

The Highland Council
No. 8 2023/2024

Minutes of Meeting of the Highland Council held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Thursday, 14 December 2023 at 10.35 am and reconvened on Thursday, 11 January 2024 at 10.30 am.

1. Calling of the Roll and Apologies for Absence
A' Gairm a' Chlàir agus Leisgeulan

Meeting on Thursday, 14 December 2023

Present:

Mr C Aitken (Remote)
Ms S Atkin
Mr M Baird
Mr C Ballance
Dr C Birt
Mr B Boyd
Mr R Bremner
Mr I Brown
Mr J Bruce
Mr M Cameron
Mrs I Campbell
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair
Mr A Christie
Mrs M Cockburn (Remote)
Ms T Collier
Mrs H Crawford
Ms S Fanet
Mr J Finlayson
Mr D Fraser
Mr L Fraser
Mr R Gale
Mr K Gowans
Mr J Grafton
Mr A Graham (Remote)
Mr D Gregg
Mr R Gunn
Mrs J Hendry
Ms M Hutchison
Mr A Jarvie (Remote)
Mrs B Jarvie (Remote)
Ms L Johnston
Mr R Jones
Mr S Kennedy
Ms E Knox
Ms L Kraft

Mr B Lobban
Mr P Logue
Mr D Louden
Ms M MacCallum (Remote)
Mr A MacDonald
Mr W MacKay (Remote)
Mr G MacKenzie
Mrs I MacKenzie
Mr A MacKintosh
Mr R MacKintosh
Mrs A MacLean (Remote)
Ms K MacLean
Mr T MacLennan (Remote)
Mr D Macpherson
Mrs B McAllister
Ms J McEwan
Mr J McGillivray (Remote)
Mr D Millar
Mr H Morrison
Mr C Munro
Ms L Niven
Ms M Nolan (Remote)
Mr P Oldham
Mrs M Paterson
Mrs M Reid
Mr M Reiss
Mr A Rhind
Ms T Robertson
Mr K Rosie (Remote)
Ms M Ross (Remote)
Mrs L Saggars (Remote)
Mr A Sinclair (Remote)
Ms M Smith
Mr R Stewart
Ms K Willis

Meeting on Thursday, 11 January 2024

Present:

| | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Mr C Aitken | Ms L Kraft |
| Ms S Atkin | Mr B Lobban |
| Mr M Baird | Mr P Logue (Remote) |
| Mr A Baldrey (Remote) | Mr D Louden |
| Mr C Ballance | Mr A MacDonald |
| Dr C Birt (Remote) | Mr W MacKay (Remote) |
| Mr B Boyd | Mr G MacKenzie |
| Mr I Brown | Mrs I MacKenzie |
| Mr J Bruce | Mr A MacKintosh |
| Mr M Cameron (Remote) | Mr R MacKintosh |
| Mrs I Campbell | Mrs A MacLean |
| Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair (Remote) | Ms K MacLean (Remote) |
| Mr A Christie | Mr T MacLennan (Remote) |
| Mrs M Cockburn (Remote) | Mr D Macpherson |
| Ms T Collier (Remote) | Ms M MacCallum |
| Mrs H Crawford | Mrs B McAllister |
| Ms S Fanet | Ms J McEwan (Remote) |
| Mr J Finlayson | Mr J McGillivray (Remote) |
| Mr D Fraser | Mr D Millar (Remote) |
| Mr L Fraser | Mr H Morrison (Remote) |
| Mr R Gale | Mr C Munro |
| Mr K Gowans | Mrs P Munro (Remote) |
| Mr J Grafton | Ms L Niven (Remote) |
| Mr A Graham | Mr P Oldham |
| Mrs J Hendry | Mrs M Paterson |
| Ms M Hutchison (Remote) | Mrs M Reid (Remote) |
| Mr A Jarvie (Remote) | Mr K Rosie (Remote) |
| Mrs B Jarvie (Remote) | Ms M Ross |
| Ms L Johnston (Remote) | Mrs L Saggars (Remote) |
| Mr R Jones (Remote) | Mr R Stewart |
| Mr S Kennedy | Ms K Willis |
| Ms E Knox | |

In Attendance:

Chief Executive
Interim Depute Chief Executive
Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place
Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning
Executive Chief Officer Health and Social Care
Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property
Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy
Interim Executive Chief Officer Performance and Governance
Head of Corporate Finance
Interim Head of People

Mr B Lobban in the Chair

Preliminaries

(On 11 January 2024)

Prior to the commencement of formal business, the Convener intimated that former Councillor Roderick Balfour had passed away that morning. Mr Balfour had left the Council at the last election after many years of stalwart service. He referred to his bright intellect, determined debating skills but also his kind and friendly demeanour. The Leader of the Opposition also paid tribute to Mr Balfour, a Highland gentleman, who would take time to talk to fellow Councillors. His mind was razor sharp and who would argue his case with logic, compassion and dignity. He particularly paid tribute to the exceptional work he did on the Council for the Armed Services and was a lead in the Council signing up to its Armed Forces Covenant. His legal background meant he was an invaluable member of the Citizens Advice Bureau, especially on welfare issues. He was a pleasure to know, and the Council's condolences were extended to his family and friends at this sad time.

1. **Calling of the Roll and Apologies for Absence** **Gairm a' Chlàir agus Leisgeulan**

Apologies for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr M Green for 14 December 2023 and Mr R Bremner, Mr M Green, Mr D Gregg, Mr R Gunn, Mr S Mackie, Ms M Nolan, Mr M Reiss, Mr A Rhind, Mrs T Robertson, Mr A Sinclair, and Ms M Smith for 11 January 2024.

2. **Declarations of Interest/Transparency Statement** **Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt/ Aithris Fhollaiseachd**

The Council **NOTED** the following Declarations of Interest:-

Item 7 – Mr D Louden and Mr M Baird

Item 14 – Mr C Munro, Mrs T Robertson and Mr K Rosie

The Council also **NOTED** the following Transparency Statements:-

Item 4.ii – Mr A Christie

Item 7 – Mr A Christie, Mr D Gregg, Mr C Munro and Mr R Stewart

Item 8 – Mrs A MacLean

Item 9 – Mr A Christie and Mr D Gregg

Item 10 – Mr A Christie and Mr D Gregg

Item 12 – Mr C Munro

Item 13 – Mr A Christie, Mr D Gregg, Mrs J Hendry and Mr C Munro

Item 16 – Mr A Christie, Mr D Gregg and Mr C Munro

Item 17 – Mr R Stewart

Item 18 – Mr A Christie

Item 19 – Mrs M Cockburn and Mr S Mackie

3. **Confirmation of Minutes** **Daingneachadh a' Gheàrr-chunntais**

There had been submitted for confirmation as a correct record the Minutes of Meeting of the Council held on 26 October 2023 as contained in the Volume which has been circulated separately which were **APPROVED**.

4. Minutes of Meetings of Committees Geàrr-chunntasan Choinneamhan Chomataidhean

There had been submitted for confirmation as correct records, for information as regards delegated business and for approval as appropriate, the Minutes of Meetings of Committees contained in Volume circulated separately as undernoted:-

| | Date |
|---|------------------|
| Easter Ross Area Committee | 30 October 2023 |
| Nairnshire Committee | 30 October 2023 |
| Lochaber Area Committee | 31 October 2023 |
| Sutherland County Committee | 31 October 2023 |
| Dingwall and Seaforth Area Committee | 6 November 2023 |
| Isle of Skye and Raasay Committee | 6 November 2023 |
| Black Isle Committee | 7 November 2023 |
| Housing and Property Committee | 9 November 2023 |
| Badenoch and Strathspey Committee | 13 November 2023 |
| Caithness Committee | 13 November 2023 |
| Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee | 15 November 2023 |
| Economy and Infrastructure Committee | 16 November 2023 |
| City of Inverness Area Committee | 20 November 2023 |
| Education Committee | 23 November 2023 |
| Communities and Place Committee | 29 November 2023 |
| Audit Committee | 30 November 2023 |
| Climate Change Committee | 5 December 2023 |
| Corporate Resources Committee | 7 December 2023 |
| Gaelic Committee | 8 December 2023 |
| Comataidh na Gàidhlig | 8 December 2023 |

The Minutes, having been moved and seconded were, except as undernoted, **APPROVED** – matters arising having been dealt with as follows:-

Sutherland County Committee, 31 October 2023

***Starred Item: Item 6 – Review of Winter Gritting Route Priorities in Lochinver Area**

The Council **AGREED** that the Council's Winter Service Policy be reviewed.

City of Inverness Area Committee, 20 November 2023

***Starred Item: Item 4 – Visit Inverness Loch Ness Business Improvement District**

The Council **AGREED** to support the Visit Inverness Loch Ness BID Proposal in the BID ballot.

***Starred Item: Item 6 - Inshes Junction Improvements - Proposed Compulsory Purchase Order (CPOs) and Stopping Up Orders**

The Council **AGREED** that plans for Inshes Junction Improvements as detailed in Appendix 1 of the report, were taken forward for use in progressing Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) for the scheme.

***Starred Item: Item 7 - Inverness Common Good Fund - Reclassification of Inverness Town House car park**

The Council **AGREED** that, although ownership of the car park would be reclassified as early as possible, the income from the car park continue to benefit the Inverness Common Good Fund until 31 December 2023.

Education Committee, 23 November 2023

***Starred Item: Item 8 - Community, Sports and Leisure Facility Strategy**

The Council **AGREED**:-

- i. the community/sport and leisure facility strategy set out in the report; and
- ii. subject to (i) above, that a report(s) be considered at a future Education Committee meeting which details plans for each Associated School Group area.

Notice of Amendment – Highland Scottish Credit & Qualification Framework (SCQF) Attainment and Scrutiny (Session 2021-22)

With reference to the Minutes of the Meeting of the Education Committee held on 23 November 2023, the following Notice of Amendment had been received in accordance with Standing Order 13:-

“Following a meeting of the Education Committee on the 23rd of November 2023.

The undersigned wish to amend the decision made in respect of item 5 of the agenda to include the following additional recommendation; “(i) Assess the impact, adverse or otherwise, that our poor school estate is having on attainment across Highland and report back to this Committee accordingly.”

Signed: Mrs H Crawford, Mr R Stewart, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr A Christie
Mrs A MacLean, Mr A Graham, Mrs T Robertson, Mr A MacDonald, Mr C Aitken, Mr M Baird, Ms M Nolan, Ms J McEwan, Mr R Gunn, Mrs B Jarvie, Mrs L Siggers

In this connection, there had been re-circulated Report No. ED/22/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning.

Speaking to the Notice of Amendment, Mrs H Crawford referred to the report on attainment in secondary schools that had been submitted to the Education Committee on 23 November 2023, emphasising that Highland trailed the national average in every graph and statistic. A Motion had been put forward at the Committee calling for officers to assess the impact, adverse or otherwise, the school estate was having on attainment across Highland and report back to the Committee. However, the Motion had been voted down. She asserted that the Council had a responsibility to assess the impact poor school buildings were having on children’s attainment and staff retention, and that a report should be submitted to the Education Committee in that regard to better inform Members as to what could be done to mitigate any impacts. The evidence showed that Highland trailed the national average in secondary attainment and, according to the Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels national data published by the Scottish Government earlier that week, Highland ranked equal bottom with Dumfries and Galloway for literacy and, for numeracy, shared the lowest ranking with Clackmannanshire and Shetland.

Highland had arguably the poorest school estate in Scotland and thousands of children were being educated in schools that were not fit for purpose. There were so many schools rated Category C for condition and suitability that virtually every Member would have one in their Ward. Members had heard the pupil voice about the impact on morale, and it was also necessary to consider the impact on health and wellbeing, and subsequently attainment, of studying or working in a school building that was damp and mouldy. The Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning, had stated that her aim was to raise attainment and that was applauded. The paper called for in the Notice of Amendment was precisely the type of assessment the Education Committee ought to consider and, having emphasised the importance of the issue to parents across Highland, she urged Members to support it.

In response, Mr J Finlayson stated he was sure all Members were in agreement about the need to try and improve the school estate and take into consideration how any aspect of a learning environment impacted on the delivery of education in schools.

At the most recent Education Committee, as part of the report referred to in the Notice of Amendment, Members had been asked to scrutinise and note three recommendations which had indicated that school-based attainment meetings would continue to take place on a regular basis and the Raising Attainment Action Plan would continue to be used to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap. Both these actions would include looking at the factors that influenced attainment and achievement, including assessing the impact of learning environments and school buildings. What was being asked for in the Notice of Amendment was therefore already happening as part of the “business as usual” agenda that Collaborative Leads and senior school staff worked on every day, and the analysis of school data showed limited correlation between attainment and building condition.

There were 89 primary schools large enough to allow access to attainment data at school level, and there were instances where attainment in almost new Category A buildings was very strong and other instances where improvement was needed. Similarly, some of the oldest Category C buildings were amongst the highest attaining establishments.

Despite the challenges the Council faced with its school estate, there were key factors that were central to improving both attainment and achievement and these were all part of the current Improving Attainment Strategy. The most important factor in delivering positive learning experiences would always be the quality of learning and teaching in schools and this continued to be a central focus. Other factors included highly effective leadership at all levels; having an improvement strategy that was known to all; providing relevant Continuous Professional Development and professional learning for all staff; having robust and understood assessment and moderation activities in place; ensuring there was strong and ongoing self-evaluation happening at all levels; and promoting parental engagement and support.

Clearly, having appropriate learning environments was also important and, as indicated, this was already factored into discussions with Collaborative Leads and other officers. Carrying out the specific assessment asked for in the Notice of Amendment would not provide any new information. Officer and teacher time was better spent supporting schools and, as such, he asked Members to support the decision taken by the Education Committee.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- concern was expressed regarding recent figures in respect of P1, P4 and P7 literacy and numeracy levels;
- it was necessary to look at all of the factors and what could be done to make things better, not only for pupils but for staff for whom the Council had a duty of care;
- Highland had the worst school estate in Scotland. Concrete action was required and it was necessary to bring a report forward, with the information in an easily accessible form, that highlighted the scope and scale of the issue and opened up a discussion as to how it could be addressed;
- the condition of the school estate was not a matter of opinion - it was the lived experience of the children who attended these schools, and reference was made to letters received from children stating that it was difficult to learn when water was dripping on their desks;
- concern was expressed regarding the deterioration of Inverness High School, the refurbishment of which had never been completed, and it was queried what had happened to the planned investment of £14.7m;
- the condition of the school estate spanned a number of Council Administrations, and there had never been enough money to refurbish or replace all the schools that needed it. The situation had been made worse by not getting Learning Estate Investment Programme (LEIP) funding, meaning there was insufficient money to address the top five priorities;
- there was no doubt that a good modern educational environment holistically improved learning, and reference was made to the difference in attitude and demeanour of pupils at Inverness Royal Academy after the new school building had opened;
- if the information requested in the Notice of Amendment was already available, it was requested that it be presented to a future Education Committee for scrutiny and discussion and to improve Members' awareness;
- as evidenced by the statistics, attainment in Highland was improving but other local authorities were improving faster, and it was necessary to understand what could be done to inject pace and urgency so Highland could overtake other authorities;
- Members were encouraged to view the workshops that had taken place on literacy and numeracy which would provide an understanding of the data collection taking place in Highland and the holistic work that went into supporting pupils;
- Members had been told for years that action was being taken to improve attainment but nothing had changed in terms of Highland's position in the rankings;
- teaching staff in Highland did a wonderful job but they were being asked to work in abysmal conditions;
- Members were all Corporate Parents which meant doing everything they could for every child in Highland, and the Council had a duty of care to raise the condition of the school estate as an emergency higher up in government;
- concern was expressed that the condition of schools posed potential danger to pupils and teaching staff, both mentally and physically;
- referring to depopulation, it was questioned whether people, having looked at education in the area, would want to move to Highland and bring their children up;
- Highland had once had the highest-ranking education in Scotland but sadly that was no longer the case;

- a question under item 5 related to the cost of carrying out repairs to the school estate, which had been estimated at £61.5m;
- more than a third of schools in Highland were officially in poor condition, and the Leader was commended for saying so, in a recent press article, in response to comments by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills that more than 90% of schools in Scotland were in acceptable condition. Members also commended the Executive Chief Officer, Housing and Property, for his support in helping staff with local school estate issues; and
- it was acknowledged that there might be limited correlation between the condition of the school estate and attainment but there was some and, whilst the improving attainment figures were caused for cautious optimism, any evidence that supported the Council's case for more funding was to be welcomed.

At this stage, in terms of Standing Order 18, Mr P Oldham, seconded by Mr D Millar, **MOVED** that the matter be put to the vote, and this was **AGREED**.

Having summed up, Mrs H Crawford, seconded by Mr R Stewart, **MOVED** the terms of the Notice of Amendment.

As an **AMENDMENT**, Mr J Finlayson, seconded by Mr D Millar, **MOVED** not to accept the Notice of Amendment and to confirm the decision of the Education Committee on 23 November 2023.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 29 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 38 votes, with 5 abstentions. The **AMENDMENT** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion:

Mr C Aitken, Mr M Baird, Mr A Baldrey, Mr J Bruce, Mr A Christie, Mrs H Crawford, Mr R Gale, Mr A Graham, Mr D Gregg, Mr R Gunn, Mr A Jarvie, Mrs B Jarvie, Mr P Logue, Ms M MacCallum, Mr A MacDonald, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mrs A MacLean, Mr D Macpherson, Mrs B McAllister, Ms J McEwan, Mr J McGillivray, Ms M Nolan, Mr M Reiss, Mrs T Robertson, Mrs L Saggars, Mr A Sinclair, Ms M Smith, Mr R Stewart.

For the Amendment:

Ms S Atkin, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Mrs B Campbell, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Ms T Collier, Ms S Fanet, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Mr K Gowans, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Mr R Jones, Mr S Kennedy, Ms E Knox, Ms L Kraft, Mr B Lobban, Mr D Loudon, Mr W MacKay, Mr G MacKenzie, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Mr C Munro, Mrs P Munro, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mr K Rosie, Ms M Ross.

Abstentions:

Mr C Ballance, Mr S Mackie, Mr R MacKintosh, Mr A Rhind, Ms K Willis.

Decision

The Council **AGREED** not to accept the Notice of Amendment and to confirm the decision taken by the Education Committee on 23 November 2023, as follows:-

- scrutinised and **NOTED** Highland's Senior Phase SCQF attainment for session 2022/23 and specifically **NOTED** the improvement in S4 attainment;

- ii. **NOTED** that secondary school-based attainment meetings would take place in November and December 2023 and actions for improvement would be agreed. At these meetings stretch targets for session 2023/24 would be set with each school; and
- iii. **NOTED** that the Raising Attainment Action Plan agreed at the September 2022 Education Committee continued to be used as a key driver to progress the attainment agenda in secondary schools and reduce the attainment gap.

It was also **AGREED** that a survey of school leavers be carried out to gather further information in relation to positive destinations.

Climate Change Committee, 5 December 2023

***Starred Item: Item 6 - Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy (LHEES) and Delivery Plan**

The Council **APPROVED** the Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy and Delivery Plan.

Minutes of Meetings not included in the Volume were as follows:-

Transparency Statement: Mr A Christie made a Transparency Statement in respect of item 4.ii as a Non-Executive Director of NHS Highland. However, having applied the objective test, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

- i. Highland and Western Isles Valuation Joint Board held on 22 June 2023 and 22 September 2023 (approved by the Board on 22 September 2023 and 17 November 2023) – which were **NOTED**;
- ii. Community Planning Board held on 15 September 2023 (approved by the Board on 5 December 2023) which were **NOTED**; and
- iii. Redesign Board held on 5 December 2023 which were **APPROVED**.

5. Question Time Àm Ceiste

The following Questions had been received by the Head of Legal and Governance.

Member Questions

(1) Mr A Christie

To the Leader of Council.

Please can you detail all positions within the Council from the level one below Head of Service, Head of Service, Executive Chief Officer and Depute Chief Executive where the postholder is interim, acting or temporarily carrying out the role including the date the arrangement started?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was asked if the Leader of the Council agreed it would be sensible to have a meeting of the Recruitment Panel in early 2024, to review these positions in more detail and produce a plan, given the length of time that some of these arrangements had been in place.

In response, the Leader of the Council agreed that a meeting would be sensible to move this forward and the Convener hoped it would be organised in early January 2024.

(2) Mr A Christie

To the Leader of Council

At Council on 26th October in reply to the request for a Special Meeting of Council to be held in January to discuss the Budget and the progress being made you undertook to review this suggestion with your colleagues in the Senior Leadership Group. To date I have not heard any outcome from your deliberations – What was the decision?

The response had been circulated.

There was no supplementary question.

(3) Mr M Reiss

To the Chair of Housing and Property

With reference to the recently completed review of Highland Council buildings, what is the approximate estimated financial cost of carrying out repairs to the School estate that have been identified as necessary within the next 17 months (to the end of the financial year 2024/25)?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was asked if the £61 million estimated cost of repairs within the next 18 months, that had been identified as essential, would be carried out.

In response, it was confirmed the Chair of Housing and Property would consult with the Executive Chief Officer, Housing and Property and respond to Mr Reiss in the new year.

(4) Mr R Gale

To the Chair of Housing and Property

Given that the loan charges associated with the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) is sitting at over half a million pounds per week what is the total outstanding level of debt being serviced by the HRA?

The response had been circulated.

There was no supplementary question.

(5) Mr M Baird

To the Leader of the Council

What checks are being carried out to ensure Highland Council owned Charging Points are fit for purpose?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was asked that, when the Council was informed of problems, repairs be expedited.

In response, it was confirmed that there were systems in place that could be followed up on.

(6) Mr A Baldrey

To the Chair of Communities and Place

As part of Highland Council's declared policy called 'Growing Our Future' it was stated that existing project officer time would be expanded to include food growing with a trial demonstration site using biochar to illustrate the combined benefits of improved produce yield and long term carbon sequestration, via the simplest and most widely accessible process known to mankind (i.e. that of controlled partial combustion of wood). Could you please update Members on the progress to date?

The response had been circulated.

There was no supplementary question.

(7) Mr C Ballance

To the Leader of the Council

In 2014 the Highland Council agreed a Community Benefit policy which promised that communities across the Highlands would benefit from renewable energy developments by 1) developers being required to pay a minimum £5000 per MW, RPI- linked to a baseline of 2011 and 2) the establishment of an arm's length organisation, Highland Trust Fund, to ensure that the development of onshore renewable energy would benefit all Highland communities. Could the Leader outline how successive administrations have progressed these commitments over the past 9 years?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was queried, given the same lack of levers to persuade energy generation companies to pay into the Highland Infrastructure Fund, why the Administration felt this would be more successful than in the last nine years.

In response, it was clarified that the Administration would strive to achieve the best that it could.

(8) Mr R MacKintosh

To the Chair of Communities and Place

To ask how much Glyphosate has been purchased and used by The Highland Council in the last 12 months.

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was queried, with the possible deadline for the elimination of Glyphosate having been set as December 2025 by the UK Government, if the Council was on track to eliminate its usage by the UK deadline.

In response, it was confirmed that 769 litres of Glyphosate was used by the Council in 2023 compared to 1269 litres used in 2022, a reduction of 40%. The Council would continue to look for suitable and affordable alternatives, recognising that there was currently no available pesticide as effective as Glyphosate. The Chair was fairly confident that the Council would be in accord with the legislation by December 2025.

(9) Ms K Willis

To the Chair of Communities and Place

I welcome in Council's food growing strategy "Growing Our Future", the commitment to improving food systems through signing the Glasgow Food and Climate Declaration, and the actions identified to address the challenges and opportunities across Highlands.

Please can the Chair provide an update on progress that has been made by Highland Council towards meeting the commitments of the Glasgow Food and Climate Declaration?

The response had been circulated.

There was no supplementary question.

(10) Mrs I MacKenzie

To the Leader of the Council

Landlines in the UK are going digital by 2025. Here in Highlands, we need to support residents who may not be aware or prepared for some consequences of this change, e.g. their Alarm Call systems stopping working.

Please may I ask how Highland Council will work with all telecoms providers, charity partners and our health care sector to ensure that senior citizens and vulnerable groups know about the change, how they will be impacted and what they need to do as a result - with appropriate signposting services?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was highlighted that it was becoming increasingly more difficult for people to function without internet access and skills and that the cohort most excluded were elderly people. It was queried what Highland Council would do to help promote digital inclusion for older people and decrease digital exclusion in Highland.

In response, the Leader recognised Councillor Mackenzie as a Champion for Older People and expressed hope that all strategic areas of the Council could note these comments and work with the Community Planning Partnership, community groups, the Highland Third Sector Interface and the Council's own Adult Social Care and Health and Wellbeing Services to see what could be done to further empower communities as well as the Council being able to deliver an improved service in terms of Councillor Mackenzie's comments.

(11) Mr A Graham

To the Leader of the Council

Charleston Academy: please provide full details of survey work being undertaken in connection with RAAC (Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete) including nature and extent of survey, number of companies involved and expected date of receipt of final report.

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was asked again if the information related to the most recent survey at Charleston Academy could be provided.

In response, the Leader of the Council undertook to liaise with officers on this issue and get back to all Members with the relevant information.

(12) Mr A Jarvie

To the Education Committee

What good news do you have to share about the Council's next steps for a replacement of St Clemente school?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was queried how many St Clements Schools could be built with the £70m of free cash reserves held by the Council.

In response, it was clarified that this was not a decision that could be taken by the Chair of Education and that work was ongoing to liaise with the Head Teacher of the school to look at what could be done in the short term. There was a meeting planned for Members the following week to look at longer term ambitions.

**6. Membership of Committees
Ballrachd Chomataidhean**

The Council **AGREED** that:-

- i. Mr R Stewart replace Mr A Sinclair on Housing and Property Committee and Pensions Committee;
- ii. Mr A MacDonald replace Mrs T Roberston on Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee; and
- iii. Mrs T Robertson replace Mr A MacDonald on Corporate Resources Committee.

7. Budget Update Cunntas às Ùr mu Bhuidseat

Declarations of Interest – Mr M Baird and Mr D Louden made Declarations of Interest as owners of second homes and, in accordance with paragraph 5.6 of the revised Code of Conduct, they left the meeting for this item.

Transparency Statements: the undernoted Members declared connections to this item but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that they had an interest to declare:-

Mr A Christie – as a Non Executive Director of NHS Highland

Mr D Gregg - as an employee of NHS Highland

Mr C Munro – as a short term let business owner and as a co-opted Director of SkyeConnect, a Destination Management organisation for Skye and Raasay

Mr R Stewart – as a close family member was an employee of Highland Council

There had been circulated Report No. HC/46/23 by the Head of Corporate Finance.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the Council Leader emphasised the challenging nature of the budget, with a £108m gap over the coming three years. All options were being considered to close the gap, but these would require mitigation which could involve job reduction, service delivery redesign, and challenging negotiations with partner organisations. A key aim was to protect jobs and the provision of statutory services. Communities were encouraged to engage with the online survey and budget simulator, which demonstrated some of the difficult choices that had to be made. Early feedback from the engagement process was summarised in the appendices to the report, and an additional recommendation would be sought seeking agreement that, to facilitate the work of the budget process, no special meetings of the full Council should take place prior to the special meeting of Council on 29 February 2024. Of particular challenge were the ongoing uncertainties around the budget settlement and Council tax decisions awaited from the UK and Scottish Governments;
- the Leader of the Opposition expressed concern at the prospect of removing the option to hold an additional special meeting prior to the Council's budget meeting, pointing out that the financial challenges faced were the most significant in the Council's history. He suggested that many vulnerable people or those living in poverty would not have had the opportunity to participate in the budget engagement process. There was insufficient information being provided on the detail of the budget pressures and proposed savings measures;
- the Convener clarified that the budget meeting on 29 February 2024 was a special meeting;
- assurance was sought, and provided, that the Leader's proposed amendment was competent and would only be relevant to special Council meetings relating to the budget, not to any different urgent matters that might arise. Some Members pointed out that, as there were many uncertainties in relation to Scottish and UK Government funding decisions, an urgent budget item could arise between now

and the end of February 2024, and it was important to be able to discuss issues in an open, democratic, and transparent manner. Attention was drawn to the financial cost of full Council meetings;

- it was suggested there was insufficient information in the report on issues relating to High Life Highland and Eden Court, and to ear-marked and non-earmarked reserves;
- assurance was sought, and provided, that the implementation of council tax charges for second homes would include a grace period following a death, although the details had not been finalised for this;
- the importance of non-digital means of public engagement was emphasised, with particular reference to elderly people, and a summary was provided of the engagement that had been undertaken to date;
- it was suggested that consideration be given to the use of the Council's pension fund surplus to help close the budget gap, and it was explained that decisions about the pension fund were the remit of Pensions Committee;
- with reference to the current minimum wage per hour of £11.89, and ongoing discussion at CoSLA to raise this to £15 over the coming two years, it was queried what measures were being put in place to tackle salary differentials and increases. It was clarified that no decision had yet been taken on the proposal to increase the minimum wage to £15 per hour;
- with reference to the plans detailed in the report to make £25.7m of budget savings in the coming year, and £55m over three years, it was queried what percentage of 2023-24 budget savings target had been achieved;
- it was pointed out that respondents to the survey had expressed a preference for the lowest increase in council tax, however simulator respondents had chosen to maximise income and minimise cuts;
- support was voiced for implementation of the discretionary 200% charge on Council Tax on second homes;
- while the budget simulator gave a good indication of the difficult choices being faced, it was simplistic and only a very small percentage of the population had engaged with it;
- the Council's borrowing strategy should be reviewed to facilitate the paying off of historic debt;
- the Leader's reference to protecting statutory services was queried;
- it was disappointing the funding decisions from the UK and Scottish Governments were late and not long-term;
- High Life Highland could face challenging times without funding assistance from the Council. This would be covered at the budget meeting on 29 February 2024;
- it was queried how many paper surveys versus online surveys had been completed;
- information was sought, and would be circulated after the meeting, on Members' personal liabilities in the event of the Council failing to balance the budget;
- Members queried the use of unoccupied premises for addressing the budget gap, and sought assurance that further cuts to jobs would not be made in areas that were already under-staffed, with particular reference to adult social care and children's services;
- concern was expressed at the impact the budget situation might have on third sector organisations that provided valuable services on behalf of the Council;
- it was considered that useful information and suggestions were being obtained from the public engagement process and Members themselves were urged to participate;
- the importance of income generation was emphasised; and

- Members emphasised the importance of receiving the papers for the budget meeting on 29 February 2024 ten days in advance of the meeting, in compliance with Standing Orders.

Mr R Bremner, seconded by Mr J Finlayson, **MOVED** the recommendations as detailed in the report, with the following addition:-

- xi. to agree that, in order to facilitate the work of the budget process, no special meetings of the full Council will take place prior to the special meeting of Council on 29 February 2024.

Mr R Gale, seconded by Mr R Gunn, moved as an **AMENDMENT**, the recommendations as detailed in the report, with the following addition:

- xi. that we will review our borrowing strategy to develop a strategy to pay off our historic debt and to introduce a means of paying capital as well as interest in the life of all borrowing going forward.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 41 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 27 votes, with 1 abstention, and the **MOTION** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:

For the Motion:

Ms S Atkin, Mr C Ballance, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Mrs B Campbell, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Ms T Collier, Ms S Fanet, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Mr K Gowans, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Mr R Jones, Mr S Kennedy, Ms E Knox, Ms L Kraft, Mr B Lobban, Mr W MacKay, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Mr C Munro, Ms P Munro, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mr A Rhind, Mr K Rosie, Ms M Ross, Ms K Willis.

For the Amendment:

Mr C Aitken, Mr J Bruce, Mr A Christie, Mrs H Crawford, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Mr D Gregg, Mr R Gunn, Mr A Jarvie, Mrs B Jarvie, Mr P Logue, Ms M MacCallum, Mr A MacDonald, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr S Mackie, Mrs A MacLean, Mr D Macpherson, Ms J McEwan, Mr J McGillivray, Ms M Nolan, Mr M Reiss, Mrs T Robertson, Mrs L Saggars, Mr A Sinclair, Ms M Smith, Mr R Stewart.

Abstention:

Mr A Baldrey.

Decision

The Council:-

- i. **NOTED** the information set out in section 4 of the report relating to the Council's forecast budget gap, underlying assumptions and risks;
- ii. **NOTED** the update provided regarding actions to address the budget gap over a three-year budget planning period, and the level of targeted measures from fiscal flexibilities and budget savings;
- iii. **NOTED** the update regarding services pressures for 2024/25 – 2026/27, work ongoing to capture, quantify and assess these, and for information the list of 2023/24 agreed service pressures enclosed for information as Appendix 1 to the report;

- iv. **NOTED** the update on fiscal flexibilities and further work ongoing, elements of which would form options for Member consideration and decision on 29 February 2024;
- v. **AGREED**, subject to enabling legislation, to implement the discretionary 200% charge on Council Tax on Second Homes with effect from 1 April 2024, or as early as permitted in terms of legislation;
- vi. **NOTED** the section on income generation, as a key strand of the Council's budget planning approach, and cross-reference to other business on this Council agenda relation to income from fees and charges, income from tourism, and income from green energy and renewables;
- vii. **NOTED** the interim feedback from the Council's budget consultation and budget simulator activity, including feedback as set out in Appendix 2 to the report, with further analysis and briefing/reports to Members in the new year;
- viii. **AGREED** to adopt the Reserves Strategy as set out in Appendix 3 to the report;
- ix. **NOTED** the update provided regarding the Housing Revenue Account; and
- x. **NOTED** the updated budget timetable as set out at Appendix 4 to the report.;
- xi. **AGREED** that, in order to facilitate the work of the budget process, no special meetings of the full Council would take place prior to the special meeting of Council on 29 February 2024; and
- xii. **AGREED** that detail of Elected Members' liability be circulated to all Members.

8. **Resetting the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan Ag Ath-shuidheachadh Plana Leasachadh Thoraidhean na Gàidhealtachd**

Transparency Statement: Mrs A MacLean declared a connection to this item as a Director of the Highlands and Islands Society for Blind People and Sight Action covering both the Western Isle and Highland Council areas (Sight Action had a contract with Highland Council to deliver Children's Services and NHS Highland for supporting adults) but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that she had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No. HC/47/23 by the Chief Executive.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- there was support for the review and the leadership shown in recognising the need for change and the work of the Partnership in taking this forward;
- while a broader approach was proposed, addressing inequalities and ensuring the sustainability of communities in Highland remained at the core of the HOIP;
- it was hoped a seminar would be held to enable all Members to input into the review, the date to be confirmed in due course;
- the mobilisation of community action had to be at the heart of the Partnership;
- in resetting the HOIP, there should be no reduction in focus on poverty and inequalities, community participation, and mental health and wellbeing;
- Education and improving attainment required to be a stronger feature within the Plan and woven into the infrastructure of community planning;
- the importance of community empowerment and of communities being involved at all levels in community and place based planning was emphasised;
- formal engagement with the Third Sector was critical given its importance to the Highlands. It was confirmed the Third Sector was represented on the Partnership;
- as part of the process of resetting the Plan, a summit should be held including Community Planning Board attendee bodies, Councillors, Partner and Third Sector organisations to review delivery models, redesign of services ideas and recommend priorities for future activity;

- the Council expressed the view that in future it would be preferable if meetings of the Community Planning Partnership Board were held in public rather than in private session unless there was a valid recommendation otherwise;
- key issues in rural areas included population decline, housing for essential workers, barriers to childcare and lack of sustainable community transport and specific reference to the partnership work being undertaken in Sutherland to address these issues;
- there was potential for more support to be provided to local community planning partnerships across Highland; and
- the need to develop an older people's strategy and consider all aspects of community planning to deliver age friendly communities in Highland, including an appropriate mix of affordable housing, was called for.

Decision

The Council:-

- AGREED** the work outlined to date to reset the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan;
- NOTED** the next steps planned and that this would support the review and its consequential impact on planned developments in Highland Council's future activity;
- AGREED** that as part of the process of resetting the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan a summit be held including Community Planning Board attendee bodies, Councillors, Partner and Third Sector organisations to review delivery models, redesign of services ideas and recommend priorities for future activity; and
- AGREED** that the Council expressed the view to the Community Planning Partnership Board that in future it would be preferable if meetings were held in public rather than in private session unless there was a valid recommendation otherwise.

9. Assessing Future Population Related Challenges in the Highland Council Area A' Measadh nan Dùbhlann a' Buntainn ri Sluagh san Àm ri Teachd ann an Sgìre Chomhairle na Gàidhealtachd

Transparency Statements: the undernoted Members declared connections to this item but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that they had an interest to declare:-

**Mr A Christie – as a Non Executive Director of NHS Highland
Mr D Gregg - as an employee of NHS Highland**

There had been circulated Joint Report No. HC/48/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy, Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property and Executive Chief Officer Health and Social Care.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- a long term integrated strategy was necessary;
- the report was timeous given the range of opportunities across Highland being developed. It was hoped this would halt, and reverse, depopulation by retaining and attracting young people. These included initiatives such as the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport and it was important that the economic benefits were shared across Highland;

- to maximise the benefits of the Green Freeport it was essential that young people were equipped with the skills that would be required;
- it was important to support long term micro economies;
- historical data of population changes had been provided over a ten year period together with the trends that were predicted to continue into the future. This would enable interventions to be targeted where they were most effective;
- the population around the Moray Firth area was growing whilst other areas, such as Caithness and the West Highlands, had seen population decline and therefore, when considering the percentage data provided, it was important to take existing levels of population into account and the scale of the impact of changes. Going forward, the depopulation would create a crisis in rural areas;
- a small change in the number of people living in or leaving a rural area could have a significant impact and the economic and sustainability effect would be acutely felt;
- in areas where major population increases were predicted it was important to ensure that services, resources and the necessary infrastructure were sustainable and in place;
- the net increase in Highland's population was predicted as 1.4%, below the Scottish average of 2.7%, whilst the number of people aged over 65 was higher than the Scottish average. This meant the Highland population was getting older with a consequential impact on Council Services;
- education was a key component as many young people who left to go to university did not return and more needed to be done to retain them. It was doubtful if maximum benefit had been made of the University of the Highlands and Islands and funding for some courses, that would have helped to ensure sustainability, had been removed;
- similarly, long term planning was required to ensure there was capacity in schools in Inverness to meet the demands of an increasing population;
- housing was also an issue and one reason why the population of the Inner Moray Firth was growing was because, unlike many rural areas, there was a supply of affordable accommodation;
- rural communities needed support so they were able to work with partners to look at innovative housing solutions;
- it was commented that there was no gauge to measure the need for social housing in rural areas;
- it was vital social care was sustainable so it was essential to work closely with partners and stakeholders and to make social care an attractive career prospect;
- a call was made for political group leaders to write to the First Minister pointing out that, unless the National Care Home Contracts was addressed, larger care homes outside of Inverness would be unviable. An allowance therefore needed to be made for Highland recognising its unique geography and demographics so that elderly people did not have to move significant distances from where they lived to access adult social care;
- keeping the aging population healthy was important but there was no mention of Public Health initiatives to reduce frailty in later life;
- community ownership in rural areas had frequently seen growth and an increase in housing as a result, Eigg and Knoydart being cited as examples. Community engagement was important but community empowerment needed to be the aim and therefore a change in the pattern of land ownership was necessary to protect the future of rural areas;
- vibrant healthy communities were part of the solution;
- the provision of Early Learning and Childcare in rural areas was vital to repopulate and build community resilience and should be included as a priority;

- environment and ecological matters, such as peat bog and native woodland restoration, would revitalise communities and provide employment opportunities;
- the cost of living in rural areas was estimated to be between 20-60% more expensive depending on the distance from a main population centre;
- given the predicted decrease in the population of north Highland, calls were made for someone to champion the area in the Scottish Parliament. Scottish Government funding was generally based on population and the time had now come for this to be revisited so that the Central Belt was not unfairly favoured;
- the allocation of Scottish Government funding for addressing depopulation, to be shared between three local authorities, was meagre; and
- a whole system approach was required if the compound impact of inadequate funding and the high cost of service delivery on rural areas was to be reversed.

Decision

The Council:-

- NOTED** the population trends affecting the Highland area;
- NOTED** the specific challenges facing Highland Council and NHS Highland relating to social care provision;
- AGREED** that further planning be done on a comprehensive response to the Scottish Government Repopulation Action Plan, using the framework set out in Paragraph 7.4 of the report; and
- AGREED** a letter be sent from all Group Leaders to the First Minister pointing out the inadequacies and failures of the existing funding formula for National Care Home Contracts (as outlined in section 5.3 of the report). The letter should request the government to revise this formula and put in place a fairer funding model which recognised the uniqueness of Highland geography and demographic challenges being faced.

10. A Review of Property Assets Maintained by Highland Council and a Future Approach to Strategic Capital Planning **Ath-sgrùdadh de Sho-mhaoinean Seilbhe air an Cumail Suas le Comhairle na Gàidhealtachd agus Dòigh-obrach Theachdail do Phlanadh Calpa Ro-innleachdail**

Transparency Statements: the undernoted Members declared connections to this item but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that they had an interest to declare:-

Mr A Christie – as a Non Executive Director of NHS Highland
Mr D Gregg - as an employee of NHS Highland

There had been circulated Report No. HC/49/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the Council owned a vast number of properties and other assets and it was now time critical that this was reduced, managed and the functionality and efficiency of each improved. Together with the land audit, this would help to reduce costs, take advantage of economic opportunities and manage risks appropriately;

- the Council was facing cost pressures in terms of inflation, inflated construction costs, high interest rates and reduced funding. Property maintenance and energy costs also outweighed the available budget and the approach suggested outlined a methodology to assess need and risk that would enable the Council to streamline its assets and align them to ensure effective and sustainable Service delivery in Highland;
- the honesty of the report, in setting out the challenges the Council faced, was to be commended. £60m was required to repair Council properties and bring them up to an acceptable standard. In this regard, a breakdown of the Priority 1-4 of repairs was requested at either Area or Ward level;
- if High Life Highland properties and schools were to be included in the scope for rationalisation, together with focusing on five administrative hubs, then this would exacerbate the depopulation crisis. There was concern therefore about how the Council's policy of rationalisation would be aligned to addressing the issues raised in the previous item and a risk analysis was suggested. In addition, in the implications section, the impact on depopulation needed to be gauged going forward for all reports. This might mean locating offices etc in the rural areas, thus providing well paid jobs, rather than centralising in Inverness;
- the Council were faced with the challenge of how to balance the matter of depopulation at the same time as managing the Council's assets. Many Council offices were now under used and it was contended that, with new ways of working, disposing of properties did not necessarily mean that jobs were lost to that area and that it could in fact make posts more cost effective;
- calls were made, in relation to paragraph 7.8 of the report, to include the Council's Drummie Office as one of six key offices to ensure that the needs of the people of Sutherland were met going forward given it lay halfway between Caithness and Ross-shire. It would also ensure that it remained a focal point for locals with a number of services being located there;
- the strategic capital planning approach was welcomed;
- it was suggested that the CCFM and Revenue budgets be frozen meantime, rather than reduced, until the project was underway;
- £10.6m was required, at present, to bring depots up to correct standards;
- the idea of a "super" depot would be impractical given the geography of Highland;
- it was queried how many of the Council's 3,500 assets were liabilities;
- it was also queried how the proposal sat with Place Based Planning and "20 minute" communities, as detailed in National Planning Framework 4, so that communities were involved before decisions about facilities were made. It was important for the project to recognise what was best for the community and not simply a mechanism to save the Council money;
- it might also be the case that properties were shared with other community planning partners and discussion with them would also be required; and
- the Redesign Board had considered this matter in detail and there was a realisation that not all properties could be kept and, to balance the budget, difficult decisions would be required.

Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, seconded by Mr L Fraser, **MOVED** the recommendations as detailed in the report.

Mr R Gale, seconded by Mr M Reiss, moved as an **AMENDMENT**, the recommendations as detailed in the report, with the following addition:-

- vi. that, in relation to paragraph 7.8 of the report, the Council's Drummie Office be included as one of six Key Offices to ensure that the needs of the people of

Sutherland were met going forward and to act as a halfway point between Caithness and Ross-shire.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 36 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 28 votes, with 2 abstentions, and the **MOTION** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:

For the Motion:

Ms S Aitkin, Mr C Ballance, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Mrs B Campbell, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Ms T Collier, Ms S Fanet, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Mr K Gowans, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Mr R Jones, Mr S Kennedy, Ms E Knox, Ms L Kraft, Mr B Lobban, Mr D Louden, Mr W MacKay, Mr G MacKenzie, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr C Munro, Mrs P Munro, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mr K Rosie, Ms M Ross.

For the Amendment:

Mr C Aitken, Mr M Baird, Mr A Baldrey, Mr J Bruce, Mr A Christie, Mrs H Crawford, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Mr D Gregg, Mr R Gunn, Mrs B Jarvie, Mr P Logue, Ms M MacCallum, Mr A MacDonald, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mrs A MacLean, Mr D Macpherson, Ms J McEwan, Mr J McGillivray, Mr H Morrison, Ms M Nolan, Mr M Reiss, Mrs T Robertson, Mrs L Saggars, Ms M Smith, Mr R Stewart.

Abstention:

Mr R MacKintosh, Ms K Willis.

Decision

The Council:-

- i. **NOTED** the background data provided regarding the condition of the Council's buildings and asset base and the cost estimate of mitigating these challenges;
- ii. **NOTED** the proposed further asset rationalisation workstreams, the proposed process for the review of built environment assets maintained by Highland Council, and proposals for service involvement;
- iii. **NOTED** the proposed concept of a Single Property Service (SPS) model to manage all built environment assets going forward, with the detailed proposals as to implementation to come forward in a separate paper to next Council for approval;
- iv. **APPROVED** the proposed future approach to strategic capital planning; and
- v. **APPROVED** the repurposing of the old HQ building on Ardross Street back into office accommodation to unlock further rationalisation opportunities across office estate, as set out at 7.5 of the report, given the non-viability of it being converted into housing.

11. Highland Council Energy Transformation: Unlocking Renewable Energy Prospects
Cruth-atharrachadh Lùtha Chomhairle na Gàidhealtachd: A' Fuasgladh Dhùilean Lùth So-ùrachaidh

There had been circulated Report No. HC/50/23 by the Interim Depute Chief Executive.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- regarding paragraph 5.6 of the report, the intent was to lobby for mandatory contributions from windfarm developments;
- the Highland Council had developed, and were continuing to develop, extensive interventions to reduce in-house costs and boost income for renewable energy. In this regard actions needed to be taken to reduce electricity consumption at the appropriate scale to make an impact;
- thanks were conveyed to the officers for their hard work and for the report;
- Members welcomed the emphasis on heat networks but the ongoing maintenance costs of repairing Heat Network infrastructure should be included within the business case;
- paragraph 7.3 of the report was highlighted as a priority action for the Council. It was queried if there was full confidence that the important energy efficiency commitments for Housing stock would be met;
- it was essential that community ownership received further investigation to empower them to take control and increase local income;
- it was expected that applications to all the potential available funding schemes would be undertaken to maximise utilisations. However, it was suggested that the £350 Electric Vehicle (EV) Chargepoint Grant for Landlords might not be worth applying for;
- Members were urged to consider the long-term community benefit investments for windfarm generated income. It was suggested that a cross party Working Group be formed to consider the subject of community benefit and where this money should go. In response it was confirmed that the governance, management and Member input were deemed sufficient and a separate Working Group would not be necessary;
- regarding 5.4 of the report, concern was raised if speeding up the process would impact on the planning process and, if so, what the environmental impact would be;
- regarding 6.6 of the report, it was confirmed that the new Heat Networks would include Fort William;
- it was emphasised that all opportunities needed to be balanced against the impact on local communities and the local environment;
- concern was raised by many that Highland landscapes were becoming dominated by electrical transmission infrastructure which was sent to other parts of the UK but local people had to pay considerably more to connect and use energy from the grid. Further concern was raised regarding the environmental impact as installing the infrastructure often required peat disturbance or removal which in turn released carbon dioxide;
- the dangers should be highlighted as a priority and considered in terms of advancing with Highland renewable energy infrastructure, such as fire fighting requirements if battery storage compounds were to go on fire. In this regard the Scottish Government should be approached for their help in developing renewable energy solutions with residents' wellbeing at the centre;
- the report was a strategic overview of the direction to be taken by Highland Council and details would follow as officers' work progressed. It was also emphasised that all Highland communities should benefit from the income, not just in the communities that generated renewable energy;
- disappointment was expressed that hydro electric solutions had not been included within the report;
- it was requested that properties which had an Air Source Heat Pump system installed be reviewed if solar and battery could be retrospectively installed to assist with fuel poverty;
- health and safety should remain a top priority across all renewable solutions;
- opportunities for joint ventures should be taken to ensure that local communities

greatly benefitted from the arrangements. In this regard, information was sought on how officers would demonstrate the progression of joint ventures for the net zero ambition;

- the biggest risk was that Highland Council was not bold or quick enough with this great opportunity and might be left behind and therefore pace and urgency were required. However, it was also felt that due diligence and due caution should be applied to take into account the associated risks;
- regarding 5.3 of the report, there was an urgent need to improve and develop the Council's industrial strategy to benefit from available funds;
- it was confirmed that discussions with Highland and Islands Private Action Hub were going well, and a Highland COP 2024 event was being planned. This would provide a platform for academia, private and public voluntary sector, community organisations and Scottish and UK Government representatives;
- opportunities to improve the energy efficiencies of Council housing, like the installation of additional insulation materials, should be taken forward to assist with the cost-of-living impact on tenants;
- caution should be taken when discussing community wealth building projects as some communities might not want the energy infrastructure in their area, and the money that came with it;
- regarding 6.4 of the report, it was queried if there was sufficient time for officers to review SSEN's quotation return date of 8 February 2024 and the subsequent budget meeting;
- it was queried if the net income would be reinvested back into the network. In addition, it was requested that consideration be given to rural areas whereby a surcharge of £40 was applied after 45 mins charge time which was putting consumers off using the EV chargers;
- it was felt that communities might not welcome Highland Council distributing the community wealth income expenditure across the highlands;
- it was confirmed that additional works were going on behind the scenes to support progress already being made. Highland Council representatives had opportunities to meet with Ministers from Scottish Government and UK Government, and the Council was committed to doing that;
- nuclear energy was a low carbon option which also filled energy gaps when there was no solar or wind available; and
- it was recognised that decisions made today would impact future generations. For example, it was understood electricity pylons put people off living in certain areas of Highland.

Decision

The Council:-

- i. **AGREED** that a focussed piece of work was undertaken to set out what the Council's ask should be for a Highland Infrastructure Fund;
- ii. **AGREED** the measures set out in detail at paragraph 5.5 of the report relating to the development of complimentary approaches relating to community benefit and community wealth building; and
- iii. **NOTED** the intention was to bring forward a detailed portfolio plan for renewables investment as part of the Council's budget in February 2024.

12. Maximising Income Generation in Highland Council A' Meudachadh Togail Teachd-a-steach ann an Comhairle na Gàidhealtachd

Transparency Statement: Mr C Munro declared a connection to this item as a short term let business owner and as a co-opted Director of SkyeConnect, a Destination Management organisation for Skye and Raasay, but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Joint Report No. HC/51/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place and Executive Chief Officer, Infrastructure, Environment & Economy.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- each service was taking forward a critical analysis with creative and forward-thinking energy, including areas such as energy, tourism, and digital transformation. The Income Generation Board was welcomed and communication with Members was critical;
- the opportunities to assist with sustainable communities were welcomed;
- assurance was sought, and provided, that the remit of the Income Generation Board would be considered and approved by the Corporate Resources Committee. It was suggested that business cases be considered by the Committee prior to excessive expenditure on potential projects, and that income generation become a standing item on the Corporate Resources Committee agenda;
- reference was made to the power of general competence currently available for English local authorities to utilise, and it was welcomed that this was an aspiration of CoSLA within the negotiations with Scottish Government as part of the Verity House process;
- caution was urged in relation to unintended consequences, for example raising letting charges in a blanket manner, which could make halls unaffordable to community groups providing valuable services, such as youth groups or lunch clubs for the elderly or the vulnerable; and
- it was important to ensure a partnership approach between the Income Generation Board and localities, and to ensure projects empowered communities.

Decision

The Council:-

- i. **NOTED** the work done to consider mechanisms to generate income as part of wider budget considerations;
- ii. **AGREED** that these propositions would be considered by Council in relation to the upcoming three year budget setting process;
- iii. **AGREED** to reflect on any other areas of income generation they would like officers to consider within available powers;
- iv. **AGREED** that the Income Generation Board described in the paper be established, subject to the remit being approved by the Corporate Resources Committee;
- v. **NOTED** that these proposals were supported and recommended to Council by the Redesign Board; and
- vi. **AGREED** that income generation be a standing item on the agenda for the Corporate Resources Committee.

13. Developing a Strategy to Enable a Future Workforce – A Strong and Fair Economy for all

A' Leasachadh Ro-innleachd airson Feachd-obrach a Chomasachadh dhan Àm

ri Teachd – Eaconamaidh Làidir is Chothromach dhan a h-Uile Duine

Transparency Statements: the undernoted Members declared connections to this item but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that they had an interest to declare:-

Mr A Christie – as a Non Executive Director of NHS Highland

Mr D Gregg - as an employee of NHS Highland

Mrs J Hendry - a shareholder for Teclan Ltd and one of their clients was the Virtual Learning Academy Ltd, based in Invergordon

Mr C Munro - as a short term let business owner and as a co-opted Director of SkyeConnect, a Destination Management organisation for Skye and Raasay

There had been circulated Joint Report No. HC/52/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning and Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- Members welcomed the report, particularly reference to acceleration of pathways to retain talent in the Highlands, and recognised the need to work collaboratively with other key partners to develop a strategy to improve employment opportunities in the Highlands. It was queried if any financial support could be provided from the other partners;
- although supportive of the report, concern was expressed regarding inclusion of the secondary curriculum, but it was clarified that feedback from the Board would be used to inform further strategy around the curriculum pathway;
- it was important the work of the Workforce for the Future Board started at pace and it was confirmed that the Board would be broadened to include science and health as well as further dialogue being undertaken to determine the governance arrangements;
- reference was made to the importance of the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), which it was felt was a key partner, not only for retaining talent but also for attracting students from outwith the Highlands who might then continue to live in the area at the conclusion of their studies;
- as well as the UHI, there was a need to develop relationships with other universities in Scotland with a view to them establishing campuses in the Highlands to enable students to study at different educational institutions within the Highlands;
- the need for inward migration to support the Highland economy and help reduce depopulation. However, it was stressed that infrastructure, e.g. housing and public transport, needed to be improved to encourage and support this;
- the importance of building for the future was stressed and with this in mind there was a need to tie learning into well paid jobs of the future, e.g. renewable energy, which would transform the Highland economy and make employability more sustainable;
- concern was expressed that the report did not make reference to Highland Third Sector organisations. Further information was sought on whether any work was being undertaken to ascertain their employment opportunities and future needs to ensure they had a workforce for the Highlands. Assurance was provided that there would be full engagement with the third sector via the resetting of the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan;
- it was highlighted that most people left the Highlands as they were following a career pathway. Responding to a question, it was confirmed that a copy of the Regional Skills Assessment, produced by Skills Development Scotland, would be

circulated which provided a breakdown of the job profile for the Highlands and Islands; and

- it was queried if the Council retained a list of student accommodation available and, if not, it was recommended that this be undertaken in order that potential students did not opt for another university due to a lack of accommodation.

Decision

The Council:-

- i. **NOTED** the work done to establish the strategy;
- ii. **NOTED** the purpose of the approach to developing a strategy;
- iii. **AGREED** that a report outlining the final version of this strategy be brought to full council in May 2024; and
- iv. **AGREED** that the Workforce for the Future Board, as described in the paper, be established.

14. Establishing a Short-Term Let Control Area for Ward 20: Badenoch and Strathspey – Update

A' Stèidheachadh Sgìre Smachd Màil Gheàrr-ùine airson Uàrd 20: Bàideanach agus Srath Spè – Cunntas às Ùr

Declarations of Interest: the undernoted Members made Declarations of Interest and, in accordance with paragraph 5.6 of the revised Code of Conduct, they left the meeting for this item:-

Mr C Munro – as a short term Lets provider

Mr K Rosie – as a Short Term Lets operator

Mrs T Robertson – as a Short Term Let owner

There had been circulated Report No. HC/53/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- thanks were expressed to officers and Members combined for years of hard work on this project;
- the policy had been modified due to recent legal challenges toward Edinburgh Council regarding their proposal for a short term let control area. scheme. In this regard if Highland Council received any challenges they would be examined on a case by case basis;
- it was felt that the policy provided a good level of balance;
- regarding section 10 of the report, it was queried if the estimation of short term lets and applications received across the whole Highland area were substantially different, as this would likely result in more work than anticipated; and
- it was queried when the short term let scheme would be rolled out to other areas of Highland. It was explained that Local Members could seek to start a scheme in their own areas but, at this time, there was no intention to make the whole of Highland a blanket short term let control area.

Decision

The Council:-

- i. **NOTED** the updates provided;
- ii. **AGREED** to delegate to officers to:
 - a. undertake the final legislative arrangements to establish the Short-Term Let Control Area for Ward 20 (Badenoch and Strathspey), including the necessary press advertisement, notification of interested parties and other publication work;
 - b. hold information session(s) to inform existing (& prospective) operators of the requirements the Control Area has across Ward 20 (Badenoch and Strathspey); and
 - c. the establishment date of the Short-Term Let Control Area for Ward 20 (Badenoch and Strathspey) would be Monday 4 March 2024; and
- iii. **AGREED** to adopt the draft Non-statutory Planning policy (as amended) (Appendix 2) as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications for Short-term lets within the Control Area.

15. **Establishing a Highland Council Land Audit: Terra-Tracker A' Stèidheachadh Sgrùdadh Fearainn Chomhairle na Gàidhealtachd: Tracair-Tìre**

There had been circulated Report No. HC/54/23 by the Interim Executive Chief Officer Performance and Governance.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- there was a need to rationalise the property estate and therefore the Council needed to know what it owned before it could sell its assets. The project proposal ('Terra Tracker') which aimed to validate and update data on Highland Council land and building ownership would deliver this aim by focusing on areas most likely to produce income, saving or cost avoidance. The Council needed to raise income and there would be financial benefits from this project;
- the project was worth doing and the costs should be recouped over time. It was queried what measures were in place to secure the hard copy and digital information derived from the project and costs associated with this. It was highlighted that the information from the project would be contained in a public register. There was also no need for additional capacity for the storage of deeds;
- it was queried if land gifted to the Council for specific purposes would be recorded. It was advised that it would set out what the Council could do or not do with land or property.
- it was felt that the project was the right thing to do but at the wrong time and that it should form part of the budget proposals to be considered at the special budget meeting on 29 February 2024. The public perception might be that money was being spent on back-office services when front line services could well be cut;
- work on an asset register had been undertaken in the past and it was queried what had happened to this information. It was advised that the Council did know about land it owned and the project aimed to add assets to the register by aggregating the existing data and making it more accessible;
- a lot of time had been taken to complete community asset transfers as the Council did not have a definitive register of what it owned and therefore this project would save time in completing community asset transfers;
- the project might highlight that a lot of the land thought to be in the Council's ownership might turn out to be common good land;
- there was concern that the funding for this project would be underwritten by the use of reserves, as the Council's reserves were finite;
- it was surprising that the Council did not know what assets it owned. While

income might be received from the project there was also a risk that, through research, it could be found that the Council had been operating on land or property that it didn't own and it could end up costing the Council significant amounts of money. It was advised that, like many large organisations, the Council lacked a definitive record of land and property records as a consequence of its long history, geographic dispersal of records with associated losses of both physical records and institutional knowledge;

- it was queried if Officers could do work on the project without the need for additional expenditure. It was advised that there were not existing staff resources to undertake this project and therefore additional staff were required; and
- it was highlighted that the project would be self-funding over time as a result of income received.

Following discussion, Mr D Louden, seconded by Mr C Munro, **MOVED** the recommendations as detailed in the report.

Mr A Christie, seconded by Mr M Reiss, moved as an **AMENDMENT** to defer the Terra Tracker proposal until the Budget meeting in February 2024.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 39 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 22 votes, with no abstentions, and the **MOTION** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:

For the Motion:

Ms S Atkin, Mr C Ballance, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Mrs B Campbell, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Ms T Collier, Ms S Fanet, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Mr K Gowans, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Mr R Jones, Mr S Kennedy, Ms E Knox, Ms L Kraft, Mr B Lobban, Mr D Louden, Mr A MacDonald, Mr W MacKay, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr H Morrison, Mr D Millar, Mr C Munro, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Reid, Mr K Rosie, Ms K Willis.

For the Amendment:

Mr C Aitken, Mr M Baird, Mr J Bruce, Mr A Christie, Mrs H Crawford, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Mr D Gregg, Mr R Gunn, Mrs B Jarvie, Ms M MacCallum, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mrs A MacLean, Mr D Macpherson, Ms J McEwan, Ms M Nolan, Mr M Reiss, Mrs T Robertson, Ms M Smith, Mr R Stewart.

Decision

The Council **AGREED** the establishment of a dedicated team, at an estimated cost of £410k over two years, to deliver the Terra Tracker project.

**16. Review of the Council Programme and Corporate Plan
Ath-sgrùdadh air Prògram agus Plana Corporra na Comhairle**

(Considered on 11 January 2024)

Transparency Statements: the undernoted Members declared connections to this item but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that they had an interest to declare:-

**Mr A Christie – as a Non Executive Director of NHS Highland
Mr D Gregg - as an employee of NHS Highland**

Mr C Munro - as a as a short term let business owner and as a co-opted Director of SkyeConnect, a Destination Management organisation for Skye and Raasay

There had been circulated Report No. HC/55/23 by the Interim Depute Chief Executive.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the workforce, Elected Members and communities were all thanked for their hard work and cooperation in delivering the best outcomes for Highland;
- the Council Programme was ambitious, based on the Council's priorities, and it was important to deliver the best services possible;
- the report highlighted some of the successes and benefits delivered so far but it was important not to be complacent and to continue to focus on areas where improvements could still be made;
- the Council (a) had delivered 161 houses with a further 200 planned; (b) was the second most improved Education Authority in Scotland in terms of literacy and numeracy for P1, 3 and 4; (c) had delivered bus services with 10 routes now in operation; (d) invested an addition £12.8m in roads; and (e) had delivered legacy projects such as Uig Harbour. However, the changing economic landscape was a factor and continuing to build on successes and deliver services had to be done in a responsible and sustainable way;
- the costs to the Local Authority to build affordable housing was significantly higher than in the private sector and a more holistic approach of procurement was needed to ensure Best Value was delivered;
- the 5 strategic outcomes for the Council Programme had been agreed in December 2022 and positive progress had been made in many areas. However, it was recognised there was still much to do and therefore ongoing evaluation was necessary, both at Strategic Committees and at Full Council;
- the lack of progress with dualling the A9, the lack of engagement with the Scottish Government around the Corran ferry and the difficulties in providing Adult Social Care, particularly in rural areas, were pointed out;
- by working together, Health and Social Care would enable more people to remain at home, this saving resources. However, recruiting staff to adult social care services was difficult. Whilst there were initiatives underway, it was suggested that, particularly in the rural areas, a review of pay bands was required. This affected other professions too and an element of a rural enhancement was one way to ensure services were maintained in these areas;
- the reduction in investment by the Scottish Government for major roads was both significant and disappointing and it was suggested that Highland could work with Argyll and Bute Council to seek improvements to the A82;
- better roads resulted in happier, more content communities;
- the Programme sought to continue to expand its programme for improving road conditions and maintenance and had made cuts in other service so that, in 2023/24, an additional investment of £12.8m could be made. However, concern was expressed that not more schemes had been completed and in some areas the poor quality of roads and pavements meant that children were unable to cycle to school;
- additional housing would be required if the Council was to address the issue of depopulation. The difference housing made to the quality of people's live was significant;
- the improved education statistics for 2021/22 was welcomed. However, Highland Council was still behind where it should be and the attainment gap needed to be addressed. It was essential Highland continued to improve. In addition, there was no reference to vulnerable pupils and they too deserved to be monitored and

- an idea of their destinations, once they left school, was sought;
- a trading statement for the Council bus operation was requested to gauge its success. It was also queried if the Council would apply to the Zero Carbon Bus Fund once it reopened and the bus operation would be expanded to the more rural areas so that young people in these areas could enjoy similar benefits to those pupils in Inverness;
 - the need to make £108m savings in the budget would undoubtedly impact the Council Programme and Corporate Plan which would need to be recalibrated and adjustments made. This would be reported to the Full Council on 14 March 2024 and examples of some of these adjustments were requested;
 - the money earmarked for energy efficiency in Council houses was welcomed and it was suggested that an in-house Direct Works Unit could be established to ensure this was spent;
 - information was sought as to how many Third Sector Employer Placements had been made this year in the Council, High Life Highland and NHS Highland;
 - it was disappointing more schools had not received Bikeability training and information was sought as to the target for delivering this before the end of the School Academic year;
 - despite the wide range of natural assets, it was disappointing that Scotland's target to become Net Zero was now 2045. Also, the fact that the Council was to continue to work with the Scottish Government to dual the A9 and would be supporting the Public Service Obligation for Wick Airport appeared to contradict the Council's Net Zero Strategy. However, it was pointed out that Wick Airport was vital to the Caithness economy;
 - the timeframe for the delivery of the Tourism Strategy was queried and a Members' Workshop to deliver this would be welcomed;
 - the Council's aim was to identify and commit to renewable energy investments to reduce overall energy cost for the Council and further information as to what these investments would be was sought;
 - the Delivery Plan was to be framed around 6 Portfolios but, with its commitment to Net Zero strategy, action needed to be taken across all the thematic groups and for the strategy to be included in the Next Steps;
 - there were strategies in place to reduce inequalities and there were many achievements including improvements that had been made to the housing stock. However, there were challenges, including the cost-of-living crisis, and this had put pressure on already stretched budgets and Performance Indicators had highlighted areas which still needed work. The Redesign Board were actively looking at these areas and a creative approach was required;
 - it was important to work with the University of the Highlands and Islands to increase the range of subjects to keep students in Highland;
 - in considering Highland's rich heritage and culture it was important to bear in mind the small towns, outside of Inverness;
 - more detail was sought as to how the Council supported veterans, especially in terms of housing, and a report to a future Council meeting updating Members on the Armed Forces Covenant would be forthcoming;
 - the importance of working in partnership with the Third Sector was emphasised; and
 - Place Bases Plans would be of importance in developing a Community Wealth Building strategy.

Decision

The Council:-

- i. **NOTED** the Programme achievements set out in sections 5 – 9 of the report;
- ii. **NOTED** the most recent performance received which was provided at section 10.2 of the report and that a report would be provided to March Council detailing performance in respect of the 2022/23 Statutory Performance Indicators. This information would also include benchmarking data to enable comparison of the Council's performance against other local authorities; and
- iii. **APPROVED** that a recalibrated Programme, incorporating a strengthened delivery plan element and a clarified performance framework be brought to full Council on 14 March 2024 for approval.

17. Staff Survey Action Plan Plana-ghnìomha Suirbhìdh Luchd-obrach

(Considered on 11 January 2024)

Transparency Statement: Mr R Stewart declared a connection to this item as a close family member was an employee of Highland Council but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No. HC/56/23 by the Interim Depute Chief Executive.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- appreciation was extended to staff for their patience over the delay in publishing the results of the original survey and for the Action Plan that had been prepared in response to the findings;
- employees with protected characteristics were valued but further work was required to make this more apparent. Further discussions would be held offline with Mr D Macpherson on the concerns raised regarding members of staff, particularly teachers, that were pregnant or returning from pregnancy and also those wishing to take early/phased retirement. Concerns were raised regarding the significant number of staff reporting that they felt they had been discriminated against because of their protected characteristics. A request was made for mandatory training to address unconscious bias and develop a welcoming culture for all;
- confirmation was provided that there was internal and external bullying and a full breakdown of this information was available within the survey results;
- assurance was provided that information would be disseminated in a variety of ways, including methods such as toolbox talks and group sessions as well as electronically to ensure engagement with non-desk based staff and that no sections of the workforce would be omitted from any communications;
- clarity was sought and provided as to the reason why the number of cases of bullying was so low compared to the average of 10%;
- support was expressed for commencing accreditation of Investors in People which it was felt would be helpful in addressing some of the issues highlighted in the survey but caution was raised that it would involve a lot of work and could be stressful for staff;
- a request was made for the joining of trade unions to be encouraged and promoted in the workplace;
- the report stated that bullying should be reported to their line manager but they might be the alleged perpetrator and a request was made for the terminology used in guidance and surveys to be improved;
- although bullying and harassment had been highlighted in the survey, this might

be partly due to stress as workloads increased and this was unsustainable. It was queried how senior management would have time to communicate with staff, to ensure they felt valued and listened to, given the high volume of meetings they were required to attend. Reference was also made to the importance of providing flexibility for staff to support retention and reduce stress. Confirmation was provided that the Wellbeing and Stress survey had been issued with a closing date of 22 January 2024. Reference was made to the importance of demonstrating to staff that the findings from surveys would result in action/changes;

- there was a need to strengthen training to ensure managers were aware and fully understood how to apply the policies and procedures; and
- discrimination, bullying and harassment was the worst experience and there was still a stigma associated with being victimised in this way. There was a need to breakdown these barriers to overcome this and it was suggested that this be addressed through Corporate Resources Committee. Reference was made to the former Equal Opportunities Sub-Committee, which enabled these issues to be explored in more detail, and benefits of this group. It was suggested that Corporate Resources Committee re-establish this group and it was confirmed that this would be considered.

Decision

The Council:-

- AGREED** the priority actions as contained in the Draft Action Plan in Appendix 1 of the report;
- NOTED** the ongoing work to address the bullying and harassment concerns and the further survey on wellbeing and stress had been issued; and
- NOTED** that consideration would be given to Corporate Resources Committee re-establishing the Equal Opportunities Sub-Committee.

18. Statutory Review of Polling Districts and Places Ath-sgrùdadh Reachdail de Roinnean Taghaidh agus Àiteachan Taghaidh

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

There had been circulated Report No. HC/57/23 by the Returning Officer.

Decision

The Council:-

- AGREED** to the amendments to current polling arrangements as outlined in Appendix 1 of the report;
- NOTED** that there were minor adjustments to current polling district boundaries; and
- NOTED** that the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) would make any necessary amendments to the Register of Electors.

19. Highland Response to Education Reform Bill Consultation Freagairt na Gàidhealtachd do Cho-chomhairleachadh Bile Ath-leasachaidh an Fhoghlaim

Transparency Statements: the undernoted Members declared connections to this item but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that they had an interest to declare:-

**Mrs M Cockburn – as a friend of one of the authors of the Independent Review
Mr S Mackie – as a business owner**

There had been circulated Report No. HC/58/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the Chair of the Education Committee explained that it had been hoped to bring a report on the consultation to the November Education Committee but the timescales had not allowed. However, a paper had been presented to the Committee on 7 September 2023 on the national discussion and independent review of qualifications. The focus of the proposed consultation response was on what the Education Reform Bill meant for Highland, and any additional comments made today could be included. It was important that the response reflected the diversity of Highland and identified the challenges and pressures that a large rural authority with some urban centres faced. The response also highlighted that any developments and solutions would need to be place-based to respond to the changing needs of children and young people, teachers and other practitioners and adult learners, while also recognising there was a significant additional cost to delivering education experiences, inclusion and equity in Highland. These key areas provided essential context to the proposed response to the consultation which, at this stage, mainly focused on the establishment of a new qualification body and maximising the impact of inspection by removing the inspection function from the rest of the current executive agency, Education Scotland. Clearly there were many more discussions to be had in the future, and he hoped Members would support the proposed response;
- educational reform took many years, and children who were in primary school at present would not see the benefit of any changes;
- there was a divergence in approaches to education within the United Kingdom, with England going in one direction and Scotland in another. Looking at the international rankings, Scotland's performance was not satisfactory and was deteriorating, and it was evident that reform was essential. Attainment in literacy, numeracy and science was the worst on record in Scotland and it was necessary, as a nation and as an education authority, to begin to tackle that. Whilst the proposed response was fine from a Highland perspective, it was suggested it was necessary to take a higher-level view of education and the need for reform and include some thoughts in that regard. It was confirmed that would be taken forward;
- an independent inspection service was sensible, as were the proposed reforms in terms of supporting teachers. However, if the Council received a flat cash settlement from the Scottish Government that was effectively a cut because of inflation, and that would make it harder for teachers who were being asked to do more with less money;
- thanks were expressed to officers for the robust response, which made the right salient points and highlighted the challenges that were unique to Highland;
- it was not necessary to wait for the consultation to finish to begin to address some of the issues highlighted, and it was important to take a holistic view and look at how the Council could implement some of the low-hanging fruit actions;
- education for the sake of education was a good thing, and support was

expressed for a curriculum-first approach. However, if young people wanted to be accepted to the top universities they would need a broad set of qualifications, and it was suggested that more specifics be provided in the response on the practical difficulties in terms of delivering qualifications in rural secondary schools versus urban schools and how that inequality could be addressed;

- Members were encouraged to read both the Hayward and Withers Review Reports. Particular reference was made to a comment in the Hayward Report that a lot was already happening, it had just not been embedded;
- the recognition in the response of the challenges faced in remote and rural areas, particularly the significantly higher impact of fuel poverty, was welcomed, as was the paragraph on Additional Support Needs (ASN) challenges post-pandemic and the need for a multi-agency approach;
- it was necessary to be cautious when talking about rankings, both national and international, and to have a wider discussion on what education was about. In that regard, reference was made to a letter by academics from around the world to the OECD warning against rankings, and to a report which indicated that the top performing countries reported high levels of fear and failure amongst students, challenging the assumption that academic success equated to overall happiness. However, other Members supported rankings as a way of measuring performance;
- some Members emphasised the importance of continuous engagement with local employers so there was an understanding of the career options that existed in Highland and the qualifications required, and so young people had direction when making subject choices. Other Members expressed the view that education was not about providing employees for the workplace but about producing rounded, hopefully creative, individuals who were ready to face the challenges of their generation, and that training was the responsibility of businesses;
- education was one of the most passionate subjects talked about throughout Highland, and it was important to be the most engaged local authority when asked how things could be done better;
- comparisons were useful, but it was important to compare like with like;
- there were always going to be historic and cultural differences in terms of education provision, as well as differences in the value placed on education in other parts of the world and in different types of communities;
- a whole system approach was necessary to achieve the best possible outcomes;
- it was important to consider the different types of positive destination young people might have;
- the recent workshops on literacy and numeracy were commended, and all Members were recommended to attend workshops; and
- there would be additional costs associated with ASN provision in schools. Members had some very serious budgetary decisions to make, and it was necessary to look at young people across the board, not just the high attainers, and have a priority system whereby education was prioritised.

Decision

The Council:

- i. **AGREED**, subject to a high-level view being incorporated, the proposed Highland Council Education and Learning response to the recent Education Bill consultation which would feed into the national response and future recommendations; and
- ii. **NOTED** the questions that formed the consultation broadly focused on the new qualifications body and maximising the impact of inspection assurance and supporting improvement.

**20. Amalgamation of Black Isle and Easter Ross Area Committees
Aonachadh Chomataidhean Sgìreil an Eilein Duibh agus Rois an Ear**

The Council **AGREED** the amalgamation of the Black Isle and Easter Ross Area Committees.

**21. Appointments to Companies - Highland Opportunity (Investments) Limited
Cur an Dreuchd gu Companaidhean - Cothrom dhan Ghàidhealtachd
(Tasgaidhean) Earranta**

Following the resignation from the Company of Mrs M Cockburn, the Council **AGREED** to appoint Ms T Collier as a new Director for Highland Opportunity (Investments) Limited.

**22. Timetable of Meetings for 2023/24
Clàr-ama Choinneamhan airson 2023/24**

The Council:-

- i. **AGREED** the Revised timetable for 2024 as circulated, subject to the revised date, from of 29 January 2024, of 19 February 2024 for the Dingwall and Seaforth Area Committee;
- ii. **AGREED** that a Special Meeting of the North Planning Applications Committee be held on 17 January 2024; and
- iii. **NOTED** that the Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Committee on 27 November 2023 had been cancelled.

**23. Deeds Executed
Sgrìobhainnean Lagha a Bhuilicheadh**

There had been circulated a list of deeds and other documents executed on behalf of the Council since the meeting held on 26 October 2023 which were **NOTED**.

**24. Notices of Motion
Brathan Glusaid**

(Considered on 11 January 2024)

The following Notices of Motion had been received by the Head of Legal and Governance –

(i) School Estate Emergency Declaration

This Council notes:

1. Across Scotland the percentage of schools graded as 'A-Good' for Condition and Suitability is almost 91%. In Highland, the percentage of schools graded 'Good' is under 20%. 34% of primary school buildings across Highland have a rating of 'C-Poor' for Condition, compared with 6% for the rest of Scotland. 37% of secondary school buildings across Highland are rated 'C-Poor' for Condition, compared with 10% for the rest of Scotland. The deteriorated fabric and condition of school buildings across Highland is acute and significantly worse than those of the rest of Scotland.

2. This Council hugely values education and accepts the condition and suitability of school buildings impacts significantly on the educational opportunities and experiences of our children and young people as well as on the working environment of our valued teaching and support staff.
3. This Council's applications to the Learning Estate Improvement Plan (LEIP) Phase Three, were wholly unsuccessful - despite the acute need for funding in Highland. And despite the fact that 25% of Scotland's secondary schools, rated C-Poor for Condition, are located in Highland. And 33% of all Scotland's primary schools, rated C-Poor for Condition, are located in Highland.
4. The Leader of the Council wrote to the Cabinet Secretary for Education following on from her statement in Parliament that she will be taking forward further engagement and collaboration with COSLA to explore how the Scottish Government can address the remaining sub-standard condition schools, and the additional schools required due to population growth.
5. To date, despite the undertaking given by the Cabinet Secretary for Education, no further funding has been identified by the Scottish Government to improve the condition of the Highland school estate.

Therefore, Highland Council declares a School Estate Emergency and will:

- establish a School Emergency Action Plan to address the shortcomings in Highland's school estate,
- task the Leader of the Council to write to The First Minister, the Cabinet Minister for Social Justice, and the Cabinet Secretary for Education, outlining the urgent need for additional resources to address the disparity between Highland school estate and the rest of Scotland,
- task the Leader of the Council to invite the Cabinet Secretary for Education to attend the next Full Council Committee and answer questions from Members regarding the funding shortfall.

Signed: Mrs H Crawford Mr R Stewart Mrs L Saggars Mrs I MacKenzie

Following a summary of the Motion, the following main points were raised during discussion:-

- Members apologised to parents, staff and pupils at Beaully Primary School and Charleston Academy. Plans to replace the school buildings had been well underway and capital funding had been allocated then the economic landscape had completely changed due to a devastating combination of events including Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the UK Government mini-budget in September 2022. The Resolution Foundation had estimated that the latter had cost the UK in the region of £30bn, including billions lost to interest rates and government borrowing costs. Those interest rates had cost local authorities millions in increased loan repayments, building and labour costs had spiralled and fuel costs had rocketed;
- whilst the unsuccessful application for LEIP Phase 3 funding had been the source of considerable disappointment, the Council had already received £111m in the first two phases which had followed on from the £63m awarded from the Scotland's Schools for the Future Programme;
- the Leader of the Council had already written to the Cabinet Secretary for

Education and Skills in the strongest terms and made the Council's case at COSLA and directly to Scottish Government Ministers;

- at its meeting on 14 December 2023 the Council had agreed to a number of proposals to maintain the Council's estate, including schools, and the Administration was working on several income-generating initiatives including ways to increase income from tourism, reviewing Council-held assets, increasing revenue through charges and enforcement, incentives for early contractor payments and energy generation;
- the Motion called for essential funds to be diverted to prepare an Action Plan and report. All Members were aware of the appalling condition of schools in Highland and that working in a building that was not fit for purpose was detrimental to learning, and another expensive report would not change that;
- the UK Government block grant to Scotland had been cut by over 6% which, with inflation, was a real-terms cut of 10%;
- it was important to invite Scottish Government Ministers to see the condition of schools as that would be more compelling than answering questions from Members in the Council Chamber. It was also important to invite them to meet with Group Leaders so they could see there was cross-party concern about the situation;
- it was necessary to ensure the Scottish Government recognised that Highland was unique and understood the geography and the challenges faced. There were more schools from the 18th and 19th century in Highland than in other areas, and there were schools that had been built in a hurry due to the population boom associated with the oil industry. The Council had done everything it could with the funding available to replace some of those schools, but it had been unable to keep pace with the need for investment and a tipping point had now been reached;
- as set out in the Motion, 37% of secondary school buildings in Highland were rated C-Poor for condition compared with 10% in the rest of Scotland, and it was necessary to pull together and do everything possible to make the buildings good for pupils, teachers and everyone in the school communities;
- Highland was more than double the land mass of Northern Ireland, one and a half times larger than Wales, and larger than Slovenia, Montenegro and Israel, and it had more schools than any other local authority in the UK;
- reference was made to a poll which indicated that a quarter of Councils across the UK believed they might go bankrupt within the next five years. There was a nationwide funding shortfall, and the Council was not going to get the money to undertake the rebuilds needed. Immediate improvements were required, and it was necessary to look at what could be done with what was available;
- in setting the 2023/24 budget, it had been accepted that the condition of the roads in Highland was an emergency and additional funding in the sum of £14.1m had been allocated for road improvements. It was therefore proposed that, in setting the 2024/25 budget, the Council seek to maximise improvements in working conditions for staff and pupils by diverting £14.1m towards extra school building maintenance and continue to investigate other methods of funding such work, which was of vital importance. The Convener explained that such a proposal was not competent at this meeting and should be brought forward at the time of the budget;
- in relation to St Clements School, the fact that Highland had a school for children with special needs that was not fully wheelchair accessible was a significant issue in its own right;
- interest rates were now below what they had been when the current capital programme had been agreed, and it was questioned why discussions were still centred around what the Council could not afford rather than what could be done;
- whilst it was difficult when in a crisis, it was necessary, as a Council, to have

some ambition and revert to a longer-term capital programme setting out what was going to be done to improve schools;

- according to the current Capital Programme, the earliest there would be a new school building at Charleston Academy was 2032 and this was causing depression and anxiety amongst the school community;
- the schools that had been built 50 years ago when the oil industry was taking off had all reached the end of their life at the same time and the Council found itself in an extraordinary position trying to replace them. The debt that had been incurred building those schools had never been properly looked at by central government, which is where responsibility for not funding them to begin with lay;
- reference was made to the Electricity Generator Levy which was scheduled to raise £40b over the next 5 years, half of which was going to come from Scotland. It was necessary to find out where the money was going and get some of it back;
- the Motion did not suggest any solutions for the Council, and instead looked to others to provide a solution; and
- Western Isles Council had one school ranked C-Poor for condition and had managed to secure a meeting with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, and it was questioned why the Council could not do the same.

Mr A Christie proposed that the last bullet point of the Motion be deleted and the following be inserted as two new bullet points:-

- That a meeting be urgently arranged for the Group Leaders with the relevant Government Ministers to find solutions to the chronic situation facing our school estate.
- That invitations be issued to the Ministers to visit the schools that were included in our LEIP 3 application so they can be better informed ahead of the meeting.

This was accepted by Mrs H Crawford and Mr R Stewart.

Mrs H Crawford, seconded by Mr R Stewart, **MOVED** the terms of the Notice of Motion, as amended by Mr Christie.

As an **AMENDMENT**, Ms E Knox, seconded by Mr P Oldham, **MOVED** that the Motion be amended as follows:-

“Delete the word “declaration” in the heading of the Motion.

Delete everything after numbered paragraph 4 to the end of the Motion and insert:

5. To date no further external funding has been identified to improve the condition of the Highland school estate.

The Highland Council acknowledges the unacceptable condition of parts of the School estate and will:

- Continue to seek to identify external sources of funding to improve the school estate
- Continue to explore income generating initiatives such as increased income from tourism, reviewing Council held assets, reviewing charges and enforcement, early payment incentives/late payment penalties, and energy generation.”

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 28 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 35 votes, with no abstentions. The **AMENDMENT** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion:

Mr C Aitken, Ms S Atkin, Mr M Baird, Mr A Baldrey, Mr J Bruce, Mr A Christie, Mrs H Crawford, Mr L Fraser, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Mr A Jarvie, Mrs B Jarvie, Mr P Logue, Ms M MacCallum, Mr A MacDonald, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mr R MacKintosh, Mrs A MacLean, Mr D Macpherson, Mrs B McAllister, Ms J McEwan, Mr J McGillivray, Ms M Ross, Mrs L Saggars, Mr R Stewart, Ms K Willis.

For the Amendment:

Mr C Ballance, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Mrs I Campbell, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Ms T Collier, Ms S Fanet, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr K Gowans, Mr J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Mr R Jones, Mr S Kennedy, Ms E Knox, Ms L Kraft, Mr D Louden, Mr B Lobban, Mr W MacKay, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Mr C Munro, Mrs P Munro, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mr K Rosie.

Decision

The Council **AGREED**:-

School Estate Emergency

This Council notes:

1. Across Scotland the percentage of schools graded as 'A-Good' for Condition and Suitability is almost 91%. In Highland, the percentage of schools graded 'Good' is under 20%. 34% of primary school buildings across Highland have a rating of 'C-Poor' for Condition, compared with 6% for the rest of Scotland. 37% of secondary school buildings across Highland are rated 'C-Poor' for Condition, compared with 10% for the rest of Scotland. The deteriorated fabric and condition of school buildings across Highland is acute and significantly worse than those of the rest of Scotland.
2. This Council hugely values education and accepts the condition and suitability of school buildings impacts significantly on the educational opportunities and experiences of our children and young people as well as on the working environment of our valued teaching and support staff.
3. This Council's applications to the Learning Estate Improvement Plan (LEIP) Phase Three, were wholly unsuccessful - despite the acute need for funding in Highland. And despite the fact that 25% of Scotland's secondary schools, rated C-Poor for Condition, are located in Highland. And 33% of all Scotland's primary schools, rated C-Poor for Condition, are located in Highland.
4. The Leader of the Council wrote to the Cabinet Secretary for Education following on from her statement in Parliament that she will be taking forward further engagement and collaboration with COSLA to explore how the Scottish Government can address the remaining sub-standard condition schools, and the additional schools required due to population growth.

5. To date no further external funding has been identified to improve the condition of the Highland school estate.

The Highland Council acknowledges the unacceptable condition of parts of the School estate and will:

- Continue to seek to identify external sources of funding to improve the school estate
- Continue to explore income generating initiatives such as increased income from tourism, reviewing Council held assets, reviewing charges and enforcement, early payment incentives/late payment penalties, and energy generation.

(ii) Shared Rural Network

The UK Government digital connectivity programme - the Shared Rural Network (SRN) - aims to achieve 95% mobile phone coverage across Britain focusing on geographical coverage rather than population coverage. This makes little sense in the Highland's uninhabited mountain and upland landscapes. There has also been very little, or no, consultation with communities in Highland to understand their connectivity needs and to identify appropriate locations for SRN masts so that connectivity is improved for rural communities.

In support of the coalition of community groups and conservation and outdoor recreation organisations in Scotland, this Council agrees to write to Scottish Government and UK Government to ask that Ministers work together, to pause and review the SRN programme and improve it by:

- Consulting with rural communities across Highland to establish their digital connectivity needs first
- Avoiding construction of new access tracks unless no other method is possible
- Adequately resourcing Local Planning Authorities
- Avoiding the Highland's designated and other environmentally sensitive wild areas
- Insisting that mobile operators share mast infrastructure, rather than building adjacent masts.

Signed: Ms K Willis Mr C Ballance

A summary of the motion was provided by the proposer during which it was highlighted that in principle it was a good idea to improve digital connectivity to rural communities. However, in Lochaber and other very rural areas in the Highlands, many locations where the masts were being proposed there was no community need and therefore a waste of public funds for construction and ongoing maintenance. Approximately 200 SRN masts were proposed for the Highlands to provide connectivity which were primarily in mountainous west coast areas where geographic coverage was low. These areas were largely unpopulated, wilderness areas. The SRN rollout had little regard for environmental, visual impacts or community/landowner requirements. The motion was asking the Council to show support for the coalition of concerned partners and to help protect designated areas and precious wild land and nature in the Highlands by writing to Scottish Government and UK Government to ask that Ministers work together, to pause and review the SRN programme and improve it.

A point was made that good digital connectivity for all communities was important especially with the analogue switch off in 2025. The motion was supported and that

where masts were proposed careful consideration be given to details such as colour and access tracks.

Reference was made to new Scottish Government planning guidance on digital telecoms and the SRN rollout was not following that guidance. The planning department was busy with planning applications for SRN masts and many of them did not have the support of local communities. There was a need to have discussions with the communities in the areas where masts were proposed to be erected before they applied for planning permission. Also, there should be a cost benefit analysis for the rollout of these masts and the rollout should be halted in order that the geographic spread of the masts could be reconsidered.

Opposition to the motion felt that the language in it was already covered by the planning regime which was relatively robust and comprehensive. Communities did want digital connectivity and as part of this trying to get the R100 superfast broadband programme underway would help. In terms of the SRN masts there were financial implications for mobile operators in terms of mandatory shared masts and the infrastructure costs associated with this. The goal of businesses was to provide affordable services and the more costs there were for operators the less affordable services would be. While these masts may provide coverage where people do not live, tourism was a significant industry in Highland and the outdoors was being promoted as a Council to attract tourists and they would want digital connectivity while they were visiting the Highlands. Therefore, it was felt the motion should not be supported.

Thereafter, Ms K Willis seconded by Mr C Ballance **MOVED** the Notice of Motion as detailed.

Mr R Stewart, seconded by Mr J Bruce, moved as an **AMENDMENT** the direct negative of the motion.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 47 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 8 votes, with 1 abstention, and the **MOTION** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:

For the Motion: Ms S Aitkin, Mr C Aitken, Mr M Baird, Mr C Ballance, Mr A Baldrey, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Mrs B Campbell, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Mr A Christie, Ms S Fanet, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Mr J McGillivray, Mr K Gowans, Mr A Graham, Mr J Grafton, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Mr R Jones, Mr S Kennedy, Ms L Kraft, Mr B Lobban, Mr D Loudon, Mr A MacDonald, Ms J McEwan, Mr W MacKay, Ms M MacCallum, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr R MacKintosh, Mrs A MacLean, Ms K MacLean, Mr H Morrison, Mr D Millar, Mr C Munro, Mrs P Munro, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mr M Reiss, Mr K Rosie, Ms K Willis

For the Amendment: Mr J Bruce, Mr R Gale, Mr A Jarvie, Mrs B Jarvie, Mrs B McAllister, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mrs L Saggars, Mr R Stewart.

Abstention: Mr T MacLennan

Decision

The Council **AGREED** the Motion.

(iii) Ecosia (carried over from Council on 14 December 2023)

Ecosia is an internet search engine that uses its profits to fund tree planting projects worldwide. By adopting Ecosia as the default search engine, Highland Council can actively contribute reforestation efforts, combat deforestation and help mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Ecosia is a free search engine, and its implementation as a default option will not incur additional costs for the council. Ecosia provides monthly financial reports, ensuring transparency in their tree planting projects and the allocation of funds.

Implementing Ecosia provides the opportunity for Highland Council to engage with the community further on environmental issues by fostering sustainable practices and encouraging residents to use the search engine.

Therefore, this Council agrees that Highland Council implements Ecosia as the default search engine for all council operated devices and computer systems.

Signed: Mr R MacKintosh Mr C Balance

During discussion, it was commented that Ecosia had been successfully implemented by 20 major universities including St Andrews, Bristol and the University of Sussex, as well as supermarket retailer The Co-op and the local authority of Brighton and Hove.

However, the Chair of Corporate Resources proposed that the motion be reviewed at the Corporate Resources Committee, and that “therefore, this Council agrees that Highland Council implements Ecosia as the default search engine for all council operated devices and computer systems” be replaced with “therefore, this Council agrees that a report be brought to Corporate Resources in respect of the ability for Highland Council to adopt Ecosia as the default search engine for all Council operated devices and computer systems”, an amendment which the signatories agreed to.

Decision

The Council **AGREED** the amended motion as follows:-

Ecosia is an internet search engine that uses its profits to fund tree planting projects worldwide. By adopting Ecosia as the default search engine, Highland Council can actively contribute reforestation efforts, combat deforestation and help mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Ecosia is a free search engine, and its implementation as a default option will not incur additional costs for the council. Ecosia provides monthly financial reports, ensuring transparency in their tree planting projects and the allocation of funds. Implementing Ecosia provides the opportunity for Highland Council to engage with the community further on environmental issues by fostering sustainable practices and encouraging residents to use the search engine.

Therefore, this Council agrees that a report be brought to Corporate Resources in respect of the ability for Highland Council to adopt Ecosia as the default search engine for all Council operated devices and computer systems.

(iv) Access Rangers (carried over from Council on 14 December 2023)

The Highland Council’s eighteen Access Rangers provide a unique and exceptional

service to the people of the Highlands, as well as to the environment we are all so proud of. Listed below are some eye catching examples of their day to day work:

- One Skye ranger found a small rucksac at the Quariang car park with 2 Spanish passports inside. He contacted the people directly who were on their way to Inverness airport. They turned around at Fort Augustus and the bag was returned to them, saving a lot of distress later in the day.
- The rangers have attended and called in at least 8 road traffic accidents often helping with directing traffic before or after Police attendance and occasionally with first aid including one incident at Tore involving Cllr Collier.
- Helped soaked & exhausted cyclist in a storm get to a campsite near Achiltibuie
- Put out gorse fire Dores beach
- Asked by Police to talk to naked swimmers near Lochcarron School
- Assisted a crofter find a dangerous dog that was killing sheep.
- Move on campers in Dornoch play park
- Call out SSPCA after finding a dead dog in layby at Reay
- Hostile reception from motorhome owner at Strathy Burial Ground, despite 'No Overnight Parking' signs.
- Removing fallen trees on road after storms,
- Changed a tyre for some foreign visitors
- Hill walker with head injury given first aid and ambulance called.
- Coigach & Assynt Ranger provided info & directions to German visitors with little English, by phone via the Lochaber Ranger
- Repaired broken down motorhome at Shin Falls to get visitors moving.

These examples illustrate the largely unseen work that the Rangers are providing. They are currently funded by NatureScot- Better Places Fund 4- and this Motion calls on the Council to ensure all practical steps are taken to ensure the funding is forthcoming for the next financial year”

Signed: Mr M Reiss Mr R Stewart Mr R Gunn Mr D Macpherson

During discussion, an amendment was proposed to the wording of the last sentence, whereby “this motion calls on the Council to ensure all practical steps are taken to ensure the funding is forthcoming for the next financial year” be replaced with “this motion calls on the Council to ensure that all practical steps are taken to secure external funding and make sure it continues in the year ahead.”

Decision

The Council **AGREED** the amended motion as follows:-

The Highland Council’s eighteen Access Rangers provide a unique and exceptional service to the people of the Highlands, as well as to the environment we are all so proud of. Listed below are some eye catching examples of their day to day work:

- One Skye ranger found a small rucksac at the Quariang car park with 2 Spanish passports inside. He contacted the people directly who were on their way to Inverness airport. They turned around at Fort Augustus and the bag was returned to them, saving a lot of distress later in the day.
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- Removing fallen trees on road after storms,
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- Hill walker with head injury given first aid and ambulance called.
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These examples illustrate the largely unseen work that the Rangers are providing. They are currently funded by NatureScot- Better Places Fund 4- and this Motion calls on the Council to ensure all practical steps are taken to secure external funding and make sure it continues in the year ahead.

The meeting was closed at 1:40 pm. (11 Jan 2024)