**The Highland Council**

Minutes of Meeting of the **Corporate Resources Committee** held in the Chamber, Council Headquarters, Inverness on Thursday 7 March 2024 at 10.30 am.

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| **Present:**  Mr M Baird  Mr R Bremner  Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair  Mr R Gale  Mr J Grafton (substitute)  Mr R Gunn (substitute)  Mr B Lobban (remote) | Mr D Louden  Mr G MacKenzie  Mr T MacLennan (substitute)  Mr D Millar (remote)  Mr C Munro  Mr P Oldham  Ms M Reid (substitute) |
|  |  |
| **Non-Members also present:** |  |
| Mr K Gowans  Mr J MacGillivray  Mr R Mackintosh | Mr D Macpherson  Ms M Ross |

**Officials in Attendance:**

Mrs K Lackie, Interim Depute Chief Executive

Mr P Nevin, Interim ECO Performance and Governance

Ms E Barrie, Head of HR, Resources & Finance

Mrs S McKandie, Head of Revenues and Customer Services, Resources & Finance

Mr B Porter, Head of Corporate Finance, Resources & Finance

Mr J Shepherd, Head of ICT and Digital Transformation, Depute Chief Executive Service

Mrs L Dunn, Joint Democratic Services Manager, Performance & Governance

Ms A MacRae, Senior Committee Officer, Performance & Governance

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

**Mr D Louden in the Chair**

1. **Calling of the Roll and Apologies for Absence**

**Gairm a’ Chlàir agus Leisgeulan**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr J Bruce,Mr A Christie, Mr M Green, Mr A Jarvie, Mr S Kennedy, Mr S Mackie, Mr A Rhind and Mrs T Robertson.

1. **Declarations of Interest/Transparency Statement**

**Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt/ Aithris Fhollaiseachd**

There were no declarations of interest.

1. **Good News**

**Naidheachdan Matha**

The Committee **NOTED** the following good news story:

* Mr Millar Gamble had completed his Modern Apprenticeship qualification SQA Certificate in Payroll SCQF at level 6.

1. **Late Submission of Expenses Claims**

**A’ Cur A-steach airson Cosgaisean Anmoch**

It had previously been agreed by the Corporate Resources Committee that late submissions of Elected Members expenses claims would be presented to the Committee for approval.

The Committee **APPROVED** the following claims:

* Mrs Isabelle Campbell  £73.28 for 50% of Broadband expense for September 2023; and
* Mrs Margaret Paterson £66.15 for mileage for the month of October 2023.

**5. Appointments to Sub-Committees, Working Groups, etc**

**Cur an Dreuchd gu Fo-Chomataidhean, Buidhnean-obrach is eile**

The Committee **AGREED** the following appointments:

* Mr J Bruce to replace Mr R Stewart on Appeals and Disputes Committee; and
* Mrs T Robertson to replace Mr A MacDonald on Non-Domestic Rates Appeals Committee.

1. **Corporate Revenue and Capital Monitoring Report to 31 December 2023**

**Aithisg Teachd-a-steach Corporra agus Sgrùdadh** **Calpa gu 31 Dùbhlachd 2023**

1. **Corporate Revenue Monitoring to 31 December 2023**

**Sgrùdadh Teachd-a-steach Corporra gu 31 Dùbhlachd 2023**

There had been circulated Report No RES/01/24 by the Interim Head of Corporate Finance.

* whether the overspend on the Property & Housing budget due to fee earning staff vacancies was a result of vacancy management or recruitment challenges, reference being made to the impact on the Council’s income levels. It was confirmed the relevant officers would be asked to provide Mr R Gale with a more detailed response on this issue and reference made to measures approved at the Council’s budget meeting on 29 February 2024 to address income variances in respect of fee earning staff;
* the Council’s Welfare Team be congratulated on the excellent work being undertaken during the continuing cost of living crisis;
* further clarity was sought and provided on the overspend on the HRA and in terms of the rent increase agreed for 2023/24, noting the overspend was a variance on the overall budget agreed for the current financial year;
* information be provided on future spend projections on the HRA given the age profile of the Council’s housing and related concerns about the condition of some properties. It was confirmed this issue would be reported to the Housing & Property Committee and in the meantime the relevant officers would be asked to provide Mr J Grafton with more specific details on this matter; and
* in response to concerns at the impact of the Corran Ferry on the budget, an assurance was provided that all potential investment opportunities to support the provision of new ferries and infrastructure were being considered and further announcements in this regard would be forthcoming in the coming weeks.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the:

1. financial position of the General Fund and HRA revenue budgets as at 31 December 2023 and the estimated year end forecast; and
2. status of budgeted savings in the year.
3. **Corporate Capital Monitoring to 31 December 2023**

**Sgrùdadh Calpa Corporra gu 31 Dùbhlachd 2023**

There had been circulated Report No RES/02/24 by the Interim Head of Corporate Finance.

In discussion, further clarification was sought and provided on the Review of the Capital Programme and forecast underspend in respect of budgets that were no longer required this financial year and on the significant underspend on schools detailed at Appendix 1. It was confirmed that officers would provide Mr R Gale with more details on this matter if required.

The Committee **NOTED** the:

1. net spend to the end of Q3 2023/24, the forecast year end outturn and the funding profile; and
2. updated position of approved major capital projects.
3. **Revenue Budget Monitoring and Service Performance Reporting for Quarter 3: 1 October 2023 to 31 December 2023**

**Sgrùdadh Buidseat Teachd-a-steach agus Aithris Coileanadh Seirbheis airson Ràith 3: 1 Dàmhair 2023 gu 31 Dùbhlachd 2023**

1. **Depute Chief Executive’s Service**

**Seirbheis an Iar-Àrd-Oifigeir**

There had been circulated Report No RES/03/24 by the Interim Depute Chief Executive.

In considering the report, the low sickness absence rate of the service was recognised compared to the average for the Highland Council and perhaps some lessons learned could be gained from this for the rest of the Council.

The Committee**:**

1. **NOTED** the Service’s revenue monitoring position;
2. **NOTED** the Service’s performance and risk information; and
3. **AGREED** the suggested changes to planned targets in paragraph 6.2 of the report.
4. **Performance and Governance Service**

**Seirbheis a’ Choileanaidh agus an Riaghlachais**

There had been circulated Report No RES/04/24 by the Interim Executive Chief Officer Performance & Governance.

It was highlighted that there had been a slight decline in young people taking Gaelic learners education in secondary school. It was advised that the figures for the current academic year would be available soon and perhaps would give an update on the reasons for this decline. Generally, there was a mixed picture for each school as some schools were seeing an increase in demand for Gaelic learners education and some were unable to take on all the pupils who had requested Gaelic due to teacher timetables and availability. There were also declining school rolls in some areas which affected the numbers of Gaelic learners. However, there were positive increases in take up of Gaelic in nursery and primary education.

In terms of Corporate Communications, the Council was ranked 10 out of the 32 local authorities in Scotland and this reflected the number of followers the Council had on social media platforms such as Facebook and X.

In relation to the budget for licensing activities, it was clarified that the variance in figures related to short term licensing that had recently been introduced. The income from these were received in a lump sum but would require to be spread across the term of the licence which was three years. Therefore, adjustments to the budget would require to be made over that three year period.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the Service’s**:**

1. revenue monitoring position; and
2. performance and risk information.
3. **Resources and Finance Service**

**Seirbheis nan Goireasan agus an Ionmhais**

There had been circulated Report No RES/05/24 by the Interim Depute Chief Executive.

In particular, reference was made to a correction to the report in relation to paragraph 11.5 Nairn Connects BID levy, where the collection rate was 67.7% (and not 62.73% as shown in the narrative of the report).

Further, reference was made to the service risk relating to the delivery of the new Enterprise Resource Planning system which was showing some slippage. Part of this project related to the replacement of the financial system which was due to go live on 1 April 2024. Work was still ongoing to meet this deadline and communications on this project had been issued to staff in the last week. A further update on progress with this project would be issued to Members.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the Service’s**:**

1. revenue monitoring position; and
2. performance and risk information.
3. **Treasury Management – Summary of Transactions**

**Rianachd Ionmhais – Geàrr-chunntas Ghnothaichean**

There had been circulated Report No RES/06/24 by the Interim Head of Corporate Finance.

Congratulations were afforded to the Interim Head of Corporate Finance and the Finance Team for their hard and highly skilled work to maintain financial solvency of the Council.

Concern was expressed that the Council’s level of Gross External Borrowing was too close to the Operational Boundary and reference was made to the impact of this on the revenue budget to service loan repayments. It was suggested that this should be reviewed with a view to developing a plan to reduce the level of capital borrowing. It was explained that the Operational Boundary was set by the Council but this was aligned with the Capital Programme. Although it was highlighted it could be advantageous to undertake more borrowing if market rates were favourable.

The Committee **NOTED** the Treasury Management Summary of Transactions report for the period from 1 October 2023 to 31 December 2023.

1. **Resources and Finance Service Workforce Plan 2024-27**

**Plana Feachd-obrach Seirbheis nan Goireasan agus an Ionmhais**

There had been circulated Report No RES/07/24 by the Interim Depute Chief Executive.

In respect of section 7.2 of the report, officers were commended for the success of the Growing Our Own initiative and the efforts that had been made to nurture and develop talent.

Clarification was sought, and provided, regarding the staff turnover rate of 7.9% and it was confirmed that exit interviews were carried out to understand why staff were leaving and to pick up any learning gained.

The Committee **APPROVED** the Resources & Finance Service Workforce Action Plan at Appendix 2to the report.

1. **Staff Wellbeing Survey**

**Suirbhidh Sunnd Luchd-obrach**

There had been circulated Report No RES/08/24 by the Interim Depute Chief Executive.

In discussion, Members welcomed the survey and noted it had been anonymous, however concern was expressed at the low response rate particularly from Education and Learning staff. There was a need to understand the reasons for this and consider how to facilitate an improvement to the benefit of staff and their careers and the Council. It was hoped there would be a positive change in responses as a consequence of the learning from the survey. While it was important the survey was repeated after six months, there were concerns about the cost and the resources required to support staff wellbeing generally.

In response, an assurance was provided that the next survey would not be conducted over any holiday periods impacting on Education and Learning staff. In relation to costs, the survey had been conducted inhouse and at the Council’s recent budget meeting, funding for ‘Investors in People’ had been agreed which was part of an approach to invest in the continuing professional development and health and wellbeing of staff.

Thereafter, the Committee:

1. **NOTED** the survey results and the Executive Summary as contained in Appendix 1 attached to the report;
2. **AGREED** the next steps as outlined in Section 7 of the report.
3. **Highland Council Adopting Ecosia Search Engine**

**Comhairle na Gàidhealtachd a’ Gabhail ri Einnsean-luirg Ecosia**

There had been circulated Report No RES/09/24 by the Interim Depute Chief Executive.

In discussion, it was pointed out that while the concerns set out in the report were understood, the fact the symbolic aspect of the proposal was not mentioned in the report was an oversight. There were other institutions that had easily adopted Ecosia such as a large retail company, UK universities, and another local authority and it was hoped the proposal could be considered in future.

The Chair advised that the point around symbolism was acknowledged, however the main reasons for the recommendation not to adopt Ecosia were outlined in the report and this included issues of safety within schools and the use of Chromebooks. He thanked the Member that had brought forward the motion and the officers who had undertaken the assessment.

The Committee:

1. **NOTED** the report; and
2. **AGREED** not to adopt Ecosia as the Council’s default search engine.
3. **Minutes of Meetings**

**Geàrr-chunntasan Choinneamhan**

The following Minutes of Meetings had been circulated and:

1. **APPROVED** - Central Safety Committee held on 1 December 2023;
2. **APPROVED** - Staff Partnership Forum held on 8 February 2024; and
3. **NOTED** – Appeals and Disputes Committee held on 14 February 2024.
4. **Exclusion of Public**

**Às-dùnadh a’ Phobaill**

The Committee **RESOLVED** that, under Section 50A(4) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following item on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 6 & 9 of Part 1 of Schedule 7A of the Act.

1. **HRA Debts Recommended to be Written Off**

**Fiachan Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais gam Moladh airson Dì-sgrìobhadh**

There had been circulated to Members only Report No RES/10/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place.

Following discussion, the Committee **AGREED** the recommendations as set out in the report.

The meeting was closed at 11.55am.