

Item 9ii

Question Time Àm Ceiste

There are circulated Responses to the Questions on the Council Agenda which it was indicated would follow –

Member Questions

(1) Mr A Christie

To the Leader

“Please could the Leader detail occasions since the establishment of the Administration up to the current date where he or the Chairs of the Strategic Committees have represented the Council in meetings with elected members of the Scottish Government or UK Government including the main topic of the meeting and the outcome?”

The following meetings have taken place: -

- *Leader attended Green Energy Conference, Inverness and delivered keynote speech along with Michael Matheson MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport on 8 June 2022. Further meetings and discussions have and will take place as a result of the representation made at the conference.*
- *Leader met Iain Stewart MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Scotland to discuss the economic challenges and opportunities facing the Highlands on 9 June 2022. Further discussion was to take place during a visit of the Leader to Westminster however, this will be rescheduled due to the death of the late Queen Elizabeth.*
- *Leader met with Keith Brown MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Governance, standing in for Kate Forbes MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Finance, to discuss matters relating to Inverness and the Highlands as part of the Scottish Cities Alliance on 14 Jun 2022. Matters will continue to be discussed as part of the agenda of the Scottish Cities Alliance.*
- *Leader attended network event with Ivan McKee MSP, Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise to discuss and explore opportunities for the Scottish Cities Alliance, of which Highland Council is a member, on 15 Jun 2022. Matters will continue to be discussed as part of the agenda of the Scottish Cities Alliance.*
- *Leader attended a meeting with Jenny Gilruth MSP, Minister for Transport and Caithness Chamber of Commerce to discuss transport issues in Caithness on 15 June 2022. Matters will be progressed as part of the continued work of the Caithness Transport Forum.*
- *The Chair of Economy and Infrastructure Committee met with Jenny Gilruth MSP, Minister for Transport to discuss the Corran Ferry on 29 June 2022. The*

Minister has accepted an invitation to visit the Corran Ferry and explore and discuss options.

- *Leader met Kate Forbes MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Finance, and the Economy to discuss constituency matters on 11 July 2022. Matters will be progressed by the office of the Cabinet Secretary and the Council as appropriate.*
- *The Chair of Economy and Infrastructure Committee met Tom Arthur MSP, Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth to discuss Fort William 2024 on 21 July 2022. Matters will be progressed in respect of discussions.*
- *Chair of Education met Iain Stewart MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Scotland when he visited Skye (Staffin & Portree) to discuss harbour development and Levelling Up Bid for Portree on 25 July 2022. Matters will be progressed in respect of discussions.*
- *The Leader and The Chair of Economy and Infrastructure Committee met Michael Matheson MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport at the opening of Hydro Ness on 28 July 2022.*
- *Leader met with Jenny Gilruth MSP, Minister for Transport to discuss Uig Harbour Development on 8 Aug 2022. Actions and future meetings to progress were agreed.*
- *Leader met with Jenny Gilruth MSP, Minister for Transport to discuss Uig Harbour Development on 24 Aug 2022. Actions and future meetings to progress were agreed.*
- *Leader met with Jenny Gilruth MSP, Minister for Transport to discuss Uig Harbour Development on 25 Aug 2022. Actions and meetings were agreed and the outcome was subsequently reported in the press 2 Sept 2022.*
- *Leader met with Ian Blackford MP, Leader of SNP, Westminster, to discuss constituency matters on 29 Aug 2022. Matters will be progressed by the office of the Member of Parliament and the Council as appropriate.*
- *The Chair of Economy and Infrastructure Committee met Jenny Gilruth MSP, Minister for Transport to discuss Uig Harbour Development on 4, 8 August and 6 September 2022.*
- *Leader met with Emma Roddick MSP, to discuss matters in respect of ASN delivery on 7 Sept 2022. Matters will be progress by the office of the MSP and the Council as appropriate.*
- *Chair of Housing and Property met with Shona Robison, Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government to discuss Housing/Homeless issues on 11 August 2022. Matters will be progressed in respect of discussions.*

(2) Mr A Christie

To the Leader

“Could the Leader update Council as to the activity the Administration has undertaken since the 30th June in developing the new Council Programme, developing a strategy for the next revenue budget 2023/24, and working towards finalising a revised affordable capital programme and when this will be presented to Council?”

A progress update report on the development of the Council Programme will be considered at the Council meeting on 22 September 2022, and this update includes research undertaken, the identification of strategic priorities, and next steps.

In addition, there will also be reports considering the financial context setting out the situation which will influence the development of the revenue budget for 2023/24. Revenue funding will determine the affordability of capital investment and a revised capital programme will be submitted to the Council in due course.

(3) Mr A MacDonald

To the Leader

“Scottish Government have confirmed in response to recent enquiries that active consideration is being taken to connect Hebridean Islands by tunnels with distances far in excess of the short length to cover the Corran Narrows.

Would the Leader agree to write an open letter to Jenny Gilruth, The Minister of Transport urging that the Corran Narrows is added to the tunnel program?”

An outline feasibility study for fixed links and a tunnel at the Corran Narrows was prepared and the report was then submitted to Transport Scotland for consideration within the Strategic Transport Projects Review 2 (2022-2042). Unfortunately, this was not considered as a project to take forward into the STPR2.

I would like to provide an assurance that the Council will continue to take steps to explore a permanent link across the Corran Narrows which is in line with the previously prepared report and has an officer in place who will be leading on this project.

It should be noted that the ongoing Ferry replacement vessels project is essential to prevent service failure in the immediate and medium term, until a longer-term fixed link can potentially be delivered.

Further, I refer you to my answer to question one, that the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure Committee met with Jenny Gilruth MSP, Minister for Transport to discuss the Corran Ferry on 29 June 2022. The Minister has accepted an invitation to visit the Corran Ferry to explore and discuss options.

Given the ongoing programme as detailed in my answer and the already established communication channels with the office of the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, I consider that the request to write an open letter is superceded.

(4) Mr A Baldrey

To the Chair of Communities and Place

“What is the Council doing to encourage more allotments and food growing projects? Given the waiting list for these is long and the availability of current allotments is limited, and given the Council’s statutory duty to provide allotments, as well as

Government policy to promote local food growing, how many new sites does the Council plan to open in the next twelve months?"

The Highland Council formally adopted the community food growing strategy "Growing our Future" in February 2022. The strategy was developed following thorough consultation with community groups, partner organisations and council staff. The strategy, and its accompanying guidance, can be found on the Council website https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/1210/environment/321/climate_change/7. Community food growing encompasses allotments, community orchards and general community food growing opportunities.

Unlike other local authorities, the Highland Council does not directly manage allotment sites, these are instead run by community-led allotment associations. Several of these are located on Council owned land, and we support the community-led groups which manage them.

As highlighted in the draft Communities and Place Service plan, an allotments review is being undertaken during 2022-2023, this will review the current allotment provision, and explore how the Council might support any necessary expansion.

While there are currently no new allotment sites planned to open in the next 12 months there has been discussion regarding the expansion of the Hawthorn allotment site in Inverness, which is located on Council owned land.

(5) Mr D Gregg

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

"Does the Administration support the Cycling by Design 2021 guidelines produced by Transport Scotland?"

The Highland Council supports Transport Scotland's Cycling by Design Guide (2021).

(6) Ms J McEwan

To the Leader

"What are the lessons learned from the "carefully planned closure" of Avonlea Children's Home in Wick in terms of the impact on service users, the wider community, staff and the best practice in media handling?"

Action in respect of Avonlea Children's home was in response to a poor inspection report and was to ensure that our children were safe. The engagement of the young people involved and taking their views into account was an important part of this process. The Chief Executive has already made a commitment to Caithness Members to visit Caithness and there will be an in person visit by the Executive Chief Officer for Health and Social Care and the Chief Executive in the month of September to meet and listen to young people and their families, staff, and local Members. This feedback

will then be considered in quality assurance and performance forums and contained within performance reports at the Health and Social Care Committee.

(7) Ms A MacLean

To the Leader

“The Highland Council has had a longstanding commitment to replace St Clement’s School. The school provides for some of the most vulnerable children in Highland and is based in Dingwall. The current school accommodation has been rated poor for both Condition and Suitability and the limitations of much of the facilities that the pupils require including the outdoor space. The 2014 HMIE inspection made a number of recommendations and highlighted “The buildings do not provide a satisfactory range or quality of facilities. Corridors and doors are narrow and challenge pupils with limited mobility. One classroom can only be accessed through the staff room and there is a lack of space and specialist facilities.” The current school is not suitable in its condition or layout as a special needs school.

I welcome the report to the Education Committee on 15th September 2022 with the outcome of the statutory consultation and also reaffirming that Highland Council has identified £13m for the project within the capital plan. All the stakeholders, including the voice of the pupils have been working towards the new St Clement’s School for many years, however there is a concern that given Budget pressures that some projects may not be taken forward or that there will be slippage in some.

Will the Leader confirm the replacement school for St Clement’s School is proceeding with haste and what are the planned start and completion dates?”

The current expenditure profile in the approved capital programme shows the bulk of the funding in financial years 2024/25 and 2025/26. Based on this, we would program a start on site in late 2024, with the new building completed in spring 2026 and potentially opening in August 2026.

(8) Mr A Jarvie

To the Leader

“As the first Caithness Leader of the Highland Council, how will you specifically reverse the unfair funding methodology and ensure Caithness receives what it deserves?”

As the Leader of the Highland Council who is also a member from Caithness, I am committed to seeing that all areas of the Highlands receive the best levels of funding possible and that no area is seen to be disadvantaged in favour of another; that includes my home county of Caithness where I live.

(9) Mr C Balance

To the Chair of Corporate Resources

“In view of the announcement in the Holyrood Programme for Government that Councils will be empowered in the next year to introduce a Transient Visitor Levy, will you agree to commission a feasibility study by officers into the practicalities of introducing such a tax on visitors in hotels, larger b & bs, self-catering rental properties and mobile homes, including the possibility of exempting patients attending Raigmore or other medical appointments, and suggesting levels at which the tax could be levied, and projected income from it, so that this Council be ready to initiate such a tax as soon as it is possible.”

The Highland Council at its meeting on 9 Dec 2019 agreed that the consultation undertaken during 2019 by the Council constituted a mandate to introduce a Highland Transient Visitor Levy (TVL).

Included in this decision, was a consideration that a Highland TVL should be able to be applied, in ways other than just a ‘bed tax’, on those staying in paid overnight accommodation; that Highland residents should be exempted from paying a Highland TVL; that the Council should continue to work with the Scottish Government wherever possible to help shape other elements of the national approach to reflect the region’s needs and the results of the Highland consultation; that officials investigate logistical and financial implications of different models and work on the detail of a scheme with a view to producing a series of recommendations on the design of a scheme that would be brought back to a future meeting of the Council for approval.

As the Scottish Government has now commenced work on the TVL after the pandemic, discussions between Scottish Government officials, CoSLA and Council officers has also re-commenced. Future reports will therefore be presented to Council on this matter as details of the legislation and TVL become known.

(10) Mr R Gunn

To the Chair of Health, Social Care and Wellbeing

“Is the Chair in favour of the proposed National Care Service and what does he see as the biggest challenges to its introduction in Highland?”

There is a report before Council today setting out the Council’s response to the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill which is currently before Parliament. I am supportive of that response.

(11) Mrs H Crawford

To the Leader

“What criteria will Highland Council apply when deciding which of the new school building projects, as contained in the current capital plan, will take priority over the course of the session?”

The criteria will be established in due course for the review of the capital programme. However, the School Core Facts Criteria of Condition, Sufficiency and Suitability will be key, along with an assessment of all capital and revenue life cycle costs, and the availability of external funding.

(12) Mr M Reiss

To the Leader

“Respite Care at Thor House in Thurso has been stopped/massively reduced over the Pandemic period and, instead, the premises are now being used as a Residential Children’s Home. The Unit specifically provides services for those with disabilities and was highly regarded in this respect, being described as a “purpose built 4 bedded residential respite facility offering support to children up to 18 years of age with a learning disability”. It also provided day care support for up to 15 adults, some of which is continuing. Now those same Respite Service Users are being told to make alternative arrangements (sometimes at their own expense) in Inverness, 110 miles from Thurso or in Moray. When will the Administration fully reinstate this vital service for the benefit of families in Caithness and North Sutherland?”

Due to Covid restrictions, respite care was suspended throughout Scotland. Children and young people who were in crisis during this time were accommodated at Thor House. We will be looking at the provision of respite as part of service redesign and seeking to identify the needs of our population as we move forward. There had been a relatively low demand for this service in the North as people are using their Self-Directed support funding in different ways in terms of accessing the support they need.