

Minutes of Meetings

To be submitted to the Council

On

14 March 2024

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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 additional £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 services 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 lives was significant;
- the improved education statistics for 2021/22 were 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-gnìomha 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:-

- i. **AGREED** the priority actions as contained in the Draft Action Plan in Appendix 1 of the report;
- ii. **NOTED** the ongoing work to address the bullying and harassment concerns and the further survey on wellbeing and stress had been issued; and
- iii. **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:-

- i. **AGREED** to the amendments to current polling arrangements as outlined in Appendix 1 of the report;
- ii. **NOTED** that there were minor adjustments to current polling district boundaries; and
- iii. **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 Sgireil 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 Loudon, 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 rucksack 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 rucksack 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
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- 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.
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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)

**The Highland Council
No. 1 2024/2025**

Minutes of Meeting of the Special Highland Council held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Thursday, 29 February 2024 at 10.35 am.

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

Present:

Ms Sarah Atkin	Mr Bill Lobban
Mr Michael Baird	Mr Patrick Logue
Mr Andrew Baldrey	Mr Derek Louden
Mr Chris Ballance	Mr Angus MacDonald (Remote)
Dr Chris Birt	Mr Willie MacKay (Remote)
Mr Bill Boyd	Mr Graham MacKenzie
Mr Raymond Bremner	Mrs Isabelle MacKenzie
Mr Ian Brown	Mr Andrew MacKintosh
Mr John Bruce	Mr Ryan MacKintosh
Mr Michael Cameron (Remote)	Mrs Angela MacLean
Mrs Isabelle (Biz) Campbell	Ms Kate MacLean
Mrs Glynis Campbell-Sinclair	Mr Thomas MacLennan (Remote)
Mr Alasdair Christie	Mr Duncan Macpherson
Mrs Muriel Cockburn	Mrs Bet McAllister
Ms Tamala Collier	Ms Jan McEwan
Ms Helen Crawford	Mr Jim McGillivray (Remote)
Ms Sarah Fanet	Mr Drew Millar (Remote)
Mr John Finlayson	Mr Hugh Morrison (Remote)
Mr David Fraser	Mr Calum Munro
Mr Laurie Fraser	Mrs Pauline Munro
Mr Richard Gale	Ms Leslie-Anne Niven
Mr Ken Gowans	Ms Molly Nolan (Remote)
Mr John Grafton	Mr Paul Oldham
Mr Alex Graham	Mrs Margaret Paterson
Mr David Gregg	Mrs Morven Reid
Mr Ron Gunn	Mr Matthew Reiss
Mrs Jackie Hendry	Mr Alasdair Rhind
Ms Marianne Hutchison	Mrs Trish Robertson
Mr Andrew Jarvie	Mr Karl Rosie
Mrs Barbara Jarvie (Remote)	Ms Maureen Ross
Ms Lyndsey Johnston	Mrs Liz Saggars (Remote)
Mr Russell Jones	Mr Andrew Sinclair (Remote)
Ms Emma Knox	Mr Ruraidh Stewart
Ms Liz Kraft	Ms Kate Willis

In Attendance:

Chief Executive

Interim Depute Chief Executive

Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place

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

Interim Head of Corporate Finance

Interim Head of People

Mr B Lobban in the Chair

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

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr M Green, Mr S Kennedy, Mr S Mackie, Ms M MacCallum and Ms M Smith.

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

There were no Declarations of Interest.

The Council **NOTED** that the undernoted Members declared Transparency Statements in respect of item 3 but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that they had an interest to declare:-

Mr Cameron, Mr Macpherson, Ms McEwan, Mr Morrison and Mr Stewart, as a close family member was an employee of Highland Council

Mr Christie, as a Non-executive director of NHS Highland, General Manager of Inverness Badenoch and Strathspey CAB, a Non-executive Director of Inverness Business Improvement District, a Trustee/Non-executive director of Eden Court Theatre and as a parent of a child in secondary education

Mr Gowans, as a close family member was an employee of High Life Highland; however, had a specific discussion taken place regarding HLH he would have declared an interest and left the room during discussion of that issue.

Mr Gregg, as an employee of NHS Highland

Mr Loudon, as a second home owner which was currently up for sale

Mr Munro, as a director of SkyeConnect, the tourism DMO for Skye and Raasay

Mrs Paterson, as a director of Puffin Pool and Highland Football Academy

3. Revenue Budget, Council Tax and Medium-Term Financial Plan 2024/25 to 2026/27

Buidseat Teachd-a-steach, Cìs Comhairle agus Plana Ionmhasail Meadhan-Ùine 2024/25 gu 2026/27

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

Prior to debate the Head of Corporate Finance, as S95 Officer, informed Members the report followed a series of earlier reports to Council and followed a number of written and in-person briefings for Members. He gave an assurance that the report and recommendations were set out to allow the Council to fulfil its legal obligations regarding the setting of a balanced budget and Council Tax.

Since the report had been issued, further information had become available and supplementary information detailing correspondence with the Scottish Government's Depute First Minister had been circulated. He explained there was a proposal of additional funding of £62.7m. However, that funding was not certain until the outcome of the UK Government budget, set for 6 March 2024. Consequently, he did not believe there was a basis to revise budget assumptions or recommendations. Turning to the funding rate for Early Learning and Childcare provided by the Private, Voluntary and Independent Sectors, confirmation had now been received, via CoSLA, that the agreed national approach for 2024/25 was a 7.6% uplift to provide for the payment of £12 per

hour. Lastly, the Local Government Finance Order had been approved on 28 February 2024 and this would lead to a revised grant circular for Councils. This had yet to be received but he again assured Members that this would not impact on the recommendations. He did not anticipate a material change to arise from that final grant circular but, should there be, this could be addressed in future reports.

In moving the recommendations, the Leader of the Council pointed out that all local authorities were facing financially challenging times with some local authorities in England entering into special measures and some in Scotland facing a critical financial time. In developing the budget for the 2024/25 there were uncertain outcomes such as pay awards, interest rates and potential government elections with the inevitable unknown in terms of policy. In October 2023 the Council was facing an estimated budget gap of £61.7m. However, the final revised budget gap was now £113m over three years with an increased in-year budget gap for 2024/25 being £65.6m.

He recognised how important it was for Highland communities to see the continuation of services. During the process of setting the budget, Members were faced with putting in place a number of actions that would mitigate the financial challenges so that a balanced budget could be delivered. The proposals had been arrived at following a long and thorough process after engagement with members of the public, meetings with organisations, stakeholders, partners, staff and unions and briefings to Council Members. The areas that the Administration had consulted on had been made available through presentations and everyone who fed into that process were thanked.

Continuing he pointed out that in January 2024, Audit Scotland had said “Councils recognised the risks ahead, but they need to innovate at pace and make difficult decisions about cuts to services to remain financially sustainable” and “Some councils have experienced opposition from within their communities when seeking to reduce services to balance budgets. This reinforced the need for frank consultation and engagement with communities when planning change.” He contended that this was exactly what the Administration had done and the engagement process undertaken was detailed in the budget papers. The Administration therefore sought, in this budget, to provide sustainability and confidence in the way ahead for the Council by providing for a three year budget plan, committing to continuous improvement and to increase the pace of change within the Council’s operations.

Difficult decisions had been needed to implement savings but also to protect certain services. It wasn’t possible, or affordable, to continue to provide all services at the same level but there were also areas of considerable opportunity for improvement and investment, and on a more sustainable basis given the approach of setting a three year budget plan.

Turning to Council Tax, following discussions with CoSLA and Government Ministers, it was not proposed to raise Council Tax as Scottish Government funding provided what would have been the equivalent of a 4.8% Council Tax rise. It was hoped this would help communities and the most vulnerable during the current financial crisis. In regard to other fees, taxes and charges there would be only limited increases for particular services in order to ensure they were continued. Increases in some fees and charges, like car parking, contributed to a general fund that paid for other services to be delivered. In addition, through representations made by CoSLA, the amount of ring-fenced funding that local authorities were directed to use by Scottish Government had been reduced. This gave local authorities much more flexibility with grant funding.

He pointed out that a change in accounting rules by the Scottish Government now permitted Council reserves to be increased by approximately £68m. A number of local authorities had used these flexibilities but, if Highland Council also wanted to use these, it had to be done before 31 March 2024. These flexibilities would support the Council in its medium term financial planning and achieving a financially sustainable position. While it did extend the time period the Council would account for PPP costs, it was important to consider that it had no impact on the contracts, when buildings were handed back to the Council or on how school buildings were run. It brought the accounting into line with the life of the school asset and how the Council accounted for its own capital costs. Whilst the Administration was proposing to agree to have these flexibilities to benefit the Council's reserves, the funds, cost and financial impact of using them needed careful consideration. In respect of the Transient Visitor Levy and other flexibilities, the fiscal flexibilities in Year 1 (2024/25) were based on specific and deliverable savings or income streams that the Council had already made decisions on, such as the Council Tax on second homes and Non-Domestic Rates empty property relief. Regarding subsequent years, indicative figures were provided and were dependent on future decisions. The legislation for the Tourist Levy had not as yet passed and it would be for a future Council to make decisions upon. The Scottish Government's own financial assessment suggested that income across the Highlands and Islands from the levy could range from £3m up to £21m. It was not unreasonable therefore for the Council, given its support in seeing legislation for a levy being introduced, to consider that the levy form part of its financial planning.

Reference had been made in the budget papers of investing £1m per annum over the next three years to create an investment fund of £60m. The outline of the work being undertaken on the delivery of that wide-ranging programme would be reported to the Full Council on 14 March 2024. The intention was to bring forward plans for investment in roads, infrastructure and other areas of Council that would provide a focus going forward and to have confidence in a more sustainable approach.

He reminded Members that the strategy for the Council's reserves had been agreed at Full Council on 14 December 2023. In line with that strategy, the proposals hoped to grow the level of reserves and ensure that the Council met the 3% minimum level. They also would earmark reserves to support the medium term financial plan, investment and change and transformation and would use reserves to support the budget and to reach financial sustainability. There was a substantially lower annual use of reserves proposed so that by Year 3 of the budget, the forecast was for Council's use of reserves for balancing the budget be reduced and down to £1.1m. He emphasised that it was not possible to continue to use reserves to avoid making savings and reductions in service provision.

He acknowledged the importance of protecting as many jobs as possible and a commitment was given to avoid redundancies wherever possible and council policy and process would be followed when staff numbers needed to be reduced.

The budget also reflected on the work being done with partners, particularly High Life Highland (HLH) and NHS Highland. The budget reflected on continued support for HLH in respect of supporting their planned financial commitments with reducing reserves support towards a surplus position within three years. In addition, there was a commitment of £20m from reserves to work with NHS Highland to deliver transformation in Adult Social Care, learning from successes seen in improving Children's Services.

In conclusion, he acknowledged that the budget year ahead would be difficult with challenges in delivering savings but through change, transformation and determination, progress would be monitored and assessed regularly. The longer term approach of delivering a three Year budget would support that process of change and transformation and provide more confidence in being financially sustainable.

The Leader of the Opposition referred to his intention to move an amendment, the details of which had been circulated to Members. He summarised the key elements that comprised a budget: a rolled-forward base budget, assumptions, pressures, savings and financial flexibilities.

Starting with financial flexibilities, the Leader of the Opposition suggested that, in the report, there was no back up information or rationale for the £10m income calculation for the Transient Visitor Levy. The PPP Service Concessions Accounting Flexibility was akin to equity release on a home, but rather than obtaining cash, this accounting method was more like adding a credit to a balance sheet, necessitating further borrowing to release the credit.

In response to the reported intention to avoid the use of Council Reserves, he highlighted that the presented budget included around £80m of reserve usage, with £23m proposed to close the budget gap, and £67m proposed to provide reserves for NHS Highland and transformational areas.

Mr Christie referred to his amendment, which included investment proposals to rebuild St Clements School, £30m investment in roads over three years and the importance of expressing disappointment to the Scottish Government as a result of its removal of local authority power in relation to Council Tax flexibility.

In relation to risk, he expressed concern that three areas of proposed savings measures, namely campervans and motorhome charging, Adult Social Care and the maximisation and expansion of Solar PV, accounted for around £20m of the £54m of savings detailed in the report. If any of these areas failed, the repercussions for the budget would be significant.

While welcoming the public response to the budget engagement process, he pointed out that the response rates of 1.3% (of the adult population) for phase one and 0.45% for phase two could not be considered to have reached 'everyone' as suggested. He added that the budget lacked reference to the cost of living crisis and poverty.

In terms of providing robust scrutiny of the proposed budget, Mr Christie spoke of the importance of honesty and transparency. He welcomed the proposed efficiency of £2m in relation to recycling services, but highlighted specific areas of concern including: lack of detail for the £2m Family First savings proposal; the need for milestones and operational plans for the Adult Social Care initiative; opposition to the removal of primary school management principal teachers given the 5-6% response rate to the proposal corporate management savings contained little depth, excessive uncertainty and lacked information on how they would be achieved; the school reconfiguration lacked detail, including on which schools would be affected; of the £4m savings target for procurement, only £1m had been identified, with a 2024-25 target of £2m; and it was unclear whether the social work procurement savings would involve third sector funding reductions.

He considered some of the income generation proposals ambitious, making reference to the campervans and motorhome charging target of £1.5m, which would require 12.5k passes to be sold per year, yet no marketing plan or explanation of this had been provided. The Unique Tourist Visitor Experiences proposal also lacked detail.

Regarding the proposal to increase fees and charges for garden waste by 2.5%, and burials and cremations by 4.5%, he suggested these should be reversed.

Mr Christie summarised his amendment, which included inviting Early Learning and Childcare providers to present their proposals to the Education Committee, funding to rebuild St Clements School, £30m investment in Roads, and writing to the Scottish Government's First Minister to express Highland Council's concerns, particularly regarding council tax flexibility and teacher numbers.

In closing, Mr Christie acknowledged the challenges of setting a budget during difficult financial times, but he considered that the budget presented by the Administration relied too heavily on the use of reserves, lacked depth and some of the savings proposals would leave the Council in a vulnerable financial position.

During further discussion, the following main issues were raised:-

- it was important to recognise and continue to develop the unprecedented levels of engagement that had taken place with communities, staff and Elected Members throughout the budget process. The Administration had reached out across Highland using a broad range of communication platforms over a prolonged period of time to ensure that everyone had had the opportunity to engage. Over 2000 people had responded to a range of questions and 500 people had taken part in the budget simulator, and this evidence had informed the budget before the Council, which reflected the priorities of constituents;
- it was necessary to work together, and there was more in the budget that Members agreed on than disagreed on;
- it was important to acknowledge that the proposed budget was less than optimal. There were challenges associated with setting a budget in the current financial climate but the Administration had not gone far enough in protecting the things that mattered to communities, such as roads and schools;
- whilst it was acknowledged that there had been more community engagement than ever before, only 39 community groups had responded and, given there were 156 Community Councils in Highland that were a source of valuable information, it was suggested this was an area that ought to be reviewed in the future;
- in relation to the health, social care and wellbeing element of the budget, the strategies proposed underpinned transformational change to deliver improved health and wellbeing outcomes for all and was not about saving money;
- there was a £600k saving arising from improved procurement practice working with Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire shared services. The Third Sector were looking for longer term and more effective commissioning of services and it was hoped this change would help deliver that. Success would be measured by improved outcomes and value for money;
- Members were reminded of the successful Home to Highland project started back in 2016. This was now delivering improved long term outcomes for children and families as well as significant financial benefits. The Council was also building on the Family First approach and it was hoped this would further reduce the need for placements due to the increased focus on working with children and their families to remain at home. The strategy would also help to increase the number of foster carers and develop kinship care. The Family First strategy was already a successful model of improved care and sought to deliver a £2m efficiency;

- changes to the service delivery model for Adult Services were contained in the approved NHS /Highland Council Adult Social Care Strategic Plan 2024–2027. As already indicated, the implementation of this strategy was supported by up to £20m of reserves with an additional £10.8m from the Scottish Government. When fully implemented the Plan was expected to deliver improved health outcomes and a £12.6m saving to the annual budget;
- Highland had the second lowest balance of care as measured by the Scottish Government meaning too many people were going into care, too soon and for too long. The Adult Social Care Strategy, one of a number of co-dependant strategies including the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan, NHS Highland Working Together, the Carers Strategy, and the Housing and Transport Strategies, would support people to live healthy and independent lives within their communities. The budget delivered on the commitment to the adult strategy and provided the financial support necessary to deliver improving outcomes;
- a lead agency model was in operation in Highland, and NHS Highland had been commissioned to deliver adult social care services. A lot of work had gone into developing and implementing the Adult Strategic Plan which would be regularly monitored by the Joint Monitoring Committee and the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee. Work was also taking place with the Highland Third Sector Interface, and the contribution and learning from third sector organisations was commended. The most successful transformation of any organisation was achieved by working with staff and developing solutions that worked for the rich and varied communities in the Highlands. Transforming services was not easy but it was evident from the work in respect of children’s services that outcomes could be improved whilst delivering cost savings;
- whilst it was recognised that a lot of good work was taking place to try and improve adult social care services across the Highlands, it was questioned how a £12.6m saving was going to help. An increasing number of people needed care, and reference was made to the issue of bed blocking and the growing waiting list to get a place in a care home. It was questioned what services would be lost, whether care packages would have to be cut and what the position would be in three years’ time. It was added that in Caithness a new campaign group had been formed representing over 30 families and highlighting the problems they had had trying to get care and respite;
- concern was expressed at the deliverability of the proposed savings through the Redesign of Adult Social Care and Family First Approach given this was dependent on NHS Highland’s strategic and operational plans. Specific reference was made to the impact on waiting times for care packages and recruitment of care staff;
- the Adult Services Strategic Plan required partnership funding support to be delivered effectively. Its foundation was community led support and there was reliance on third sector organisations and the public to deliver the project. The proposed reduction in ward discretionary funds would impact on funding for those organisations and local community projects;
- the Council could not continue to provide additional funding for Adult and Social Care delivered by NHS Highland and it was suggested an alternative model was required as the current model was not sustainable;
- being more ambitious and increasing the proposed efficiency target from 1% to 1.16% would be sufficient to protect the roles of Principal Teachers, a matter many Members had received representations on;
- concerns had been expressed about the removal of Principal Teacher posts. Principal Teacher posts were vital in the running and management of primary schools and were responsible for discrete areas of work;
- at the Opposition Briefing, Members had been informed that the proposal in respect of Principal Teachers would improve career progression in teaching. However,

reference was made to a representation from a Head Teacher which stated that it would remove a vital step in the career progression structure, impact on mentoring, increase the workload for Head Teachers and leave those with any ambition to progress to headships with no ability to verify their leadership potential by having worked as a Principal Teacher;

- the proposed education cuts were targeted in the wrong place, and support was expressed for the proposed amendment by Mr Baldrey. It was added, in relation to earlier comments regarding the job description for Principal Teachers, that the first line of the online job description mentioned management;
- in response to the concerns regarding the removal of Primary School Principal Teacher posts, it was emphasised that there would be no wholesale change from August. The saving was to be achieved by Year 3, which meant there was time to take a measured and sustainable approach to implementing change. There would be engagement with school staff starting well in advance of the summer break and, as indicated by the Chair of the Education Committee, a meeting had taken place that week with Principal Teachers and representatives. Irrespective of any changes that might happen, the management time would remain with the school and there would be engagement with the Head Teacher on the best way to utilise it. Principal Teacher posts in Additional Support Needs bases, 3-18 settings and clusters would not be included at this stage and any staff member whose status changed would receive three years of conserved salary. Schools might also consider if they wished to use their Pupil Equity Funding to maintain a level of Principal Teacher post within the school. Current Principal Teacher postholders would be encouraged and supported to undertake leadership training which would equip them to move onto other promoted posts such as Depute Head Teacher and Head Teacher, as the Council was keen to grow its own talent. Part of the review would be looking at developing career pathways for all primary teachers who wished to progress;
- concern was expressed at the level of savings proposed on the Education and Learning budget and the proposals for Additional Support for Learning (ASL) and principal teacher (primary) posts should be replaced by alternative savings that would not impact on children in Highland;
- ASL required additional funding due to growing demand for services and the statement on how the public would be affected did not reflect the views of parents;
- engagement with teachers was paramount to demonstrate they were valued and to seek views on potential improvements and support required;
- since the previous uplift for early learning and childcare settings, the cost of the Scottish Living Wage, food and utilities had risen well above the 11% uplift offered. The proposed reinvestment rate would not cover the costs involved. If these rates were not reviewed then more settings might have to close;
- in relation to Education and Learning, a targeted approach would be developed in consultation with school staff. Most savings were one-off or scheduled in Year 3, and it was not known how the financial and political landscape might change. The Service's share of the total combined Council's Services proposed savings was 6.4%;
- the proposed early learning and childcare private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector rates would allow providers to pay the real living wage and invest in their settings;
- ASL changes would be managed as part of the agreed allocation process and there were no plans to close any ASN bases or offsite provisions. The proposed saving represented 1% of the budget;
- the DSM Scheme was being amended to bring it into line with almost every other local authority in Scotland and it would also allow the Head Teacher, as budget holder, to decide how best to make these savings;

- management time would remain and head teachers consulted on its best use and schools could use pupil equity funding to maintain a level of posts in schools. Principal teachers would be supported to move onto promoted posts and consideration given to career pathways for all primary teachers;
- the current level of loan charges was unsustainable and having a significant impact on the budget and the Redesign Board consider this issue as a priority going forward;
- it was important for the Council to become leaner and greener and look at potential opportunities for smarter working and spend to save initiatives to deliver the Council's and public's priorities and services to the highest standard;
- the roads budget required significant additional funding and delaying essential road repairs would cost the Council and the public significantly more over the next three years. Income generation was critical to improving the roads infrastructure in Highland;
- the proposed reduction in ward discretionary grants and coastal communities funding was effectively centralisation and would not be popular in rural areas;
- UK and Scottish Government decisions had impacted on the Council's budget and the funding available for schools and roads. The budget was based on political priorities and not those of the people and culture in Highland;
- concern that support and services for special needs was not mentioned or considered as a priority in the budget;
- whether engagement on the budget had reached the various campaign and pressure groups in Highland particularly on schools, health and roads that highlighted key areas of concern;
- support was expressed for many areas of the budget, however there were some considerable risks and a lack of detail which raised concerns about its deliverability;
- the Opposition amendment sought to deliver additional roads investment and a new St Clement's School. Members should set aside party allegiances and put the people of the Highlands first;
- the proposals for investment in climate change and green energy be supported;
- an opportunity had been missed to tie in the installation of air source heating in Council houses with the provision of solar panels;
- a cautious approach be taken to alternative ways of storing electricity that would generate a profit for the Council;
- concern that Members were required to vote on the budget proposals in the absence of a delivery plan which was to be presented to the Council separately;
- specific reference to the lack of detail on the proposals for digital innovation, sustainable bus transport model and procurement;
- projected income from campervan and motorhome charges was optimistic and further information was required on local area committee budgets in terms of local visitor experiences;
- wider issues had impacted on the Council's funding, including Brexit, the pandemic, cost of living crisis, inflationary and wage increases, all of which were outside the Council's control;
- positive progress was being made with economic development in the area and the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport would create employment opportunities;
- the proposals for income generation had to be ambitious given the level of savings the Council had to achieve;
- the Council Leader had raised with the Scottish Government the general power of competence as a measure to reduce costs;
- the potential to generate income from renewable energy schemes would allow the Council to take a share in the large profits being made by developers;

- an excellent budget had been delivered given the financial challenges facing the Council and it was recognised there would be challenges with implementation and delivery;
- transformational change in the current model of service delivery was required to bridge the budget gap. Members had to take ownership of the budget and work towards its delivery on behalf of their constituents;
- concern that freezing Council tax benefited the richest and reducing public services impacted on those at the fringes of society and concern at the lack of information on the impact of the budget on those most in need;
- the Transient Visitor Levy legislation was being progressed by the Scottish Government who had estimated that the amount generated for Highland would be between £3m and £23m pounds, but it was reasonable to assume that the benefit to Highland could be in the region of £11m. However, the actual amount would depend on how Members of the Council decided to implement the policy in the future. Some Members expressed the need for caution, referring to the issues that had been experienced with other Scottish Government initiatives such as the Deposit Return Scheme, Highly Protected Marine Areas and the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill;
- the proposed £40 motorhome levy/bumper sticker was not what the public wanted to address irresponsible tourism and the issues associated with motorhomes, and it was necessary to do better;
- the allocation for the roads budget beyond the base budget would be determined at a future meeting. What the Council was being asked to agree today was the quantum that would cover roads, schools, and a range of other projects;
- concern was expressed regarding the impact of the closure of rural schools. A school was the heart of a community, and young families would not move to an area that did not have a school or where a school was mothballed or under threat of closure. In response, it was emphasised that schools would only close for sound educational reasons and that, for example, having three children in a school did not provide a good educational experience for those children;
- the proposed top-slice reduction from the Coastal Communities Funding and Ward Discretionary Budgets was an attack on localism and local decision-making. Communities relied on this funding to deliver local projects, and Coastal Communities Funding in particular provided a lot of benefit in terms of economic growth and development and was often used to leverage in more funding;
- renewable energy and climate change were the Council's biggest opportunity and challenge. The Generating Income theme set out in the report provided a crucial element of creating, delivering and developing the Council's own Highland Investment Plan and the ability to combat the effects of climate change. The Council now had the ability to consider how to create energy parks that utilised four elements, namely, wind, solar, hydrogen and battery storage. It was necessary to enable research and development and closer working relationships with industry that would, in turn, provide real and meaningful solutions to many of the issues that currently impacted Highland communities, and sending a message that the Council was open for business was key;
- concern was expressed regarding Opposition Members proposing that money being freed up from the revenue budget be spent on capital projects;
- referring to earlier discussions on pay, it was emphasised that the Council and NHS Highland paid higher levels of salary than private sector organisations and their terms and conditions were more advantageous;
- all Members wanted to improve and support the health and wellbeing of all citizens in the Highlands, and this could be done by supporting the methodology in the proposed budget, specifically, improved procurement ensuring best value for the public purse;

- as central government budgets became tighter every year, the only way to retain quality service delivery was for the Council to improve its own finances, and the efforts in respect of income generation were welcomed;
- the proposed increase in car parking charges and the extra income this would generate was welcomed. However, it was questioned why the minimum charge was not being increased further to £4 or £5. It was added that, to implement the new charges, the parking team needed increased capacity. It was understood that was going to happen but it was not evident in the budget report and it was suggested the position needed to be clarified;
- it was understood that, in 2010/11, prior to the previous period of Council Tax freezes, Ward Discretionary Budgets had been almost £60k per annum plus another almost £5k to develop services for young people. They were now £16k per year and about to be reduced by a further 10%. The proposed budget highlighted the role of the third sector and, with the cuts proposed across a range of Council services, the demands on third sector and community groups were only going to increase, but it was questioned where these groups were going to find the funding needed to support the essential work they did. The small saving to the Council by reducing Ward Discretionary Budgets would be a big loss to communities and it was requested this be reconsidered;
- reference was made to representations from private, voluntary and independent (PVI) Early Learning and Childcare providers indicating they felt undervalued and disappointed with the engagement with the Council, and support was expressed for the proposed amendment by Mr Christie which sought to invite them to a meeting of the Education Committee. This seemed to be a reasonable request, and it was questioned why it would not be supported by the Administration if there was confidence the PVI package was robust;
- in response to comments that Opposition Members had not proposed a credible alternative budget, it was contended that an equitable amount of time would be needed;
- it was emphasised that teachers' marking efforts had not been criticised as had been insinuated by some Members and, in fact, teachers' efforts had been praised and the excellent work taking place in schools had been acknowledged;
- neither the UK or Scottish Government had given the Council or Councils across the country the appropriate powers and funding whilst expecting long-term transformative change to be delivered based on their priorities. This was highlighted in the budget paper which stated that the budget gap had increased by £5m following the Scottish Government grant settlement, and that there had been a significant reduction in ring-fenced funding but with an expectation to deliver the same number of services. This was not fair or equitable, and it was necessary to continue to make cross-party representations in that regard;
- there were a lot of positives in the proposed budget, but concern was expressed regarding the deliverability of much of it. For example, a quarter of the savings came from working with NHS Highland, an organisation which the Council did not have control of, on an area of social care that was being transformed by the Scottish Government;
- Brexit was not mentioned in the budget paper, and it was questioned why the impact had not been analysed if it was as significant as had been suggested earlier in the discussion;
- it was pleasing to see how much of the proposed budget focussed on climate change. However, concern was expressed regarding 10% of the savings coming from solar panels given the supply chain sensitivities due to them coming from China in an area where minorities were being persecuted;
- the proposed implementation of PPP accounting flexibility would ease some in-year budget pressures but incur further expenditure in future years, thereby making funding future capital projects more difficult. It was a big risk for little reward, and

concern was expressed about agreeing it at this stage given that in recent years projected significant deficits had turned into surpluses in the end of year accounts. In response to a question, the Head of Corporate Finance confirmed that PPP accounting flexibility could only be implemented in financial years 2022/23 and 2023/24, and the usual accounting arrangements would apply from 1 April 2024;

- in relation to generating revenue, it was questioned what the Council was doing that showed it could in any way compete with the private sector. There had never been more opportunities but, if the Council wanted to embrace commercial endeavours, a shift to a less negative and risk-averse mindset was needed;
- Thurso High School had today been evacuated due to a problem with a roof in a different building to the block that had been condemned last year, which highlighted the ongoing problem with school buildings;
- concern was expressed regarding the small proportion of the roads in Caithness and Sutherland that were scheduled to be improved in the coming year;
- reference was made to the potholed condition of the B9176 Struie Road and the damage to the High Bridge which had resulted in temporary traffic lights being in place for a number of months at a cost of £90 per week. Similarly, a traffic system had been in place for several weeks near Strathroy, and these jobs needed to be done sooner rather than later; and
- in relation to St Clement's School, there was no reference in the budget report to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In the Bute House Agreement, there was a commitment to produce a strategy to mainstream equality, inclusion and human rights and embed them across the public sector in all policies, decisions and spending. Whilst St Clement's School was one of five schools mentioned previously that would have £100k of revenue investment over the next five years, the situation in the school was dire and five years was too long to wait for the possibility of a new school building. Earlier comments about the Carers Strategy, the wellbeing of families and the Family First redesign applied to the children and families of St Clement's School, which was not a school for Dingwall but for communities throughout Highland. Members, as Corporate Parents, had a duty of care to every child in Highland, and the proposal contained in the amendment by Mr Christie that a portion of the Investment Fund be designated towards the phased development of a new St Clement's School should be strongly looked at. Budgets were a clear sign of a government's values, and the Leader, in his opening remarks, had said that the Council wanted to protect the most vulnerable. Supporting the amendment would show that the Council was committed to the most vulnerable children and families in Highland, the children and families of St Clement's School.

Following summing up by the Leader of the Council and the movers of the amendments, the Council proceeded to the vote as follows:-

Mr R Bremner, seconded by Mr B Lobban, **MOVED** the recommendations as detailed in the report.

Mr A Baldrey, seconded by Ms H Crawford, moved as an **AMENDMENT**, the following:-

The item on Page 85 'Education – Primary Management Restructure' be removed from the budget. Savings which only begin to appear in the financial year 26/27 of an estimated £0.495m be replaced by funding from the "Future Investment Capacity Fund" currently showing £18.691m of reserve as this is an element of earmarked reserves that is not committed.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 39 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 27 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 Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Ms B Campbell, Ms G Campbell-Sinclair, Ms M Cockburn, Ms T Collier, Ms S Fanet, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Mr K Gowans, Ms J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Mr R Jones, Ms L Johnstone, Ms L Kraft, Ms E Knox, Mr B Lobban, Mr D Louden, Mr W MacKay, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr A MacKintosh, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Ms P Munro, Mr C Munro, Ms L Niven, Ms P Oldham, Ms M Paterson, Ms M Reid, Mr A Rhind, Mr K Rosie, Ms M Ross

For the Amendment:

Mr M Baird, Mr A Baldrey, Mr C Ballance, Mr A Christie, Ms H Crawford, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Mr D Gregg, Mr R Gunn, Mr A Jarvie, Ms B Jarvie, Mr P Logue, Mr A MacDonald, Ms I MacKenzie, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms A MacLean, Mr D MacPherson, Ms J McEwan, Mr J McGillivray, Ms M Nolan, Mr M Reiss, Ms T Robertson, Ms L Sagers, Mr A Sinclair, Mr R Stewart, Ms K Willis

Mr R Bremner seconded by Mr B Lobban, **MOVED** the recommendations as detailed in the report.

Mr A Christie seconded by Mr R Stewart, moved as an **AMENDMENT**, the following additional recommendations:-

- xviii. With regard to the previous delays in progressing the capital works for the 5 schools associated with the LEIP bid namely Beauly Primary, Dunvegan Primary, Park Primary, St Clement's School and Tornagrain Primary, and noting that Council at the September meeting approved Tornagrain Primary being included in the Capital Programme. That Council now agrees to designating a portion of the Investment Fund referred to at Section 11 and Annex 3 to start the building of one of the schools with phasing to be reported to the next Council Meeting– St Clements School at an estimated cost of £20 Million. It is imperative that solutions are found to secure funding for the other 3 schools and a report should come to the next possible meeting of Council addressing that issue as well as financial phasing implications for St Clements School;
- xix. In order to address the lack of roads investment in the Administration Budget that Council agrees to utilising a portion of the Investment Fund referred to at Section 11 and Annex 3 that the capital sum of £30 million be allocated to increasing the amount spent on our roads over 3 years, the phasing of which to be considered at a future meeting;
- xx. In relation to ELC that Council notes the rate proposed by PVI Representatives in contrast to the amounts in the Budget Papers at Section 10.12 and invites the groups to make a presentation to the next Education Committee in support of their claim; and
- xxi. That Council resolves to write to the First Minister drawing attention to the severe financial plight of the Council which has been made worse through the Government's decision to freeze Council Tax without consultation, the threat to penalise the Highland Council financially if teacher numbers are not maintained, the need on one hand to meet the expectations of Government flagship policies whilst on the other hand being told ring fenced funding rules have been removed, the continual push towards a National Care Service causing destabilisation in our communities and workforce and the continual inability to

provide an indication of figures for a multi-year grant settlement. These factors indicate a lack of partnership working which is the ethos of the Verity House Agreement and show disrespect to the Local Government structure in Scotland.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 41 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 24 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, Mr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Ms B Campbell, Ms G Campbell-Sinclair, Ms M Cockburn, Ms T Collier, Ms S Fanet, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Mr K Gowans, Ms J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Mr R Jones, Ms L Johnstone, Ms L Kraft, Ms E Knox, Mr B Lobban, Mr D Loudon, Mr W MacKay, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Ms P Munro, Mr C Munro, Ms L Niven, Ms P Oldham, Ms M Paterson, Ms M Reid, Mr A Rhind, Mr K Rosie, Ms M Ross, Ms K Willis

For the Amendment:

Mr M Baird, Mr A Christie, Ms H Crawford, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Mr D Gregg, Mr R Gunn, Mr A Jarvie, Ms B Jarvie, Mr P Logue, Mr A MacDonald, Ms I MacKenzie, Mr A MacKintosh, Ms A MacLean, Mr D MacPherson, Ms J McEwan, Mr J McGillivray, Ms M Nolan, Mr M Reiss, Ms T Robertson, Ms L Saggars, Mr A Sinclair, Mr R Stewart

Abstention:

Mr A Baldrey

Decision:

The Council:

- i. **NOTED** the budget assumptions as set out within the report;
- ii. **NOTED** the extensive process of budget engagement as set out within the report, and the update from the most recent period of engagement which concluded on 7 February 2024;
- iii. **AGREED** the three-year package of budget saving proposals put forward by the Council Administration as set out at Annex 5 of the report;
- iv. **AGREED** the implementation of the PPP accounting flexibility as per the terms of guidance specified in Scottish Government Finance Circular 10/2022 that permitted changes to internal accounting and the extension of the period over which accounting charges for PPP contracts were made;
- v. **NOTED** that as a result of recommendation (iv) there would be an estimated increase into Council reserves on a retrospective basis of approximately £68m;
- vi. **NOTED** the short to medium term benefits that result, as well as the longer-term implications and additional charges that would extend into future years, arising from recommendation (iv);
- vii. **AGREED** the package of budget pressures and investment funding proposed by the Council Administration as set out on Annex 3 of the report;
- viii. **AGREED** to the Partner Funding arrangements relating to NHS Highland, High Life Highland and Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) partners as set out in section 10 of the report, noting that in relation to ELC the proposed rates were pending confirmation from Scottish Government relating to funding and relevant guidance;

- ix. **AGREED** to Earmark reserves as set out in section 16 and Annex 6 of the report;
- x. **AGREED** to utilise reserves to support change and transformation and meet short-term pressures, as set out in section 11 and 16 of the report;
- xi. **AGREED** to utilise reserves totalling £9.927m in 2024/25 and, on an indicative basis, £12.922m in 2025/26 and £1.129m in 2026/27 to balance the revenue budget in those years;
- xii. **AGREED** in relation to Council Tax, to freeze Council Tax levels in 2024/25 at 2023/24 levels, with details of the resulting Council Tax as shown in Annex 7 of the report;
- xiii. **NOTED** the indicative assumptions on Council Tax for 2025/26 and 2026/27 as per Annex 7 of the report, with these subject to future review and formal decision as part of annual budget setting;
- xiv. **AGREED** the Revenue Budget for 2024/25 as set out within the report and on Annex 8 of the report;
- xv. **AGREED** the Indicative Revenue budgets for 2025/26 and 2026/27 as set out within the report and on Annex 8 of the report;
- xvi. **NOTED** the risks associated with the budget and the Medium Term Financial Plan as set out on section 19 of the report; and
- xvii. **NOTED** the update provided in relation to a Delivery Plan.

The meeting concluded at 2.35 pm.

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Black Isle and Easter Ross Area Committee** held remotely on Monday, 22 January 2024, at 10.30 am.

Present:

Ms T Collier	Ms M Nolan
Ms L Johnston	Mr A Rhind
Mr D Louden	Ms M Ross
Ms M MacCallum	

Participating Officials:

Ms H Ross, Senior Ward Manager
 Mr B Cameron, Head of Housing and Building Maintenance
 Mr I Moncrieff, Area Roads Operations Manager
 Mr M Culbertson, Project Officer- Community Regeneration
 Ms A Tanner, Community Regeneration Team
 Ms F MacBain, Senior Committee Officer

Also in Attendance:

Inspector Richard Ross, Police Scotland (Item 4)

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

Ms L Johnston in the Chair

1. Appointment of Chair and Vice Chair Cur Cathraiche agus Iar-Chathraiche an Dreuchd

Ms M MacCallum, seconded by Ms M Nolan, **MOVED** to defer the appointment of the Chair and Vice Chair to the next meeting due to the absence of a number of members of the committee.

Ms L Johnston, seconded by Ms T Collier, moved as an **AMENDMENT**, to appoint the Chair and Vice Chair immediately.

There were two votes for the motion and five votes for the amendment, and the **AMENDMENT** was carried, the votes having been cast as follows:

For the motion: Ms M MacCallum, Ms M Nolan

For the amendment: Ms T Collier, Ms L Johnston, Mr D Louden, Mr A Rhind, Ms M Ross

The Committee **AGREED:**

- i. to appoint Ms L Johnston as Chair, and Ms M MacCallum as Vice Chair, of the Black Isle and Easter Ross Area Committee; and

- ii. to investigate the possibility of appointing a second Vice Chair at the next meeting of the Committee.

2. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

Apologies were intimated on behalf of Ms S Atkin, Ms M Smith and Ms P Munro.

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

Item 6 – Mr A Rhind, Ms M Ross, Mr D Louden

4. Police – Area Performance Report Poilis – Geàrr-chunntas Dèanadais Sgìreil

There had been circulated Report No BIER/01/24 by Chief Inspector Stuart Fitzpatrick - Area Commander (North Highland Area Command).

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- the geographic area of the North Highland Area Command was clarified;
- information was sought and provided on the types of shoplifting offenders, and preventative measures being undertaken, which included assisting retailers to improve security. Vulnerable offenders, who were thought to be shoplifting due to need, were reported to partner agencies as appropriate;
- the drop in the numbers of Looked After children being reported as missing was welcomed;
- information was sought and provided on sexual and drink spiking offences, and on driving offence detection policy; and
- Mr Rhind expressed disappointment the Council did not keep more schools open during periods of severe weather.

The Committee **NOTED**:

- i. progress made against the objectives set within the Highland Local Policing Plan 2023 – 2024 Year 1 attached as Annex A to this report, for the period covering 01 April 2023 – 30 November 2023; and
- ii. the change in format necessitated by a reduction in back office capacity to prepare additional area committee reports.

5. Garage Rents Màil Gharaidsean

There had been circulated Report No BIER/02/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Property and Housing.

During discussion, Members referred to the need for investment to reduce the number of void garages, and the relative affordability of garage rents. Consideration was given to both a 7.3%, and a 7.95% rise, and clarification was

sought and provided that the increases were in line with Council house rent increases.

The Committee **AGREED** that a 7.95% rent increase be applied to Black Isle and Easter Ross Garages and Garage Sites.

6. Community Regeneration Fund – Assessment of Applications Maoin Ath-bheòthachadh Coimhearsnachd – Measadh Iartasan

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

- **Maureen Ross, as a Project Management Team member for the Tain & Fearn Free Church – New Build, as a director of the Seaboard Memorial Hall Ltd, and as a Trustee of the Seaboard Polytunnel Group;**
- **Derek Loudon, as a director of Tain Heritage Trust; and**
- **Alasdair Rhind, as Chair of the Tain Initiative.**

Transparency Statement - Maureen Ross, in relation to the Fearn Amenities SCIO 2 applications, as she was asked to help them on a voluntary advisory basis in relation to their application, declared a connection but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that she had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No BIER/03/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy.

Members considered the applications as follows:

Applicant	Project	Grant approved
Cromarty and Resolis Film Society	Improving Cinema Accessibility	£35,815.00
Culbokie Community Trust	Culbokie Village Hub	£30,000.00
Ferintosh Community Hall	Repairs to external walls	£30,216.00
Fearn Amenities SCIO	Fearn Abbey Regeneration Project	£20,640.00
Tain and Fearn Free Church	New Build	£46,000.00
Fox and Friends Highland	Fox Trots	£30,000.00 agreed, subject to match funding being obtained
Inver Football Club	Osprey Park Community Sports Facility	£9,200.00
Tain Heritage Trust	Phase 3 Works	£65,000.00
North Kessock Village Hall	Village hall enhancements	£50,000.00

Ross Sutherland RFC	Sound Proofing and Kitchen Completion	£25,000.00
Tain Initiative Group	T.I.G Development Officer	£33,000.00
Seaboard Memorial Hall Ltd	Village Entrances	£43,643.00
Evanton Community Trust	Community Development Project Manager	£28,860.00
Fearn Amenities SCIO	Refurbishment of Playing Field Pavilion	£12,006.19
Seaboard Polytunnel Group CIC	Needs Must Fixtures & Fittings	£9,000.00
The Place Youth Club	The Place Staffing and Operating Costs	£42,840.00
Total funding approved:		£511,220.19
Total funding available:		£536,611.48

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** that an approval of funding should detail the amount approved and outline any conditions of funding that Members wished to attach to the approval over and above the required technical conditions. A deferral would allow an applicant to resubmit the current application at a future date with updated information or for the project to be approved subject to further funding becoming available. A rejection would mean that the application would not proceed and any future application to the fund should be brought forward initially as a new expression of interest;
- ii. **AGREED** the approved CRF grant award for each application up to the value of the available area allocation, as detailed; and
- iii. as there was a balance of funding remaining, **AGREED** to ringfence remaining grant within the 2023/24 allocation to deliver area priorities identified through work to develop an area-based plan, subject to full applications being brought to a future committee meeting for consideration.

7. Area Roads Capital Programme 2024-25 Prògram Calpa Rathaidean Sgìreil 2024-25

There had been circulated Report No BIER/04/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- in relation to pothole patching, Members highlighted specific locations which were of concern, and which would be further considered at ward business meetings. Information was sought and provided on patching versus inlay, and attention was drawn to the budget restrictions in relation to road maintenance and repairs. It was anticipated that budgetary restrictions on capital projects might result in more staff being available for revenue budget repairs, and it was clarified that capital projects would start as soon as possible after the end of the winter season. Although there was some

flexibility within the programme to alter the scheduling of projects, as the start date for projects approached, it became more problematic to reschedule them without causing delays;

- it was suggested that contributions should be sought towards road maintenance from significant developments, for example the Freeport, which were likely to increase traffic levels and cause more wear and tear on the road network. Information would be sought from the Transport Planning Team on this and provided to the Committee; and
- it would be helpful if local communities were able to undertake their own patching with an appropriate service level agreement.

The Committee:

- i. **APPROVED** the proposed 2023/24 Area Roads Capital Programme for Black Isle and Easter Ross; and
- ii. **AGREED** to seek information on the possibility of obtaining developer contributions for road maintenance from significant developments and provide feedback on this to the Committee.

8. Common Good Funds Maoin Maith Choitchinn

It was explained that the four sets of common good fund accounts for 2022-23 had not been individually audited, but the total common good fund balances, comprising all of the Highland Council Common Good Funds, which appeared as a note to the Highland Council accounts, had been audited as they appeared in the Highland Council accounts and no significant issues identified. However, until signed, the Highland Council accounts including these Common Good accounts remained in draft.

a. Cromarty Common Good Fund Maoin Math Coitcheann Chromba

There had been circulated Report No BIER/05/24 by the Chief Executive Officer, Communities and Place, and the Head of Corporate Finance & Commercialism.

The Committee:

- i. **AGREED** the Cromarty Common Good Fund Statement of Accounts (Appendix 1a) and Quarter 4 monitoring report for 2022/23 (Appendix 1b), subject to the approval of the 2022/23 Highland Council accounts;
- ii. **NOTED** the position of the Cromarty Common Good Fund as shown in the 2023/24 Quarter Three monitoring statement at Appendix 2; and
- iii. **APPROVED** the proposed budget for 2024/25 as set out in Appendix 3

b. Fortrose and Rosemarkie Common Good Fund Maoin Math Coitcheann na Cananaich agus Ros Maircnidh

There had been circulated Report No BIER/06/24 by the Chief Executive Officer, Communities and Place, and the Head of Corporate Finance & Commercialism.

The Committee:

- i. **AGREED** the Fortrose & Rosemarkie Common Good Fund Statement of Accounts (Appendix 1a) and Quarter 4 monitoring report for 2022/23 (Appendix 1b), subject to the approval of the 2022/23 Highland Council accounts;
- ii. **NOTED** the position of the Fortrose & Rosemarkie Common Good Fund as shown in the 2023/24 Quarter Three monitoring statement at Appendix 2; and
- iii. **APPROVED** the proposed budget for 2024/25 as set out in Appendix 3.

**c. Invergordon Common Good Fund
Maoin Math Coitcheann Inbhir Ghòrdain**

There had been circulated Report No BIER/07/24 by the Chief Executive Officer, Communities and Place, and the Head of Corporate Finance & Commercialism.

The Senior Ward Manager explained that since publication of the report, she had been verbally advised by the Chair of the Invergordon Naval & Heritage Museum that they were withdrawing their Community Asset Transfer for the of Invergordon Town Hall, but a new expression of interest had been received from the Invergordon Development Trust, with discussion on this ongoing

During discussion, the process for the Community Asset Transfer was summarised and it was clarified that, at present, the Town Hall was being managed by High Life Highland.

The Committee:

- i. **AGREED** the Invergordon Common Good Fund Statement of Accounts (Appendix 1a) and Quarter 4 monitoring report for 2022/23 (Appendix 1b), subject to the approval of the 2022/23 Highland Council accounts;
- ii. **NOTED** the position of the Invergordon Common Good Fund as shown in the 2023/24 Quarter Three monitoring statement at Appendix 2;
- iii. **APPROVED** the proposed budget for 2024/25 as set out in Appendix 3; and
- iv. **NOTED** the current position in relation to Community Asset Transfer interest in Invergordon Town Hall.

**d. Tain Common Good Fund
Maoin Math Coitcheann Bhaile Dhubhthaich**

There had been circulated Report No BIER/08/24 by the Chief Executive Officer, Communities and Place, and the Head of Corporate Finance & Commercialism.

During discussion, the increase in interest received for the fund to over 1% was welcomed. To assist the Black Isle Members who were not familiar with Tain issues, Mr D Louden provided a brief explanation of the ambiguity around ownership of the Blarliath industrial estate and that the matter would

be investigated in due course by the Common Good Fund Officer, noting their significant workload at present. Solar arrays and offshore blue carbon initiatives were being looked at.

The Committee:

- i. **AGREED** the Tain Common Good Fund Statement of Accounts (Appendix 1a) and Quarter 4 monitoring report for 2022/23 (Appendix 1b), subject to the approval of the 2022/23 Highland Council accounts;
- ii. **NOTED** the position of the Tain Common Good Fund as shown in the 2023/24 Quarter Three monitoring statement at Appendix 2; and
- iii. **APPROVED** the proposed budget for 2024/25 as set out in Appendix 3.

**9. Ward Discretionary Awards
Duaisean fo Ùghdarras Uàird**

There had been circulated and were **NOTED** details of the Discretionary Budget applications that had been approved.

**10. Minutes
Geàrr-chunntas**

There had been circulated and were **NOTED** minutes of the meeting of the Black Isle Committee held on 7 November 2023, and the Easter Ross Area Committee held on 30 October 2023, which had been approved by the Council on 14 December 2023.

The meeting ended at 12.55pm

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Nairnshire Committee** held in the Chamber, The Court House, High Street, Nairn on 30 October 2023 at 10.30 am

Present:

Mr L Fraser
Mr M Green
Ms B Jarvie
Mr P Oldham

In Attendance:

Mr L Hannah, Ward Manager, Nairn and Badenoch and Strathspey
Ms R Ross, Committee Officer, Performance and Governance

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

Mr M Green in the Chair

Business

1. Apologies for Absence
Leisgeulan

There were no apologies for absence.

2. Declarations of Interest
Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt

There were no declarations of interest or transparency statements.

3. Good News
Naidheachdan Matha

The Chair drew the Committee's attention to the great progress being made by the Nairnshire Community Newspaper Steering Group.

During discussion Members highlighted the following additional items of good news:-

- thanks were extended to the people of Nairn for their efforts in helping make the town festive over the Christmas period; and
- the success of the local place plan meeting was highlighted with thanks extended to Inspector Ross McCartney for attending.

4. Police Area Performance Report
Poileas – Geàrr-chunntas air Coileanadh Sgìreil

There had been circulated report No NC/01/24 dated 17 January 2024 by the Area Commander (South Highland Area Command)

During discussion the following main points were raised:-

- it was queried why rates of speeding and shoplifting had increased;
- information was sought and provided on how a 103% detection rate for drug possession could have been achieved;
- in response to a question it was confirmed that the expected new speeding detection equipment could be tested in Cawdor and the recently acquired new speed detection gun had been used in the Nairnshire Area;
- it was emphasised that the area around the hospital was an area of concern for speeding;
- the Committee had been invited to visit the CCTV headquarters in Inverness; and
- the new report format was welcomed.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. progress made against the objectives set within the Highland Local Policing Plan 2023 – 2024 Year 1 attached as Annex A to the report, for the period covering 1 April 2023 – 30 November 2023; and
- ii. the change in format necessitated by a reduction in back-office capacity to prepare additional area committee reports.

5. Community Regeneration Fund – Assessment of Applications Maoin Ath-bheòthachadh Coimhearsnachd – Measadh Iarrtasan

There is circulated Report No NC/02/24 dated 10 January 2023 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

During discussion the following main points were raised:-

- the team Hamish project had significant public support and would be of great benefit to the town; and
- the Nairn BID Heritage Trail would be invited to apply to the Ward Discretionary Fund for additional funding to assist with their remaining funding gap.

The Committee **APPROVED** all of the applications presented for a funding award from the Community Regeneration Fund as follows:-

- Nairn Improvement Community Enterprise, Team Hamish - £11,000; and
- Nairn BID Heritage Trail - £5093.53.

6. Area Roads Capital Programme 2024/25 Prògram Calpa Rathaidean Sgìreil 2024/25

There is circulated Report No NC/03/24 dated 12 January 2024 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy.

During discussion the following main points were raised:-

- Nairnshire was very lucky compared to other parts of the Highlands where many roads, including major roads were in a much worse condition;

- the work planned for the A9007 and Lochloy Road was welcomed;
- it was queried when the yellow lines would be painted on Marine Road;
- information was sought on the cost of repairs to the Howford and Dava bridges;
- in the response to a question, it was confirmed that the person who caused damage to the Dava Bridge had been identified and an insurance claim for the cost of repairs had been instigated;
- attention was drawn to the poor condition of the road at Drynachan which was a route that was included in many scenic maps; and
- information was sought and provided concerning the bridge at Millhill near Drumduan.

The Committee **APPROVED** the proposed 2024/25 Area Roads Capital Programme.

7. Housing Revenue Account: Garage Rents 2024/2025 Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais: Màil Gharaidsean 2024/25

There is circulated Report No NC/04/24 dated 19 December 2024 by the Executive Chief Officer Property and Housing.

During discussion the following main points were raised:-

- over 80% of garages were not being rented by Council tenants and were benefiting from a very low rental rate;
- the garages were currently in good repair but costs of repairs were rising and the Council had a requirement to meet future repair needs; and
- it was highlighted that the greater increases were not included in the consultation.

Mrs B Jarvie proposed that garage rents should increase by 7.95% for Council tenants and 20% for non-tenants but did not find a seconder.

The Committee **AGREED** a rent increase of 20% be applied to Nairnshire Garages and Garage Sites for 2024/25.

8. Nairn Common Good Fund Engagement – Consultation Responses Maoin Math Coitcheann Inbhir Narann

There is circulated Report No NC/05/24 dated 11 January 2024 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place.

During discussion the following main points were raised:-

- the youth input in the Engagement Group was welcomed;
- some of the comments in the consultation responses were disappointing, incorrect and potentially defamatory;
- it was emphasised that the Engagement Group had no decision making powers;
- Engagement Group meetings could become very challenging based on the views contained in some consultation responses;

- it was suggested that the group be trialled for 12 months only;
- the importance of flexibility and diversity in membership was emphasised as it was unknown which new community groups might form in the following two years; and
- it was queried which Council officers would be supporting the Group meetings.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the update provided in the report along with the consultation responses received detailed at Appendix 1;
- AGREED** the proposed replies to the consultation responses received as set out at Appendix 2;
- APPROVED** the proposed Terms of Reference for a Nairn Common Good Fund Engagement Group as set out in Appendix 3;
- NOTED** that the Terms of Reference at Appendix 3 did not impinge on the need for decisions in relation to the Nairn CGF to be taken at this Committee; and
- AGREED** the work of the Common Good Fund Engagement Group be trialled for 24 months however reviewed after 12 months at a future meeting of the Committee.

9. Ward Discretionary Budget Buidseat Fo Ùghdarras Uàird

The Committee **NOTED** the following Ward Discretionary Fund payment that had been approved since the previous meeting of this Committee:-

- Millbank Primary Parent Council, Millbank Reading Refresh, £1,000.00

10. Minutes Geàrr-chunntas

The committee **NOTED** the Minutes of the Meeting of the Nairnshire Committee held on 30 October 2023 which had been approved by the Council on 14 December 2023.

The meeting concluded at 11.30am.

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Lochaber Committee** held remotely on **Tuesday, 23 January, 2024 at 10.30 a.m.**

Present:

Mr A Baldrey (remote)
Ms S Fanet
Mr A MacDonald

Mr T MacLennan
Ms L Saggars (remote)
Ms K Willis

Officials in Attendance:

Mrs D Ferguson, Senior Ward Manager (Ross, Skye and Lochaber), Communities & Place

Mr R Porteous, Roads Operations Manager/Corran Ferry, Operations Manager

Mr D Wood, Principal Housing Officer, Housing & Property

Mr D Lamont, Community Works Officer, Communities & Place

Mr M Culbertson, Project Officer, Community Regeneration Fund

Mr M Crowe, Project Officer, Community Regeneration Fund

Ms A Martin, Project Manager (FW2040), Communities & Place

Mr A MacInnes, Senior Committee Officer, Performance and Governance Service

Also in attendance:-

Mr M Colliar, Group Commander (Highland West), Scottish Fire & Rescue Service,

Mr C Scott, Station Commander, Lochaber District, Scottish Fire & Rescue Service

Mr A Hubbert, Threesixty Architecture

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

Ms K Willis in the Chair

BUSINESS

1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr J C Grafton.

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

There were none.

3. Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Local Committee Performance Report Aithisg Choileanaidh Comataidh Ionadail Seirbheis Smàlaidh agus Teasairginn na h-Alba

There was circulated Report No LA/1/24 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland.

Following commentary on the report by the Station Commander, Lochaber District, Members were pleased to note that overall the statistics showed below average and decreases in number of incidents which was good to see.

In relation to the last storm to hit the area it was queried what the impact on the Service had been following the A82 being closed due to a fallen tree, which effectively cut Fort William off. It was highlighted that Authorities needed to have a serious look at this as it did impact on all emergency services. It was advised that the Service had been lucky in that there were still sufficient crew that lived in Fort William town centre which allowed it to still have an operational response. In terms of the operational response outside Fort William, in this situation, there were other options within the district for other stations to respond. The resilience model with partner agencies had moved from a local to a national model, which allowed the Service to draw on resources from across Scotland. The Highland Council had done a remarkable job in clearing up storm damage in very challenging conditions.

It was advised that community response unit stations, such as Spean Bridge, had all been allocated funding for a new vehicle with new equipment and off road capability and they should be delivered to stations later in the year.

The Committee **noted** the area performance report.

4. **Corran Ferry Update Cunntas air Aiseag a' Chorrain**

There was circulated Report No. LA/2/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

Following commentary on the report by the Roads Operations Manager/Corran Ferry, Operations Manager, during which he acknowledged that it had been a challenging year for all concerned with the Corran ferry breakdowns. The ferry team were grateful to the community and local business community during that time for their understanding and co-operation. They were equally grateful to service suppliers such as Calmac, maintenance contractors and partner agencies for their assistance.

In considering the report, Members acknowledged the difficult year for the Corran ferry and that there was a long term programme for a replacement ferry and associated infrastructure. Options for funding were being looked at but no conclusions reached as yet. £20m in funding received to date was greatly welcomed and the momentum to build on this was ongoing particularly to focus on vessel replacement. The new vessel would be electric powered with diesel generator back up to top up the batteries. New technologies to power vessels were being developed all over the world and the industry was moving at pace. New technologies were becoming more advanced and reliable.

The maintenance of the current vessels was discussed and the importance of annual services and good relationships with suppliers was highlighted. Mitigations in place should the ferries break down again were detailed.

Following, further discussion, the Committee **noted** the information provided in the report and that the crew of the Corran ferry be thanked for their efforts during the recent challenging times with the ferry.

5. **Lochaber Area Roads Programme 2024/25 Prògram Rathaidean Sgìreil Loch Abar 2024/25**

There was circulated Report No. LA/3/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

The Roads Operations Manager provided an overview of the proposed roads maintenance programme for the Lochaber area, which was predominately surfacing and surface dressing. In terms of what could be achieved, the priorities were set out in the report, however the budget for roads maintenance had not yet been agreed. The priority list showed what could be achieved if the basic allocation of around £500k was given and any other priorities would be dependent on additional funding being received.

During maintenance works the roads team tried hard to avoid road closures and cause as little inconvenience as possible to local communities. In this respect, it was requested that in terms of the planned works on the B8007, Officers engage with the community council and elected members at an early stage on traffic management proposals. In terms of road maintenance planned for Eigg, the island only had the one road and the condition of it had deteriorated. Scottish timber transport scheme funding had been received to pay for some works to it in the last few years. This road was a priority and some funding had also been received from the small isles improvement fund for it. Similarly, the road on Knoydart was also in need of repair and there would be a focus on this in future years.

The Committee **approved** the proposed 2024/25 Area Roads Capital Programme and that a commitment was given to engage with the local community Council and elected members at an early stage on traffic management proposals for planned works on the B8007 Salen to Camus Inas.

6. Draft Fort William Town Centre Masterplan & Delivery Framework Prìomh Phlana Meadhan Baile a' Ghearasdain

There was circulated Report No. LA/4/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

The report provided an overview of the process to develop a draft Fort William town centre masterplan and delivery framework. The Fort William 2040 programme was at a key stage in implementing an agreed vision and there was a need to position the town centre at the core of the FW2040 programme. The draft masterplan sought to build on the town centre action plan and to provide the FW2040 Board with a framework to progress. Last year, Threesixty Architecture had been appointed to develop a fresh plan for the town centre with key themes to this. There had been comprehensive stakeholder engagement and a further period of engagement was proposed. Mr A Hubbert, Threesixty Architecture was in attendance and went over the highlights of the plan, and there was also commentary on the proposed public engagement by the FW2040 project manager.

Thereafter, Members welcomed the fantastic vision of the draft masterplan, they shared the aspirations to make Fort William better and it was an exciting vision to work towards. There was further detail provided on the stakeholder engagement. There was a concern that there may be public scepticism that all these plans were never going to happen based on past experiences, particularly with the significant amount of money that would be required to see all the plans come to fruition. It was highlighted that it was not always public money that went into such projects and if you made an area attractive, private

investment could be sought for developments. These were long term visions and projects would be prioritised and carried out on a phased basis.

In terms of the vision to change the A82 trunk road going through Fort William back to 2 lanes of traffic, it was queried what the traffic management proposals were to deal with the significant volume of traffic on this road. It was advised that this was a very important road, but however this was an aspirational long term vision for the town centre. Transport Scotland had been engaged with on the vision and the proposal would require to be considered as part of a wider detailed study of the road network in that area.

The Committee **agreed**:-

- i. the content of the draft Masterplan and Delivery Framework, including stakeholder feedback obtained to date; and
- ii. to conduct a 12-week period of public engagement under the auspices of Fort William 2040 (FW2040).

**7. Housing Revenue Account: Garage Rents 2024/2025
Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais: Màil Gharaidsean 2024/2025**

There was circulated Report No. LA/5/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

The Principal Housing Officer gave a summary of the report, following which Members were invited to agree a level of rent increase for garages and garage sites for 2024/25. In response to queries from Members, there had not been an increase in the repairs budget for garages in the last few years and the tenant consultation on the rent increase had still to be concluded, but initial soundings were that tenants were minded that a 7.3% increase would be acceptable.

The Committee **agreed** a 7.95% rent increase to apply to Lochaber Garages and Garage Sites.

8. Scottish Government Play Funding Allocation

There was circulated Report No. LA/6/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place. Members were invited to agree the spending of their Scottish Government Play funding allocation on the identified sites.

The Committee **agreed**:

- i. the allocation of funding to the projects identified for Ward 11;
- ii. the allocation of funding to the projects identified for Ward 21;
- iii. homologate the spend for works already completed in Ward 11 at for Roy Bridge Play Park; and
- iv. homologate the spend for works already completed in Ward 21 at Victoria Road and Inchree Play Parks.

**9. Community Regeneration Fund (CRF) Assessment of Applications
Measadh Iarrtasán Maoin Ath-bheòthachaidh Coimhearsnachd**

There was circulated Report No LA/7/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

The report detailed the community regeneration fund allocations received in the current round. There were 22 applications, however 5 of those were directed to the community led local development fund as they were capital projects that could potentially meet the criteria for that fund. It was confirmed that all 5 of these applications (Lochaber rural education trust mini bus; Mallaig & Morar community centre kitchen upgrade; Morven water sports club kit; resurface of car park in Arisaig; Shielbridge hall fire alarm system) would remain with that fund and were withdrawn from consideration of funding from the CRF.

Therefore, there were 17 applications for consideration at the meeting and a total request of funding of £445K, with an available budget of £540,708. If all applications were approved there would be an underspend of £95,706. All 17 applications were eligible for support.

Following consideration of the applications, the Committee:-

i **noted** that 5 of the projects submitted had been withdrawn from consideration and had instead been redirected to the Community Led Local Development Fund.

ii **approved** all of the remaining applications. In terms of the Green Fingers project, the Project Officer to liaise with the applicants to re-work project costs in light of recent storm damage; and

iii. **agreed** to ringfence the remaining grant within the 2023/24 allocation to deliver area priorities identified through work to develop an area-based plan, subject to full applications being brought to a future committee meeting for consideration.

10. **Ward Discretionary Budget** **Buidseat Fo Ùghdarras Uàird**

The Committee **NOTED** the following Ward Discretionary Fund grant awards 2023/24.

Ward 11

HLH Archive Centre – contribution to travelling exhibition costs Tir nan Og - £750

Lochaber Wheeled sports society – for purchase of bikes & helmets - £1,000

Knoydart Trading Limited – purchase of freezer - £2,350

Nevis Landscape Partnership - National Park Working Group - £1,500

Ward 21

Kinlochleven Primary School Council – School trip - £250

South Lochaber Community Association – Contribution to Bus repairs - £1,750

Lochaber wheeled sports society – for purchase of bikes & helmets - £1,000

West Ardnamurchan Community Council – for purchase of IT kit - £450

Nevis Landscape Partnership - National Park Working Group - £1,500

11. **Minutes** **Geàrr-chunntas**

There was circulated for information, Minutes of Meeting of the Lochaber Committee held on 31 October, 2023 which were approved by the Council on 14 December, 2023, the terms of which were **NOTED**.

The meeting ended at 1.00 p.m.

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Sutherland County Committee** held in the Chamber, Council Offices, Drumbuie, Golspie on Tuesday 23 January 2024 at 10.30am.

Present:

Mr M Baird

Mr H Morrison (remote)

Mr R Gale

Ms L Niven (remote)

Mr J McGillivray

In attendance:

Mr P Tomalin, Ward Manager

Ms J Sutherland, Roads Operation Manager

Ms M Grant, Principal Housing Officer

Ms P Betts, Project Officer (Community Regeneration)

Ms A Macrae, Senior Committee Officer

Also in attendance:

Inspector R Ross, Police Scotland

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

Mr R Gale in the Chair

Business

1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Ms M Hutchison

2. Declarations of Interest Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt

Item 6: Mr R Gale

3. Police – Area Performance Summary Poileas – Geàrr-chunntas air Coileanadh Sgìreil

There had been circulated Report No SCC/01/24 by the North Area Commander.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:

- clarification was sought and provided that no correlation had been observed between the increase in speeding detections and the introduction of 20mph speed zones;
- the increase in mobile phone offences and the measures being taken by Police Scotland to educate drivers;
- noting that improvements in technology in terms of ease of access to information may have contributed to the increase in detections of vehicles being driven without a MOT;

- further information was sought and provided on the preventative messaging issued by Police Scotland to tackle fraud and the proactive approach taken to prevent repeat cases involving the same victim;
- in relation to targeting first time drivers, confirmation was provided that Police Scotland allocated a school liaison officer to each secondary school, albeit resourcing challenges had impacted on the level of activity compared to previous years. Police Scotland also had other schemes designed to reinforce safety messaging for young drivers;
- the rural Police stations at Lochinver, Rhiconich and Tongue were vitally important to North and West Sutherland and officers be thanked for the work undertaken in the area; and
- commending Police Scotland on the significant reduction in missing persons cases.

The Committee **NOTED** the:

- i. progress made against the objectives set within the Highland Local Policing Plan 2023 – 2024 Year 1 attached as Annex A to this report, for the period covering 01 April 2023 – 30 November 2023; and
- ii. change in format necessitated by a reduction in back office capacity to prepare additional area committee reports.

4. Area Roads Capital Programme 2024/25 Prògram Calpa Rathaidean Sgìreil 2024/25

There had been circulated Report No SCC/02/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

In discussion, Members requested that their thanks be conveyed to the Roads Team for their efforts and hard work within the available resources in responding to the recent storm and heavy snow conditions in Sutherland.

Thereafter, the following main points were raised;

- concern at the anticipated Capital budget allocation for roads in 2024/25, while recognising the budget for the next financial year had not yet been confirmed;
- the Embo streets project was welcomed and confirmation provided that the Highland Broadband scheme was being factored into the scheduling of the works;
- the challenges in determining the priority list within the Programme and the need to accept the professional engineering judgement of officers in this regard;
- the Programme and priority list was published on the Council's website and this could help inform public expectations once the final budget was confirmed; and
- an update was sought and provided on progress with the Capital Programme for the current financial year in relation to the level of spend and benefits delivered to the area. A report on the projects completed and spend would be brought to the next Area Business Meeting.

The Committee **APPROVED** the proposed prioritised Area Roads Capital Programme for the Sutherland Area for 2024/25.

**5. Housing Revenue Account: Garage Rents 2024/2025
Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais: Màil Gharaidsean 2024/25**

There had been circulated Report No SCC/03/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, it was proposed that a 10% rent increase be applied to garages and garage sites in Sutherland in 2024/25 on the grounds that a small increase had been applied in the current financial year in recognition of cost of living increases and as a result there had been limited investment in garages in the area. This proposal would result in an increase in garage rents for Council tenants of 75p per week which was not considered to be excessive and recognised the need for significant maintenance works to be carried out to some garages.

The Committee **AGREED** that a 10% rent increase apply to Sutherland Garages and Garage Sites in 2024/25.

**6. Community Regeneration Funding – Assessment of Applications
Maoinachadh Ath-nuadhachadh Coimhearsnachd – Measadh Iarrtasan**

Declaration of Interest: Mr R Gale declared an interest in the application by the Go Golspie Development Trust on the grounds he was Trustee of the organisation and he left the meeting for the determination of this application. Mr H Morrison, Vice Chair, took the Chair for Go Golspie Development Trust's application.

There had been circulated Report No SCC/04/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

The Committee **APPROVED** the applications presented for a funding award from the Community Regeneration Fund as follows:

Applicant	Project	Grant awarded
Lairg & District Community Initiatives	Ferrycroft Playpark Development	£60,000
Golspie Golf Club	Climate Mitigation Water Management Project	£18,765
Strathnaver Museum	Exploring the Archives	£5,755.20
Assynt Development Trust	Lochinver Glebe housing design stages 4a & 4b	£90,000
Durness Community Group	Durness Play Park	£56,899.01
Helmsdale Heritage and Arts Society (Timespan)	People's Mobile Archive	£31,964
Assynt Development Trust	Development Officer Post	£21,600
Brora Development Trust	Development Officer Post	£29,163
Brora Development Trust	Visitor Information Point Officer	£20,250

Assynt Development Trust	Administrative Staff Post	£9,600
Dornoch Heritage SCIO	Historylinks Heritage Hub – Community Programme	£18,985
Go Golspie Development Trust	Ross Street Playpark Project	£85,000
Assynt Development Trust	Lochinver Main Street Playpark Green Space Enrichment Phase 1	DEFER to next meeting for further information on costings and match funding.
Farr North Community Development Trust	Delivery of Farr Community Action Plan	£30,360.90
Assynt Development Trust (ADT) on behalf of NW2045	NorthWest2045 Place Plan Coordination	£50,110
Carbisdale Castle Community Interest Company Limited	Carbisdale Community Centre	DEFER to next meeting for further information on the fire tender and equipment element of the application.
TOTAL		£528,452.11

The Committee **AGREED** subject to consideration at the next meeting of the applications that had been deferred, to ringfence the remaining grant within the 2023/24 allocation to deliver area priorities identified through work to develop an area-based plan, subject to full applications being brought to a future Committee meeting for consideration.

**7. Dornoch Business Improvement District – Member Appointment
Roinn Leasachadh Gnothachais Dhòrnaich – Cur Ball an Dreuchd**

Members were advised that following the successful ballot in favour of the creation of a Business Improvement District in Dornoch, a new Dornoch BID company was being established with a Board comprising representatives from Dornoch businesses. There was also a place on the Board for a Highland Council representative.

The Committee **AGREED** to appoint Mr J McGillivray from the East Sutherland and Edderton Ward as detailed.

8. **Dornoch Common Good - Annual Report 2022/23, Proposed Budget 2024/25 and Quarterly Monitoring Statement 2023/24**

Math Coitcheann Dhòrnaich – Aithisg Bhliadhnail 2022/23, Buidseat ga Mholadh airson 2024/25 agus Aithris Sgrùdaidh Ràitheil 2023/24

There had been circulated Report No SCC/05/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place and Head of Corporate Finance.

In discussion, it was noted that the Fund was being well managed including the risks such as the Dornoch Burn, and reference made to the benefits it was delivering for the Dornoch area, The increase in rental income from Royal Dornoch Golf Club was also welcomed.

The Committee:-

- i. **AGREED** the Dornoch Good Fund Statement of Accounts (**Appendix 1**) and Quarter 4 monitoring report for 2022/23 (**Appendix 2**), subject to the approval of the 2022/23 Highland Council accounts;
- ii. **NOTED** the position of the Dornoch Common Good Fund, as shown in the Q3 monitoring statement (**Appendix 3**) against budget for 2023/24; and
- iii. **AGREED** the Dornoch Common Good Fund Annual Budget for 2024/25 (**Appendix 4**).

9. **Ward Discretionary Awards
Duaisean fo Ùghdarras Uàird**

North, West and Central Sutherland Ward Discretionary Budget applications approved 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024

The Committee **NOTED** that the following North, West and Central Sutherland Ward Discretionary Budget applications have been approved since 1 April 2023:

Lairg Community Council - Lairg Bird Hide upgrade	£2,000.00
Sutherland Women's Football Club - Transport Funds	£800.00
Farr Youth Development – High Life Highland - Day Trip to Durness	£240.00
The Sutherland Community Partnership - Community Learning Exchange	£500.00
Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust - Kyle Feeds	£1,000.00
Lairg & District Community Initiative - Replace Flag Pole	£500.00
North West Training Centre - Learning Programme 23-24	£1,750.00
TYKES - Programme of Residential Respite	£1,240.00
Farr Edge 2000 - Continue Service	£2,500.00
Culrain Hall – Heating upgrade	£1,200.00
Scourie Community Devt Co. – Safe Parking for Affordable Housing and School	£1,000.00
North West Schools PC – Extra-curricular Activities	£1,000.00
East Sutherland Schools Sports Association – Transport	£1,000.00
Total	£14,730.00

East Sutherland and Edderton Ward Discretionary Budget applications approved 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024

The Committee **NOTED** that the following East Sutherland and Edderton Ward Discretionary Budget applications have been approved since 1 April 2023:

Clyne Heritage Society – Aultcraggie Roundhouses Archaeological Excavation	£500.00
Dornoch Bowling Club – Victorian Benches	£700.00
East Sutherland Camera Club – Highland Challenge 2023	£600.00
Sutherland Women's Football Club - Transport Funds	£800.00
Go Golspie - Caretaker Post	£500.00
The Sutherland Community Partnership - Community Learning Exchange	£500.00
Dornoch Academy - Edinburgh Book Festival Literacy Trip	£1,175.00
The Embo Trust - Old School Reset	£600.00
HLH - Dornoch Youth Services Summer Activity Programme	£1,000.00
Tykes - Programme of Respite Residential	£3,000.00
Embo Trust (Urras Euraboil) - Embo Community Centre Resilience	£999.99
East Sutherland Schools Sports Association – Transport	£2,560.00
Golspie Youth Action Project - Office	£2,215.00
Helmsdale PS Parent Council – Crossing Patroller Shed	£850.00
Total	£15,999.99

10. Minutes Geàrr-chunntas

There had been circulated and **NOTED** the Minutes of the Sutherland County Committee held on 31 October 2023, which had been approved by the Council on 14 December 2023.

11. ***ADDITIONAL URGENT ITEM** **WINTER MAINTENANCE**

The Chair advised that he wished to raise an urgent item on the grounds that following the recent spell of storms and heavy snowfall experienced across the Highlands, it was important the following item be addressed as soon as possible.

The efforts of the Roads team in clearing the main arterial routes and other roads according to priority and resource availability was greatly appreciated and it was appropriate Members expressed their gratitude to everyone involved. However, in spite of the Team's best efforts there were some roads that could not be cleared given the resource available.

As a result of one particular road not being cleared, residents had been unable to leave their homes for 5 days and had no way of getting food or essential medication. This was only one example and the Chair advised he was aware there were many others.

It was well known that farmers and contractors had approached the Council to offer their services, but this had been rejected for various reasons. It was time for the Council to take a more practical and flexible approach and bring in assistance to clear roads in such difficult times.

* The Committee therefore **AGREED** to call upon the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy to arrange an urgent review of current resources and to look at developing a partnership arrangement with the many farmers and contractors who have machinery capable of clearing snow from the roads that are not prioritised across Sutherland and any of the remote and rural parts of the Highlands. One way that this could be done was by a simple memorandum of understanding with anyone with the appropriate equipment who is willing to be called in as necessary.

The meeting concluded at 12.45pm.

The Highland Council

Minutes of Special Meeting of the **Audit Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Wednesday, 24 January 2024 at 10.30am.

Present:

Mr M Baird	Mr G Mackenzie
Mr B Boyd	Ms J McEwan (remote)
Mr D Fraser (remote)	Mr P Oldham (remote)
Mr L Fraser	Mrs T Robertson (remote)
Mr R Jones	Mr R Stewart
Mr S Kennedy	

Non-Members also present:

Ms T Collier (remote)	Mrs A MacLean
Mr R Gale (remote)	Ms K MacLean (remote)
Mrs B Jarvie (remote)	Mr D Macpherson (remote)
Mr D Louden (remote)	Ms M Ross

Officials in Attendance:

Mr P Nevin, Interim Executive Chief Officer, Performance and Governance
 Miss D Sutherland, Strategic Lead (Corporate Audit and Performance), Performance and Governance
 Ms E Barrie, Interim Head of People, Resources and Finance
 Mr B Porter, Head of Corporate Finance, Resources and Finance
 Mr J Thurlbeck, Corporate Audit Manager, Corporate Audit and Performance
 Mr M Watters, Corporate Performance and Information Governance Manager, Performance and Governance Service
 Ms R MacDonald, Principal Accountant, Corporate Finance, Resources and Finance
 Miss J MacLennan, Joint Democratic Services Manager, Performance and Governance
 Mrs G MacPherson, Committee Officer, Performance and Governance

Also in attendance:

Ms E Scoburgh, Audit Scotland (remote)
 Ms C Gardiner, Audit Scotland (remote)
 Ms J McBride, Audit Scotland (remote)

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

Mr R Stewart in the Chair

1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr C Ballance, Mr K Rosie and Mr A Sinclair.

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

There were no declarations of interest or transparency statements.

3. Best Value Thematic Report 2022/23 Aithisg Chuspaireil an Luaich as Fheàrr 2022/23

There had been circulated Report No. AC/01/24 by the Strategic Lead (Corporate Audit and Performance).

Prior to discussion, it was flagged that some of the matters in the report had been superseded by recent events and any actions taken had been agreed at the meeting of Highland Council on 11 January 2024. Members were reminded that given the scale of the financial challenges facing the Council, the Council programme would be recalibrated following approval of the Budget on 29 February 2024.

During discussion, the following points were raised:-

- it was felt the report not only showed the overall effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and cost of living but also the room for improvement in terms of equality, climate change and Services executing what had been agreed;
- it was asked how Place Based Planning would be embedded in order for Members to support their communities moving forward, in terms of a balanced budget, delivering community priorities during the reduction of services;
- information was sought, and provided, regarding the recording and management of similar issues reported by other local authorities;
- in terms of community engagement and the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan (HOIP), it was felt that it wasn't as effective as it could be – that sometimes the onus was on a small group of officers to do much of the engagement – and it was asked how Members and auditors could scrutinise this;
- differing views were expressed in relation to liaison between officers and communities. While it was said that liaison could be improved, it was also stated that there were many instances of excellent working between officers and communities, as mentioned in the report;
- it was asked if Members could be provided with progress updates when an officer made a target or promise and it was confirmed that the Strategic Lead – Corporate Audit and Performance would take responsibility for tracking;
- it was felt that Members were not always made aware of the full cost when new ideas were being presented by officers and that public consultation questions could be quite leading rather than open ended, and a full breakdown of cost in the initial stages, including the source of funding, would be preferable;
- community participation and the pace of progress had been a theme throughout the report; and

- in terms of recommendation 3 in the Thematic report, information was sought regarding public engagement and abandoned asset transfer requests, and it was confirmed that engagement would continue. In addition, it was stated that an annual report detailing all community transfer activity was provided to the Communities and Place Committee.

The Committee:-

- scrutinised and **NOTED** the report findings and the improvement action plan set out in Appendix 1 of the report; and
- NOTED** that the next thematic review would examine 'workforce innovation' and would be included and reported as part of Audit Scotland's 2023/24 audit work.

4. **Highland Council External Audit 2022/23** **Sgrùdadh on Taobh A-muigh aig Comhairle na Gàidhealtachd 2022/23**

a) **Audited Accounts 2022/23**

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

Information was sought, and provided, regarding when an asset became a liability and it was confirmed that the Head of Corporate Finance would provide a brief report in relation to void properties to Members after this meeting.

The Committee **APPROVED** the audited accounts for signature.

b) **Report to Those Charged with Governance on the 2022/23 Accounts**

There had been circulated Report No. AC/03/24 from Audit Scotland.

The Committee having considered the report, **AGREED** that the letters of representation be signed by the Head of Corporate Finance (Section 95 Officer).

c) **Annual Report 2022/23**

There had been circulated Report No. AC/04/24 from Audit Scotland.

Members complimented Audit Scotland on their well presented and prepared reports, particularly that they were easy to read and understand.

The Committee scrutinised and **NOTED** the report findings, in particular the key messages on pages 3-4 and the action plan at Appendix 1 of the report.

5. **Risk Management – updated Risk Management Strategy and new Risk Appetite Statement** **Stiùireadh Cunnairt – Ro-innleachd Stiùireadh Cunnairt ùraichte agus Aithris Càil Cunnairt ùr**

There had been circulated Report No. AC/05/24 by the Interim Executive Chief Officer, Performance and Governance.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the revised Corporate Risk Management Strategy at Appendix 1 of the report; and

* **AGREED** to recommend to Council:-

- ii. the Risk Appetite statement on page 5 of Appendix 1 of the report; and
- iii. that it would be named the Corporate Risk Management Policy.

**6. Internal Audit Report 2022/23 (updated version)
Aithisg In-Sgrùdaidh 2022/23 (cunntas às ùr)**

There had been circulated Report No. AC/06/24 by the Strategic Lead (Corporate Audit and Performance).

It was highlighted to Members that an internal audit review was currently in progress, examining circumstances that had led to 5 payroll overpayments and it was confirmed that Members would be provided with a report, upon completion, for scrutiny. It was asked what percentage of work had been completed in terms of the overpayment and Members were reassured that work was underway.

In terms of access to their pension, it was confirmed that it was the responsibility of the employee prior to termination of employment to ensure their email address was changed and in terms of payroll, the responsibility of the employee to notify their line manager they were leaving, providing appropriate notice. Line managers were then responsible for submitting relevant paperwork to notify payroll. In every case mentioned in the report, managers did not submit the relevant information to payroll in time.

The Committee **NOTED** the content of the updated report, the audit opinion provided and that any relevant points be raised with the Strategic Lead (Corporate Audit and Performance).

The meeting ended at 11:40 am.

**The Highland Council
Caithness Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the **Caithness Committee** held remotely on **Monday 29 January 2024 at 10.00am.**

Present:

Mr R Bremner, Mr R Gunn, Mr W Mackay, Mr S Mackie, Ms J McEwan, Mr M Reiss, Mr K Rosie

Officials in attendance:

Ms A Clark, Head of Community Support & Engagement, Communities & Place

Ms F Cameron, Programme Manager, Community Regeneration, Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

Mr M Crowe, Project Officer, Community Regeneration, Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

Ms A Jansson, Area Education & Learning Manager, Education & Learning

Ms J Sutherland, Roads Operations Manager, Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer, Housing & Property

Mr A MacInnes, Senior Committee Officer, Performance & Governance

In Attendance:

Station Commander Gary Cringles, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

Mr R Gunn in the Chair

Business

**1. Apologies for Absence
Liesgeulan**

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr A Jarvie.

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

Item 5 – Mr R Bremner, Ms J McEwan, Mr M Reiss, Mr K Rosie (declaration of interest)

Item 11 – Mr S Mackie (transparency statement)

**3. Minutes
Geàrr-chunntas**

There were circulated and **noted** minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 13 November 2023 which were approved by the Council on 14 December 2023.

**4. Scottish Fire and Rescue Local Performance Report
Aithisg Dèanadais Ionadail Seirbheis Smàlaidh is Teasairginn na h-Alba**

There had been circulated Report No CC/01/24 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland.

Following commentary on the report by the Station Commander, thanks were extended to elected members, the local crews and members of the community in their efforts to

help with the ongoing recruitment to the service and ensuring crews were available to attend incidents. Thanks were also extended to the local roads team and the community for their assistance during the recent spell of heavy snow which was very much appreciated.

Members referred to the encouraging position regarding new/potential recruits to the service and the Station Commanders comments regarding the assistance provided during the spell of heavy snow was echoed by Members and showed there was a great community spirit in the area. The benefits of the fire skills program for young people was highlighted and specifically the satisfaction it brought to them and it was hoped they would continue. The service was looking to increase the number of instructors to deliver these courses. Information would be provided to Members on where the funding came from for the fire skills program for young people, and the number and gender of young people in the SFRS youth volunteer scheme.

Continuing if the service had the flexibility to attend and prevent flooding incidents, flood victims would not be applying for extra public funds to help them make good the damage. While this subject could continue to be discussed outwith the meeting, it was stressed that the service would respond where there was a risk to life.

The Committee **noted** the Area performance report.

5. Community Regeneration Fund Assessment of Applications Measadh Iarrtasán Maoin Ath-bheòthachaidh Coimhearsnachd

Declaration of Interest

Mr R Bremner declared an interest in part of this item as he had a connection with one of the applicants, Thrumster community development association. He took no part in the discussion or determination of the application for funding submitted by Thrumster community development association.

Ms J McEwan, Mr M Reiss, Mr K Rosie declared an interest in part of this item as members of the Association of Northern Trails Scotland. They took no part in the discussion or determination of the applications for funding submitted by the Association of Northern Trails Scotland.

There had been circulated Report No CC/02/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy. The report detailed the community regeneration fund allocations received in the current round. There were 14 applications to be considered with a total grant request of £500,358.68 and the available area funds were £354,412.98. Details were provided of 3 projects (Thurso youth club; Wick amateur swimming club; Pentland firth yacht club) that had applied for CRF funding that had received funding separately through the community led local development capital funding.

The Committee dealt with the applications that had been presented as follows:-

- a) Caithness KLICS – approved £11,244.80
- b) Dunbeath Community Centre – approved £28,940.66
- c) John O’ Groats Development Trust – Deferred for further application when project has planning consent;
- d) Home Start Caithness – approved £3615 revenue costs and deferred capital costs for future consideration following submission of additional information relating to building development works.
- e) Thurso Community Café – deferred for information on financial plan and sustainability of project.
- f) Thrumster community development Association – approved £9,500.22
- g) Reay Golf Club – approved £75,000
- h) Staxigoe community football pitch – approved £33,871
- i) Thurso on Board – deferred pending further information on structural condition of the building; costs to bring it into a safe condition and to develop the building; and information on what consultation there has been with other organisations in the locality about youth activity provision
- j) High Life Highland Youth development Thurso – approved £29,831
- k) Association of Northern Trails Scotland (embarking on the north coast trail) – approved £20,000
- l) Association of Northern Trails (stepping up on the JOGT) – approved £8,000 subject to landowner consent
- m) Wick Harbour Authority – deferred. Further information on funding package for this project be sought.
- n) John O’ Groats Mill Trust – approved £50,000

ii. agreed to ringfence remaining grant within the 2023/24 allocation for consideration of deferred applications that will be resubmitted.

6. Thurso Associated School Group Attainment Overview Tar-shealladh Buileachaidh Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte Inbhir Theòrsa

There had been circulated Report No CC/03/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Education & Learning.

Following a summary of the report by the Area Education and Learning Manager and in response to Members queries it was confirmed that Education Scotland inspections of schools had started and reports on inspections undertaken were detailed in the report. However, in the Thurso associated school group there had not been an inspection in the last five years. In terms of standards and quality reports, the service was fair in its evaluation of schools and there were Collaborative lead officers who worked closely with schools to improve standards and quality. The work of nurseries in the area was commended. Overall members were pleased with the report, it was very encouraging for the schools and the hard work of staff was recognised.

The Committee **NOTED** the content of the report.

7. Area Roads Programme 2024/25 Prògram Rathaidean Sgìreil 2024/25

There had been circulated Report No CC/04/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

The Chair on behalf of the Committee thanked the Roads team for the brilliant job over the recent bad period of weather. Thanks were also extended to Bear Scotland, the emergency services for their professionalism during this challenging period and also members of the community and businesses who had also helped.

The Roads Operations Manager provided an overview of the proposed roads maintenance programme for Caithness. The priorities for roads maintenance were set out in the report, however the budget for roads maintenance had not yet been agreed. Priorities throughout the year could also change and members would be briefed and they would consider any proposed changes to priorities at their monthly roads meetings with officers. The Roads Operations Manager gave an update in relation to specific road schemes raised by Members.

It was highlighted that over the last few years significant additional money had been spent on road maintenance and the challenge would be to see what funding could be given for further capital investment on our roads in Caithness and across Highland. There was a roads redesign project underway and this would look at area prioritisation of resources. Also, if there was to be extra funding for the area, consideration be given to improving footpaths. It was advised that a separate programme of footpath maintenance priorities would be discussed with Members.

An update on white lining in the area was provided. There had been difficulties with contractors coming to the area to do this work as work was mainly done during the busy summer period and accommodation for contractors was difficult to find. An undertaking was given to encourage contractors to forward plan their accommodation bookings. Going forward an inhouse white lining team was being formed.

Further, as part of the roads redesign process it should be considered how to maximise the benefits of the Pothole pro. Also, it was felt there should be a bid for extra staff in the roads team given how stretched they were to undertake all the work required of them. It was advised that in the last few years Caithness had appointed 2 additional foremen as a result of additional funding.

Continuing, the positive stories regarding work on road maintenance, such as with the benefits achieved through use of the Pothole pro, should be communicated to the public. It was advised that as part of the roads redesign, newsletters and fact sheets were to be produced on road maintenance/investment. The lack of investment in road maintenance nationally over many years was highlighted and the need to work more closely with both Scottish and UK Governments on this. In particular, it was felt that the funding provided to the trunk road network was unfair in comparison to funding given to the local authority for its road network.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i **approved** the proposed prioritised Area Roads Capital Programme for the Caithness Area; and
- ii **noted** that a separate programme of footpath maintenance priorities would be discussed with Members.

**8. Annual Roads Capital Programme 2023/24 Update
Cunntas Bliadhnaile Prògram Calpa Rathaidean 2023/24**

There had been circulated Report No CC/05/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

The Roads Operations Manager presented a summary of the report during which it was highlighted that there had been a significant increase in last years roads budget across Highland with Caithness receiving £2.9m which allowed for a significant amount of work to be undertaken. External contractors had been engaged to help deliver the programme of works and all the capital allocation had been largely spent.

Members commended the work of the roads team for undertaking and completing the additional works to ensure the capital allocation was spent. There were now many good road surfaces in Caithness as a result of this additional investment in road maintenance. There would be an ongoing commitment to find additional resources for roads.

The Committee **NOTED** the:

- i. final budget allocation for Caithness area for 2023/24;
- ii. works completed on the approved prioritised list to date; and
- iii. additional works identified and prioritised throughout the year.

**9. Housing Revenue Account: Garage Rents 2024/2025
Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais: Màil Gharaidsean 2024/25**

There had been circulated Report No CC/06/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property. The Principal Housing Officer gave a summary of the report, following which Members were invited to agree a level of rent increase for garages and garage sites for 2024/25.

The Committee **agreed** a 7.95% rent increase to apply to garages and a 10% rent increase on garage sites in the Caithness area.

**10. Wick Common Good – Draft Accounts 2022/23, Proposed Budget 2024/25
and Quarterly Monitoring Statement 2023/24
Math Coitcheann Inbhir Uige – Dreachd Chunntasan 2022/23, Buidseat ga
Mholadh airson 2024/25 agus Aithris Sgrùdaidh Ràitheil 2023/24**

There had been circulated Report No CC/07/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place and Head of Corporate Finance.

The Head of Community Support & Engagement provided a summary of the report, after which it was queried how it was proposed to maximise income from Wick common good fund assets for the benefit of the area. A commitment was given to discuss the development of the fund at an Area business meeting.

The Committee:-

- i. **agreed** the Wick Common Good Fund Statement of Accounts (Appendix 1) and Quarter 4 monitoring report for 2022/23 (Appendix 2);
- ii. **noted** the position of the Wick Common Good Fund, as shown in the Q3 monitoring statement (Appendix 3) against budget for 2023/24;
- iii. **agreed** the Wick Common Good Fund Annual Budget for 2024/25 (Appendix 4); and

iv **noted** that further discussions on the development of the Wick common good fund to look at opportunities in order to maximise income from assets would be held at an Area business meeting.

Urgent Item of Business – *In terms of standing order 8, the following item was taken as an urgent item of business as an assessment of the Wick Street Design project bid for funding and award was expected to be made before the next meeting of the Committee.*

Item 12 - Wick Street Design Project

It was advised that The Highland Council was in the process of submitting a bid for funding for the Wick street design project. A decision on the bid was expected at the end of March. This project had been in development for a number of years and it was fully supported by elected members and hugely supported by many members in the community. Elected Members had been involved throughout the process for each stage of the project. It was now the final stage where it was hoped to secure funding for the construction phase in the region of £2.2m. This would be a tremendous investment for Wick town centre. Members were invited to formally endorse the submission of the bid for £2.2m funding and, in recognition of this support, it was requested that the Chair of the Committee, submit a letter of support for the bid to the Service Lead, Infrastructure, which would also be signed by all Ward 3 Members.

The Committee **agreed** to endorse the submission of the bid for funding for the Wick street design project and that a letter in support of the bid be sent by the Chair of the Committee to the Service Lead, Infrastructure.

11. Ward Discretionary Awards Duaisean fo Ùghdarras Uàird

Transparency Statement – Mr S Mackie made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item, as he was a co-owner of a business that was a member of the Caithness Chamber of Commerce. However, he was not involved in the decision regarding the award to the Caithness Transport Forum, and having applied the objective test, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

Thurso and Northwest Caithness Ward Discretionary Budget applications approved 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024

The Committee **NOTED** that the following Thurso and Northwest Caithness Ward Discretionary Budget applications have been approved since 1 April 2023:

Caithness Chamber of Commerce – Caithness Transport Forum	£500.00
Thurso Comm Devt Trust – Thurso Toilets/Youth Volunteer Engagement (2/2)	£2,500.00
Thurso Football Academy – Professional Coaching Event	£1,500.00
Sidhchailleannart – Legends of Caithness	£675.00
Feis Ghallaidh/Caithness Feis – Traditional Music Workshops	£1,250.00
Pennyland Primary School – Pennyland Wellbeing 60	£580.00
Association of Caithness Community Councils – Village Officer Fund	£1,876.50
RBLs Thurso Branch – Poppy Wreath	£70.00

Total**£8,951.50****Wick and East Caithness Ward Discretionary Budget applications approved 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024**

The Committee **NOTED** that the following Wick and East Caithness Ward Discretionary Budget applications have been approved since 1 April 2023:

Caithness Chamber of Commerce – Caithness Transport Forum	£500.00
Dunbeath and District Centre – Back Office Support	£2,500.00
Pentland Parish Church of Scotland – Flower Festival	£800.00
Sidhchailleannart – Legends of Caithness	£675.00
Highlife Highland – Schools Out 2023	£630.00
Feis Ghallaidh/Caithness Feis – Traditional Music Workshops	£1,250.00
Association of Caithness Community Councils – Village Officer Fund	£1,876.50
RBLS Wick, Canisbay and Latheron Branch – Poppy Wreath	£120.00
Total	£8,351.50

The meeting ended at 1.45 pm

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Committee**
held remotely on 29 January 2024 at 10.30 am.

Present:

Mr C Birt
Mrs I Campbell

Mrs E Kraft
Mr P Logue

In attendance:

Mr W MacKinnon, Ward Manager, Communities and Place
Mr D Martin, Area Education Manager
Mr I Moncrieff, Area Roads Operations Manager
Mr M Crowe, Project Officer
Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer
Mr M McGinty, Trading Standards Team Leader
Mrs O Bayon, Committee Officer

Also in attendance:

Inspector Richard Ross, Police Scotland (Item 3)
Station Commander Allan McLean, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (Item 4)
Group Commander Mike Colliar, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (Item 4)

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

Ms L Kraft in the Chair

Preliminaries

Prior to the commencement of the formal business, and on behalf of the Council, the Chair paid tribute to Mrs Julie Wileman who had recently passed away and extended deep condolences and sympathy to her family.

Business

**1. Apologies for Absence
Leisgeulan**

There were no apologies for absence.

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

There were no declarations of interest or transparency statements.

**3. Police – Area Performance Report
Poilis – Geàrr-chunntas Coileanaidh Sgìreil**

There had been circulated Report No WRSL/01/24 by the Chief Inspector - Area Commander.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- thanks was expressed to the Police for all their work;
- Members highlighted that a murder incident had not been recorded within the report's statistics. In this regard the Police Officer confirmed that was a mistake and the total number was 3 for the area during the period 2023/24;
- it was queried if the Police had plans to increase road traffic speed checks in Wester Ross, especially as many local complaints had emanated from that area;
- the reduction in the number of missing persons was encouraging and welcomed; and
- Members were seeking local community feedback on the implementation of 20mph speed reductions within villages and towns.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. the progress made against the objectives set within the Highland Local Policing Plan 2023 – 2024 Year 1 attached as Annex A to the report, for the period covering 01 April 2023 – 30 November 2023; and
- ii. the change in format necessitated by a reduction in back office capacity to prepare additional Area Committee reports.

4. Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) Seirbheis Smàlaidh is Teasairginn na h-Alba

There had been circulated Report No WRSL/02/24 by the Local Senior Officer for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the report was unclear on where Contin and Garve were to receive SFRS emergency responders from and if the cover was considered adequate;
- it was queried if the SFRS were actively seeking to recruit from all sections of the community;
- it was confirmed that the Kinlochewe station was still active; and
- thanks were expressed to the SFRS for all of the hard work they carry out.

The Committee **NOTED** the attached Area Performance Report.

5. Avoiding Financial Harm At Home A' Seachnadh Cron Ionmhasail san Dachaigh

The Trading Standards Team Leader gave a presentation providing information on Avoiding Financial Harm at Home which included Doorstep Crime and Scams Prevention. The presentation highlighted means for residents to protect themselves against scams.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- Members thanked the Trading Standards teams for their hard and important work to help protect highland residents as it was making a positive difference;
- it was queried if there had been a perceived reduction in bank transfer scams now that Banks had implemented software to match bank accounts with the specific account holder name when conducting a transfer; and
- information was sought, and provided, on how elderly persons could have call blockers installed on their phonenumber or account.

The Committee **NOTED** the presentation.

6. **Area Roads Capital Programme 2024/25** **Prògram Calpa Rathaidean Sgìreil 2024/25**

There had been circulated Report No WRSL/03/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- information was sought, and provided, on the definition where Capital expenditure ended and Revenue expenditure began in relation to roads;
- it was queried why a small section of road resurfacing had been left out on the A890 Stromferry bypass tunnel and when these works would take place. It was also queried when SSE were going to build laybys on the Glenelg Road; and
- Members highlighted that the Bealach Road repairs required urgent attention and there should be further discussions on this, and other projects, at a ward business meeting.

The Committee **APPROVED** the proposed 2024/25 Area Roads Capital Programme for Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Area.

7. **Duncraig Trust Scheme 1999 Review** **Ath-sgrùdadh 1999 Sgeama Urras Dhùn na Creige**

There had been circulated Report No WRSL/04/24 by the Area Education & Learning Manager.

Members welcomed the offer to still receive an annual report itemising awarded funds.

The Committee **APPROVED**:-

- i. the introduction of a new third category of awards to local training clubs and organisations;
- ii. the criteria for individual applications for sports; further and higher education; and local training clubs/organisations;
- iii. the scope of award levels; and
- iv. to maintain the current, officer led, grant allocations decision making process with reports to the committee.

8. **Housing Revenue Account: Garage Rents 2024/25**

Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais: Màil Gharaidsean 2024/25

There had been circulated Report No WRSL/05/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

The Committee **AGREED** that a 7.95% rent increase be applied to Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Committee Garages and Garage Sites.

9. Community Regeneration Fund Applications Iarrtasan Maoin Ath-bheòthachadh Coimhearsnachd

There had been circulated Report No WRSL/06/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy.

In considering applications for Community Regeneration Funding (CRF), the Committee also requested that applicants whose request for funding had been rejected, be advised that it was still open to them to submit updated applications to a future round of CRF.

The Committee:-

- i. **AGREED** that funding be awarded from the Community Regeneration Fund as follows:
 - The Howard Doris Centre - £59,335.00
 - Torridon District Community Association - £30,000.00
 - Dornie & District Community Hall Committee - £38,440.00
 - Gairloch Community Council with Gairloch Area Development Ltd - £22,817.00
 - Plockton & District Community Trust - £15,000.00
 - Coigach Community Development Company - £57,942.00
 - Lochbroom and Ullapool Community Trust- £33,180.00
 - Strathpeffer Residents' Association - £59,335.00
 - Lochbroom and Ullapool Community Trust – Rejected
 - Dornie Moorings Association - £30,910.00
 - Strathpeffer Pavilion Community Trust – Rejected
 - Toybox Children's Centre - £12,500.00
- ii. as there was a balance of funding remaining, **AGREED** to ringfence remaining grant within the 2023/24 allocation to deliver area priorities identified through work to develop an area-based plan, subject to full applications being brought to a future committee meeting for consideration.

10. Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Ward Discretionary Budget Buidseat fo Ùghdarras Uàird Rois an Iar, Shrath Pheofhair agus Loch Aillse

The Committee **NOTED** that the following Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Ward Discretionary Fund applications had been approved since 4 September 2023:-

- Lochbroom Community Council - Beach Cleaning & Litter Picking - £800
- Strathpeffer Primary School Parent Council - Creation of a multi-sensory learning zone – The Den - £1808
- Loch Duich Community Council – King’s Coronation Community Celebration - £500
- Wester Ross Fisheries Trust - River Catchment Management Workshop - £800
- High Life Highland Skye & Lochalsh Archive Centre – Angus Og Exhibition - £500
- Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust – Floating Classroom - £1000
- Wester Loch Ewe Community Council, Dog Fouling Initiative - £500
- Gairloch Community Council & Gairloch Area Development, Local Place Plan - £310
- Contin Football & Sports Club, Football Pitch Maintenance - £1000
- Gairloch & Area Development – Gairloch Beach Toilet & Camper Van Facilities - £2770
- Peffery Way Association, all abilities path project - £2550
- Scottish Poppy Appeal – Lighting Request - £250

11. Minutes
Geàrr-chunntas

The Committee **NOTED** the Minutes of Meeting of the Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Committee held on 4 September 2023 which had been approved by the Council on 26 October 2023.

The meeting concluded at 12:55 pm

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Housing and Property Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on **Wednesday 31 January 2024** at 10.30 am.

Present:

Ms S Atkin (Remote)	Ms A MacLean
Mr B Boyd	Mr D Macpherson
Mr R Bremner (Remote)	Mrs B McAllister
Mr I Brown	Ms J McEwan
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair	Mrs P Munro (sub) (Remote)
Mr L Fraser	Mr M Paterson (Remote)
Mr A Graham	Mr A Rhind
Mrs I Mackenzie (Remote)	Mr K Rosie (Remote)
Mr R Mackintosh	Mr R Stewart

Non-Members also present:

Mr J Finlayson	Mr J McGillivray
Mr R Gale	Mr P Oldham
Ms M Hutchison	Mrs T Robertson
Mr B Lobban	Ms M Ross
Mr P Logue	

Tenant Representatives in Attendance:

Ms L Richardson, Tenant Representative
Mr A Dick, Tenant Representative

Officials in Attendance:

Mr M Rodgers, Executive Chief Officer, Housing and Property
Mr B Cameron, Interim Head of Housing & Building Maintenance
Mr F MacDonald, Head of Property and Facilities Management
Mr R Campbell, Service Lead-Capital Planning & Estates Strategy
Ms H Cameron, Housing Development Manager
Mrs L Dunn, Joint Democratic Services Manager
Ms A Macrae, Senior Committee Officer
Mrs O Bayon, Committee Officer

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

Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair in the Chair

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

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr C Munro.

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

There were no declarations of interest.

**3. Good News
Naidheachdan Matha**

The Committee **NOTED** the good news as circulated.

**4. Housing Revenue Account Estimates 2024/25
Tuairmsean Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais 2024/25**

There had been circulated Report No HP/01/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the proposed rent increase would help fund the backlog of non-essential repairs and tenants would expect an improved service, although it was acknowledged this would place additional pressure on the Service due to external factors such as cost of works, net zero standards and availability of trades;
- officers be commended on the high level of engagement achieved through the tenant consultation;
- further clarity was sought and provided that the proposed long term strategy for rents would help identify investment and borrowing requirements and provide more stability and assurance for tenants;
- concern at the deliverability of the strategy as rent increases were affected annually by factors such as cost of materials, contractor costs and pay awards;
- in response to a query, information was provided on the changes to the telecare system and it was confirmed that Ms S Atkin would be provided with a briefing on this matter;
- concern at the increasing debt burden on the HRA and impact of loan charges on the budget and the proposed strategy going forward given future capital investment pressures. It was explained the strategic review would seek to ensure that loan charges remained affordable to enable a balanced position on the HRA to be achieved and to build up a sustainable level of reserves;
- concern at the substantial reduction in reserves and further clarity was provided on the target level for the minimum and preferred level of those reserves;
- if the proposed rent increase was approved, tenants would continue to pay substantially less than the average Council house and housing association rents in Scotland;
- a request that local Members receive information on void properties so they could pass this onto constituents enquiring about housing;
- the impact of the small rent increase applied in the current financial year on repairs and maintenance and the implications for the level of rent increase in 2024/25; and

- a strategic decision had been taken on the rent increase for the current year to protect tenants from the cost of living crisis and in recognition that a higher increase might be required in the next financial year.

Thereafter, the Committee:

- APPROVED** a 7.95% rent increase which would result in an increase of £6.68 in the average weekly Council house rent from £83.17 to £89.85 per week. This increase for 2024/25 would still be lower than average Council house rents in Scotland for 2023/24;
- NOTED** the above rent increase would be applied to all residential HRA rents and service charges, to Gypsy/Traveller site pitches and to non-HRA rents for leased properties (subject to lease agreements);
- APPROVED** the increase to £15 per week in the new build supplement service charge to tenants moving into new build housing from 1 April 2024; and
- NOTED** the current strategic review of the Housing Revenue Account which would enable the Committee in 2024 to agree long-term rental increases in line with a revised Housing Revenue Account Capital Plan.

5. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Non-HRA Budget Monitoring Statement to 31 December 2023

Aithris Sgrùdaidh Buidseat Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais agus Neo-thaigheadais gu 31 An Dubhlachd 2023

There had been circulated Report No HP/02/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- in response to a query, it was explained that a trades review was to be carried out, reports would be brought back to Members and there would be Member workshops;
- the challenges around the Council being competitive with the private sector in terms of pay rates for trades including that some pay scales were set nationally and the requirement to balance the HRA each year;
- additional inhouse trades staff would deliver savings for the Council as there would be less reliance on external contractors. There was a national skills shortage of trades and the Council had to consider paying the going rate to address recruitment challenges;
- further clarity was sought and provided on the management and repairs and maintenance costs associated with homeless accommodation and where these were reflected in the HRA and Non HRA budgets;
- in response to a query, information was provided on the Council's policy on rechargeable repairs and issues of proportionality around the time and resources involved in the debt recovery process;
- in response to a query, it was confirmed that Ms A MacLean would be provided with further details in relation to the budget allocation for community initiatives;
- the number of building maintenance vacancies in the Inner Moray Firth area raised concerns around recruitment for the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport and the provision of housing and associated infrastructure for essential staff;

- the range of issues with the Green Freeport had been discussed at a housing seminar held at Eden Court, Inverness at the end of 2023 attended by a range of agencies. Scottish Ministers had given a commitment to make Highland a designated area for consideration in terms of planning. A further seminar was scheduled for the end of February 2024 and the Chair would ensure all Committee Members received an invitation once a date was confirmed;
- in response to a query, information was provided on the main reasons for void properties in Highland and it was confirmed that the Council's re-let times compared favourably to the national average. Mrs B McAllister would be provided with specific details of voids in Merkinch;
- the percentage of the homeless budget spent on renting properties from other agencies and on supervision and management costs. It was confirmed the potential to provide a more detailed breakdown of costs in the next report would be investigated;
- potential alternative ways of supporting homeless tenants such as the repurposing of long terms voids to alleviate some of the burden on the Council's Housing service;
- the work undertaken with other support providers with vulnerable tenants and confirmation there had been a move away from the model of supported accommodation; and
- the need to consider more innovative ways of building and funding housing of all tenures including the role of private sector developers. It was highlighted discussions were ongoing with the Scottish Government on how the Council might be involved in delivering forms of housing other than the traditional Council house tenure.

Thereafter, the Committee **APPROVED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account and non-Housing Revenue Account 2023/2024 for the period to 31 December 2023.

6. Property & Facilities Management Services Revenue Monitoring Statement Quarter 3 to 31 December 2023
Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Teachd-a-steach Sheirbheisean Rianachd Cuid-seilbh & Ghoireasan gu 31 An Dubhlachd 2023

There had been circulated Report No HP/03/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:

- confirmation was sought and provided that the Scottish Government had provided additional funding for the expansion of free school meals. There would be challenges with space in some locations and further work would be undertaken with schools;
- in response to a query, it was confirmed there were strict guidelines on the nutritional content of school meals and the issues around food procurement and waste was being taken toward by a working group;
- the savings achieved on non-domestic rates was a good news story and noting the Service also had a member of staff engaged in applying for rates relief across the Council;

- an explanation was sought and provided on the savings being delivered through the vacation of buildings as part of the asset management process;
- an assurance was sought and provided that a head teachers group was engaged in the redesign of FM services and there would be further engagement with head teachers across the Council. As part of the redesign robotic cleaning was being tested to compensate for the non-filling of vacancies;
- in response to a query, reference was made to the work ongoing to ensure cleaning standards were maintained within the available resource;
- an update was sought and provided on the work ongoing in relation to the remaining schoolhouses in terms of them being declared surplus to requirements, disposed of or incorporated into the school estate;
- concern at the high utility costs and that a mechanism had to be found that changed behaviour around energy usage and the potential for High Life Highland and Council occupiers to be more directly responsible for their energy bills on the basis this would reduce usage;
- the challenges around filling vacancies in relation to fee earning staff due to the fact the Council's salary offer could not compete with the private sector; and
- the challenges in retaining graduates and other staff on completion of their training. An update was also provided on the engagement undertaken with schools in terms of careers with the Council.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED**:

- i. the position for the third quarter of the 2023/24 financial year, and the predicted year-end position;
- ii. that the budget gap might change positively or negatively depending on the application of expenditure and recruitment controls, filling fee earning posts in an extremely challenging job market, adjusting services to meet previously agreed budget savings; in-year income recovery, and identifying new income and procurement opportunities; and
- iii. the progress update provided in relation to corporate budget savings delivery.

7. Property Capital Monitoring Statement and Progress Update Aithris Sgrùdaidh Calpa Seilbhe agus Cunntas às Ùr air Adhartas

There had been circulated Report No HP/04/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- officers were thanked for attending a stakeholders meeting at St Clement's School, Dingwall and for enabling the pupils affected by nearby building noise to use an alternative facility;
- in response to a query, it was confirmed that officers would meet with local Members to provide an update on progress on the Tain 3 to 18 Campus;
- the Service be commended on the plans for upgrading the Gypsy/Traveller Site at Longman Park, Inverness;

- the average replacement costs of school sports pitches and the opportunities to continue to make funding bids to Sports Scotland and other sports bodies and the importance of a whole life cycle cost approach being taken to these facilities;
- an assurance was sought and provided that it was expected the full condition and structural surveys for Charleston Academy would be completed by the end of February and May 2024 respectively. Local Members would be advised if unforeseen circumstances impacted on that timeframe. Thereafter, a period of time would be required to consider the resource implications, following which stakeholder meetings would be arranged; and
- in response to a query, it was confirmed that officers continued to work towards the Learning Estate Investment Programme funding deadline at the end of 2025 in relation to Broadford Primary School. Local Members and stakeholders would be informed in advance if a request for an extension was required.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the:

- i. position at the end of the third quarter of the 2023/24 financial year, and the estimated year-end position;
- ii. current position regarding the management of the works programmes and the delivery of the individual projects referred to in the report; and
- iii. various challenges faced this financial year and that were expected to continue into 2024/25.

8. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Monitoring Report Quarter 3 Monitoring Report to 31 December 2023
Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Calpa Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais Cairteal 3 gu 31 An Dubhlachd 2023

There had been circulated Report No HP/05/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:

- a request that more detailed information be provided in future reports on progress with the new Council house build programme, given the significant level of spend involved;
- further clarity was sought and provided that the average cost of a new build Council unit was £250,000, albeit there were huge variations depending on location and type of contract;
- a request that the numbers on the Council house waiting list be provided in future reports; and
- confirmation was sought and provided that individual new and second hand house purchases continued to be progressed where those properties met the standards the Council had to achieve.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme 2023/2024 for the period to 31 December 2023; and

- ii. **NOTED** that more information on the new Council house build programme and the numbers on the Council house waiting list would be provided in future reports.

9. **Housing Performance Report to 31 December 2023** **Aithisg Choileanaidh Taigheadais gu 31 An Dubhlachd 2023**

There had been circulated Report No HP/06/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

The Chair indicated that she wished to send out a clear message to tenants in rent arrears that the Council was compassionate and understanding and to encourage them to contact the Council as early as possible so they could be provided with the excellent support available through its inhouse teams.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- long term rent arrears impacted on both tenants and the Council's budget and reference to the importance of tenants contacting the Council and the Citizens Advice Bureau to check their benefits entitlement;
- more than half of tenants were not in rent arrears and this underlined the effectiveness of early intervention and the support being provided;
- officers be commended on a positive performance report, specific reference being made to the benchmarked performance for repairs and it was hoped the position with non-emergency repairs would improve in the next financial year;
- concern at the significant impact on the budget due to the small proportion of tenants with high level rent arrears and how this could be addressed going forward, also recognising the level of work and resources invested in seeking to recover those arrears;
- in regard to the above, reference was made to the challenges around the high cost to the Council associated with evictions. The removal of legislative barriers at the end of March 2024 might impact on high level arrears, while recognising evictions were considered to be a last resort;
- the opportunities to improve the energy performance of Council properties and consider other measures to reduce utility costs and increase the disposable income tenants had to pay their rent;
- further clarity was sought and provided on the main reasons older people presented as being homeless and the range of preventative work being undertaken. Nationally there was discussion around prevention duties on national bodies such as the NHS. In relation to armed services veterans, the Service worked with Poppy Scotland and other agencies to support households;
- in response to a query, it was confirmed the Service had a right sizing scheme that provided incentive payments to tenants if they wished to move to a smaller property and there were opportunities to engage with tenants on this matter; and
- confirmation was sought and provided that information on progress with the transfer of tenants from housing benefit to universal credit would be included in the Tenancy Management section of future reports.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2023 to 31 December 2023 and that information on progress with the transfer of tenants from housing benefit to universal credit would be included in the Tenancy Management section of future reports.

**10. Service Performance Monitoring Report to 30 September 2023
Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Coileanadh Seirbheis gu 30 Sultain 2023**

There had been circulated Report No HP/07/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

The Committee **NOTED** the Service's performance information.

**11. Strategic Housing Investment Programme 2024-2029
Prògram Tasgaidh Taigheadais Ro-innleachdail 2024-2029**

There had been circulated Report No HP/08/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

Members were advised of a proposed amendment to recommendation ii. set out in the report in that the Committee was invited to approve the priorities for affordable housing investment for 2024 to 2029 contained in Appendix 2 to the report.

Thereafter, Members raised the following main points:-

- further clarity was sought and provided that a main issue for the lack of housing development on the West coast was contractors having to import labour exacerbated by the lack of housing for workers;
- further information was sought and provided on the different types of low cost home ownership projects the Council operated and models being considered;
- the importance of there being different types of housing tenure and support for mid-market options particularly for young people;
- the challenges around purchasing properties in rural areas and the issues around having more short term let control areas in Highland;
- purchasing houses which were up to the Council's standards was a cheaper option compared to new builds and should continue to be promoted;
- in response to a query, it was explained the costs of Council and private sector housing development was fairly similar, however the lack of private sector speculative development on the West coast was essentially due to the cost value relationship;
- information was sought and provided in relation to enabling older and vulnerable people to continue to live independently in their homes including that the Council and NHS Highland continued to support the Care and Repair scheme and there was also a budget line for equipment and adaptations in the HRA Capital Programme;
- in response to a query, it was explained that different sources of funding to tackle vacant and derelict land would continue to be pursued and discussions were ongoing with the Scottish Government on the matter; and

- reference to the barriers in bringing some older empty properties back into use given the current space and increasing energy standards. It was explained while the challenges were recognised, opportunities to upgrade existing buildings would be pursued given the numbers on the waiting lists and the high cost of the new build programme.

Thereafter, the Committee:

- i. **APPROVED** the Strategic Housing Investment Plan as attached as Appendix 1 to the report, for submission to the Scottish Government in draft form pending consideration by Area Committees; and
- ii. **APPROVED** the priorities for affordable housing investment for 2024 to 2029 contained in Appendix 2 to the report.

The meeting was closed at 2.30pm.

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **City of Inverness Area Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Monday 5 February 2024 at 10.00 am.

Present:

Mr C Ballance (Remote)	Mrs I MacKenzie
Mr B Boyd	Mr A MacKintosh
Mr I Brown	Mr R MacKintosh (Remote)
Mr M Cameron (Remote)	Ms K MacLean
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair (Remote)	Mr D Macpherson
Mr A Christie (Remote)	Mrs B McAllister
Mr D Fraser	Mrs M Reid
Mr A Graham	Mrs T Robertson
Mrs J Hendry	Mr A Sinclair (Remote)
Ms E Knox (Remote)	

In attendance:

Mr D Haas, Inverness Senior Community Development Manager Inverness & South, Communities and Place
 Mr M Greig, Ward Manager, Communities and Place
 Ms F Cameron, Programme Manager, Infrastructure, Environment and Economy
 Mr S Grant, Roads Operations Manager, Infrastructure, Environment and Economy
 Mr J Taylor, Roads Operations Manager, Infrastructure, Environment and Economy
 Mr J Henderson, Housing Manager South, Housing & Property Service
 Ms J Macrae, Principal Housing Officer, Housing & Property Service
 Mrs L Dunn, Joint Democratic Services Manager, Performance and Governance
 Mrs O Bayon, Committee Officer, Performance and Governance
 Mrs G MacPherson, Committee Officer, Performance and Governance

Also in attendance:

Chief Inspector J Hill, Area Commander (Inverness Area Command), Police Scotland

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

Mr I Brown in the Chair

Preliminaries

Prior to the commencement of the formal business, and on behalf of the Council, the Chair and Members paid personal tributes to Councillor Roderick Balfour who had recently passed away and extended deep condolences and sympathies to his family. Councillor Roderick had been elected to serve the Highland Council for five consecutive terms from 1999-2017, serving until 2022 as an independent Councillor for Culloden and Ardersier.

Business

1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr C Aitken, Mrs H Crawford, Mr K Gowans, and Mr D Gregg.

2. **Declarations of Interest** **Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt**

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

Item 5 – Mrs J Hendry

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

Item 10 – Mr A Christie

Item 11 – Mr A Christie

3. **New Years Honours** **Urraman na Bliadhn' Ùire**

The Committee **NOTED** that the following individuals had been recognised in the New Year's Honours List: -

- Robert Stewart Nicol, OBE
- Fiona Bennett Morrison, MBE
- Robert Coburn, BEM

4. **Police – Area Performance Report** **Poileas – Geàrr-aithisg Coileanadh Sgìreil**

There had been circulated Report No. CIA/01/24 by the Inverness Area Commander. In introducing the report, the Commander advised and apologised that the figures relating to Protect Vulnerable People were not accurate and an updated report would be circulated to the Committee.

During discussion, the following main comments were raised:-

- concern was expressed at the increasing level of thefts particularly in respect of shoplifting, noting that these cases were not limited to food products but also included other essential items. Members recognised the importance of the Council helping those in need and it was queried what they could do to assist;
- regarding pages 7 – 9 of the report, it was queried what the main scenarios were around the statistics on motor vehicle crimes;
- Members expressed real concern that sexual crime, and drug use crime statistics had substantially risen. In this regard guidance on how to reassure local communities was requested;
- regarding missing persons, information was sought on the different age groups and what the main reasons were in order to offer guidance to local communities to protect them;
- it was confirmed that the Police would discuss and work with Members in their community to carry out leaflet drops to provide helpful up to date information;
- it was queried if the Police sensed that County Lines were affecting other more rural parts of Highland and not just Inverness City;
- information was sought and provided on the figure of 79 supply of drugs convictions and if this was considered a low figure. It was also queried what work was being carried out at schools to educate and protect young people;

- clarification was sought and provided regarding the Police policy for enforcing the new 20mph speed limits in the city;
- suggestion was made that the Police reports separate issues at ward level so this information could be passed onto Community Councils, as they want to understand and contribute to assist locally;
- as the long-term averages for drink and drug driving statistics had gone up whereas speed offenses had gone down, it was queried if this reflected reality or reflected where limited Police resources had been deployed. In addition, Members requested that future Police reports include an asterisk next to statistics where particular Police focus and resource had been deployed;
- it was highlighted that families also required assistance via organised initiatives during the summer period for food poverty as this holiday season proved challenging for them. In this regard, it was confirmed that local charities provided free hot meals on different days of the week for persons in food poverty, and a list outlining these arrangements would be circulated to Members; and
- reassurance was provided by the Senior Community Development Manager that Inverness Partnership initiatives were taking place across Inverness to support local communities. In addition the Council was working with Inverness Community Council Forum and this had become a robust reliable working arrangement to support local communities.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED**:-

- the progress made against the objectives set within the Highland Local Policing Plan 2023-2026 Year 1, attached as Annex A to the report, for the period covering 1 April 2023 – 30 November 2023;
- the figures contained in the report regarding Protecting Vulnerable People were incorrect and an updated report would be circulated; and
- that further information would be circulated on the local charitable initiatives available for support with hot meals and food banks.

5. Community Regeneration Fund Maoin Ath-bheòthachadh Coimhearsnachd

Declarations of Interest – Mrs J Hendry made a Declaration of Interest as one of the applications was a customer of Teclan Ltd of which she was a major shareholder, and in accordance with paragraph 5.6 of the revised Code of Conduct, she left the meeting for this item.

There had been circulated Report No. CIA/02/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy.

The Committee **AGREED** :-

- the formal recommendation from the Inverness Common Good Fund Sub-Committee contained in paragraph 1.4 of the report as follows:
 - approved capital funding for the following projects:
 - The Highland Council: Whin Park project - £100,000
 - Free North Church: Restoration Project - £40,000
 - Safe Space Inverness: Safe Space Inverness - £33,800
 - Glen Urquhart Men's Shed Group: Workshop & Office Refurbishment - £10,000

- 2nd Inverness Scout Group: Hall Insulation Project - £36,514.55
 - Culduthel Woods Group: Culduthel Woods Path Restoration Project – £12,000
 - Inverness Caledonian Thistle Community Development: ICT Community HUB - £50,000
 - The Ledge SCIO: Clean Air /Warm Air - £58,485
 - Cultarlann Inbhir Nis: Insulating the East Church - £90,000
- b. approved revenue funding for the following projects:
- Merkinch Partnership: One Stop Shop Advice Service - £25,000
 - Inverness Wheeled Sports Club: Inverness City Wheeled Sports Feasibility Study & Strategy - £9,987
 - LGBT Youth Scotland: LGBTYS Highlands - £9,987
- c. the application from Inverness Sea Cadets Unit, TS Briton, be deferred; and
- ii. the recommendation to ringfence any remaining balance within the 2023/24 allocation to deliver area priorities identified through work to develop an area-based plan, subject to full applications being brought to a future committee meeting for consideration.

6. Area Roads Capital Programme 2024/25 Prògram Calpa Rathaidean Sgìreil 2024/25

There had been circulated Report No. CIA/03/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy.

During discussion, the following comments were raised:-

- appreciation was expressed to the Roads team for all their hard work over the past year;
- focus was highlighted on investing and improving road drainage across Inverness to reduce instances of flooding;
- it was queried if footpath maintenance could be assigned its own separate budget line for reactive and planned maintenance;
- information was sought on how the backlog of blocked road drains/gullies would be addressed across Inverness. In this regard it was queried if the shortage of gully-sucker machinery was a Highland Council issue or if this was replicated across other local authorities;
- it was acknowledged that not all potholes and roads issues were the fault or responsibility of the Council as other utility organisations had their own repair responsibilities;
- it was queried if road repairs could be resolved at the first attempt to save time and resources in having to return at a later date to carry out more extensive repair works;
- information was sought and provided on whether there was a budget line to replace illegible street signage; and
- attention was drawn to white line road painting which had begun to wear out, and information was sought if there was a white lining plan of works for Inverness.

Thereafter, the Committee **APPROVED** the proposed 2024/2025 Area Roads Capital Programme for the City of Inverness and Area.

**7. Housing Revenue Account: Garage Rents 2024/25
Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais: Màil Gharaidsean 2024/25**

There had been circulated Report No CIA/04/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following comments were raised:-

- the setting of Garages Rents at Area Committees was queried and it was suggested that it would be more appropriate for this to be considered by the Housing and Property Committee as part of the annual Housing Revenue Account rent setting report;
- the Culloden and Ardersier Ward had 25 sites but only one garage. Out of the 25 sites, 15 were occupied and information was sought as to what they were used for;
- Members could be more proactive with filling the 83 garage voids and information as to their location would assist;
- the cost of upkeep of garages was queried; and
- there had been a sharp increase in the demand for storage facilities and there was an opportunity to generate income through the utilisation of the garage voids.

The Committee **AGREED** a 7.95% rent increase be applied to Inverness Garages and Garage Sites.

**8. Inverness Wards Repurposing COVID-19 Fund
Uàrdan Inbhir Nis ag Ath-adhbhrachadh Maoin COVID-19**

There had been circulated Report No. CIA/05/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

The Committee **AGREED** the repurposing of the following COVID-19 Funds:-

i. Ward 15 – Inverness Ness-side

- £3,881 to support Transport Services with the installation of new enclosed bus stop area providing a shelter for all bus users within the community;
- £10,000 to support the improvements to the park area next to the Inverness Gaelic Primary School (Bun-Sgoil Ghaidhlig Inbhir Nis) providing a green community space for all to enjoy; and
- £6,197.27 to support improvements to the green area of Holm Park for the users to continue to enjoy.

ii. Ward 16 – Inverness Millburn

- £3,881 to support Transport Services with the installation of new enclosed bus stop area.

**9. Ward Discretionary Budget Applications
Iarrtasan Buidseat fo Ùghdarras Uàird**

The Committee **NOTED** that the following City of Inverness and Area Ward Discretionary Budget applications had been approved since 20 November 2023:-

- **Ward 12**
 - Kilmorack Community Council: Teanassie School Swimming Transport 2024 £1,500
 - Dores Parish Hall: Wifi Heaters plus Internet Control - £799
 - Strathglass Community Council: Glen Strathfarrar Public Shelter - £613
- **Ward 13**
 - Inverness Disc Golf: Putting Baskets - £950
 - Safe, Strong & Free: Early Intervention Project - £846.66
 - Muirtown Primary School: Reading Champs Promoting Reading for Pleasure Across the School - £1,000
 - Kinmylies Primary School: Primary 7 Residential Trip 2023/24 - £1,500
- **Ward 14**
 - Merkinch Football Academy: Goals for the Future - £2,500
 - Safe, Strong & Free: Early Intervention Project - £846.66
- **Ward 15**
 - Inverness Ice Centre Limited: Support for the New Winter Season - £1,428
- **Ward 16**
 - Raigmore Primary School: Transportation to Swimming Lessons - £1,500
 - Raigmore Primary School: M&M Theatre Visit to School – Sleeping Beauty - £1,000
 - Safe, Strong & Free: Early Intervention Project - £846.66
- **Ward 17**
 - Culloden Balloch Baptist Church: Warm Places / Hot Food - £1,400
 - Ardersier Hub: Food Bank Provisions - £750
 - Ardersier Hub: Gritting Pavements - £250
- **Ward 19**
 - HLH Milton of Leys Primary School: Football Training Session Let Costs - £4,052.50

10. Paw Print Trail – Victorian Market Slighe Lorg Spòige – Margaidh Bhictòrianach

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

There had been circulated Report No. CIA/06/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place.

Disappointment was expressed at the lack of progress. Some Members found the Paw Print Trail out-of-keeping and detracted from the city centre. There were lessons to be learnt, one being the lack of consultation with businesses out with the Victorian Market. Moving forward, it was hoped to reinstate the Victorian Market's Stakeholder Group with a view to engaging with other city centre

businesses to enable ideas and projects which would bring mutual benefit to the City.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the costs and implications for any alterations being made to the Trail;
- ii. **AGREED** the Trail be left in place at present until the benefits and any implications were understood; and
- iii. **AGREED** that a review be undertaken later in year with associated recommendations coming back to this committee.

**11. Inverness Common Good Fund (ICGF)
Maoin Math Coitcheann Inbhir Nis**

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

**a) Inverness Common Good Fund - 2022/23 Annual Accounts and Final Monitoring
Maoin Math Coitcheann Inbhir Nis – Cunntasan Bliadhnail agus Sgrùdadh Deireannach 2022/23**

There had been circulated Joint Report No. CIA/07/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place and the Head of Corporate Finance & Commercialism.

The Committee **NOTED** the final monitoring report (Appendix 1) and Statement of Accounts (Appendix 2) for the Inverness Common Good Fund for the year ended 31 March 2023.

**b) Financial Monitoring
Sgrùdadh Ionmhasail**

There had been circulated Report No. CIA/08/24 by Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

The Committee **NOTED** the financial monitoring report to 31 December 2023 and that overall expenditure was within agreed budgets excepting estimated outturns detailed in Appendices 1 and 2 of the report.

**c) Inverness Common Good Fund Budget Setting for 2024/25
Suidheachadh Buidseit Maoin Math Coitcheann Inbhir Nis airson 2024/25**

There had been circulated Joint Report No. CIA/09/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place and the Head of Corporate Finance & Commercialism.

The Committee **APPROVED** the Common Good Fund budget for 2024/25 as detailed within the report and Appendices.

**d) Grants Applications over £10,000
Iarrtasán Tabhartais thar £10,000**

There had been circulated Report No. CIA/10/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place. A copy of supporting documentation had also been circulated as Booklet A.

The Committee **APPROVED** the following grant applications:-

- The City of Inverness Annual Floral Displays 2024 - £52,410
- Wider City of Inverness Annual Floral Displays 2024 - £23,631
- Operation Respect Easter/Summer/Autumn 2024 – £13,403
- Inverness Gull Project 2024 - £13,606
- Safe Inverness Project 2024 - £9,700
- Coach & Visitor Ambassador Project 2024 - £19,865

**12. Appointments to Outside Bodies
Suidheachadh Dhreuchdan gu Buidhnean on Taobh A-muigh**

The Committee **AGREED** that Mr R MacKintosh be appointed to the Ness District Salmon Fisheries Board to replace Mr C Ballance.

**13. Minutes
Geàrr-chunntas**

The following Minutes had been circulated and:

- i. **NOTED** the City of Inverness Area Committee held on 20 November 2023;
- ii. **APPROVED** the Inverness Events and Festivals Working Group held on 21 December 2023 and 18 January 2024; and
- iii. **APPROVED** Inverness Common Good Fund Grants Sub-Committee held on 22 January 2024.

The meeting ended at 12 noon.

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the Isle of Skye and Raasay Committee (Comataidh an Eilein Sgitheanaich agus Ratharsair) held remotely on **Monday, 12 February, 2024 at 10.30 am.**

Present:

Mr J Finlayson
Mr D Millar

Mr C Munro
Mr R Stewart

Officials in attendance:

Ms M Macdonald, Area Education & Learning Manager, Education & Learning
Mr M Sutherland, Interim Roads Operations Manager, Infrastructure & Environment
Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer, Housing & Property Service
Mr C Sharp, Repairs Manager (North), Housing & Property Service
Mr A McKinnie, Strategic Lead, Waste Strategy & Operations, Communities & Place
Mr A Yates, Strategic Lead, Environmental Health & Bereavement Services
Ms A Clark, Head of Community Support & Engagement, Communities & Place
Mr P Waite, Outdoor Access & Long Distance Route Manager, Infrastructure & Environment
Mr J Mackay, Amenities Manager (North), Communities & Place
Mr W MacKinnon, Ward Manager, Communities and Place
Ms F Cameron, Programme Manager, Community Regeneration, Infrastructure & Environment
Ms M Gray, Project Officer Community Regeneration, Infrastructure & Environment
Mr A MacInnes, Senior Committee Officer, Performance & Governance

Also in attendance:-

Ms K Stevenson, Station Commander, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

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

Mr J Finlayson in the Chair

Julie Wileman, Assistant Ward Manager

At the commencement of the meeting, the Chair wanted the Committee to have a moment of reflection for Julie Wileman, Assistant Ward Manager who passed away suddenly on 26 January. Julie was a hard working and valuable member of staff in the ward management team covering Skye, West & Mid Ross areas of Highland, supporting the work of Elected Members and providing support to community councils and community groups. Julie carried out her duties with enthusiasm and good humour and would be very sadly missed by her colleagues and Elected Members. At this difficult time, Members thoughts were with Julie's family and friends.

**1. Apologies for Absence
Leisgeulan**

There were none.

2. **Declarations of Interest** **Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt**

Item 5 – Mr C Munro (Transparency Statement)

Item 14 – Mr C Munro; Mr J Finlayson (Declaration of Interest)

3. **Minutes** **Geàrr-chunntas**

There had been circulated for information, Minutes of Meeting of the Isle of Skye and Raasay Committee (Comataidh an Eilein Sgitheanaich agus Ratharsair) held on 6 November, 2023 which were approved at the Highland Council meeting held on 14 December, 2023, the terms of which were **noted**.

4. **Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Local Committee Performance Report** **Aithisg Choileanaidh Comataidh Ionadail Seirbheis Smàlaidh agus** **Teasairginn na h-Alba**

There was circulated Report No SR/1/24 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland.

Following a summary of the report by the Station Commander, the work of the service on community engagement to try and improve recruitment to the service was acknowledged and had been quite positive over the last year. Fire skills courses for young people, engaging with local employers to show them the benefits of their employees could have by joining the SFRS; and undertaking more training locally were all initiatives aimed at improving recruitment and retention of staff. The joint mobilisation of crews was working well and helped keep stations operational.

It was good news that there were no casualties in this period and the data relating to incidents was below average which showed the safety message put out by the service was getting to communities.

In terms of the Uig fire station and its future relocation, the funding had been approved for a new station in next year's capital budget. In particular, there would be much improved welfare facilities for employees and there would be the opportunity for partner agencies to co-locate to the new station.

In terms of the relocation of the Portree fire station, the services property team was working with the Council to identify a suitable location and there were ongoing negotiations with partner agencies regarding this. A full update on this project would be provided to members outwith the meeting when further information was available.

The Committee **noted**:-

i the area performance report; and

ii that an update on the relocation of the Portree fire station would be provided to Members.

5. Education Reports

Transparency Statement - Mr C Munro made a transparency statement in respect of this item, as a close family member was a teacher employed by Highland Council and he also had children who attend schools in the associated school group. Mr Munro wished to record a connection to the item but having applied the objective test he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

5a School Inspection Report – Portree Primary School

There was circulated Report No. SR/2/24 by the Area Education and Learning Manager.

Following a summary of the report by the Area Education and Learning Manager, it was highlighted that a report was being submitted to the next Education and Learning Committee which would set out improvements, more robustness and consistency in terms of assessment and moderation in schools. Overall Members noted the school inspection report and that there was good progress being made at the school and no further school inspections were required at this time.

The Committee **noted** the report's findings in relation to the school and that the Committee's congratulations would be passed onto staff on receiving a very positive school inspection report.

5b - Portree High Associated School Group Overview

There was circulated Report No. SR/2a/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning.

The Area Education and Learning Manager provided commentary on the report and thereafter reference was made to positive destinations and what could be offered in terms of modern apprenticeships. It was highlighted that Skye and Raasay had tourism at the heart of its economy and the hospitality sector was struggling to recruit. Consideration needed to be given on how to attract more young people into this sector and also the social care sector. The collaboration between school, college and local employers was key to encouraging young people having careers in these sectors. Some examples of successes where pupils had moved into careers in hospitality were provided. Items would be on a future Committee agenda relating to the Highlife Highland programme "My future, my success"; and ways to encourage local young people into jobs in hospitality and health and social care sectors.

The lack of land to build affordable housing was seen as having an impact with falling school roles in some areas and there should be collaboration between the Council's housing team, education services and the local housing association to address this. While there were house building projects currently in progress on the island more needed to be done.

The Committee **noted**:-

i the content of the report; and

ii items would be on a future Committee agenda relating to the Highlife Highland programme “My future, my success”; and ways to encourage local young people into jobs in hospitality and health and social care sectors.

6. **Area Roads Capital Programme 2024/25** **Prògram Calpa Rathaidean Sgìreil 2024/25**

There was circulated Report No. SR/3/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

Following a summary of the report by the interim Roads Operations Manager, it was understood that variations in the capital programme could be expected as priorities could change due to extreme weather events and roads could deteriorate faster than expected. These variations would be discussed with members at ward business meetings. The priorities for roads maintenance were set out in the report, however the budget for roads maintenance had not yet been agreed. It was noted that additional funds for roads maintenance were received last year and all this funding had been committed to road schemes.

The budget constraints for roads maintenance were highlighted and the amount of schemes that could be undertaken was dependent on the funding from the Council and central government. The ‘green book’ that the Scottish Government used when awarding funding to local government put a heavy weighting on road usage and not road length. It was argued that the length of the road network should be more of a consideration than road usage so that the Highlands and Skye/Raasay areas could get its fair share of roads funding. It was advised that there was a roads redesign project underway and this would look at area prioritisation of resources.

The interim Roads Operations Manager gave an update in relation to specific road schemes raised by Members, in particular in relation to gully emptying, the A855, the road to Edinbane and the issue of extending the sides of roads on Raasay. An update on the staffing establishment of the roads team was provided and the establishment was nearly at full complement.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i **approved** the proposed prioritised Area Roads Capital Programme for Isle of Skye & Raasay Area; and
- ii **noted** that information would be provided to Members on planned road maintenance on the road to Edinbane and a planned safety barrier on the A855 above Idrigill.

7. **Housing Performance Report – 1 April 2023 to 31 December 2023**

There was circulated Report No. SR/4/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In particular, reference was made to the difficulties some contractors were having on getting onto the Council’s framework for bidding for contracts. The bureaucracy of the framework was disincentivising them from becoming involved in the framework. It was advised that there was difficulty in obtaining contractors to carry out work on the housing stock and an undertaking was given to provide

information on the contractors framework to Members. Continuing, the maintenance team staffing establishment was at full strength which helped to alleviate some of the maintenance issues.

In terms of long void periods for properties, it was queried if this was due to repairs to houses to ensure they were up to a good standard before being offered to tenants. It was advised that all void properties had to meet an empty home standard before they could be let. The aim was to turn these properties around for re-let as quickly as possible. Energy efficiency in homes should be looked at but the difficulty was the high costs involved to implement these improvements.

Further, some of the housing stock in Broadford was not in good condition and an update on this was provided. The lack of ground maintenance around properties was a concern and specifically further information on ground maintenance at Cruachan Place, Portree would be shared with Members.

Also, it was noted that there had been good progress in reducing rent arrears. An increase in homelessness figures was to be investigated further to understand the reasons for this. Regarding a rat infestation in Uig, an option being explored was to take the grass away and replace it with gravel.

The Committee **noted**:-

- i the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2023 – 31 December 2023; and
- ii that information would be provided to Members on the Council's framework for contractors; and ground maintenance at Cruachan Place, Portree.

**8. Housing Revenue Account: Garage Rents 2024/25
Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais: Màil Gharaidsean 2024/25**

There was circulated Report No. SR/5/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

The Principal Housing Officer gave a summary of the report, following which Members were invited to agree a level of rent increase for garages for 2024/25. It was suggested that there be a rent increase of 7.95% for garages. Further, garage rent increases should be aligned in future with Council house rent increases, albeit the Committee should reserve the right to change this arrangement in future.

The Committee **agreed**:-

- i a 7.95% rent increase to apply to Isle of Skye and Raasay garages for 2024/25;
- ii in future, the Committee shall delegate the decision making authority regarding the rent increase for the Isle of Skye and Raasay Garages. The rent increase for these garages will be set to align with the rate of increase applied to Council house rents; and
- iii the Area Committee reserves the right to change this arrangement at the request of the Chair of the Committee.

9. Waste Management and Environmental Health (Abandoned vehicles) Update

There was circulated Report No. SR/6/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place.

Following a summary of the report by the Strategic Lead, Waste Strategy & Operations and Strategic Lead, Environmental Health & Bereavement Services, it was queried if there were any known issues regarding the development of the Portree waste transfer station. It was advised that focus was currently on the design of the transfer station in advance of a planning application being submitted and a tender for the contract. There were no risks highlighted to this project other than there was a tight timescale to complete it. In terms of changes to refuse/recycling bins, a crucial part of this project was how the changes were communicated to the public and businesses. A phased delivery of the new bins would commence across Highland in April and would include communication about the changes.

The issue of abandoned vehicles was discussed and how the Council dealt with these, the legislation surrounding this and constraints on the Council to removing these vehicles. Various scenarios regarding abandoned vehicles and how they could be removed were discussed. Any improvement in legislation and progress by the Council to remove abandoned vehicles as quickly as possible would be welcomed.

The Committee **noted**:-

- i. the progress on the Recycling Improvement Service Change and Portree Waste Station; and
- ii. the update from environmental health on abandoned vehicles.

10. Community Support & Engagement Team update

The Head of Community Support & Engagement provided an update on the review of the Community Support & Engagement team. There had been a restructure of the team as roles within the team had changed over time, there were new legislative duties and a change of focus in the Council to local decision making. Recruitment to the new team was almost complete and staff were transitioning into their new roles. A Member briefing pack on team structure, key contacts and functions of the team would be shared with Members. A detailed briefing on operational aspects of the team would be given to Members at a ward business meeting.

Members highlighted the importance of the community knowing about the changes and their appreciation of the work of the Ward Manager for Skye and Raasay was recognised. It was confirmed that communications would be issued through contact networks so that community groups would know who to contact if they had specific queries.

The Committee **noted** the update on the Community Support & Engagement team and that a Member briefing pack on the new structure, key contacts and functions of the new team would be issued to Members. There would be a detailed briefing at an area business meeting on operational matters.

11. Modified West Highland and Islands Amended Core Paths Plan, Skye and Raasay Area

There was circulated Report No. SR/7/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy, which summarised the review of The Highland Council Core Paths Plan in Skye and Raasay with respect to the representations received on the amended core paths plan which was out for public consultation from June to September 2019.

It was queried if a further consultation was carried out the outcome on the proposed changes to the core path plan might be different, given the length of time since the initial consultation. It was advised that there may be greater interest in the core path plan as more people had used core paths during the covid period and continued to do so. However, given the changes to the plan were minor and would not significantly affect access to walking routes in these areas, it was unlikely a further consultation would make a difference to the amendments proposed to the plan.

The Committee:-

- i. **approved** the Skye and Raasay area of the Modified West Highland and Islands Amended Core Path Plan to be submitted to Scottish Ministers. The modifications are shown in Appendix 1;
- ii. **agreed** that the changes being minor and raised no previous public comment do not require further public consultation; and
- iii. **noted** the reasons for the delay in bringing this matter to committee in paragraph 4.7.

12. Portree Demonstrator Project - Presentation

This item was deferred to the next meeting when a comprehensive briefing would be provided. In the meantime, the Chair provided a brief update on the project whereby a contractor and external design team had been engaged to work alongside the Council's project team to review options and develop a masterplan. Once this exercise had been completed a full update would be provided to the next area Committee.

13. Scottish Government Play Funding Allocation Sònrachadh Maoineachadh Cluiche Riaghaltas na h-Alba

There was circulated Report No. SR/8/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place. The report proposed Members agree the spending of their area Scottish Government play funding allocation on the identified sites

The Committee **agreed**;

- i. the homologation of funding to the project identified for Dunvegan Community Park; and
- ii. the homologation of funding to the project identified for Ardvasar Play Park.

At this point the meeting was adjourned for a short break and it resumed again at 1.00 pm.

**14. Community Regeneration Fund Assessment of Applications
Measadh Iarrtasan Maoin Ath-bheòthachaidh Coimhearsnachd**

Declaration of Interest

Mr C Munro declared an interest in part of this item as he was a co-opted Director of SkyeConnect. He took no part in the discussion or determination of the application for funding submitted by SkyeConnect.

Mr J Finlayson declared an interest in part of this item as he had a connection with Skye & Lochalsh Citizens Advice Bureau. He took no part in the discussion or determination of the application for funding submitted by Skye & Lochalsh Citizens Advice Bureau.

There was circulated Report No. SR/9/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy.

The report detailed the community regeneration fund allocations received in the current round. There were 11 applications for consideration at the meeting and a total request of funding of £403,921.37, with an available budget of £437,500.67.

The Committee dealt with the applications that had been presented as follows:-

- i Skye Connect – Sustainable Transport & Infrastructure improvements – approved £57,080.00. Also to highlight concerns to applicant from Members and regular reports on the work being carried out was requested.
- ii Skye & Lochalsh Mental Health Association – connecting our communities – approved £58,476.00
- iii Uig Community Hall – Accessibility improvements - approved £67,500.00
- iv Sleat Community Trust - Supporting our community with a refurbished play area – approved £55,719.00 subject to conditions being met.
- v Carbost Pier Ltd – Safe harbour – approved £29,813.00
- vi Skye Dance – Building connection & community through dance – approved £23,052.37. Applicant to look at how they can be financially sustainable going forward and look at other funding opportunities.
- vii Broadford & Strath Community Company – resilient communities programme – approved £24,776.00. Applicant to look at financial sustainability and other funding opportunities in future.

Mr C Munro, Vice Chair of the Committee took the Chair for the next application only.

viii Skye & Lochalsh Citizens Advice Bureau – cost of living advice in the community – approved £18,177.00

ix Portree Community Centre Association – Venue co-ordinator – approved £11,328.00

x Dunvegan Community Trust – Dunvegan community park – approved £37,500.00 subject to conditions being met.

xi Broadford & Strath Community Company – Paths network feasibility study – approved £10,500.00

The Committee also **agreed** to ringfence remaining grant within the 2023/24 allocation to deliver area priorities identified through work to develop an area-based plan, subject to full applications being brought to a future committee meeting for consideration.

**15. Ward Discretionary Budget
Buidseat Fo Ùghdarras Uàird**

The Committee **noted** the following Ward Discretionary Fund Grants for Ward 10 in the financial year 2023/24:-

Highlife Highland Skye & Lochalsh Archive Centre £500
Skye and Lochalsh Mental Health Association (2) £500
Skye Youth Pipe Band £1,000
Waternish Community Garden £500
Portree & Braes Community Trust £1,500
New Pads for Tigh na Sgìre Defibrillator £55
Helping Hands Skye & Lochalsh £2000
Skeabost & District Community Council £530
Poppy Scotland Wreaths £160
Portree & Braes Community Trust £6000

Any other business

Storr Project – the Committee **noted** progress was being made and jobs at the Storr site had now been advertised on the My Job Scotland website.

The meeting ended at 2.00 p.m.

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Badenoch and Strathspey Area Committee** held in **Courtroom, Grantown Courthouse, Grantown-on-Spey/Remotely** on 12 February 2024 at 10.30 am

Present:

Mr J Bruce
Mrs M Cockburn

Mr R Jones
Mr B Lobban

In attendance:

Mr L Hannah, Ward Manager (Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey)
Mr M MacKay, Ward Manager
Ms A Tanner, City Heritage Project Manager
Mr R Porteous, Roads Operations Manager
Mr J Taylor, Roads Operations Manager

Also in attendance:

Inspector C Johnstone, Police Scotland

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

Mr R Jones in the Chair (with the exception of item 4 – Kingussie Camanachd Club application where Mr B Lobban took the Chair)

Business

**1. Apologies for Absence
Leisgeulan**

There were no apologies for absence.

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

The Committee **NOTED** the following declarations of interest:-

Item 4 – Kingussie Camanachd Club Application – Mr R Jones

and the following transparency statements:-

Item 4 – Mr R Jones, Mr B Lobban

The Committee **AGREED** to consider Item 4 at this stage.

4. Community Regeneration Fund – Assessment of Applications Maoin Ath-bheothachadh Coimhearsnachd – Measadh Iarrtasan

Declaration of Interest – Mr R Jones in respect of the application from Kingussie Camanachd Club as a club member and former Club President.

Transparency Statement – Mr R Jones and Mr B Lobban as they had previously indicated support for one or more of the applications.

There had been circulated Report No BSAC/02/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy.

The Committee **AGREED:-**

- i. to grant funding to all applications as follows:
 - Upgrade of Newtonmore Playpark - £30,000
 - Kingussie Tennis Club – Phase 3 - £17,500 with an additional amount of £360 due to increased contractor costs;
 - Dalwhinnie Village Hall Regeneration Project - £27,718.80, on the condition that match funding was secured;
 - Kingussie and Vicinity Community Council (KVCC) – Regeneration of the Glebe Ponds – £31,095.60;
 - Carrbridge Community Orchard - £6,000;
 - Kingussie Camanachd Club - £15,000;
- ii. an allocation of £80,000 2023/24 Community Regeneration Funding be ringfenced towards the Member identified priority of refurbishment of the pedestrian link at Glenmore, and that the full application for funds be brought for consideration at a future committee; and
- iii. to ringfence remaining grant within the 2023/24 allocation to deliver area priorities identified through work to develop an area-based plan, subject to full applications being brought to a future committee meeting for consideration.

3. Police Area Performance Report

Poileas – Geàrr-chunntas air Coileanadh Sgìreil

There had been circulated Report No BSAC/01/24 by Area Commander (South Highland Area Command), Police Scotland.

During discussion, Members made the following points:-

- the importance of enforcing the new 20 mph speed limits in towns and villages was highlighted, information was sought on how this was being done and a police presence in towns and villages to enforce these speed limits was requested;
- information was sought and provided on the incident in December 2023 where 250 motorists were stuck on the A9 due to weather conditions and on the procedures and decision-making process involved in closing the snow gates;
- the new report layout was commended;
- disappointment was expressed at the increasing number of seatbelt offences;
- information was sought and provided on the mechanism for Road Traffic Officers to report safety issues with roads, for example at junctions and Inspector Johnstone undertook to highlight problems with junctions at Lynwilg, Carrbridge, Ralia and Granish to the Roads Policing Inspector;

- in response to a request, Inspector Johnstone confirmed that updates on operation CEDAR and the work of the Health Promotion Officer in Badenoch and Strathspey would be included in his next presentation to the committee;
- it was queried whether the high rates of shoplifting were linked to the cost of living crisis; and
- it was important to look closely at the problem of Hate Crime especially when targeting visitors to the area and in schools.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- progress made against the objectives set within the Highland Local Policing Plan 2023 – 2024 Year 1 attached as Annex A to this report, for the period covering 01 April 2023 – 30 November 2023; and
- the change in format necessitate by a reduction in back office capacity to prepare additional area committee reports.

5. **Area Roads Capital Programme 2024/25** **Prògram Calpa Rathaidean Sgìreil 2024/25**

There had been circulated Report No BSAC/03/24 dated by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

During discussion, Members made the following points:-

- information was sought and provided on what would happen if additional capital funding was approved;
- in response to a question, it was clarified that there had never been an underspend on the Winter Maintenance Budget for Badenoch and Strathspey;
- on the point being raised, it was explained that once Cattle Grids were installed by landowners they would be adopted and maintained by the Council;
- information was sought and provided on the Timber Transport Scheme and on investment in roads from Windfarm operators; and
- the Area Roads Manager undertook to look into whether the B970 could be assessed for referral to the Timber Transport fund and to contact Bear Scotland concerning the repainting of white lines in Kingussie High Street.

The Committee **APPROVED** the proposed 2024/25 Area Roads Capital Programme.

6. **Ward Discretionary Budget** **Buidseat fo Ùghdarras Uàird**

During discussion, Members made the following points:-

- in response to a question, it was confirmed that there was £3,500 remaining in the Ward Discretionary Fund; and
- information was sought and provided on the progress with funding a scheme to provide winter jackets and shoes in the north of the area.

The Committee **NOTED** that the following Ward Discretionary Fund applications had been approved since the previous Committee:-

Organisation	Project	Amount
Newtonmore Business Association	Centenary Garden Project Consultation	£750
Kingussie Parish Church	Winter Jackets and Waterproof Shoes	£2,000

7. **Minutes**
Geàrr-chunntas

The Committee **NOTED** the Minutes of Meeting of the Badenoch and Strathspey Area Committee held on 13 November 2023 which were approved by the Council on 14 December 2023.

The meeting concluded at 11.50am

The Highland Council

Minutes of the meeting of the **Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Wednesday, 14 February 2024 at 10.30am.

Present:

Dr C Birt	Mr A MacDonald
Mrs M Cockburn	Mrs I MacKenzie
Mr D Fraser	Mrs A MacLean
Mr R Gunn (remote)	Ms K MacLean
Mrs B Jarvie (remote)	Mr T MacLennan
Ms L Johnston	Mrs P Munro (remote)
Ms E Knox (remote)	Mrs M Paterson
Ms L Kraft	Mrs M Reid

Non-Members present:

Mr M Baird	Mr J Grafton (remote)
Mr B Boyd	Mr B Lobban (remote)
Ms T Collier (remote)	Mr J McGillivray (remote)
Ms S Fanet (remote)	Mr D Millar (remote)
	Mrs T Robertson

NHS Highland representatives:

Dr T Allison, Director of Public Health, NHS Highland (remote)
 Ms P Cremin, Chief Officer, NHS Highland (remote)
 Mr S Steer, Director of Adult Social Care

Third sector representatives in attendance:

Ms J Douglas, Care and Learning Alliance
 Mr H Tedstone, Highland Hospice

Participating Officials:

Ms F Duncan, Executive Chief Officer Health and Social Care and Chief Social Work Officer
 Ms F Malcolm, Head of Integration Adult Social Care, Health and Social Care
 Mr I Kyle, Lead Officer Strategy, Performance and Quality Assurance, Health and Social Care
 Ms M McIntyre, Head of Children and Justice Social Work, Health and Social Care
 Ms J Hutchinson, Strategic Lead Care and Support, Health and Social Care
 Ms M Morrison, Strategic Lead Early intervention & Protection
 Mr E Williamson, Practice Lead Forensic Mental Health Officer and Interim Principal Mental Health Officer
 Ms M MacDonald-Dawson, Programme Manager – Home to Highland
 Mrs L Dunn, Joint Democratic Services Manager, Performance and Governance
 Ms F MacBain, Senior Committee Officer, Performance and Governance

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

Mr D Fraser in the Chair

Preliminaries

- Mr A MacDonald was welcomed as a new Member of the Committee;
- Friday 16 February 2024, was Care Day and Highland would be hosting several events to mark this on Saturday 17 February 2024; and
- Attention was drawn to the attendance of representatives from Community Contacts, an independent Carr Gomm project offering impartial advice, information and support about Self-Directed Support.

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

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Ms M Smith and Ms L Bussell (Director of Nursing, NHS Highland).

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

There were none.

3. **Service Achievements** **Coileanaidhean Seirbheis**

The Committee **NOTED** updates on the Families 1st Strategy, the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM) and the Autism Hero Award.

4. **Highland Health and Social Care Partnership Strategic Plan Adult Services 2024 - 2027** **Seirbheisean Inbheach Plana Ro-innleachdail Com-pàirteachas Slàinte is Cùram Sòisealta na Gàidhealtachd 2024–2027**

There had been circulated Report No HCW/01/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Health and Social Care.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- several Members welcomed the plan and highlighted the importance of its effective implementation, and the challenges this would entail, especially in relation to workforce availability. Communities and locality committees would play a vital role in the plan's implementation, and regular updates would be provided to the committee;
- third sector representatives drew attention to the importance of all partners working together with a 'no blame' culture;
- assurance was sought and provided that the target date of April 2024 for all District Locality Planning Groups to be in place was likely to be achievable for most of the nine localities, which mirrored the community planning areas;
- information was sought and provided on the partnership's ability to provide equality of service across the Highlands;
- concern was expressed that some partners were operating with a reduced workforce and this might impact the provision of person-centred care;
- the importance of prevention and early intervention was emphasised, and in this respect the roles of GPs, community hospitals and community groups were highlighted;

- the management and monitoring of the plan's implementation would be key to its success, and information was provided on governance and the role of the NHS Highland – Highland Council Joint Monitoring Committee, as well as local and Committee Members. Members could raise urgent concerns with officers without waiting for a committee meeting;
- information was sought and provided on the commissioning of services from third sector partners;
- attention was drawn to the value of face-to-face engagement with certain groups of consultees, especially older adults, with roadshow-type engagement being a useful example;
- in relation to the dissemination of consultation information to the public, attention was drawn to the benefits of the use of Plain English, British Sign Language, and subtitles;
- information was sought and provided on progress developing a housing policy for key workers, which was an especially significant issue in remote and rural Highland, and on increases to the flexibility of Self-Directed Support policies;
- it was important that any areas of good practice were shared;
- the Howard Doris Centre, Lochcarron, was praised for its services and a plea was made for NHS Highland funding to support it;
- further issues highlighted as important included the provision of community-led support for local managers, the inclusion of families from the start of care provision, the need for premises for the use of groups, for example to provide day care activities, and the importance of identifying early onset dementia to facilitate preventative action, for example home modifications; and
- the intention for performance and quarterly reporting was welcomed.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the:

- i. content of the agreed Strategic Plan 2024 – 2027; and
- ii. proposed implementation of the Plan.

**5. Mental Welfare Commission (MWC) Mental Health Act Monitoring Report, 2022-23: Highland Mental Health Officer (MHO) Service Response
Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Achd na Slàinte-inntinn aig Coimisean na Sochair Inntinn, 2022-23: Freagairt Seirbheis Oifigeair Slàinte-inntinn na Gàidhealtachd**

There had been circulated Report No HCW/02/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Health and Social Care.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- the report was welcomed and it was hoped further updates would be provided in future;
- information was sought and provided on the risks, challenges and processes for dealing with individuals suffering from mental health issues, including the role of the Mental Health Officers (MHOs), community support facilities, preventative approaches, and the role of the Chief Social Work Officer in scrutinising the MHOs;
- concern was expressed about access to inpatient mental health services and police cells being used as a place of safety for people suffering a mental health crisis. It was pointed out that while police custody was a 'safe place', multi-agency efforts were made to avoid this. It was pointed

out that Police Scotland had dealt with around 750 mental health issues per month the previous year, and highlighted the recent decision of certain other police forces to no longer deal with non-urgent mental health incidents;

- assurance was sought that mental health incidents were not being inappropriately criminalised;
- information was sought on the procedures for children experiencing a mental health crisis, but these would be better directed to medical professionals and the Children and Adolescents Mental Health Service. It was clarified that active conversations were being undertaken to avoid police cells being used for children in these circumstances;
- attention was drawn to the correlation between mental health and social deprivation, and information was sought on policies that promoted access to mental health services;
- attention was drawn to the increase in mental health issues in the elderly population, particularly the over-85 age group and males, and it was queried whether this was the result of social isolation, loneliness and deprivation, and what could be done to tackle it. In response, proactive planning and adequate resourcing of the appropriate teams were highlighted; and
- it was suggested the development of an Autism Strategy should be expedited.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the:

- i. contents of the report; and
- ii. analysis of local performance in the context of national indicators.

6. Health and Social Care - Revenue Budget Monitoring and Performance Reporting for Q3 2023/24 – 01 October 2023 to 31 December 2023
Sgrùdadh Buidseat Teachd-a-steach –
Slàinte is Cùram Sòisealta – Aithris Sgrùdaidh agus Coileanadh
Buidseat Teachd-a-steach Ràith 3 2023/24 – 01 Dàmhair 2023 gu 31 Dùbhlachd 2023

There had been circulated Report No HCW/03/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Health and Social Care.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- the report evidenced how better outcomes could be delivered at a lower cost through transformational change;
- in response to a query from Dr C Birt on an entry in Appendix 3 of the report to 'Increase health behaviour change activity in line with public health data', it was explained that this referred to a programme in secondary schools tackling alcohol and drugs;
- the NHS Highland Chief Officer sought and received clarification on the section in the report entitled 'Commissioned Adult Services' at paragraph 4.9;
- it was queried and confirmed that some of the savings made on Self-Directed Support (SDS) related to workforce shortages. The process for SDS for children was separate and would be clarified to Ms L Johnston outwith the meeting;

- it was important that staffing vacancies were not used as a recurring savings measure, and a summary was provided of innovative solutions being developed to tackle recruitment challenges;
- it was queried whether the United Nations Commission on the Rights of Children (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill, due to come into force in Scotland in July 2024, would impact the Council's budget, and if it would be relevant to the Council as a Corporate Parent;
- reference was made to the Highland Carers Team, which had provided around £80k to different committees to support children and young people and, in response to a query on whether this had evolved into a different initiative, discussions were ongoing on how this funding would be reflected in the budget, noting that it covered both children's and adult services;
- it was clarified that the implications section of the report was standard for all reports, and that specific implications relevant to the topic of a report would be included in the main body of a report;
- assurance was sought and provided that any plans to reshape services would take a holistic approach and include the third sector; and
- it was important to value the role of support workers and provide careers for them.

Thereafter, the Committee:

- NOTED** the forecast revenue position as at Q3 of the 2023/24 financial year;
- NOTED** the progress update provided in relation to budget savings delivery;
- NOTED** the Service's performance, improvement and risk information; and
- APPROVED** the change to the target for the number of foster carers as outlined in paragraph 7.2 of the report.

7. Home to Highland Programme - Evaluations Prògram Dhachaigh dhan Ghàidhealtachd – Luachaidhean

There had been circulated Report No HCW/04/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Health and Social Care.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- Members welcomed the positive progress detailed in the report;
- information was sought on the robustness of the transition process to NHS Highland's Adults Services;
- it was important to never lose sight of the child- and family-centred approach, especially during a period of budget challenges;
- the value and importance of the programme was emphasised;
- attention was drawn to the improvements being worked on for The Orchard following a recent Care Inspectorate report, and the excellent staff in the facility were commended; and
- it was clarified, in response to a question, that specialist care for a young person in psychiatric care would come from Highland Council budgets.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the:

- report and evaluations; and
- areas for improvement and next steps contained within the evaluations.

8. Service Workforce Plan Annual Progress Report Aithisg Adhartais Bhliadhnaile Plana Feachd-obrach Seirbheis

There had been circulated Report No HCW/05/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Health and Social Care.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- with recruitment and retention, especially in remote and rural areas, being so challenging, information was sought and provided on the use of data gained from exit interviews, which should be proactively undertaken. Other suggestions included the implementation of flexible employment policies, tailoring working hours to suit a candidate, and targeting specific demographics to recruit from;
- attention was drawn to the benefits of providing work or voluntary experiences, mentoring, or shadowing in care settings to children and young people to demonstrate the range of career opportunities in that sector;
- significant challenges included workforce shortages, the ageing population, and the resultant pressure on existing staff;
- some 'grow your own' recruitment strategies had been successful but it took time for new recruits to complete training and gain experience;
- assurance was sought and provided that sickness and absence levels in Health and Social Care were on a par with other services. In relation to tackling stress and mental health issues, attention was drawn to management policies and return to work interviews;
- it was suggested that consideration be given to the use by the Council of the NHS Highland social work staff bank, and this would be investigated; and
- discussions were underway with UHI about the development of training modules for support workers.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the four-year action plan and progress report.

9. Champions Updates Cunntasan nan Curaidhean

A short presentation was provided by the following champions to give an update on their work:

Adult: Mr Bill Boyd

Mr Boyd highlighted the work of national and local organisations which provided support for older adults, and expressed his aspiration to bring representatives from Age Scotland to speak in Highland about their work. Results of an informal survey he had conducted showed key issues of concern for older people included universal benefits (such as bus passes and free prescriptions), roads and traffic, public transport, and communication with the Council, NHS Highland, and utility companies.

Children: Dr Chris Birt

Dr Birt made reference to a Highland charity, Growing2gether, which aimed to give young people the chance to realise their unique potential, and build their mental health, educational engagement and life skills, so that they could contribute to stronger communities. He highlighted the opportunities for the use of Raddery House, on the Black Isle.

Dr Birt spoke of the importance of children's health, from drugs and alcohol, to nutrition, physical health, education, transport, and recreation, with many issues affecting children's health crossing service boundaries. The impact of poverty on health was significant and provided a challenge for the committee to tackle.

Trauma: Ms Liz Kraft

Ms Kraft reminded Members there was online Trauma training on Monday 19 February 2024, and she played a short video, 'Opening Doors Trauma Informed Practice for the Workforce'.

The Chair thanked the Champions for their presentations and valuable work, and the Committee **NOTED** the updates and that consideration would be given to the format of future Champions updates to the Committee.

**10. Minutes
Geàrr-chunntas**

The following Minutes had been circulated and were **NOTED**:-

- i. Highland Child Protection Committee held on 11 May 2023 (the meeting on 31 August 2023 was cancelled);
- ii. Highland Council / NHS Highland Joint Monitoring Committee held on 27 September 2023; and
- iii. Highland Violence Against Women Partnership Group held on 10 August 2023.

The meeting ended at 2.25pm.

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Economy and Infrastructure Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Thursday, 15 February 2024 at 10.30 am.

Present:

Mr M Baird	Mr W MacKay (Remote)
Mr I Brown	Mr H Morrison (Remote)
Mr M Cameron (Remote)	Ms L Niven (Remote)
Mr A Christie	Mr A Rhind
Mr K Gowans	Mrs T Robertson
Mr M Green	Mr R Stewart
Mr R Jones	

Non-Members also present:

Mr Ballance (Remote)	Mr J McGillivray (Remote)
Mr J Finlayson (Remote)	Mr C Munro (Remote)
Ms M Hutchison (Remote)	Ms M Reid
Mr D Macpherson (Remote)	Mrs M Ross (Remote)

Officials in Attendance:

Mr M MacLeod, Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy
 Mr A Maguire, Head of Development and Regeneration
 Ms T Urry, Head of Roads and Transport
 Ms N Wallace, Service Lead, Environment, Development and Active Travel
 Mr M Bailey, Programme Manager (City Region Deal)
 Mr A McCann, Economy and Regeneration Manager
 Mr N Young, Active Travel Manager
 Mr A Puls, Environment Team Leader
 Ms J Cromarty, Sustainable Transport Team Leader
 Miss J MacLennan, Joint Democratic Services Manager, Performance & Governance
 Mrs O Marsh, Committee Officer, Performance & Governance

Also in attendance:

Professor C O'Neil, Principal UHI Inverness
 Ms A Wilson, Head of Economic Development and Advancement UHI

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

Mr K Gowans in the Chair

Business

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

Apologies were intimated on behalf of Mr J Bruce, Mr K Rosie, Ms M Smith and Ms K Willis.

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

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

Items 6, 9 and 10 – Mr A Christie
Items 3a and 7 – Mr K Gowans

3. Good News Naidheachdan Matha

In-House Bus Operations January 24 - First Year of Operation Highlights

The in-house bus operations pilot had delivered the initial group of services at a significantly lower cost than the best tendered prices received from commercial operators. All services had operated as per their registered particulars for the entire year and the only journeys that failed to operate were due to weather related incidents. Services were continually monitored to ensure reliability and minor timing and route changes had been made to various timetables in April and August 2023 and January 2024.

Fare revenue income had exceeded initial expectations and figures showed an average increase of 40% compared to the same period in 2022 when the same services were delivered by a commercial operator. All periodic vehicle inspections and annual tests (MOT) had been carried out on time and in accordance with relevant legislation. Furthermore, in Summer 2023, the Council had commenced operating internal and external private hires and would continue to build on these hires during 2024.

Council announces thermal pothole repair trial

A 3-week trial of a thermal process for pothole repairs was to take place. An external contractor, Thermal Road Repairs, had been appointed to undertake the trial before the end of the 2023/24 financial year. The thermal repair process used existing material on site which was recycled and added to as necessary, thus reducing material costs and the carbon footprint of the works. The company would meet with Council roads staff on site to agree the works which would then be programmed with details provided once work was completed. Repairs were expected to be undertaken in Thurso, Dingwall, Inverness and Fort William, weather dependent.

New Year Honors List

Dr Steven Andrews, a research associate with the Environmental Research Institute (ERI), part of UHI North, West and Hebrides, had been named in The New Year Honours List. Dr Andrews had been awarded the Polar Medal for his outstanding achievement and service to the UK in the field of polar research.

Dr Andrews works alongside ERI researchers, based in Thurso, as the Flow Country World Heritage Project Coordinator, leading the compilation of the nomination documentation for the UNESCO World Heritage Site bid.

3a. Presentation

Transparency Statement: Mr K Gowans made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item as an employee of UHI Inverness.. However, having applied the objective test, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

Professor Chris O'Neil and Ms Alison Wilson, UHI Inverness, gave a presentation providing information on the role UHI played in the economic prosperity and development of Highland, especially taking into consideration the opportunities the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport would provide. During the detailed presentation, copies of which would be circulated to Members, they explored several topics including how it intended to work with communities, would be a demand led institution and the challenges that would be faced along the way.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the Chair thanked Professor O'Neil and Ms Wilson for the presentation and expressed his interest in what was already taking place and what was planned for the future. A strong UHI would help address population retention, population growth and create an environment attractive for investment;
- clarification was sought, and provided, as to the percentages for construction and science Further Education enrolment;
- it was vital Highland was ready for the opportunities the Green Freeport presented and that young people, and reskilled workers, were ready to take up these opportunities at the right time. In addition, it was important to have in place the skilled lecturers who could deliver these new skills;
- some businesses had commented that, at the last intake time, there had not been enough opportunities for construction workers. This was disappointing now that there was a demand for such workers;
- the need for care workers remained and it was important this was not overlooked;
- in response to a question as to where UHI would like to see demand emanating from it was explained that, while STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) was important, there needed to be more emphasis on STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths *plus the Arts*) courses which added that value added need;
- clarification was sought as to the statistics provided regarding the proportion of Higher Education and Further Education students;
- the symbiotic relationship that now existed between education and industry was to be welcomed;
- the challenging facing UHI was to reverse the expectation in the past for young people to leave Highland for the Higher Education. Every person who chose to remain, or come to UHI should be celebrated;

- one of the biggest challenges facing Highland was depopulation with many who had left for tertiary education remaining where they had graduated. It was therefore suggested that UHI link with other Universities and offer to hold courses in Highland remotely;
- the suggestion of an arrangement akin to sixth form colleges in England merited further consideration and UHI could be seen as pioneers;
- UHI was still viewed as a “new” University and a cultural shift was needed;
- the concept of apprenticeships had changed over time and information was sought, and provided, as to what work had taken place in schools etc to promote this;
- many Highland communities faced considerable problems with public transport to access UHI courses and this needed to be addressed cross-agency;
- there was a danger that some traditional skills were disappearing and UHI were encouraged to bring these back;
- reference was made to a recent presentation of a digital welding outfit which, it was suggested, could be adopted by UHI, as appropriate; and
- accommodation for students from rural areas was a financial disincentive but it was appreciated that the provision UHI could provide was limited. However, the curriculum was, where possible designed to alleviate this.

The Committee **NOTED** the presentation.

**4. Quarterly Revenue and Performance Monitoring Report Quarter 3 2023/24
Aithisg Ràitheil Teachd-a-steach agus Sgrùdadh Coileanadh Ràith 3
2023/24**

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/01/2024 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- regarding the Corran Ferry it was queried if any lost revenue had been recovered, or if discussions had progressed on this issue;
- whilst there had been staff cost savings in Planning, performance should be strongly considered as applications had not been processed within timescales;
- information was sought regarding how the Planning budget was allocated;
- regarding balancing the needs of operational efficiency with budget pressures for the 2024/25 budget, it was queried how this would be determined for the Roads programme;
- it was acknowledged that the bulk of the £5.9 million spend was attributable to the Corran Ferry and School Transportation and it was queried what the Policy would be for basing the 2024/25 budget due to the increased costs for these;
- regarding section 4 of the report, an additional summary table to highlight the underspends and overspends was requested;
- a profit and loss account was requested to demonstrate the school transportation performance, which would include the allocation of fleet and leasing costs; and

- it was queried if there was scope to increase Harbour Dues.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. the position for the third quarter of the 2023/24 financial year, and the predicted year-end position;
- ii. that the budget gap might change positively or negatively depending on the application of expenditure and recruitment controls, filling fee earning posts in an extremely challenging job market, adjusting services to meet previously agreed budget savings, in-year income recovery, and identifying new income and procurement opportunities; and
- iii. the progress update provided in relation to corporate budget savings delivery.

and **AGREED**:-

- iv. to provide a school transportation profit and loss account at the next Committee.

5. Capital Monitoring – Quarter 3 2023/24 Sgrùdadh Calpa – Ràith 3 2023/24

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/02/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the financial position as at 31 December 2023 and the estimated year end forecast;
- ii. **NOTED** the projects in section 5.2 of the report which had been impacted by construction cost inflation; and
- iii. **AGREED** the award of contracts if more optimum prices were received.

6. Inverness and Highland City Region Deal (IHCRD)– 2022/23 Annual Report Cùmhnant Baile Roinne Inbhir Nis agus na Gàidhealtachd – Aithisg Bhliadhna 2022/23

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

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/03/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- Inverness Castle Project was on budget and Members were encouraged to visit to view the construction project progress;

- frustrations were highlighted regarding the lack of progress on the Inshes roundabout, Longman roundabout and the Smithton to Inshes roadway. In this regard, an update was sought on these projects; and
- Members welcomed section 5.4 regarding the development of FitHomes, and section 5.7 of the report regarding the development of Affordable Housing. As 70% of tenants for these new homes would be young people, it was queried what the age or family circumstances criteria was to meet this category.

The Committee **APPROVED** the IHCRD Annual Report as a record of the activity and delivery during 2022/23.

**7. UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) – Delivery Plan Progress Update
Maoin Soirbheachais Cho-roinnte na RA – Cunntas mu Adhartas Plana
Libhrigidh**

Transparency Statement: Mr K Gowans made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item as an employee of UHI Inverness. However, having applied the objective test, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/04/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- thanks were expressed to the officers for the report, and acknowledgment of the Scottish Government for their support in the management of underspends on this project;
- regarding section 3, P&S S31 of the report, it was queried how many people had been supported into the job market in 2023/24, and how many people were anticipated during 2024/25. In this regard, it was also queried what the success rate was for retained and sustained employment;
- appreciation was expressed for the Team Hamish social gathering place at Nairn Links;
- regarding section 5.2.1 of the report, thanks were expressed to officers for their hard work on the allocation of CRF (Community Regeneration Fund) within Badenoch & Strathspey;
- as the CRF funding was in its final year, it was queried what funding mechanism was being investigated and established to succeed this to sustain and increase investment. In this regard, it was confirmed that much would be dependent on the elected Westminster Government; and
- Members welcomed commitments for the Science Skills Academy and support for technical and vocational qualifications.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the UKSPF Delivery Plan update; and
- AGREED** to the reallocation of funds to approved activities within each of the UKSPF priorities to ensure full commitment and spend of the UKSPF.

8. Highland Local Development Plan and Development Plan Scheme Plana Leasachadh Ionadail na Gàidhealtachd agus Sgeama Plana Leasachaidh

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/05/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

Appreciation was expressed on extending the registration deadline for the local place plans to September 2024. It was felt that consideration for non-digital means of communications, especially for more rural communities with less reliable internet or for members of communities who could not use digital means, be incorporated into the strategy.

The Committee:-

- i. **AGREED** the Development Plan Scheme / Newsletter at Appendix 1 of the report, including the suggested updates to the Participation Statement; and
- ii. **NOTED** the proposed collaborative approach to preparing a new single Local Development Plan for Highland.

9. Bus Partnership Fund Update and Changes to Active Travel Funding Cunntas às Ùr mu Mhaoin Com-pàirteachas nam Busaichean agus Atharrachaidhean do Mhaoineachadh Siubhal Gnìomhach

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

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/06/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- an update was requested if the Raigmore Bus Gate sensor had arrived or, if not, when it was anticipated;
- it was queried if the Kingussie Spey Street project was on hold due to funding issues;
- disappointment was expressed that the bus partnership fund had been scrapped by Transport Scotland. It was requested that a letter be sent by Highland Council to express great disappointment regarding this decision as this would negatively result in a reduction of schemes in Highland; and
- it was acknowledged that planned projects would still go ahead but would require to be funded from the Active Travel fund. This would however effectively reduce the overall active travel budget as a result.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. the confirmed pause on the Bus Partnership Fund by Transport Scotland for the 24/25 financial year;
- ii. the progress of the Bus Partnership Fund within the Highland Council to date and outstanding work on the project beyond the 23/24 financial year;
- iii. the changes announced by Transport Scotland to Active Travel Funding from 2024/25 and that officers would bring a further paper to Committee once more information had been received from Transport Scotland;

and **AGREED**:-

- iv. to send a letter to Transport Scotland to express great disappointment regarding the pause of the Bus Partnership Fund which would result in a reduction in funding for other Active Travel projects.

10. Regional Economic Partnership Vision and Action Plan Lèirsinn agus Plana-ghnìomha a' Chom-pàirteachais Eaconamaich Roinneil

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

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/07/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

Members confirmed they would like to see closer links between infrastructure such as NHS facilities, Schools and new housing developments as concern was raised regarding the length of time needed to have these in place.

The Committee **AGREED** that the outcomes of the initial phase of the surveys being undertaken reflected the broad areas of action that Highland Council would like to see in the ongoing formulation of the Vision and Action Plan.

11. Minutes Geàrr-chunntas

The Committee **NOTED** the following Minutes of the Planning Applications Committees (PAC):-

- i. South PAC – 4 October 2023;
- ii. North PAC – 1 November 2023;
- iii. Joint North and South PAC – 8 November 2023;
- iv. South PAC – 22 November 2023;
- v. North PAC – 6 December 2023;
- vi. North PAC – 17 January 2024;

and also **APPROVED**:-

- vii. City Region Deal Monitoring Group of 23 January 2024.

Exclusion of the Public
Às-dùnadh a' Phobaill

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

12. Property Transactions Monitoring Report
Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Ghnothachasan Seilbhe

There had been circulated to Members only Report No. ECI/08/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy.

The Committee **NOTED** the recommendations as detailed in the report.

13. Land and Property
Fearann agus Seilbh

There had been circulated to Members only Report No. ECI/09/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy.

The Committee **AGREED** the recommendations as detailed in the report.

The meeting ended at 12:45 pm

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Dingwall and Seaforth Area Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Dingwall on 19 February 2024 at 11.00 am.

Present:

Mr S Kennedy (Remote)
Mr G MacKenzie

Mrs A MacLean
Mrs M Paterson

In attendance:

Mrs D Ferguson, Senior Ward Manager
Ms H Ross, Senior Ward Manager
Mr R MacLeod, Service Lead – Housing and Building Maintenance
Mr I Moncrieff, Roads Operations Manager, Ross and Cromarty
Ms A Jansson, North Area Education Manager
Mr L Hannah, Community Development Manager
Ms K Ellen, Community Support Officer
Ms F Shand, Principal Housing Officer
Ms F Hepburn, Project Officer – Community Regeneration
Ms M Gray, Project Officer – Community Regeneration
Miss J MacLennan, Joint Democratic Services Manager
Mrs G MacPherson, Committee Officer

Also in attendance:

Inspector R Ross, Police Scotland

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

Mr G MacKenzie in the Chair

Prior to the commencement of the formal business, and on behalf of the Council, the Chair paid tribute to Mrs Julie Wileman who had recently passed away and extended deep condolences and sympathy to her family.

The Chair then welcomed Mr Lewis Hannah and Ms Kirsty Ellen into the roles of Community Development Manager and Community Support Officer, respectively.

**1. Apologies for Absence
Leisgeulan**

There were no apologies for absence.

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

There were no Declarations of Interests or Transparency Statements.

3. Police – Area Performance Summary Poilis – Geàrr-chunntas Dèanadais Sgìreil

There had been circulated Report No DSA/01/24 by the North Area Commander.

During discussion, the following points were raised:-

- it was enquired why Police Scotland Highlands and Islands (N Division) underwent national inspection in relation to hate crime and Members were advised that N Division was one of three areas chosen to check compliancy and if needs were being met. Although the full report was not yet available, it had shown their processes and procedures were in good order;
- concern had been raised by residents of Macrae Crescent and Brown Square, Dingwall regarding Police presence. It was confirmed that Police continued to pro-actively patrol those areas in a bid to prevent crime, and Members would be informed of any significant Police concerns via the Ward Manager;
- information was sought, and provided, regarding accidents and near misses at the Mineral Bridge on the A862 road to Ardullie, and the B9169 Mulbuie and the B9162 Conon Bridge junctions with the A835 road to Tore. It was indicated that a statistics report would be provided to Members;
- it was emphasised that communities felt they were becoming distanced from the Police and that bringing together a number of wards and community councils for a presentation or question and answer session would be well received. This would take place once a standardised report template was completed and a protocol in place, expected around summertime. Topics would include Driving Ambitions, adult support and protection, county lines and partnership working;
- it was felt that while the report was positive, it was more of an overview and it was thought that communities would ask how it would affect them;
- information was sought, and provided, regarding Police Liaison Officers in terms of missing young people;
- an enquiry into the partnership with social work and housing in terms of county lines confirmed that Police did work with multi agencies to identify vulnerable people but no further information had been provided due to operational reasons;
- information was sought, and provided, regarding anti social behaviour and reporting concerns, and Members were reminded that Police were always looking for public support; and
- a link to statistical crime data would continue to be provided in future reports.

The Committee:-

- i. scrutinised and **NOTED** the North Highland Scrutiny Report covering the reporting period 1 April to 31 December 2023; and
- ii. **AGREED** a statistics report be provided to Members regarding accidents and near misses at the Mineral Bridge on the A862 road to Ardullie, and the B9169 Mulbuie and the B9162 Conon Bridge junctions with the A835 road to Tore.

4. Area Roads Programme 2024/25 Prògram Rathaidean Sgìreil 2024/25

There had been circulated Report No DSA/02/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

While introducing the report, the Roads Operations Manager advised that the budget for 2024/25 was not yet allocated so the previous year's baseline capital had been used as an estimate to allow the programme to be developed.

Members shared concern that the report itself was difficult to read and sought clarification as to the budget available. The works to be carried out in 2024/25 were the same as shown in 2023/24 budget.

It was stated in the report that the budget was allocated to the disaggregated area of Ross and Cromarty and there was no specific amount delegated to the individual wards of Dingwall and Seaforth, Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh, and Black Isle and Easter Ross. However, at the end of section 5.3 of the report, an allocation of 8% and an amount of £155,205 was specified, which led to concern from Members.

In response, the Roads Operations Manager advised that he would clarify the financial allocation and provide a report of schemes undertaken in 2023/24.

During discussion, further points were raised:-

- a workshop on allocation of road funding had been abandoned due to poor weather and it was hoped that it would be rearranged soon. Meanwhile Ward 8 roads continued to deteriorate, and ditches, verges, street signs and bollards had not received attention for some time, despite Ward 8 roads being significantly busy;
- cyclical revenue funded works such as ditching, signs and pothole fixing had been impacted due to the fact that capital funding (being received at short notice) had heavily influenced other works, as there was no guarantee capital funding would be carried over to the following year;
- potholes –
 - information was sought, and provided, regarding pothole claims, and it was stated that the community was voicing concerns about the amount of potholes in Dingwall and the damage being caused to their vehicles;
 - a trial of externally contracted thermal pothole repair was expected to be undertaken in Dingwall before the end of March. Members were under the impression that they were to be consulted prior to the trial but it was confirmed that a list of potholes had already been decided. Members asked for a copy of the list. Members also enquired where the budget came from to pay for the trial; and
 - the benefit of the pothole pro machines and a list of the works completed were requested, given that Members were not aware of them being used in Ward 8;
- Members expressed interest in site visits and wished to include a visit to Mineral Bridge; and
- information was sought regarding the temporary metal plate on the bridge over the River Conon and it was confirmed that, although no longer under his

remit, the Roads Operations Manager would obtain an update from the Structures Team.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the following works only, from the proposed 2024/2025 Area Roads Capital Programme for the Dingwall and Seaforth area;-
 - a) A862 Conon Bridge to Muir of Ord Surface Dress
 - b) U3027 Gairloch Crescent, Conon Bridge Surface Dress
- ii. **AGREED** to hold a meeting with the Roads Operations Manager to further discuss the matters raised, to be held prior to the next Dingwall and Seaforth Area Committee in May.

5. **Community Regeneration Fund (CRF) – Assessment of Applications** **Maoin Ath-bheothachadh Coimhearsnachd (CRF) – Measadh Iartrasan**

There had been circulated Report No DSA/03/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

During discussion, the following points were raised:-

- background to the 2023/24 allocation of funds was provided and information was sought regarding next year's allocation. It was said that the allocation was not confirmed so far. It was asked if the remainder of 2023/24 funding would be rolled over and it was confirmed that the funds needed to be spent by March 2025 to avoid being clawed back by the Scottish Government;
- information was sought, and provided, regarding the status of an application for a Project Manager post and it was confirmed that the Project Officers would arrange a separate meeting to discuss; and
- in terms of the CRF budget, it was questioned if it could be loosened off from the direct ring-fencing.

Following general discussion on the specific projects, the Committee:-

- i. considered and **AGREED** to approve the applications;
- ii. **AGREED** that funding be awarded from the CRF as follows:
 - Dingwall Men's Shed - £5,500
 - High Life Highland Dingwall Youth Club - £8,830
 - Dingwall and District Angling Club - £6,800;
- iii. **AGREED** to ringfence the remaining grant funds of £172,311.62 within the 2023/24 allocation to deliver area priorities identified through work to develop an area-based plan, subject to full applications being brought to a future committee meeting for consideration; and

- iv. **AGREED** to hold a meeting with the Community Regeneration Project Officers regarding the status of an application for a Project Manager post.

6. Dingwall and Seaforth Ward Discretionary budget applications approved since last meeting
Iarrtasan buidseat fo Ùghdarras Uàrd Inbhir Pheofharain agus Shìophort air an aontachadh bho choinneamh mu dheireadh

The Committee **NOTED** the following Dingwall and Seaforth Ward Discretionary Budget applications approved since its last meeting.

- i. Conon Bridge Amenities Association - Conon Bridge Old Age Pensioners' Christmas Party - £500
- ii. Lady Haig Poppy Factory - Poppy Wreaths for Remembrance Sunday 2023 - £83.11
- iii. Conon Bridge Lunch Club - Christmas Lunch 15 December 2023 - £300
- iv. Dingwall Community Council - Providing Christmas Dinners to residents of Dingwall - £1,000
- v. Muir of Ord Development Trust - Senior Citizens Christmas Dinner Delivery - £850

7. Dingwall Common Good Fund
Maoin Math Coitcheann Inbhir Pheofharain

There had been circulated the Dingwall Common Good Fund 2022/23 Annual Accounts and Final Monitoring, 2023/24 Quarter Three Monitoring Statement and 2024/25 Proposed Budget by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place, and Head of Corporate Finance.

In terms of section 3.5 of the report, it was confirmed that non-essential spends covered community grants and property repairs required (both planned and unplanned) to keep assets in good order. Information was also sought, and provided, regarding the staff costs.

The Committee:-

- i. considered and **AGREED** the Dingwall Common Good Fund Statement of Accounts (Appendix 1a) and Quarter 4 monitoring report for 2022/23 (Appendix 1b);
- ii. scrutinised and **NOTED** the position of the Dingwall Common Good Fund as shown in the 2023/24 Quarter Three monitoring statement at Appendix 2; and
- iii. **APPROVED** the proposed budget for 2024/25 as set out in Appendix 3.

8. Attainment Overview Dingwall ASG
Foir-shealladh Buileachaidh Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte Inbhir Pheofharain

There had been circulated Report No DSA/04/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning.

Information that might have led to the disclosure of individuals had not been included in the report but Members were advised an area meeting could be arranged, where the relevant Head Teacher could be asked to attend, should Members have questions relating to an individual school.

Head Teachers for both Dingwall Primary School and Dingwall Academy had recently attended a ward business meeting where topics within the report were covered.

Information was sought, and provided regarding:-

- the number of exclusions and it was confirmed that the number did not differentiate between one pupil being excluded more than once or a group of pupils being excluded for being involved in one incident. Further comment was not appropriate via this public forum;
- section 4.2 of the report, and it was confirmed that Head Teachers self-assessed Standards and Quality Reports with support from Collaborate Leads. Head Teachers worked to the six point scale framework and lead on best practice with peers; and
- school leavers and their destinations, particularly those who seemed to drop off the radar. It was confirmed that it was a team effort, working alongside Skills Development Scotland and other Council services although it was difficult to find out what happened if a young person left the area.

The Committee scrutinised and **NOTED** the content of the report.

9. Minutes Geàrr-chunntas

The Committee **NOTED** the Minutes of Meeting of the Dingwall and Seaforth Area Committee held on 6 November 2023 which were approved by the Council on 14 December 2023.

10. Housing Revenue Account: Garage Rents 2024/25 Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais: Màil Gharaidsean 2024/25

There had been circulated Report No DSA/06/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Property and Housing.

Information was sought, and a summary provided, regarding garage rents.

The Committee **AGREED** a level of rent increase of 7.95% to apply to Dingwall and Seaforth Garages and Garage sites.

The meeting ended at 1.00 pm.

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Education Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Wednesday 21 February 2024 at 10.35 am.

Present:

Ms S Atkin	Ms M Hutchison
Mrs I Campbell (remote)	Ms L Johnston
Mrs M Cockburn	Ms L Kraft
Ms H Crawford	Ms M MacCallum
Ms S Fanet	Mrs I MacKenzie (remote)
Mr J Finlayson (Chair)	Ms J McEwan (substitute)
Mr D Fraser	Mr J McGillivray (remote)
Mr J Grafton	Mr D Millar (Vice Chair)
Mr D Gregg	Mrs P Munro (remote)

Religious Representatives (non-voting):

Ms S Lamont
Mr I MacDonald (remote)
Mr W Skene

Youth Convener (non-voting):

Ms O MacLeod

Non-Members also present:

Mr M Baird	Mr C Munro (remote)
Mr M Cameron (remote)	Mr P Oldham (remote)
Mr A Christie (remote)	Mrs M Reid
Mr B Lobban	Mr K Rosie (remote)
Mr G MacKenzie (remote)	Ms M Ross
Mr D Macpherson (remote)	

In attendance:

Ms F Grant, Head of Education, Learning and Teaching
Ms C Macklin, Head of Education, Lifelong Learning and Gaelic Services
Ms A MacPherson, Head of Resources
Ms B Brown, Senior Lead Manager, Performance and Improvement
Ms T Stones, Senior Lead Manager, Professional Learning
Ms A Jansson, Area Education and Learning Manager (North)
Ms F Shearer, Area Education and Learning Manager (South)
Ms B Cairns, Principal Educational Psychologist
Mr I Jackson, Education Officer
Ms L Burns, Head Teacher, St Columba's Primary School
Mr D Hayes-MacLeod, Head Teacher, South Lodge Primary School
Ms A MacLennan, Head Teacher, Auchtertyre and Shieldaig Primary Schools
Mr J Naples-Campbell, Head Teacher, North West Sutherland Schools
Mr N Ross, Head Teacher, Dornoch Firth 3-18 Campus
Mr F Thomson, Head Teacher, Noss Primary School
Ms J Douglas, Care and Learning Alliance (Third Sector)
Ms S Fowler, Thriving Families (Third Sector)
Ms M Chemonges, Highland Parent Council Partnership

Ms M Murray, Principal Committee Officer
 Ms R Ross, Committee Officer

Also in attendance:

Ms A Footitt, Information Officer, National Autistic Society

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

Mr J Finlayson in the Chair

Business

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

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr R Gale.

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

The following Members made general Transparency Statements but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that they had an interest to declare:-

Mr J McGillivray, as a retired member and former Highland District Secretary of the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association.

Mr J Grafton, on the basis that his partner was a secondary school teacher in Highland.

**3. Good News/Outstanding Achievements
 Naidheachdan Matha/Coileanaidhean Air Leth**

A presentation on outstanding achievements by pupils and schools had been circulated to Members in advance of the meeting. To formally recognise the outstanding achievements at the Committee the presentation was shown, together with a video of music from primary schools in south Lochaber.

The Committee **NOTED** the outstanding achievements.

**4. Continuing to Raise Attainment and Achievement
 A' Sior Thogail Buileachadh agus Coileanadh**

There had been circulated Report No EDU/1/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning.

The Chair commented that the report put into context the realities of the attainment story in Highland and, because of the scrutiny and debate at previous meetings of the Committee and the requests made by Members, there was now a better understanding of what was happening in terms of attainment from 3-18 and where it was necessary to be more strategic in both supporting and improving, in collaboration

with school staff, different aspects of learning, teaching, assessment, moderation and data collection so that the Council was not only accurately reporting attainment but ensuring consistency across all Highland schools using a variety of strategies, resources and knowledge.

As had been asked by Members of the Committee, officers were working with agencies like Education Scotland and other local authorities to learn from them in terms of what could be done better with respect to all aspects of improving and assessing attainment. They had also, as could be seen in the appendices to the report, developed clear raising attainment strategies to articulate what was being done in schools, supported by the Council, which he was sure Members would see as being positive and responsive to what had been asked for.

However, the overarching message from the report was that, at the senior phase, attainment in Highland was in line with the national average. The building blocks for attainment at the senior phase were always underpinned by what happened in primary schools and it was necessary to recognise the great work staff were doing in all settings including nurseries, primary schools and secondary schools. The good news was that because officers now had so many different types of data and were working with schools to improve the moderation material needed to support them, there was now a better understanding of what needed to be driven forward as part of the Raising Attainment Strategy.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the report was not about the quality of teaching in primary schools but about working with teaching staff to improve reporting against national standards;
- primary education set the foundation for pupils, and getting it right was critical to future performance. If pupils were going into secondary school not fully prepared, secondary school head teachers would be flagging that as an issue;
- secondary senior phase attainment was in line with the national average which was positive and confirmed that teaching and attainment in primary schools was at a high level;
- consistency was key in terms of assessment and moderation. However, it was difficult to get consistent assessment and moderation reporting across Scotland, and in Highland there were particular challenges with rurality and small schools;
- it was right to have a focus on assessment reporting but it was absolutely not a criticism of teaching staff;
- the data in the report was fascinating and indicated that attainment was better than was being portrayed;
- information was sought, and provided, on a number of points including when the dip in attainment in P4 had begun and whether consideration was being given to what came before P4 – ie was the leap too big in terms of the curriculum; whether there was any evidence that the secondary school structure suited young people more than primary school; whether the Progress and Achievement tracking module referred to in the report would lessen the administrative burden on teachers; and whether, from a practical perspective, the end of term two was the best time to gather predictions;
- making meaningful change was complex and could only be achieved by hardworking teachers and support staff working with families and pupils;
- the way the data in the report was presented showed the commitment by teaching staff and officers, and Members looked forward to further updates;

- it was necessary to look behind the numbers and remember that young people were at the centre of this matter;
- in relation to the cohort attainment timeline set out in the report, it was questioned how certain officers were that the 2016 cohort was representative. It was added that it would be interesting to see the same data for the 2015 and 2017 cohorts if it was available, and that it was necessary to be aware of what the picture was currently;
- the statement in the report that secondary senior phase attainment was firmly in line with the national average was questioned given the attainment report presented to the Committee in November 2023 had indicated that the gap to the national average remained steady;
- teachers erring on the side of caution when undertaking assessment was understandable. How it was intended to address that was outlined in Appendix 2 of the report, and the improvement activity and proposed next steps described therein were welcomed;
- disappointment was expressed regarding what had been reported recently in the press, which bore no resemblance to what was contained in the report, and members of the press were encouraged to read the report in more detail;
- concern was expressed that no other theory had been advanced as to the reason for the discrepancy between primary and secondary attainment, and it was queried whether consideration had been given to other factors such as the impact of tutors and parental input. The Head of Education, Teaching and Learning, confirmed that the impact of tutors had not been considered and that might be something that could be looked at. However, there was not a large number of tutors operating across the Highland area;
- moderation and standardisation of marking had been rolled out in 2023, which had led to an uplift in the attainment statistics, and it was questioned whether it was appropriate for this to happen twice. In response, the Chair explained that moderation and assessment was not something that was carried out as a one-off but an ongoing exercise;
- concern was expressed regarding the wording of the recommendations in the report and the impact on staff morale. However, other Members contended that the negative comments in the press and by some Members of the Committee were what was impacting the morale of hard-working teachers and education staff;
- teachers might feel there were being put under some pressure, and an amendment was proposed in that regard. The Chair expressed serious concern regarding the terms of the proposed amendment, which questioned the integrity of the Education and Learning Service by suggesting teachers would be pressurised to inflate attainment;
- the recommendations in the report invited the Committee to approve next steps including recommendations from Members raised at previous Education Committee meetings, and it was queried which particular recommendations from Members were being taken forward;
- on the point being raised, it was confirmed that a list of the local authorities the Council was working with in terms of raising attainment would be circulated to Members following the meeting;
- there were standalone papers on today's agenda in respect of attainment, finance and behaviour in schools. These issues were interlinked and it was suggested there was a need for a more holistic approach;
- in response to comments suggesting attainment in primary schools was poor, the Chair emphasised that Highland was the second highest authority in terms of

improvement in attainment over the past few years, and predicted attainment for the coming year was above last year's national average;

- whilst further improvement was desired, the data indicated that the correct foundations were being laid in primary school. The report showed that attainment in Highland was getting better each year and there were strategies in place to support school staff and pupils going forward;
- the hard work that had gone into the report was recognised and thanks were expressed to all those involved;
- it was necessary to remember that children were different, and it was felt this was missing from the report which talked about national standards and universality;
- Highland was a unique area due to its size and rurality, and sometimes it would not fit into the national picture. The Chair concurred, commenting that it was necessary to look behind the statistics at individual pupils and schools, and promote and support a holistic approach to education;
- it was necessary to support and listen to staff, not simply instruct them;
- teachers might rather have a pupil sit a level they knew they could pass than put them through a higher level and risk a lower grade, which might knock their confidence;
- it was possible that the choice of subjects in secondary school had a positive impact on attainment as young people were more engaged in subjects they had chosen;
- it was not believed that experienced teachers would underestimate pupils' attainment, and it was suggested that teachers should be left to assess using their own judgement. To increase Members' understanding of the issues around assessment and moderation, the Chair proposed that a report be presented to a future meeting;
- it would take time for teaching staff to become confident in assessing to the standards required;
- the previously agreed Raising Attainment Strategy was now coming alive and Members were sure that the Head Teachers presenting today would instil further confidence as to how it was being embedded in schools; and
- thanks were expressed to officers for their ongoing generosity with their time in terms of responding to Members' questions and enabling them to fully understand the issues.

Following discussion, Mr J Finlayson, seconded by Mr D Millar, **moved** the recommendations as set out in the report.

As an **amendment**, Ms H Crawford, seconded by Ms J McEwan, moved that the following be added at the end of recommendation iii:-

“ensuring that no teacher will be pressurised to inflate their assessment of a pupil's attainment.”

On a vote being taken, there were eleven votes for the **motion** and five votes for the **amendment**, with two abstentions. The **motion** was therefore **carried**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion:

Ms S Atkin, Mrs I Campbell, Mrs M Cockburn, Ms S Fanet, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Ms L Kraft, Mr D Millar, Mrs P Munro.

For the Amendment:

Ms H Crawford, Mr J Grafton, Mrs I MacKenzie, Ms J McEwan, Mr J McGillivray.

Abstentions:

Mr D Gregg, Ms M MacCallum.

Decision:

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** that a young person's attainment and achievement was a 3-18 journey culminating in National Qualifications and positive sustained destinations;
- ii. **AGREED** the improvement focus for Primary 4 stage and that a progress update would be brought to a future Education Committee;
- iii. **AGREED** that the service would continue to work with primary colleagues to improve accuracy of teacher judgement and build capacity within the system, improving moderation and standardisation within our schools; and
- iv. **APPROVED** the next steps linked to the previously agreed Raising Attainment Strategy including recommendations from Members raised at previous Education Committee meetings.

It was also **AGREED** that a report on assessment and moderation be presented to a future meeting of the Committee.

5. Presentation: Primary Strategic Network**Taisbeanadh: Lionra Ro-innleachdail nam Bun-sgoiltean**

The Chair explained that this item followed on from the preceding report as it was important for Members to appreciate how things were working at grass roots level in schools to improve all aspects of education, including attainment, with school staff being right at the centre.

The Primary Strategic Network fed directly into the improvement agendas for schools including raising attainment, learning and teaching, assessment and monitoring and supporting wellbeing which were all integral to ensuring schools supported pupils in a holistic way while also ensuring improvements in all aspects of achievement and attainment.

He went on to welcome Fraser Thomson, Head Teacher, Noss Primary School, Alison MacLennan, Head Teacher, Auchtertyre and Shieldaig Primary Schools, Leah Burns, Head Teacher, St Columba's Primary School, and John Naples-Campbell, Head Teacher, North West Sutherland Schools who, following an introduction by the Senior Lead Manager, Performance and Improvement, gave presentations on the four key workstreams within the Primary Strategic Network which supported the direct involvement of Head Teachers and schools, working with central officers, in the development of key aspects of policy and improvement activity and provided a mechanism to communicate these developments across schools with an Associated School Group representative framework.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- thanks were expressed for the uplifting and encouraging presentation, which had brought the preceding report and appendices to life, and for the work the Head Teachers were doing both in their own areas and in terms of the collaborative approach taking place throughout Highland;
- information was sought as to how the work described in the presentation was developing because of the diversity and rurality of Highland and whether the IT systems that were in place and the opportunities to meet were supporting that work. In that regard, it was explained that the use of Microsoft Teams had been revolutionary in terms of connecting with colleagues and practitioners and provided a strong platform to collaborate and continue the improvement journey;
- some young people in rural areas felt isolated, and the identification of health and wellbeing support was welcomed;
- in relation to the National Improving Writing Programme, the statistics were impressive and the fact that it involved reflective, evidence-based practice and a whole-family approach was welcomed;
- professional isolation being addressed was welcomed, and it was queried whether there were any measurements in place in that regard and whether a teacher who came into post and found themselves isolated would automatically be picked up and supported;
- the Primary Strategic Network represented true collaboration which was raising attainment and achievement for all young people in Highland including vulnerable young people. Thanks were expressed to the Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning, and her team for working with Head Teachers to ensure they were heard, understood and well supported;
- the inclusion of the cost of the school day in the Health and Wellbeing areas for improvement was welcomed, as this could have a huge impact on how a family interacted with a school;
- the whole family wellbeing approach and the identification of young carers and care experienced young people were welcomed;
- further information was sought on the Raising Attainment in Literacy and Numeracy area for improvement relating to Reading Schools;
- in relation to consulting young voices, some young people might be more vocal than others and it was queried who was being consulted and by what means, and how it was intended to reach those less likely to engage; and
- the collaborative and supportive approach was welcomed and would benefit teachers and pupils.

The Chair thanked the Head Teachers for giving up their time to present and asked them to feed back to colleagues that the Committee appreciated the hard work taking place in all school settings and supported them in the good work being taken forward.

The Committee otherwise **NOTED** the presentation.

6. Service Performance Reporting and Quarter 3 Monitoring - 1 October to 31 December 2023

Aithris Coileanadh Seirbheis agus Sgrùdadh Ràith 3 – 1 Dàmhair gu 31 Dùbhlachd 2023

There had been circulated Report No EDU/2/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- almost half of children and young people in Highland had Additional Support Needs, which was a significant area of expenditure with the Education and Learning Service, and it was queried whether there was an opportunity to establish a strategic group with a specific Additional Support for Learning remit that could include Third Sector input and potentially feed into the Integrated Children's Services Board. The Chair confirmed this would be discussed, emphasising the importance of avoiding duplication;
- it having been queried whether Education and Learning officers were working with colleagues in the Health and Social Care Service to ensure a joined up approach to third sector commissioning and procurement, it was confirmed that discussions were ongoing and an update could be provided at a later date;
- congratulations were expressed in respect of the projected underspend. However, much of this appeared to be a result of increased staff turnover which was unlikely to be replicated and was undesirable in the long term;
- libraries were a lifeline for some, and concern was expressed that if the number of memberships continued to reduce library services would be seen as an easy area to cut. It was confirmed that further information on the reasons for the reduction in library memberships could be sought from High Life Highland;
- information was sought, and provided, on the historical issue relating to the establishment within Special Schools; the scoping work in relation to establishing a Highland-wide 3-18 formula for schools; and why school attendance rates were only reported to Committee every two years.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the Service's revenue monitoring position;
- scrutinised and **NOTED** the Service's performance and risk information; and
- AGREED** that discussions take place regarding the possibility of establishing a strategic group with a specific Additional Support for Learning remit.

7. Leadership Framework Frèam Ceannardais

There had been circulated Report No EDU/3/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning.

The Chair explained that focussing on leadership at all levels continued to be a key workstream for education over the next few years as it was crucial for developing the next generation of leaders. Developing leadership also included involving children and young people as well as all practitioners in Highland's educational establishments.

To help Members understand better what was happening in terms of leadership in schools, he welcomed David Hayes-MacLead, Head Teacher, South Lodge Primary School, and Norman Ross, Head Teacher, Dornoch Firth 3-18 Campus who, following an introduction by the Senior Lead Manager, Professional Learning, gave presentations on Learner Participation and Values-Based Leadership across a 3-18 Campus.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- thanks were expressed for the inspiring presentation which highlighted the importance of leadership at all levels, and Members commended the Head Teachers

involved for the work they did in their respective schools and the positive impact it had on the community;

- the reference to a whole family approach was welcomed, as was the induction for new and acting Head Teachers;
- in relation to learner participation, it was queried what impact allowing pupils choice as to how they wanted to be involved had had;
- using the right language was crucial and could have a significant impact on children;
- there were people who wanted to stay in Highland who might not yet have the skills to be leaders. It was important they were developed to take on positions of leadership, and the report set out an excellent way to do so and replenish retiring experts; and
- the inclusive approach being taken to learner participation was commended.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. that the development of a Leadership Framework would need to work for both the Education Service, and across the wider organisation, to support management and leadership development at all levels and across all services at a time of financial complexity, supporting the concept of one Council;
- ii. the necessity of partnership working across services to ensure a consistent approach to leadership and management across all levels of the Council; and
- iii. the progress made to date on Cohort 1 of the New and Acting Head Teacher Induction and the Professional Learning and Leadership Academy.

8. Presentation: Thriving Families and National Autistic Society Taisbeanadh: Teaghlaicean Soirbheachail agus An Comann Òtasamach Nàiseanta

The Chair welcomed Sarah Fowler, Chief Officer, Thriving Families, and Alison Footitt, Information Officer, National Autistic Society, who gave a presentation on the work done by their respective organisations and The Pines, Inverness, to support young people with Additional Support Needs (ASN), their families and the professionals who worked with them.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- it was recognised that the transition from children's services to adult services could be challenging and, in response to a question, it was confirmed that although the organisations presenting supported people up to the age of 25 they could signpost older people to other organisations such as the Highland One Stop Shop;
- Thriving Families ensured that families with a child with ASN knew that they were not alone, and that the wellbeing of the child was at the centre of all the support provided;
- the resources available to help schools and the work done in linking up with schools to support young people were commended;
- it was important to recognise that while teachers were professionals they were not medical professionals, and the help and support provided by organisations like Thriving Families and the National Autistic Society was crucial to allow teachers to support children with ASN and help them develop a love of learning;
- The Pines website was very clear and easy to understand and was a valuable resource both within and outwith Highland;

- information was sought, and provided, on the issues surrounding the current long waiting lists for Neurodevelopmental Assessment Services, and it was confirmed there was an active group within Education and Health and Social Care looking at this matter;
- the importance of organisations and Council services working together to support young people with ASN and their families was emphasised;
- it was helpful to be able to signpost people to where they could get help while awaiting diagnosis;
- services such as the National Autistic Society, Thriving Families and the Highland One Stop Shop were working hard but did not have the capacity to help all those who needed it;
- there was a lack of services for autistic adults which was a particular problem as many adults discovered their own autism when their child received a diagnosis; and
- the importance of GIRFEC (Getting it Right for Every Child) having been emphasised, it was confirmed that a report would be brought to a future meeting of the Committee, and the Chair undertook to liaise with the Chair of the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee in that regard.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the presentation; and
- AGREED** that a report on GIRFEC (Getting It Right For Every Child) be presented to a future meeting of the Committee.

9. Promoting Positive Behaviour A' Cur air Adhart Deagh Mhodh-ghiùlain

There had been circulated Report No EDU/4/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning.

The Chair explained that this report had been requested given the concerns in the media about behaviour in schools nationally. It indicated not only the challenges being faced but why they might be arising and what support was being offered at Council and school level to pupils, parents and staff.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the ability of teachers and non-teaching staff to work holistically was commended;
- the use of trauma informed practice was welcomed;
- the importance of the language used and the connection between a positive school ethos and attainment were evident in the earlier presentations by Head Teachers;
- the number of severe instances of challenging behaviour were relatively low;
- it was reassuring that Head Teachers had access to the tools they needed to deal with challenging behaviour;
- it was emphasised that encouraging pro-social behaviour and emotional regulation may not work as well for neurodivergent children and that modifying the environment was often more effective than trying to modify behaviour;
- on the point being raised, it was clarified that a universal approach was not a one size fits all solution and that a person-centred approach was still used;

- information was sought, and provided, on the process for reporting incidents of challenging behaviour, what constituted challenging behaviour and the policy on mobile phone use in schools;
- it was important to realise the effect challenging behaviour had on the learning of other pupils;
- on the point being raised, the Chair confirmed that consideration would be given to the possibility of Safe, Strong & Free either presenting at a future meeting of the Committee or providing a workshop for Members;
- concern was expressed regarding the rise in misogynistic views among male pupils, the increase in racist comments, the issues caused by social media and the increase in the use of vapes by young people. In relation to the latter, it was confirmed that it was intended to include a specific question on vaping in the next Lifestyle Survey;
- information was sought, and provided, on several points including the renaming of violent incidents as pupil-staff incidents, the impact of small schools and in-school accommodation on behaviour, and the effect of Covid on the behaviour of younger pupils;
- what was seen as bad behaviour could sometimes be a difference in generational expectations since children were now much more aware of their rights;
- more public education was needed around exclusion to explain that it was about safety rather than a sanction or punishment; and
- concern having been expressed regarding behaviour on school buses, it was confirmed that Members' comments would be fed back to the Executive Chief Officer, Infrastructure, Environment and Economy, whose service had responsibility for school transport.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the outcome of the national survey;
- NOTED** the actions taken to address concerns in schools and the training and support available to school staff;
- AGREED** to endorse the approach taken in the Highland Framework and Guidance on Promoting Positive Relationships as being in line with current research and national guidance from Scottish Government and Education Scotland; and
- AGREED** that consideration be given to a future presentation or Members' workshop involving Safe Strong & Free.

10. Review of Statutory Consultation Exercise - Closure of Gergask Primary School Ath-sgrùdadh air Eacarsaich Cho-chomhairleachaidh Reachdail – Dùnadh Bun- Sgoil Gharbhghaisg

There had been circulated Report No EDU/5/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the closure of schools could make areas less attractive, leading to further depopulation;
- the consultation process was commended, and generally the community supported the closure of the school; and

- it was emphasised that the most important factors were the education and wellbeing of the children, and in this instance parents had removed their children from the school and enrolled them in a nearby larger school.

- * The Committee **AGREED TO RECOMMEND** to the Council that it discontinue education at Gergask Primary School, transferring its catchment to that of Newtonmore Primary School. Gergask Primary School had not been operational since September 2022 and a closure decision would formalise the current operational situation.

11. Statutory Consultation Exercise - Duror Primary School: Request to Proceed to Consultation on Permanent Closure
Eacarsaich Co-chomhairleachaidh Reachdail – Bun-Sgoil Dhùrair: Iarrtas a Dhol air Adhart gu Co-chomhairleachadh mu Dhùnadh Maireannach

There had been circulated Report No EDU/6/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the community was very fond of the school and had been worried about its closure;
- it was queried whether the school had received enough support in previous years and what effect changes such as new families moving into the area in the next few months would have on the consultation process; and
- in response to a question, it was confirmed that transport would be provided for children to attend a nearby school if their school was closed.

The Committee **AGREED** to proceed to statutory consultation on the basis of the Proposal Paper set out in Appendix A of the report.

The meeting concluded at 3.25 pm.

**The Highland Council
Pensions Committee and Pension Board**

Minutes of Meeting of the **Pensions Committee and Pension Board** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Thursday 22 February, 2024 at 10.30 am.

Present:

Pensions Committee

Mr C Balance (remote)
Mr R Gale
Ms L Kraft (remote)
Mr B Lobban
Mr D Louden
Mr T MacLennan
Mr P Oldham
Mrs M Paterson

Pension Board

Mr G MacKenzie, The Highland Council
Mr C Munro, The Highland Council
Mr N MacDonald, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar(remote)
Mr R Fea, representative for the other Employers (remote)
Ms E Johnston, GMB
Mr D MacDonald, Unison (substitute) (remote)

Non-Members also present:

Ms M Ross (remote)

Officials in attendance:

Mr B Porter, Head of Corporate Finance, Resources & Finance Service
Mr J Gibson, Joint Secretary (Trade Unions' Side)
Ms C Strachan, Principal Accountant, Resources & Finance
Ms D Sutherland, Strategic Lead (Corporate Audit & Performance).
Mrs L Dunn, Joint Democratic Services Manager, Performance & Governance Service
Mr A MacInnes, Senior Committee Officer, Performance & Governance Service

Also in attendance:

Mr M Oliphant, Audit Director, Audit Scotland
Mr C Gardner, Senior Audit Manager, Audit Scotland
Ms L McInroy, Hymans Robertson, Fund Actuary

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

Mr T MacLennan in the Chair

Business

**1. Apologies for Absence
Leisgeulan**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr J Bruce, Mrs T Robertson and Mr R Stewart of the Pensions Committee, and Mr D MacSween of the Pension Board.

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

There were no declarations of interest or transparency statements.

3. Service Plan 2024/25

Plana Seirbheis 2024/25

There was circulated Report No. PC/1/24 by the Head of Corporate Finance.

The Head of Corporate Finance provided a summary of the report in which he highlighted key points in relation to the staffing structure of the pensions team, challenges in meeting performance targets given the increasing workload of the team, system changes that were being developed at present, workplans for the team and the budget position.

In discussion, reference was made to the staffing structure approved last year by the Pensions Committee and it was advised that good progress was being made in filling posts in that structure, details of which were provided.

In relation to the categories of implications in the report, for consistency purposes 'Island' should be included in the Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural category as it appeared elsewhere in reports. Also, in relation to the category of risk, it was anticipated that this category should have included the risk in delivering the service plan, particularly the resources to deliver the plan and this should be reflected in future reports.

Further, it was highlighted that there were a number of missed targets in the work plan and this could be strengthened to include what was being delivered and a target date for completion. In terms of performance indicators, perhaps targets could have been amended to reflect a phased approach to meeting targets given the pensions team did not yet have a full complement of staff.

By way of information, the Committee was advised that the Pension Board at their meeting held earlier had agreed that the Chair of the Board be appointed on a two yearly basis, with the next appointment to be made in February 2026.

Having heard the Head of Corporate Finance give an undertaking to reflect on the comments made on the report, the Committee **approved**:-

- i. the Pension Fund Service Plan 2024/25;
- ii. the Pension Fund budget for 2024/25 (section 9);
- iii. budget to support the implementation of the Pensioners payroll as part of the Pensions Administration system integrated solution to improve efficiency and customer service (section 9);
- iv. budget to support data cleanse during 2024 in preparation for the implementation of Pensioners payroll system and the Pensions Dashboard (section 9); and
- v. work plans for the Pensions Board, Pensions Committee and Investment Sub-Committee.

4. Pension Fund Contributions and Administration Tabhartasan agus Rianachd Maoin Peinnsein

There was circulated Report No. PC/2/24 by the Head of Corporate Finance providing an update on matters relating to the administration of the Highland Council Pension Fund.

The Principal Accountant gave an introduction to the report. In particular, the cyber-attack on the IT systems of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar had no impact on the pension fund and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar continued to pay their employer

contributions to the fund.

Reference was made to IT costs and whether there were any proposals to bring IT services for the pension fund in-house. It was advised that there were no plans to do this given the pension benefit system was a specialist IT system. Further, the member self-service portal would initially be rolled out on a phased basis to active, deferred and then pensioner members of the pension scheme and timescales for this would be shared with Councillor D Louden.

The Committee **NOTED** the details of the report.

**5. Highland Council Pension Fund Internal Audit Annual Plan 2024/25
Plana Bliadhnail In-Sgrùdadh Maoin Peinnsein Chomhairle na Gàidhealtachd
2024/25**

There was circulated Report No. PC/3/24 by the Strategic Lead (Corporate Audit & Performance) which provided details of the audits contained in the 2024/25 internal audit plan.

The Committee **approved** the 2024/25 Audit Plan.

**6. External Annual Audit
Sgrùdadh Bliadhnail on Taobh A-muigh**

**6a. Audited Accounts 2022/23
Cunntasan Sgrùdaichte 2022/23**

The Audited Statement of Accounts (Report No. PC/4/24) for the financial year 2022/23 were circulated.

By way of context to all three agenda items in this section, it was late in the year for the audited accounts to be submitted to the Committee due to a combination of events. There were minor changes to the recommendations for all three agenda items, which were circulated, to reflect disclosure requirements arising from the actuarial valuation. A written briefing would be provided to Members following the conclusion of this work.

Audit Scotland in speaking to all three agenda items in this section, presented their audit opinions in their draft report and the report would be finalised once the accounts were certified. The engagement in the audit process with the finance team was recognised and lessons would be learned to ensure a more timely and efficient audit process next year. Overall, Audit Scotland was satisfied with the annual accounts and was issuing an unqualified audit opinion. An action plan had been submitted where improvements could be made.

The Committee:-

- i. **approved** the Audited Accounts for 2022/23 for signature, subject to the conclusion of final audit work regarding disclosure requirements arising from the actuarial valuation being considered by Members; and
- ii. **noted** that a written briefing would be provided to Members of the

Committee following the conclusion of that work, and provide a link to the revised Audited Accounts.

**6b Letter of Representation 2022/23
Litir Riochdachaidh 2022/23**

There was circulated Report No. PC/5/24 a copy of the annual audit letter of representation 2022/23.

The Committee **agreed** that the letter of representation be signed on behalf of the Highland Council, subject to conclusion of final audit work regarding disclosure requirements arising from the actuarial valuation being considered by Members.

**6c External Annual Audit Report to Members of the Pensions Committee and the Controller of Audit
Aithisg In-sgrùdaidh Bhliadhnail on Taobh A-muigh do Bhuill de Chomataidh nam Peinnsean agus Rianadair an Sgrùdaidh**

There was circulated Report No. PC/6/24 by the External Auditor, Audit Scotland.

In discussion, reference was made to the audit findings that attendance by Members at pensions training events should be improved and the accuracy of the finding was queried. An undertaking was given to look at the detail behind this audit finding further and any further information on this would be shared with Members. Improving the way attendance at training events was recorded would assist the accuracy of information on members attendance. The recent training event held in January had been very well attended by Members.

In terms of auditors being unable to obtain a year-end reconciliation for the pensions administration (Altair) and payroll systems which was signed and dated, it was advised there was a commitment from management to ensure there were signed and dated reconciliations at the year-end process.

The delays in providing information to the auditor on staff about to retire, which had delayed the audit process and the difficulties auditors had in their capacity to undertake audit work required to be addressed for future years.

The Committee **noted**:-

- i. the report, noting that the report is subject to the conclusion of final audit work regarding disclosure requirements arising from the Actuarial Valuation being considered by Members; and
- ii. that the audit finding at point 57 of the report in relation to Members attendance at scheduled training events, would be looked at and any further information on this would be shared with Members.

**7. Risk Management Update
Fios às Ùr mu Rianachd Chunnairt**

There was circulated Report No. PC/7/24 by the Head of Corporate Finance.

Following an introduction to the report by the Principal Accountant, it was queried if the risk relating to failure/loss of IT should be a risk rating of red rather than amber. It was advised that in relation to the recent cyber attack on IT systems on

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar IT systems, there had been an immediate response to this to prevent any risk. The RAG rating for this risk would be reviewed. Further, there was a strong link between this risk and the business continuity plan and perhaps this could be reflected in the narrative of this risk.

In relation to the climate change risk, it was queried how the RAG status would be reviewed going forward. It was advised that there were new regulatory disclosure requirements on pension funds in terms of their wider ethical, social, governance investment strategies that included matters such as climate change. Nationally there was a drive to focus more on how pension funds were disclosing their investment strategy around considerations such as climate.

In relation to the funding risk rating on the fund of green, given the effects of inflation and interest rates on the economy it was queried if this rating should be reviewed. It was advised that there were still economic challenges in terms of interest rates and inflation etc, and the actuarial valuation took a view of past events and potential future events affecting the pension fund. The fund was expected to be in a positive valuation position and this would be kept under regular review.

It was advised that a new risk appetite statement had been produced for the Council which would go to full Council on 14 March 2024 for approval. This process would also apply to pension fund investments.

The Committee **noted** the updated risk register extract and compliance with the Pension Fund Regulator requirements.

8. **Funding Strategy Statement and Actuarial Valuation** **Aithris Ro-innleachd Mhaoineachaidh**

There was circulated Report No. PC/8/24 by the Head of Corporate Finance. Ms Laura McInroy of Hymans Robertson, the Fund Actuary was in attendance.

The Head of Corporate Finance introduced the report which provided information on the 2023 actuarial valuation process and sought approval of the funding approach outlined in the funding strategy statement. The Fund Actuary provided commentary on the actuarial valuation of the pension fund to 31 March 2023, during which thanks were extended to the finance team for their assistance during the valuation process.

Members considered the report and recommendations during which it was highlighted the work undertaken by staff was recognised to get the fund to a position of 136% funded, which was allowing a reduced employer contribution rate. In terms of the reduced employer contribution rate being proposed and a concern that this did not lead to a deficit in the funding position in future years, it was advised that there was a need to set contribution rates that were appropriate for the long term. Given the very positive funding level of the fund a modest reduction in contribution rate was proposed.

The Committee:-

- i. **noted** the overall whole Fund valuation as at 31 March 2023 included in the Report on the Actuarial Valuation as at 31 March 2023 (Appendix 1); and
- ii. **agreed** the funding approach outlined in the Funding Strategy Statement including the assumptions used in the calculation of the Fund liabilities for

the triennial valuation as at 31 March 2023 (Appendix 2).

9. Investment Sub Committee: Minutes of Meeting
Fo-chomataidh Tasgaidh: Geàrr-chunntas na Coinneimh

The minutes of the meeting of the Investment Sub-Committee held on 24 November 2023 were circulated and **approved**.

The meeting ended at 12.05 pm.

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Nairnshire Committee** held remotely on 4 March 2024 at 10.30 am.

Present:

Mr L Fraser
Mr M Green
Ms B Jarvie
Mr P Oldham

In Attendance:

Mr L Hannah, Community Development Manager, Nairn and Badenoch and Strathspey
Ms L Harrison, Accountant
Mr A Garrow, NCGF Project Officer
Ms R Ross, Committee Officer, Performance and Governance

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

Mr M Green in the Chair

Business**1. Apologies for Absence
Leisgeulan**

There were no apologies for absence.

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

There were no declarations of interest.

**3. Nairn Common Good Fund – 2022/23 Audited Accounts, 2023/24 January Monitoring and General Update, Proposed Budget 2024/25
Maoin Math Coitcheann Inbhir Narann – Cunntasan Sgrùdaichte 2022/23, Sgrùdadh agus Cunntas Coitcheann an Fhaoilich 2023/24, Buidseat ga Mholadh 2024/25**

There had been circulated joint Report No NC/06/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place and the Head of Corporate Finance.

During discussion the following main points were raised:-

- information was sought and provided on the following issues; the rise in administrative charges and “other costs”; special grants; revaluation losses; the feasibility study on Community Food Growing at Sandown; the funding of the public conveniences on Harbour Street; the ongoing maintenance of the Splash Pad; and the vandalism of life belts;

- in response to a request for further information Ms L Harrison, Accountant undertook to provide Members with a full breakdown of the administrative charges and “other costs” from the 2022/2023 accounts;
- while it was welcomed that the Council was charging for officers’ time in relation to Common Good issues it was highlighted that questions from the community often take up officers’ time and, in turn, incur a cost for the Common Good Fund;
- in response to a question, it was confirmed that the money set aside in the budget for the Links Development Fund was a contingency fund to allow Members the flexibility to deal with issues as they arose, and this was welcomed;
- the invitation to pay scheme at the Splash Pad was welcomed but the CCTV in the area needed to be updated;
- the post of Common Good Officer was getting closer to becoming cost neutral;
- the availability of Common Good land for use and the charges for doing so needed to be more widely publicised; and
- clarification was sought and provided on several points including; what was classed as a “large” or “small” circus or fairground ride; who was considered a resident of Nairn for use of Common Good land including weddings; the charges for charity events; the rental and sale of equipment by wellbeing and fitness providers; and charges for musicians.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i. **AGREED** the Nairn Common Good Fund Statement of Accounts for 2022/23 at Appendix 1a and the final 22/23 Monitoring Statement at Appendix 1b to the report;
- ii. **NOTED** the position of the Nairn Common Good Fund and 2023/24 outturn as shown in January monitoring statement against budget presented at Appendices 2a and 2b to the report;
- iii. **AGREED** the Nairn Common Good Fund budget for 2024/25 detailed at Appendix 3 to the report; and
- iv. as part of that 2024/25 budget, **AGREED** the revised Nairn Common Good Fund Lets Charging Framework at Appendix 4 to the report for implementation from 1 April 2024 with minor updates for clarity as suggested by Members.

At this stage Members extended thanks to and commended the work of Community Development Manager, Mr Lewis Hannah who was moving to a new role as part of a team restructure.

The meeting concluded at 12.20pm.

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Communities and Place Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Wednesday 6 March 2024 at 10.30 am.

Present:

Mr A Baldrey (remote)	Mr R Gunn
Mr M Cameron (remote)	Mrs B Jarvie (remote)
Ms T Collier (remote)	Mr W MacKay (remote)
Mr L Fraser	Mr G MacKenzie (Chair)
Mr R Gale	Ms K MacLean (substitute)
Mr A Graham	Mr H Morrison (Vice Chair)
Mr M Green	Mrs M Reid (substitute)

Non-Members also present:

Mr M Baird (remote)	Mrs B McAllister (remote)
Mr J Grafton	Mr D Millar (remote)
Mr R MacKintosh	Mr P Oldham (remote)
Mr T MacLennan (remote)	Mr A Rhind
Mr D Macpherson (remote)	Ms M Ross

In attendance:

Mr A Gunn, Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place
 Ms C Campbell, Head of Community Operations and Logistics
 Ms A Clark, Head of Community Support, Contact and Engagement
 Mr A McKinnie, Strategic Lead, Waste Strategy and Operations
 Mr A Yates, Strategic Lead, Environmental Health and Bereavement Services
 Ms K Ellen, Community Food Growing Coordinator
 Mr J MacLean, Bereavement Services Project Manager
 Ms M Murray, Principal Committee Officer
 Ms R Ross, Committee Officer

Also in attendance:

Chief Superintendent R Shepherd, Police Scotland

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

Mr G MacKenzie in the Chair

Preliminaries

Prior to the commencement of formal business, the Chair offered his condolences to the friends and family of Julie Wileman, Community Support Officer, who had died suddenly in January. Julie had been hugely valued by her colleagues and by Members, had showed outstanding enthusiasm and commitment to her role and would be greatly missed.

Business

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

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr J Bruce, Mr J Finlayson, Mrs J Hendry, Ms L Niven, Ms M Nolan and Mr M Reiss.

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

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

Item 7 – Mr M Green

3. **Police Performance Report** **Aithisg Coileanaidh Poileis**

Under the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012, the Local Authority had responsibility for monitoring and scrutinising performance of Police Scotland against the Local Policing Plan for their area. Each Local Plan must be approved by the Local Authority and reviewed every three years. The current Local Plan had been approved by the Committee in May 2023.

There had been circulated Report No CP/01/24 by the Divisional Commander, Police Scotland.

In addition to the report, Chief Superintendent Shepherd provided updates on the following areas: the effects of the financial settlement from the Scottish Government on officer numbers; the increase in the overtime budget; body-worn video equipment; the Proportionate Response to Crime pilot; the Service Delivery Team pilot; the reduction in road deaths; the increase in driving offences due to higher detection rates; response times for 999 and 101 calls; series two of Highland Cops; and Police housing.

During discussion, the following main issues were raised:-

- the retention of the Operational Support Division in Highland and the rollout of body-worn video equipment were welcomed;
- information was sought, and provided, on the possible loss of experienced officers due to early retirement; assaults on officers; the Concern for Persons policy; drink driving detection rates; the increase in driving offences; how online crime was being addressed; the reasons for and effects of the new Service Delivery Team pilot; and Police involvement in the issue of wild fires;
- on the point being raised, it was clarified that there had been six times more drug driving offences than drink driving offences and that, in future reports, these figures would be recorded separately along with a breakdown of age demographics and, if possible, the types of drugs detected; and
- in response to a question, an assurance was provided that there were no plans to close any Police Stations in Highland other than the station in Muir of Ord which was no longer in use.

The Committee **NOTED** progress made against the objectives set within the Highland Local Policing Plan 2023-2026 Year 1, attached as Annex A to the report, for the period covering 1 April 2023 to 31 December 2023.

**4. Communities and Place – Revenue Budget Monitoring and Service Performance Reporting for Q3 1 October 2023 to 31 December 2023
Coimhearsnachdan agus Àite – Sgrùdadh Buidseat Teachd-a-steach agus Aithris Coileanaidh Seirbheis airson R3 1 Dàmhair 2023 gu 31 Dùbhlachd 2023**

There had been circulated Report No CP/02/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

During discussion, the following main issues were raised:-

- the high rates of complaints and Freedom of Information (FOI) requests resolved within the target time were commended; and
- information was sought, and provided, on how the increase in income from garden waste had been achieved; whether the increasing number and complexity of FOI requests was having an impact on officers' time; the level of sickness absence within the service and whether there was a correlation with vacancy management and increased workload; the forecasted underspend in the budgets for Ward Management, Community Support, Service Points and Registrars; the digital resubscription system for garden waste collections; and whether it was workable for the service to make greater use of existing employees and less use of contractors.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the Service's revenue monitoring position; and
- ii. scrutinised and **NOTED** the Service's performance and risk information.

**5. Capital Monitoring – Quarter 3 2023/24
Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Buidseit Calpa**

There had been circulated Report No CP/03/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

During discussion, the following main issues were raised:-

- the work done by Communities and Place staff together with community organisations to provide playparks was a good example of the Council and communities working together; and
- information was sought, and provided, on the funding of the waste shredders; the areas of slippage in Bereavement Services; the possibility of introducing hybrid fuel heavy vehicles; and when the equipment would be installed to enable the public conveniences in Thurso to be open full-time. In relation to the latter, the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place, undertook to provide a clearer date to Mr R Gunn following the meeting.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. the forecasted capital outturn for the Communities and Place Service for 23/24 as at Quarter 3; and
- ii. the current forecast for the major project for the Communities and Place Service for 23/24.

**6. Update on Recycling Improvement Fund (RIF) Project
Cunntas às Ùr mu Phròiseact Leasachaidh na Maoin Ath-chuairteachaidh**

There had been circulated Report No CP/04/24 dated by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

During discussion, the following main issues were raised:-

- thanks were expressed to officers for the work they had done on the RIF project;
- the importance of communication around the changes in waste collections was emphasised as many members of the public were still unclear about what was happening;
- more education about what happened to waste and the recycling process was needed to encourage greater public buy-in;
- the communications plan had been well thought out;
- Local Members would be able to provide feedback from the public and Community Councils;
- it was suggested that local radio stations could be used to publicise the upcoming changes in waste collections;
- on the point being raised, it was confirmed that Local Members would be kept up to date with the rollout of the new bins at Ward Business Meetings;
- information was sought, and provided, on glass recycling collections; whether communal bins could potentially be provided for flats; the possibility of households sharing bins; and the rollout of the new refuse collection arrangements to parts of Easter Ross. In relation to the latter, the Strategic Lead, Waste Strategy and Operations, undertook to provide further detail on the rollout to the Seaboard Villages to Mr A Rhind following the meeting;
- in response to a question, it was confirmed that the Fort William Waste Transfer Station was still scheduled to be completed by spring 2025; and
- the progress of the planning application for the new depot in Portree was welcomed.

The Committee **NOTED:-**

- i. the progress that had been made in advance of the phased introduction of Recycling Improvement Funded collection service changes;
- ii. the timeline for essential infrastructure projects that would support service change in Caithness, Skye and Lochaber; and
- iii. the detail of the comprehensive communications plan to support the service change.

**7. Growing Our Future: Allotments Policy and Rules and Regulations for Allotment Sites on Council Land
A' Fàs ar n-Àm ri Teachd: Poileasaidh agus Riaghailtean Lotaichean airson Làraich Lotaichean air Fearann na Comhairle**

Transparency Statement: Mr M Green declared a connection to this item as the Council's Solitary Bee Champion but, having applied the objective test, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No CP/05/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

During discussion, the following main issues were raised:-

- the policy was welcomed as many communities had been requesting allotments and wished to grow their own food;
- the effective engagement with the Nairn Allotment Society was commended;
- although the Nairn Allotment Society did not currently allow the keeping of bees, allotments would attract solitary bees to the area; and
- the policy promoted local food resilience projects and response to the climate change crisis.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** and adopted the revised Allotments Policy set out at Appendix 1 of the report; and
- ii. **AGREED**, in principle, the Rules and Regulations for allotments pending further public notice, as outlined at section 9.5 of the report.

8. Bereavement Services – Project Updates Seirbheisean Bàis – Cunntasan às Ùr mu Phròiseactan

There had been circulated Report No CP/06/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

During discussion, the following main issues were raised:-

- in relation to burial ground projects where land investigations were underway, information was sought, and provided, on the process if discussions with landowners broke down and whether Compulsory Purchase Orders would be utilised;
- the progress that had been made in terms of raising the profile of Bereavement Services, one of the most important and sensitive services the Council provided, was welcomed, and thanks were expressed to officers for bringing specific reports on the matter to the Committee;
- the progress in respect of the project to review the options for the replacement of the cremators at Inverness Crematorium was encouraging, and support was expressed for the gas-fired cremator option;
- Kilvean Cemetery probably had 15 to 20 years left in terms of capacity, and the long-term need for a new large cemetery to serve the city of Inverness was emphasised;
- it was requested that consideration be given to a long-term strategy for Bereavement Services, encompassing all the various aspects such as Inverness Crematorium, the need for a new cemetery in Inverness, how it was intended to deal with cemetery capacity issues in other towns and smaller settlements, and where the pressure points were;
- in relation to Lochaber, given the mountainous geography, the challenges associated with identifying land for burial grounds that would meet the SEPA guidelines were recognised. A new crematorium could help to relieve the pressure on burial grounds, and the engagement that had taken place with Local Members in that regard was appreciated and it was hoped would continue. The completion of the works at Beoraid Cemetery in Morar was welcomed but this only provided another five years of capacity;

- the importance of informing Local Members when it was intended to carry out major works in cemeteries was emphasised;
- information was sought, and provided, on when it was intended to open the new cemetery in Nairn, and the impact of Nairn amenities staff covering work in Inverness;
- the Council could be proud of Bereavement Services and the dedicated team that did their utmost for families in their time of need;
- thanks were expressed in respect of the recently extended St Duthus Cemetery in Tain and the works at Chapelhill Cemetery in Nigg. Only two burial grounds in the Tain and Easter Ross Ward gave cause for concern, namely, Logie Easter and Tarbat, and it was confirmed that information on capacity and plans for future extensions would be provided to Mr A Rhind;
- positive action was needed in respect of the mole problem at Chapelhill Cemetery and Kilmuir Easter Cemetery, and the Strategic Lead, Environmental Health and Bereavement Services, undertook to raise this with the local team to see whether anything further could be done;
- Inverness Crematorium was a great facility and effectively used. However, the benefit of some of the works that had been carried out, such as the walls that had been taken down and the new feature near the front door, was questioned. Concern was expressed regarding the issues with the solar panel on the roof and the associated works which had led to the large chapel being closed on Mondays and Tuesdays throughout March, and it was requested that consideration be given to reopening the small chapel which had been closed since the Covid pandemic;
- an update on progress was sought in respect of burial grounds on Skye, particularly the major extension at Portree Cemetery and the status of the Skeabost and Borge Cemetery, so Members could report back to the community. Information was also requested on which of the cemeteries that were closed would ever re-open if land could be acquired. The Strategic Lead, Environmental Health and Bereavement Services, confirmed that an update would be provided to Local Members;
- concern having been expressed regarding the difficulties that had been experienced in recruiting amenities staff on Skye and the severe pressure being placed on existing staff, the Strategic Lead, Environmental Health and Bereavement Services, undertook to liaise with the local amenities team in that regard; and
- the Strategic Lead, Environmental Health and Bereavement Services, confirmed that a member of his team would contact Ms T Collier to discuss her query regarding maintaining access to burial grounds.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. the progress of burial ground extensions in Highland;
- ii. proposals for cremator replacement at Inverness Crematorium;
- iii. the recent inspection undertaken by the Scottish Government at the Inverness Crematorium and the positive findings; and
- iv. the update on the feasibility of a crematorium in the Lochaber area.

9. Environmental Health Performance 2023/24 and Operational Plan 2024/25 Coileanadh Slàinte Àrainneachdail 2023/24 agus Plana Obrachaidh 2024/25

There had been circulated Report No CP/07/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

During discussion, information was sought, and provided, on the following points:-

- the reasons why only 44% of high-risk private water supplies had been inspected and sampled, and whether there was any cause for concern;
- the abandoned vehicle process, including the timescale from reporting to conclusion, which organisation received the fees, which seemed low for the amount of officer time involved, and whether the fees had increased since the previous year;
- whether the short-term lets licensing regime was self-funding; and
- the changes to the legislation covering animal boarding, including whether this would include catteries, whether there would be consultation with existing establishments and whether there would be fees coming to the Council.

Having welcomed the report, which showed how busy the Environmental Health team was, the Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the Environmental Health performance in 23/24 to date including delivering statutory duties to over 6000 properties on private water supplies, over 5000 food businesses, and responding to 13,000 annual service requests on a wide range of public health, nuisance, licensing, safety, dog control, animal health and incivility issues;
- ii. **APPROVED** the Environmental Health Operational Plan to 31 March 2025 as detailed in Appendix 1 of the report; and
- iii. **NOTED** that the team was preparing annual reports on local Environmental Health team performance for Area Committees in 2024.

10. Good News

Naidheachdan Matha

The Chair spoke to a number of items of good news, as follows:-

- congratulations were extended to Lesley Gray and the Registrar's team for the very successful Wedding Fair they had held at the Archive Centre in Inverness in February. Although the team had previously attended wedding fairs to promote the Highland Registration Service, this had been the first time they had organised and held a wedding fair. Feedback from stall holders and attendees had been extremely positive and it was intended that this would become an annual event and part of the Wedding Fair calendar;
- on Thursday 29 February staff in Customer Services and Registration had participated in National Registrars Recognition Day, hosted by the Association of Registrars of Scotland who had invited all 32 local authorities in Scotland. The event had been organised to mark a day of recognition for the valuable work Registrars undertook in communities every day in respect of recording Scotland's life events, registering births, still-births, deaths, marriages and civil partnerships. Service Points and Registration Offices across Highland had closed for the morning allowing staff to attend the online event between 10.00 am and 12 noon. The event had been an enormous success and staff had been very appreciative of being given the opportunity to attend and connect with colleagues across Scotland;
- Hamish Davidson, Acting Assistant Foreperson at Inverness Crematorium, had recently been awarded the Crematorium Technician qualification issued by the Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities. The award followed study,

practical training and examination on all operations at the crematorium and the related regulations and codes of practice. Congratulations were extended to Hamish on gaining this qualification;

- the recent annual Scottish Government inspection had concluded that the Inverness Crematorium continued to perform to a high standard and had a dedicated and professional team providing a first class service; and
- progress was being made with training for mechanics on electric vehicle maintenance. Three mechanics had passed Institute of the Motor Industry Level 3 electrical vehicle training and another 12 were due to complete by the end of the month. This supported mechanics to work safely on electric and hybrid vehicles whilst carrying out diagnostic testing and repairs.

The Committee **NOTED** the good news.

The meeting concluded at 1.10 pm.

The Highland Council

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

Present:

Mr M Baird	Mr D Louden
Mr R Bremner	Mr G MacKenzie
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair	Mr T MacLennan (substitute)
Mr R Gale	Mr D Millar (remote)
Mr J Grafton (substitute)	Mr C Munro
Mr R Gunn (substitute)	Mr P Oldham
Mr B Lobban (remote)	Ms M Reid (substitute)

Non-Members also present:

Mr K Gowans	Mr D Macpherson
Mr J MacGillivray	Ms M Ross
Mr R Mackintosh	

Officials in Attendance:

Mrs K Lackie, Interim Depute Chief Executive
 Mr P Nevin, Interim ECO Performance and Governance
 Ms E Barrie, Head of HR, Resources & Finance
 Mrs S McKandie, Head of Revenues and Customer Services, Resources & Finance
 Mr B Porter, Head of Corporate Finance, Resources & Finance
 Mr J Shepherd, Head of ICT and Digital Transformation, Depute Chief Executive Service
 Mrs L Dunn, Joint Democratic Services Manager, Performance & Governance
 Ms A MacRae, Senior Committee Officer, Performance & Governance

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

Mr D Louden in the Chair

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

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

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

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Good News Naidheachdan Matha

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

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

**4. Late Submission of Expenses Claims
A' Cur A-steach airson Cosgaisean Anmoch**

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

The Committee **APPROVED** the following claims:

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

**5. Appointments to Sub-Committees, Working Groups, etc
Cur an Dreuchd gu Fo-Chomataidhean, Buidhnean-obrach is eile**

The Committee **AGREED** the following appointments:

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

**6. Corporate Revenue and Capital Monitoring Report to 31 December 2023
Aithisg Teachd-a-steach Corporra agus Sgrùdadh Calpa gu 31 Dùbhlachd 2023**

**a. Corporate Revenue Monitoring to 31 December 2023
Sgrùdadh Teachd-a-steach Corporra gu 31 Dùbhlachd 2023**

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

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

- in response to concerns at the impact of the Corran Ferry on the budget, an assurance was provided that all potential investment opportunities to support the provision of new ferries and infrastructure were being considered and further announcements in this regard would be forthcoming in the coming weeks.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the:

- financial position of the General Fund and HRA revenue budgets as at 31 December 2023 and the estimated year end forecast; and
- status of budgeted savings in the year.

b. Corporate Capital Monitoring to 31 December 2023
Sgrùdadh Calpa Corporra gu 31 Dùbhlachd 2023

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

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

The Committee **NOTED** the:

- net spend to the end of Q3 2023/24, the forecast year end outturn and the funding profile; and
- updated position of approved major capital projects.

7. Revenue Budget Monitoring and Service Performance Reporting for Quarter 3: 1 October 2023 to 31 December 2023
Sgrùdadh Buidseat Teachd-a-steach agus Aithris Coileanadh Seirbheis airson Ràith 3: 1 Dàmhair 2023 gu 31 Dùbhlachd 2023

a. Depute Chief Executive's Service
Seirbheis an Iar-Àrd-Oifigeir

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

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

The Committee:

- NOTED** the Service's revenue monitoring position;
- NOTED** the Service's performance and risk information; and
- AGREED** the suggested changes to planned targets in paragraph 6.2 of the report.

b. Performance and Governance Service
Seirbheis a' Choileanaidh agus an Riaghlachais

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

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

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

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

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

- i. revenue monitoring position; and
- ii. performance and risk information.

c. Resources and Finance Service
Seirbheis nan Goireasan agus an Ionmhais

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

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

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

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

- i. revenue monitoring position; and
- ii. performance and risk information.

8. Treasury Management – Summary of Transactions Rianachd Ionmhais – Geàrr-chunntas Ghnothaichean

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

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

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

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

9. Resources and Finance Service Workforce Plan 2024-27 Plana Feachd-obrach Seirbheis nan Goireasan agus an Ionmhais

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

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

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

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

10. Staff Wellbeing Survey Suirbhidh Sunnd Luchd-obrach

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

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

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

Thereafter, the Committee:

- i. **NOTED** the survey results and the Executive Summary as contained in Appendix 1 attached to the report;
- ii. **AGREED** the next steps as outlined in Section 7 of the report.

11. Highland Council Adopting Ecosia Search Engine Comhairle na Gàidhealtachd a' Gabhail ri Einnsean-luirg Ecosia

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

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

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

The Committee:

- i. **NOTED** the report; and
- ii. **AGREED** not to adopt Ecosia as the Council's default search engine.

12. Minutes of Meetings Geàrr-chunntasan Choinneamhan

The following Minutes of Meetings had been circulated and:

- i. **APPROVED** - Central Safety Committee held on 1 December 2023;
- ii. **APPROVED** - Staff Partnership Forum held on 8 February 2024; and
- iii. **NOTED** – Appeals and Disputes Committee held on 14 February 2024.

13. Exclusion of Public Às-dùnadh a' Phobail

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

14. HRA Debts Recommended to be Written Off
Fiachan Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais gam Moladh airson Di-
sgriobhadh

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

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

The meeting was closed at 11.55am.