

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Communities and Place Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Wednesday 16 November 2022 at 10.30 am.

Present:

Mr J Bruce	Mrs J Hendry
Mr M Cameron (Teams)	Mrs B Jarvie
Mr A Christie (substitute)	Mr B Lobban
Ms T Collier (Teams)	Mr P Logue
Mr J Finlayson	Mr W MacKay (Teams)
Mr R Gale	Mr G MacKenzie (Chair)
Mr A Graham	Ms L Niven
Mr R Gunn	

Non-Members also present:

Mr C Ballance	Mr J McGillivray (Teams)
Dr C Birt (Teams)	Mr D Millar (Teams)
Mr S Kennedy	Mrs M Paterson
Mrs A MacLean	Mr M Reiss
Ms K MacLean	Mr K Rosie (Teams)
Mr T MacLennan (Teams)	Mrs L Saggars

In attendance:

Ms K Lackie, Acting Depute Chief Executive and Executive Chief Officer, Performance and Governance
Mr A Gunn, Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place
Ms A Clark, Head of Community Support and Engagement
Mr S Fraser, Head of Corporate Governance
Mr A McKinnie, Strategic Lead, Waste Strategy and Operations
Mr A Yates, Strategic Lead, Environmental Health and Bereavement Services
Ms L Johnstone, Elections Manager, Corporate Governance
Ms D Sutton, Amenity Services Manager
Ms R MacKinnon, Principal Policy Officer
Ms W Girard-Prudon, Project Coordinator
Ms A Cameron, Customer Service Team Leader
Miss J MacLennan, Principal Administrator
Miss M Murray, Committee Administrator

Also in attendance:

Mr M Humphreys, Local Senior Officer for Highland, Scottish Fire and Rescue 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 G MacKenzie in the Chair

Business

1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr A Baldrey, Mr L Fraser, Mr H Morrison and Ms M Nolan.

2. Declarations of Interest Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt

The Committee **NOTED** the following Transparency Statements:-

Item 4: Mr A Christie

Item 7: Mr A Christie

Item 13: Mrs J Hendry

3. Good News Naidheachdan Matha

The Chair spoke to two items of good news as follows:-

Amenities

Lynn MacGillivray had been appointed to the new fixed-term Support Co-ordinator post. She had started in post on 31 October 2022 and would help deliver the Council's Play Area Strategy and Play Sufficiency obligations to the Scottish Government.

She would be involved in community engagement regarding play areas and would provide important support as part of the overall funding from the Scottish Government for the next three years.

Lynn brought a great wealth of knowledge and understanding of all things play and had quickly understood what was required to develop the Highland Play Area Strategy and engage with communities.

War Memorials

As Members were aware, the Service did a lot of work in early November to support communities for Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday by ensuring war memorials were in good condition for local events. This year had gone well with support including:

- specific improvement work funded to war memorials with the grade A listed memorial at Glenelg having pointing and professional cleaning undertaken, and on Skye, the Kilmuir War Memorial being pointed and having all lettering restored, and grounds improved around Sleat War Memorial.
- additional street cleaning and waste services had been provided to ensure litter was removed and areas kept clean around the war memorials.
- additional grounds work had been done the week before with shrub beds and grass areas tidied and checked

The staff had a very strong commitment to this support for communities and the Chair, on behalf of the Committee, recognised and thanked them for this work.

The Committee **NOTED** the good news.

4. Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) Highland Performance Report Aithisg Coileanaidh Seirbheis Smàlaidh is Teasairginn na h-Alba

Transparency Statement: Mr A Christie made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item as a Non-Executive Director of NHS Highland. However, having applied the objective test and reviewed his position in relation to the item and any personal connection, he did not consider he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No CP/18/22 dated 3 November 2022 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland, SFRS.

The Local Senior Officer for Highland, SFRS, provided a detailed summary of the report during which he spoke to a number of Key Performance Indicators, namely: All accidental dwelling fires; All fatal accidental dwelling fire casualties; Non-fatal accidental dwelling fire casualties; All deliberate fires; Special Services – Road Traffic Collisions; False Alarms – Unwanted Fire Alarm Signals; Non-domestic fire safety; Domestic fire safety activities; Proportion of station hours available for emergency response; and Injury Accidents.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- thanks were expressed for the report and the dedication and commitment of the Local Senior Officer and his crews who put their own safety at risk to protect people and communities across Highland;
- reference was made to two serious accidents on the A9 between Brora and Helmsdale on consecutive days, and appreciation was expressed for the work of the fire crews that had attended along with other emergency services. However, recruitment in north and west Sutherland had been an issue for some time. Limited availability of appliances raised an issue in terms of the safety of local communities, and it was queried what actions were in place to improve station availability in Caithness and Sutherland;
- information was sought regarding the requirement placed on the public to install interlinked heat and smoke alarms and whether there was any evidence yet of a reduction in the number of house fires;
- in relation to Thurso Fire Station, a number of experienced firefighters had recently left at one time, and information was sought on the associated impact. In addition, it was queried why Thurso 2nd Appliance availability was so much lower than Wick when staffing numbers were similar;
- it was queried whether the pilots to increase appliance availability could be extended to Cannich Fire Station where there were three dedicated firefighters training every week but unable to respond to any fires. It was added that the requirement to be within 10 minutes for 70 hours per week when the station was in such a small remote community presented difficulties;
- the SFRS, along with other emergency services, was held in high regard by the public in Highland and was the bedrock of community life. However, for the past six or seven years, Members had been aware of worries about the level of fire cover in different parts of Highland. Examples were provided, referring to SFRS charts, of several days when it was understood there had been no cover across large areas of north and west Highland. Particular reference was made to Thurso,

which had schools, a ferry service, Dounreay and the A9 and which, according to a Freedom of Information (FOI) request, had had less than 50% availability for the 1st appliance over the past three months. Further FOI requests had been submitted, one of which was on the possible implications for commercial insurance cover in areas where the local station was off the run. However, a response had not yet been received. The Local Senior Officer for Highland had inherited a challenge that was not of his making, and it was questioned what could be done to help the SFRS get back to what had been an outstanding service. Numerous suggestions had been debated in the Council Chamber but very little had happened. These included making the training requirements less onerous for both recruits and employers, reducing the age limit, considering whether retained firefighters needed to be as fit as full-time firefighters and, crucially, whether crews of three could attend some incidents, which Members had previously been told would happen when rapid response units were implemented. Using a serious road traffic accident as an example, if the Ambulance Service only had one paramedic available that paramedic would be sent, and it was the same for the Police. It was understood that existing rules required four firefighters to safely reverse an appliance whereas HGV drivers did this on their own for much larger vehicles. The crews wanted to do their best, and it was suggested it was necessary to decentralise the SFRS and entrust rural areas to be more flexible in how they dealt with challenges. It was essential to address the lack of fire coverage in rural areas and Members emphasised their determination to try to improve the situation;

- in relation to the joint mobilising arrangement in respect of Tongue and Bettyhill, there was only one road between the two communities, parts of which were single track, and it was questioned how the arrangement would work in practice – eg if the road was blocked due to a serious road traffic accident;
- it was necessary to understand why people were not joining the retained fire service and it was queried whether a survey had been carried out in that regard. It was suggested that reducing the age at which people could join the SFRS should be considered at a national level. Young people were very responsible and, through the education system offered in Highland, had opportunities to develop skills for learning, life and work. Many young people wanted to stay in rural areas and engage with what happened in their communities, and liaising with them in schools and at careers fairs would increase uptake;
- in relation to encouraging more woman to join the SFRS, reference was made to work that had been carried out at Dingwall Fire Station to ensure that facilities were suitable for both male and female firefighters. Reference was also made to previous proposals, in collaboration with the Council, to provide a creche, and an update on progress was sought;
- clarification was sought as to the difference between retained and on-call firefighters;
- the SFRS had previously been looking at providing local training for new recruits and an update was sought in that regard;
- in relation to the age profile of the SFRS, it was queried how the retirement or phased retirement of long-standing members of staff would impact on service provision and how new firefighters were being recruited – eg were steps being taken to recruit from outwith Highland and to target groups such as former armed forces personnel; and
- it was queried whether people involved in managing estates, forestry and farmlands were involved in training so they could provide backup in the event of serious moorland and forest fires.

The Local Senior Officer responded in detail to the points and queries raised. In relation to availability in north and west Highland, he questioned the source of the examples provided, some of which were not factually correct, and encouraged Members who had any questions about availability to contact the SFRS through formal routes. He provided information on availability on specific dates and explained the arrangements that were in place to increase appliance availability, including the joint mobilising process which had now been expanded across Highland. However, it was recognised that on call availability was transient, and there were a number of factors that played into that. That was why the trials described in the report had been introduced and, going forward, he was committed to looking at different methods of improving availability.

The Committee otherwise scrutinised and **NOTED** the Highland Performance Report.

In terms of Standing Order 9, the Committee **AGREED** to consider item 9 at this stage.

9. Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages – Annual Report Clàrachadh air Breith, Bàs is Pòsadh – Aithisg Bhliadhnail

There had been circulated Report No CP/23/22 dated 28 October 2022 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- thanks were expressed for the useful and informative report, and it was suggested that it would be helpful to receive similar reports on other aspects of the Communities and Place Service to assist Members in providing oversight and scrutiny;
- on the point being raised, it was explained that, unlike other services which might have specific performance targets, the Registration Service aimed to achieve as near to 100% accuracy as possible;
- the Registration Service was similar to some other Council services that carried out statutory duties in that it was not recognised enough for the excellent work it did. It was not only about accuracy but about dealing with people at some of the happiest times of their lives as well as in difficult circumstances, which could be stressful for staff. The Chair concurred and assured Members that great care was taken at the time of recruitment to Registrar posts;
- in relation to Elected Members being asked to sign Statutory Declarations such as for a change of name, it would be helpful if standard documentation could be made available in Service Points/Registration Offices. It was confirmed that this would be looked at to support Members in their role, and it was suggested that information also be made available on the Members' Intranet;
- thanks, gratitude and admiration were expressed for the work of the Registration team;
- in relation to the popularity of Highland as wedding location, local Registration staff had a wealth of knowledge and experience as well as ideas as to how the Council could become more income-generating in terms of weddings, and it was important to tap into that;
- in terms of strategic planning and targeting efforts to stop the depopulation of remote and rural areas, it would be helpful to see, on an area basis, the correlation between the number of births and death and overall population projections; and

- the number of deaths was higher than the number of births, and it was queried whether that was the usual trend. It was confirmed that data could be provided to Members on this and the previous point.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the work of the Registration team across Highland and the changes to work patterns and services over the last three years;
- scrutinised and **NOTED** the performance of the Registration team based upon the most recently examined data from 2021 and outlined in Appendix 4 of the report;
- NOTED** the future developments for the service for the next year;
- AGREED** that information and standard documentation be made available on the Members' Intranet and in Service Points/Registration Offices to support Elected Members in their role in terms of signing Statutory Declarations; and
- AGREED**, in relation to the number of births and deaths in Highland, that information on trends and the correlation with overall population projections, on an area basis, be provided to Members of the Committee.

5. Revenue Budget Monitoring Report: 2022/23 Quarter 2 Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Buidseat Teachd-a-steach: Cairteal 2 2022/23

There had been circulated Report No CP/19/22 dated 30 October 2022 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- Members welcomed the provision of more detailed information on variances, as requested at the previous meeting of the Committee, which made it easier to get behind the numbers;
- further information was requested on the projected underspend in respect of staff costs;
- concern was expressed regarding the number of vacant posts in the Refuse and Recycling and Street Cleaning teams, and information was sought, and provided, on the impact of these vacancies on service provision. In addition, it was queried what percentage of the total staffing complement of each team the vacant posts represented and, in relation to the total service establishment, whether the number of vacancies was average or above/below what would be expected; and
- as more housing developments were built, demand for statutory services such as refuse collection and street cleaning continued to increase, which made it difficult for the Communities and Place Service to meet savings targets.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the forecasted outturn for the 2022/23 Revenue budget for the Communities and Place Service as at Quarter 2 was £1.150m overspend; an
- NOTED** higher costs pertaining to fuel and parts including vehicle components, spares and tyres were placing significant pressures on the budget.
- AGREED** that further information be provided on the projected underspend in respect of staff costs.

6. Capital Budget Monitoring Report: 2022/23 Quarter 2 Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Buidseat Calpa: Cairteal 2 2022/23

There had been circulated Report No CP/20/22 dated 2 November 2022 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- the Inverness Waste Transfer Station was one of the biggest capital projects the Council had undertaken for some time and it would be useful for Members to visit it on completion. It was confirmed that the proposed visit by Members of the Waste Strategy Working Group could be extended to all Members; and
- in relation to play parks, disappointment was expressed regarding the backloading of Scottish Government funding, two thirds of which would not be made available until 2024/25 and 2025/26. This, together with the fact that the Council's budget for play parks had historically been low, suggested that there was not a high enough importance placed on children's play and exercise.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the forecasted capital outturn for the Communities and Place Service for 2022/23 as at Quarter 2;
- ii. **NOTED** the current forecasts for the major projects in the Communities and Place Service; and
- iii. **AGREED** that the proposed visit to the new Inverness Waste Transfer Station be extended to all Members.

7. Implementing the requirements of the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act 2021 (the Act) in Highland A' Buileachadh riatanasan Achd Bathar Fala-mìos (Solar An-asgaidh) (Alba) 2021 anns a' Ghàidhealtachd

Transparency Statement: Mr A Christie made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item as a Non-Executive Director of NHS Highland. However, having applied the objective test and reviewed his position in relation to the item and any personal connection, he did not consider he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No CP/21/22 dated 24 October 2022 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- inclusivity was of utmost importance and information was sought, and provided, as to what work was being done to improve LGBT+ inclusivity – ie those whose gender identity might not align to where period products were being made available;
- the implementation of the Act was warmly welcomed and thanks were expressed to officers for their efforts;
- the cost of living crisis had made it difficult for many people to survive, and period products were an expensive necessity;
- there was a piece of work to be done in terms of identifying where period products were being distributed – eg Trussel Trust gave out free products through their

foodbanks, and Highland Third Sector Interface had been distributing donations to groups such as tenants' groups. In that regard, it was suggested that it would be helpful for an officer to attend the next meeting of the Highland Poverty Action Network;

- given recent incidences of vandalism, making free period products available in public conveniences was not considered viable; and
- as menstruation became more normalised, more shops, restaurants, cafes and other businesses had period products freely available.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the arrangements that had been made to provide free period products in Highland;
- ii. **NOTED** the results of the community consultation on free period products in Highland;
- iii. **NOTED** the actions agreed by the Partnership Steering Group to further develop provision in Highland, based upon the consultation feedback; and
- iv. **AGREED** and adopted the Statement on Exercise of Functions found at Appendix 1 of the report.

8. Update on Service Enhancements from Visitor Management Plan Funding Cunntas às Ùr mu Leasachaidhean Seirbheis bho Mhaoineachadh Plana Stiùiridh Luchd-tadhail

There had been circulated Report No CP/22/22 dated 27 October 2022 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- Access Rangers dealt with thousands of people each year, addressing issues such as informal camping, littering, barbecue fires etc and, given they were only funded for one year, a call was made to bear the important work they did in mind when considering future funding. The Chair confirmed that Access Rangers came under the remit of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee and undertook to ensure Members' comments were relayed to the relevant Chair and Executive Chief Officer;
- information was sought, and provided, as to whether the role of Visitor Management Operatives was similar to that of Countryside Rangers as there appeared to be a degree of overlap between them;
- the comfort schemes in Skye had been warmly welcomed during the busy tourist season. Communities themselves were taking over toilets, and new toilets were being built in Elgol and Broadford. Local costs were sought so support for comfort schemes could be provided at a local level, through disaggregated budgets, if other budgets were unavailable;
- while providing toilet facilities was not a statutory obligation of the Council, the provision of the service was welcomed and it was important the public knew that these facilities were well used and valued;
- it was questioned, given pressure on budgets, if there was an opportunity for the comfort scheme to be increased and how communities could be involved; and
- there had been a degree of anti-social behaviour in toilets throughout Highland which had resulted, in some instances, in high repair costs. This was not sustainable and other more innovative and sustainable solutions were needed.

- CCTV was an important tool, and it was important cameras were functioning and focused on the buildings in question. The Amenity Services Manager undertook to check with colleagues in the Economy and Infrastructure Service that CCTV cameras were fully functioning. When, and how, the Police could be informed of incidents was also explained; and
- there were no comfort scheme facilities in Thurso, which was a cause of concern, and it was confirmed that the possibility of providing a comfort scheme until the Council public conveniences re-opened could be explored.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the Visitor Management Plan was not recurring funding;
- ii. **NOTED** the investment in public conveniences and waste services would be fully committed this year;
- iii. **NOTED** the enhanced public convenience service with 75 Council operated facilities, with infrastructure improvements for 40 facilities, 16 new comfort scheme providers now taking the total to 53, and support for 2 community groups running portaloos;
- iv. **NOTED** any new funding streams would be pursued;
- v. **NOTED** a number of the Council's 3-year comfort scheme contracts would be renewed in April 2023 and seasonal providers would form part of that review to ensure footfall and geographical coverage was reflected within the current budget;
- vi. **AGREED** that the local costs in respect of the provision of comfort schemes be provided; and
- vii. **AGREED** that the possibility of providing a comfort scheme in Thurso until the Council public conveniences re-opened be explored.

10. Service Points and Connected Customer Update Ionadan-Seirbheis agus Cunntas às Ùr mu Luchd-cleachdaidh Co-cheangailte

There had been circulated Report No CP/24/22 dated 28 October 2022 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- tribute was paid to staff for the particularly hard work carried out during the Covid pandemic;
- by co-locating services, Service Point opening hours could be extended and provide greater customer access in the evening and at weekends. This could go further, and examples were cited of Citizens Advice Bureaux elsewhere providing Service Point functions;
- it was important to respond to the needs of the community and create a more modern and dynamic service. The Redesign Board's review of Service Points would, it was hoped, look at different ways of providing the service to fit in better with people's lifestyles;
- partner agencies could be invited to Service Points to provide advice, NHS Highland providing information on falls prevention being cited as an example;
- Service Points were vital, providing face-to-face contact and maintaining connectivity between the Council and communities, and the Service Point network should be grown;
- there was a distinction between rural and urban Service Points as the challenges, such as transport, were different;

- some communities felt that they were not being consulted and/or listened to and it was suggested they be involved in the review;
- whilst there was a strong emphasis on digitalising Council services, this did not work for those who did not have internet access and for the more complex enquiries;
- some had felt disconnected to the Council as phone calls had gone unanswered. This had improved as staff returned to offices but it was important that this means of contact was included in the review; and
- a lot of younger people did not like using the phone and preferred to use tools such as webchat. Webchat was more resource efficient and would be used by people with hearing or speech impairments or those who suffered from anxiety.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. the update on the opening hours across the Council's Service Point network; and
- ii. the outline of the recently agreed Connected Customers and Digitisation Redesign Board review.

11. Update on Waste Strategy Cunntas às Ùr mu Ro-innleachd Sgudail

There had been circulated Report No CP/25/22 dated 28 October 2022 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- splitting the recycling from paper and cardboard and other recyclates would involve another bin, resulting in some households having four bins;
- separating the recycling further would improve the quality and value of the recycling and reduce climate impact;
- if the bid to the Scottish Government Recycling Improvement Fund (RIF) was successful, it was questioned whether it would cover the entire cost of bin upgrades and replacements or if there would be costs that would fall to the Council. In response, it was confirmed the RIF would cover all the capital costs but there would, looking forward, be some revenue implications for the Council;
- the reduced size of the residual waste bins might not be sufficient for some, particularly those with large families or specific medical needs, and it was hoped that the present discretionary approach would continue in such circumstances;
- information was sought, and provided, as to what would happen to the existing general waste bins;
- the change to daily time restrictions in relation to access to Household Waste Recycling Centres by small vans and trailers was welcomed;
- to reach a recycling centre for those living in the south of Skye or Lochalsh involved over a 100 mile trip and, bearing in mind the cost of petrol and diesel and the cost of living crisis, it was suggested that a recycling facility be provided at Council depots in Broadford and Dornie, even if it was only one or two days each month. Otherwise, some householders might not be able to recycle and this could result in an increase in fly tipping;
- extending the opening hours of the Gairloch and Ullapool recycling centres to weekends enabled some residents to use the facilities who would not otherwise be able to do so, and this was to be encouraged. It was important, in terms of equality, that all were able to access this key Council service and a commitment

- was sought, and provided, that the review of opening hours would include options relating to weekend access;
- it was questioned how the public would respond to a less frequent collection service, but it was pointed out householders would still have a weekly bin collection but it would be a collection of different matter. In this regard, it was also confirmed that the same vehicle could be used for each weekly collection;
 - it was hoped that the proposals would also reduce waste and encourage repair and re-use;
 - information was sought, and provided, as to how the public would be encouraged and informed of what could now be included in recycling bins and the reasons for the change;
 - in response to a query, whilst it was hoped that some of the recycling collection vehicles would be electric, it was difficult to say at this point if it would be economically viable;
 - investing in resources to extend what could be recycled, such as various types of batteries, lightbulbs and tyres, was encouraged; and
 - clarification was sought as to the reasons why some DIY materials could not be taken to recycling centres in trailers or vans and whether some form of declaration could be included whereby householders could confirm that it was non-commercial. However, in response, it was explained that restrictions had been required as a result of costly unnecessary unlawful commercial use of recycling centres.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the contents of the report;
- ii. **APPROVED** the submission of a bid to the Scottish Government's Recycling Improvement Fund for capital costs connected to the implementation of service changes aligned to the Household Waste Recycling Charter;
- iii. **NOTED** the changes in Household Waste Recycling Centre restrictions from December 2022 and that the outcomes from the review of opening hours would be considered by Members in early 2023; and
- iv. **NOTED** the updated position on Waste Transfer Station infrastructure in Aviemore, Inverness and Fort William.

12. Minutes of the Waste Strategy Working Group Geàrr-chunntas Buidheann Obrach Ro-innleachd Sgudail

The Minutes of the Waste Strategy Working Group held on 20 October 2022 were **APPROVED**.

13. Urgent Additional Item: Review of UK Parliamentary Constituencies: Revised Proposals Ath-sgrùdadh de Roinnean-Pàrlamaid na RA: Molaidhean Ath-sgrùdaichte

In line with Standing Order 8, the Chair had agreed that this item be considered as an urgent item of business given the impending deadline (5 December) for responses to the Boundary Commission for Scotland's Revised Proposals relating to the 2023 Review of UK Parliament constituencies

Transparency Statement: Mrs J Hendry made a Transparency Statement to the effect that she had a connection to this item in that a family member was currently the Member of Parliament for the Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and

Strathspey constituency. However, having applied the objective test, she did not consider she had an interest to declare as the Council was being asked to make comments within a consultation period, after which the Boundary Commission would present their recommendations on future constituency boundaries to the UK Government by July 2023. At this moment in time, any future Westminster election was not confirmed as changed.

There had been circulated Report No CP/26/22 dated 11 November 2022 by the Executive Chief Officer, Performance and Governance.

During discussion, Members unanimously rejected the proposals and highlighted the following issues:-

- if the boundary proposals proceeded as laid out in the report four Council Wards would be split, namely, Wards 5, 12, 17 and 21. This would result in communities being divided and confusion. The example given was where a UK Government Fund was available for the Fort William area, the MP for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber would only be able to represent the area of Kinlochleven southwards. They would consequently have to liaise with the neighbouring MP for Inverness-shire and Wester Ross for Fort William. Neighbouring MPs might have different values, priorities and political viewpoints. Furthermore, if a Councillor from one of these four Wards needed to contact their local MP for advice or help they would need to check which MP it was;
- Lochaber generally spoke with a unified voice and any move to split the area would diminish it;
- local families on either side of a village, with welfare issues could have very different outcomes as a result of contacting two different MPs;
- an election would need cross boundary co-operation with Argyll and Bute and Moray Councils leading to more staffing time and expense to Highland Council and more information as to the resource implications was sought, and provided;
- these proposals reduced the number of elected representatives, thus increasing the democratic deficit that remote communities already experienced;
- placing large parts of Highland into Argyll and Bute and Moray Council areas was unacceptable as there was no community association with these areas and with many wanting to remain as highlanders;
- localism had not been taken into account or of what people saw as already established communities. There needed to be a better understanding of Highland and what Highland communities expected;
- there were political ramifications from these proposals;
- the consultation period was relatively short and would mean that some Community Councils would not have had time to consider the proposals and to respond. Highland Council had issued a Press Release to encourage communities to participate;
- the proposed Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross constituency was so large it would take up nearly half of the Highland Council area and it was questioned how an MP would be able to engage with constituents in such a large area;
- similarly, the Inverness-shire and Wester Ross constituency included Ullapool and Cradlehall – two very different communities considerably far apart – while Cradlehall and Culloden, which did have local ties, were in two different constituencies. Families and friends who shared local facilities such as schools, play parks etc would find themselves in two different constituencies, just so electorate numbers could be balanced;

- rather than splitting communities, constituency boundaries should use natural features such as rivers or open countryside;
- Skye would be in the Inverness-shire and Wester Ross constituency and yet there was no mention of it and the terminology would appear to refer to previous historical names;
- Highland should be treated similarly to the Islands as it had its own distinct character and culture which needed to be maintained;
- Highland wasn't as densely populated as cities but it would appear the same rules had been applied;
- the Boundary Commission's principles were recognition of community ties, regard of special geographical considerations where appropriate, consideration of local geography (such as transport links, other electoral and administrative boundaries and natural features), not crossing a Council area boundary and minimising any disruption caused by boundary changes; and
- while criticising the proposals, it was important that the integrity of the Boundary Commission was not attacked.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the revised proposals detailed in section 8 and Appendices A-D of the report;
- ii. **AGREED** to reject the proposals on the basis that they did not follow the Boundary Commission's own criteria of respecting natural geographical, Electoral Ward and community boundaries and that the current constituency boundaries should remain;
- iii. **AGREED** to delegate authority to the Executive Chief Officer for Performance and Governance to draft a response, which would be circulated to all Members for information and homologated at Full Council, based upon the debate and outcome at Committee; and
- iv. **AGREED** that the Council Leader lobby Highland MPs and the Secretary of State for Scotland to reject the Commission's proposals.

The meeting concluded at 2.50 pm.