progress to a meeting of E&I this year?”

The Inverness East Development Brief sets out details of the infrastructure requirements for development in the Inverness East area including the locations for primary and secondary schools. This is allowing the education service to

begin planning for these future requirements with the position being updated and refined through the annual School Roll Forecasts and Housing Land Audit. Taking these and the Developer Contributions Supplementary Guidance into account, developer contributions are being applied to planning applications and in pre-application advice to ensure that proportionate contributions are being gathered in line with Scottish Government legislation. The Council's Capital Programme also needs to be aligned to ensure the timely delivery of infrastructure with development and to address priorities across the school estate. Officers from education and planning would be happy to present the latest position at a Committee later this year.

Mr Gowans will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Environment & Infrastructure Committee.

(xi) Mr K Gowans

To the Chair of the Environment & Infrastructure Committee

"Given the significant amounts of housing developments in the east of Inverness, some 4 -5,000 currently being built or planned, what progress has been made in identifying funding and securing land to build an indoor sports facility to service expanding settlements in the east of the Inverness and hinterland and will you agree to bring a comprehensive report advising of the progress to a meeting of E&I this year?"

The Inverness East Development Brief sets out details of the infrastructure requirements for development in the Inverness East area including the location for a secondary school which is anticipated to incorporate dual use indoor sports facilities for both school and community use. In addition, discussions are underway to introduce an outdoor sports pitch with ancillary indoor facilities at the Inverness Campus which will also be made available for community access. In line with the Developer Contributions Supplementary Guidance, developer contributions may be sought towards these facilities where appropriate. Officers would be happy to present the latest position at a Committee later this year.

Mr Gowans will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Environment & Infrastructure Committee.

(xii) Mr K Gowans

To the Leader of the Council

"A new nursery was due to be opened adjacent to Milton of Leys Primary School in August 2019. This date was missed and the opening date was put back to August 2020. Understandably, this has been now delayed in some part due COVID-19.

Given the pressure on school and nursery rolls and the imminent provision of 1140 hours of free nursery care funded by the Scottish Government, *this is particularly concerning*. Can you provide the other reasons for the delays and provide me and the community with a realistic opening date?"

The Education Committee has recently received reports in relation to Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) and as reported to members of that Committee, the current understanding from Scottish Government is that an initial readiness review of ELC 1140 hours position will be complete by December 2020, and that Scottish Government would give at least 6 months' notice of a new date for the provision of

1140 hours. As a result, it is expected to be summer 2021 at the earliest before a new requirement to deliver 1140 hours universally.

The Education Committee will be receiving a report on 30th September in relation to the review of 1140 hours delivery. That report will provide information on settings across Highland, including Milton of Leys, and provide updated timescales for capital project works related to ELC expansion.

In relation to reasons for delays to the Milton of Leys project, information has previously been provided to Ward Members explaining the status of the land acquisition related to the proposed nursery annexe. Officers will continue to provide Ward members with updates in relation to progress.

Mr Gowans will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Leader of the Council.

(xiii) Mr S Mackie

To the Leader of the Council

“Do you believe that the self-imposed restriction of five Members’ Motions affords for the effective scrutiny of the Council and provide adequate opportunity for all elected Members to shape, debate and decide Council policy?”

I do and this is a decision that was made by Council. Members have other opportunities to influence policy and the re-instatement of policy meetings for service committees are one such powerful opportunity.

Mr Mackie will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Leader of the Council.

(xiv) Mr A Baxter

To the Leader of the Council

“What is the revised timetable for the Car Parking Review including plans for full implementation?”

Work on the Car Parking Review has been stalled due to the COVID crisis and no revised timetable is currently available.

Mr Baxter will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Leader of the Council.

(xv) Mr A Baxter

To the Leader of the Council

“Which recommendations made by the Highland Commission for Local Democracy has the Council implemented in full?”

The Commission on Highland Democracy was called for and supported by the Highland Council following the COSLA Commission on Local Democracy. The purpose was to better understand what the Council could do to improve democracy and involvement with its communities.

There are not specific recommendations as it was thought this would create a rigid framework rather than allow the development of approaches, methods and structures with local relevance

The Commission identified a number of key findings/issues that they felt should be addressed in order to strengthen local democracy. The key findings of

These included:

- Communities and individuals want involvement, not consultation and they are acutely aware of the difference between these two approaches.
- Centralisation/decentralisation is not primarily a geographic issue. It is much more about inclusive or exclusive decision making.
- Involvement with the democratic process should be integrated with the daily lives of citizens; not organised to suit the way in which public bodies work.
- Communities want to see an appropriate balance between representative and participative democracy.
- Communities want to see an appropriate balance between professional and executive, community based and representative inputs to decision making. Currently communities feel that professional inputs are the principal determinants of outcomes.
- Communities and citizens expect that there will be considerable interconnection and joint planning between the various public bodies that serve their needs.
- Communities and citizens were concerned that the ability of public bodies to secure and interpret complex information can be used as a powerful “weapon” to ensure that agencies get their own way.

I would suggest that we now take the Commission findings to the next Area chairs meeting and take Chairs input on how we take this forward another step.

Mr Baxter will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Leader of the Council.

(xvi) Mr A Baxter

To the Chair of the Communities & Place Committee

“Why, when reopening recycling centres, has the Council kept them closed at weekends?”

Our Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) were reopened on the 1st of June. The sites were reopened with additional restrictions to ensure increased levels of Covid safety for site users and staff. This has included additional access restrictions and restrictions on the quantities of waste and the waste streams accepted. Additional staff resource has been needed within our sites to manage the required safety controls. With additional staff time required, the opening times of our sites have been limited to ensure budgeted staffing costs are not exceeded.

We have used a phased approach to reopen our HWRC's; the most recent change on Monday the 24th of August was the reintroduction of vans and trailers in addition to increasing waste types accepted. The next phase is looking at ways of increasing opening hours safely and where possible including weekends. We are

also mindful of savings agreed by the Council in 2019 from reducing opening hours within HWRC's (£40k) and from waste restrictions (£150k).

Mr Baxter will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Communities & Place Committee.

(xvii) Mr A Baxter

To the Leader of the Council

“When, and how, as Leader of the Council have you been in contact with the Scottish and UK Governments to discuss what opportunities there are to realign the City-Region Deal to address new economic priorities in the Highlands and what has been the outcome?”

The City-Region Deal is a signed undertaking to deliver specified projects. These cannot be changed without the express consent of the UK and Scottish Governments.

Ongoing conversations are taking place with officials from the Council and the Scottish and UK government representatives on a frequent basis to keep these bodies fully informed of progress against forecast spend and to understand what flexibilities might be available. The results of this work will be reported to a future Committee.

Mr Baxter will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Leader of the Council.

(xviii) Mr A Baxter

To the Leader of the Council

“What was the final total cost to the Council, including all agency fees, for the recent employment of the interim Executive Chief Officer for Education and Learning?”

The agreement reached with the agency is subject to confidentiality clauses which mean that I am unable to publicly disclose the information you have requested regarding fees paid.

Mr Baxter will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Leader of the Council.

(xix) Mr A Baxter

To the Chair of the Housing & Property Committee

“What areas within your Committee remit are you planning to devolve to Area Committees?”

That is a matter for the Council to determine. That said, the Council's programme within Housing & Property already has the potential to significantly increase oversight and influence for area committees and reports to that effect have been and will continue to be reported to the strategic committee.

Mr Baxter will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Housing & Property Committee.

(xx) Mr A Baxter

To the Chair of the Communities & Place Committee

“What areas within your Committee remit are you planning to devolve to Area Committees?”

That is a matter for the Council to determine

Mr Baxter will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Communities & Place Committee.

(xxi) Mr A Baxter

To the Chair of the Economy & Infrastructure Committee

“What areas within your Committee remit are you planning to devolve to Area Committees?”

That is a matter for the Council to determine

Mr Baxter will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Economy & Infrastructure Committee.

(xxii) Mr A Baxter

To the Chair of the Education Committee

“What areas within your Committee remit are you planning to devolve to Area Committees?”

That is a matter for the Council to determine but it is important that discussions take place as part of the ongoing evaluation of the service which support localism, and which are in line with the Scheme of Delegation.

Mr Baxter will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Education Committee.

(xxiii) Mr A Baxter

To the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee

“When will the process of dis-aggregating Service budgets to Area Committees be complete and will you confirm which budgets will be devolved?”

That is a matter for the Council to determine

Mr Baxter will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee.

(xxiv) Mr D Macpherson

To the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee

“How many staff are currently employed by the Highland Council today, how does this number compare with the number employed at the 2018-19-year end (at 31/03/2019) and the 2017-18-year end (at 31/03/2018) and could I have a breakdown by each Executive Chief Officer department?”

Date	Headcount
Q1 - 2020-21	10024
Q1 - 2019-20	10138
Q1 - 2018-19	10300
Q1 - 2017-18	9992

There has been an increase in 308 in head count from 31/3/18 to 31/3/19. Early years and PSA numbers show a difference of 180 and Teachers 80 accounting for 260 staff. More in depth analysis would be required to identify the remaining 48.

It has not been possible to provide the breakdown in numbers relating to each ECO Service, due to the HR system which the staffing data is derived is currently being set up with new Service allocation. Further manipulation of the data is required and has not been possible in time for issuing papers. ECO Service breakdown will follow.

Mr Macpherson will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee.

(xxv) Mr A Jarvie

To the Chair of the Communities & Place Committee

“How is a 50% increase in brown bin fees over three years consistent with this Council’s declaration of a climate emergency?”

There is currently no statutory obligation on the Council to collect garden waste. The garden waste collection charge was first introduced in 2017 and it protected the service as an alternative to stopping collections. The charge is currently £45 and is £5 more than last year. There is still new demand for the service and as reported to the Communities and Place Committee in August 2020, the service is being extended even further and into the Dornoch area this month.

While there has been a reduction in the waste collected through brown bins since charging was applied, we have seen an increase in the amount taken to Household Waste Recycling Centres. The overall garden waste tonnage that is diverted from landfill is similar to the level of diversion before the charge was introduced. By extending the service where possible, we aim to retain the levels of diversion from landfill.

The impact of the increase in charge this year will be reviewed as part of the budget setting process for next year. Council previously agreed to a further £5 charge next year as an income target.

Mr Jarvie will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Communities & Place Committee.

(xxvi) Mr A Jarvie

To the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee

“How many vehicles has the Council SORN'd to receive a road tax refund and placed on lay-up insurance during Covid?”

The adjustments to the Council's fleet operations were described in the report detailing the Service response to Covid at the Communities and Place Committee on 19th August 2020.

No Council fleet vehicles were subject to Statutory Off-Road Notification (SORN) during lockdown because:

- some key operations continued during lockdown and therefore required continued fleet use e.g. waste collections and emergency housing repairs;
- some operations were suspended for a limited time only and the duration of this was not known in advance e.g. grounds maintenance, roads repairs and street lighting operations;
- some operations required additional fleet e.g. social distancing regulations mean that crew cabs that would ordinary have carried 3 or more employees can no longer do so. Additional light fleet was redeployed to accommodate this to ensure essential services continue to be delivered;
- some new covid projects required additional fleet support. This involved redeploying fleet for food and medicines delivery from the 10 Local Community Hubs and the food distribution centre in Inverness. This also required the hire of a small number of specialist refrigerated vehicles. As reported to the Council meeting in July 2020, the Government has made grant funding available to enable the Council to claim the costs associated with humanitarian assistance. Fleet costs associated with this work will be subject to a grant claim;
- the Council's light commercial fleet is hired. The normal volume of vehicle hire reduced during lockdown, providing hire savings. Where we have an annual contract in place the fee includes the road fund licence and these vehicles were deployed to support covid response;
- further work is underway regarding the car club to reduce the contract requirements for the remainder of the year, as we assess the requirements around return to work practice. Savings have already been made on this fleet use through reduced fuel requirements; and
- the dedicated winter maintenance vehicles (x31) come under a derogation that allows free road tax due to their sole use for winter snow clearing and road gritting. For our operator licence we advise the DVLA when these vehicles are in use (and that they are not SORN'd).

Mr Jarvie will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee.

(xxvii) Mr A Jarvie

To the Leader of the Council

“At Council on 31 October 2019, a motion was passed on the change developer contribution policy yet no policy change appears to have taken place. When will this happen?”

The Development Plans team has been fully engaged in both the response to COVID and Development Planning work, including the preparation of the Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan. Whilst some areas of work have seen slippage as a result, the Development Plans Scheme presented to the July ECI Committee stated that we will update our Housing Land Audit to inform our approach to infrastructure delivery and developer contributions. I can confirm that once this work is complete, a member’s seminar will be held later in the year and work will progress on review of the approach to developer contributions, albeit recognising the real challenges in the development sector following the COVID crisis.

Mr Jarvie will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Leader of the Council.

(xxviii) Mr S Mackie

To the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee

“How many ratepayers have received a Council Tax payment holiday during Covid?”

While there are no specific Covid-19 provisions for council tax payment holidays, The Highland Council paused recovery of council tax for the first quarter of the year and of course continues to encourage all tax payers who are experiencing a drop in their income to apply for council tax reduction. The combined work of our Revenues and Welfare staff, and CAB advisers, has resulted in awards increasing by more than 17% (£2m) with more than 7% additional CTR claims since March, increasing total awards to £14m.

Towards the end of July, the Council wrote to all tax payers who had missed payments inviting them to make contact with our Revenues and Welfare staff so that council tax reduction could be claimed and to reprofile their payments over an extended period. Recovery of unpaid council tax is now following our standard procedures and timetable.

Council tax payment holidays were implemented in 2008 for Direct Debit payers. This includes for example, payment breaks in July and August or December and January. Around 5,000 tax payers have opted to take a payment break during the summer months with more than 1,300 tax payers opting for a payment holiday during the winter months.

Mr Mackie will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee.

(xxix) Mr S Mackie

To the Leader of the Council

“How many hours of Continual Professional Development have the whole Executive Leadership team received or undertaken in the past 12 months?”

Continuous Professional Development by definition covers a combination of approaches, ideas and techniques that will help individuals manage their own learning and growth. CPD is therefore an issue for the individual member of staff of the ELT and their line manager due to the personal nature of CPD. The Council does not record CPD in hours. Extensive CPD has been undertaken by members of the ELT during the COVID Pandemic over the last 4/5-month period

Mr Mackie will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Leader of the Council.

(xxx) Mrs I MacKenzie

To the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee

“We are we halfway through the financial year, but the Council is not yet fully charging for parking permits and residents have contacted me confused. Why are we losing out on much needed revenue?”

There have been numerous difficulties in reinstating the Permit Scheme: staff availability, Service Point availability as well as progress on the transition to a better fit for purpose Online self-service system.

The Parking team have been managing the on-street provisions through waivers for existing and prospective Permit Holders.

We are currently programmed to go live with our new online Permit system week beginning the 14th of September.

Mrs MacKenzie will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee.

(xxxi) Mrs I MacKenzie

To the Chair of the Economy & Infrastructure Committee

“Why are we not able to create a Highland Rover ticket to create a much needed income in the Highland Region as previously agreed to explore at the former EDI Committee as, with the Stay vacation boom, this would be both welcomed for value to users and income to the Council?”

The Council already operates a Rover Ticket, which costs £20 via RingGo, valid for one month for unlimited parking in long stay Car parks as follows:

- 4 in Fort William - West End, Transport Centre, An Aird 1 and 2
- (1 in Mallaig - West Bay when activated.)
- 2 in Skye - Storr, Quiraing (soon Bayfield Portree also)
- 3 in Inverness - Cathedral, Portland, HQ

The Council will continue to work through the opportunities for wider use of the scheme as part of the overall visitor management plan being prepared.

Mrs MacKenzie will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Economy & Infrastructure Committee.

(xxxii) Mr A Sinclair

To the Chair of the Education Committee

“What assessment has been made as to why the Highland Council cannot attract applicants for senior education posts, in what is one of the most competitive recruitment fields within Local Government?”

An assessment was undertaken early 2020 of other local authority to understand their structures, salary level of Director/ECO for Education and whether they have experienced difficulty recruiting to their equivalent post in their Council. Information received indicate there were at least 2 authorities which have a vacancy at the ECO level for Education, one of these authorities is restructuring and the other continues to cover the post internally. In the recent past, two other authorities recruited candidates who did not have a teaching background which they report had not proved to be satisfactory. There has been some de-stabilising of succession planning for senior education leaders throughout Scotland arising from the uncertainty of a possible Scottish Education Authority. Aspiring talent have remained in schools and not applied for corporate posts which would be a natural progression onto the senior education leadership positions.

It should also be noted that pay bargaining processes principles have sought agreement for a comparable increase for teaching and non-teaching staff in past years. The most recently agreed pay award for 2018-2020 saw a higher % award from 1 April 2019 applied to teachers, including Head Teachers and funded by Scottish Government. This resulted in a narrowing of any differential of Head Teachers salary responsible for larger secondary schools in Highland and that of senior Education positions. This situation is not unique to the Highlands and concern has been raised with Cosla and therefore is a national issue when vacancies at ECO/Director of Education level arise. This will compound the challenges of attracting candidates.

Mr Sinclair will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Education Committee.

(xxxiii) Mr A Sinclair

To the Leader of the Council

“Can you detail the total spend to date of City-Region Deal Funding within Wick and East Caithness?”

It has not been possible in the time available to break down spend to this level of geography. However, a number of the City Region Deal projects either have or will benefit Wick and East Caithness in the future. These include benefits arising from the delivery of the Science Skills Academy work, Northern Innovation Hub and the Joint Digital Action Plan.

Mr Sinclair will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Leader of the Council.

(xxxiv) Mr D MacLeod

To the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee

“What Council fund was each of the last financial year’s severance payments taken from?”

The costs of severance payments were met through the Council’s General Fund.

Mr MacLeod will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee.

(xxxv) Mr A Baxter

To the Leader of the Council

“What representations have you made to the Chief Executive about Members’ concerns that micromanagement is hindering the operation of the Council and disempowering staff?”

As Leader of the Council, I have made no such representations.

Mr Baxter will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Leader of the Council.

(xxxvi) Mr D Macpherson

To the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee

“How many Janitors' houses does Highland Council currently own throughout its Highland and Islands school communities, and of these janitor houses, can you please give an update on the number that are empty and the length of time that they have been empty for, including how much revenue has not been collected in housing rent and council tax, (listing the element within this 'education & housing estate' that are within the 'Empty Homes Council Tax Penalty' for properties that have remained empty for over one full year and continue to be empty today)?”

The response has been made on the basis of all former Education properties, not just janitors’ houses as referred to in the question.

The original number of former Education properties held by the Council has been reduced from 76 to 45 properties in recent years. 11 of these properties have tenancies that will continue to be managed separately from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The remaining 34 properties can be categorised as follows.

Agreement in principle to transfer to the HRA (subject to final confirmation) – 4.

Vacant: To be demolished through the approved Early Learning and Childcare/School Estate Investment capital programme – 6

Vacant: To be converted for school use as part of the above programme – 4

Vacant: Linked to concluded school closures, disposal being taken forward – 7

Vacant: Linked to currently mothballed schools – 2

Remaining vacant properties – 11. Options for the future use of each of these properties are currently being explored, and advice is required on a range of legal matters relating to some of these site

Properties that are vacant but form part of, or are within, the curtilage of a school cannot be let as Scottish Secure Tenancies as defined by legislation. As a result, any such property that becomes vacant cannot be let again, and there has

therefore been no loss in potential rental or Council Tax income from third parties in respect of these properties.

Mr Macpherson will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee.

(xxxvii) Mr D Macpherson

To the Leader of the Council

“Is it acceptable that Elected Members of Highland Council are being encouraged and instructed to complete F.O.I. (Freedom of Information) requests in order to obtain information that should be made readily available to them by virtue of their position as publicly elected Highland Councillors?”

Elected members of the Highland Council should not be directed to seek information in this way. Any examples of this happening should be referred to the ECO for Performance and Governance

Mr Macpherson will be entitled to ask a supplementary question which will be answered by the Leader of the Council.