

The Highland Council
No. 2 2024/2025

Minutes of Meeting of the Highland Council held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Thursday, 14 March 2024 at 9.35am.

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

Meeting on Thursday 14 March 2024

Present:

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

Meeting on Friday, 15 March 2024

Present:

Ms S Atkin	Ms E Knox
Mr M Baird (Remote)	Ms L Kraft (Remote)
Mr A Baldrey (Remote)	Mr B Lobban

Mr C Ballance
Mr B Boyd
Mr R Bremner
Mr I Brown
Mr J Bruce (Remote)
Mr M Cameron (Remote)
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair (Remote)
Mr A Christie
Mrs M Cockburn
Ms T Collier (Remote)
Ms S Fanet
Mr J Finlayson (Remote)
Mr D Fraser
Mr L Fraser
Mr R Gale
Mr J Grafton
Mr A Graham
Mr M Green
Mr D Gregg (Remote)
Mr R Gunn
Mrs J Hendry
Ms M Hutchison
Mrs B Jarvie (Remote)
Ms L Johnston (Remote)
Mr R Jones
Mr S Kennedy

Mr P Logue
Mr D Louden
Ms M MacCallum
Mr A MacDonald
Mr G MacKenzie
Mrs I MacKenzie (Remote)
Mr S Mackie (Remote)
Mr A MacKintosh
Mr R MacKintosh
Mrs A MacLean
Ms K MacLean
Mr T MacLennan (Remote)
Mr D Macpherson
Mr D Millar (Remote)
Mr H Morrison
Mr C Munro
Mrs P Munro (Remote)
Ms L Niven
Mr P Oldham
Mrs M Paterson (Remote)
Mrs M Reid
Mrs T Robertson
Mr K Rosie (Remote)
Mrs M Ross
Mr R Stewart Remote)
Ms K Willis

In Attendance:

Chief Executive
Interim Deputy Chief Executive
Interim Executive Chief Officer, Performance and Governance
Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place
Executive Chief Officer, Health and Social Care
Executive Chief Officer, Infrastructure, Environment and Economy
Executive Chief Officer, Property and Housing

Mr B Lobban in the Chair

Apologies for absence, on 14 March 2024, were intimated on behalf of Mrs H Crawford, Ms J McEwan and Ms M Nolan and, on 15 March 2024, from Dr C Birt, Mrs I Campbell, Mrs H Crawford, Mr K Gowans, Mr A Jarvie, Mr W MacKay, Mrs B McAlister, Ms J McEwan, Mr J McGillivray, Ms N Nolan, Mr M Reiss, Mr A Rhind, Mrs L Saggars, Mr A Sinclair and Ms M Smith.

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

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

Item 3 – Mr R Bremner, Mr A Graham, Mr D Gregg, Mrs J Hendry, Mr A MacKintosh and Mrs M Reid

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

Item 3 – Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair
Item 4 – Mr A Christie and Mr D Gregg
Item 6.i – Mr A Christie
Item 7 – Mr A Christie
Item 11 – Mr A Christie and Mr D Gregg
Item 12 – Mr A Christie
Item 13 – Mr K Gowans and Mr H Morrison
Item 14 – Mr A Christie and Mr D Gregg
Item 15 – Mr A Christie
Item 16 – Mr A Christie, Mr K Gowans and Mr D Gregg
Item 23.ii - Mr M Cameron
Item 23.iv – Mrs MacLean and Mr P Oldham

**3. Notice of Amendment (Planning) – Planning Application (23/00497/FUL)
Brath Atharrachaidh (Dealbhadh) – Iarrta Dealbhaidh (23/00497/FUL)**

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:-

Mr R Bremner – as he had a long standing association with one of the principals of Inverness Caledonian Thistle Football Club.

Mr A Graham – due to his longstanding connections to Inverness Caledonian Thistle (season ticket holder, member of the supporters' club, member of the social club).

Mr D Gregg – as an Inverness Caledonian Thistle Football supporter.

Mrs J Hendry – as a family connection was on the Board of Inverness Caledonian Thistle Football Club and had enjoyed hospitality at the Club.

Mr A MacKintosh – as he was a close friend to members of the Inverness Caledonian Thistle Trust.

Mrs M Reid – as a member of the Inverness Caledonian Thistle Women's Football Academy Committee.

Transparency Statement: Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair made a Transparency Statement in this item as a close family member had, in the past, been a sponsor of Inverness Caledonian Thistle. However, having applied the objective test, she did not consider that she had an interest to declare.

Applicant: Intelligent Land Investments Group Plc (23/00497/FUL) (PLS/02/24)

Location: Land 75M SE Of Camas House, Fairways Business Park, Inverness (Ward 19).

Nature of Development: Battery energy storage facility comprising access track, compound of battery and electrical equipment, meter building, stores, fencing, security cameras, and associated landscaping.

Recommendation: Refuse

The South Planning Applications Committee (SPAC) had granted planning permission for the above application at its meeting on 7 February 2024. The following Notice of Amendment was then received on 12 February 2024:

“We the undersigned, being Elected Members of the Highland Council, hereby declare our wish that the decision of the South Planning Applications Committee at its meeting on 7 February 2024 on the above applications (Agenda Item 5.1) be reviewed at the next scheduled meeting of the full Council.

Signed: Mr T MacLennan, Mr P Oldham, Mr C Ballance, Mr M Cameron, Mr A Baldrey, Ms K Willis, Mr A Christie, Ms T Collier, Ms K MacLean, Mr R Gale, Mr A MacDonald, Mr A Millar, Mrs B Jarvie, Mrs T Robertson, Mr K Gowans, Mr I Brown, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Ms M Hutchison, Ms S Atkin, Mr A Jarvie, Dr C Birt, Mr M Reiss, Mr S Kennedy, Ms L Kraft, Ms S Fanet, Ms E Knox, Mr C Munro, Mr J Grafton, Mrs L Siggers and Mr A Sinclair.

In this context, there had been circulated separately in Booklet A the following:

- i. Report Nos PLS/02/24, by the Area Planning Manager – South; and
- ii. copy of the draft Minute from the meeting of the South Planning Applications Committee held on 7 February 2024.

It was clarified that Inverness Caledonian Thistle Football Club was the applicant, via Intelligent Land Investments Group Plc, and that the application had been deferred by the South Planning Applications Committee on 20 November 2023 for a site visit, which took place on 7 February 2024, after which the application was approved by the Committee, and then became the subject of a Notice of Amendment.

A presentation of the application was provided, including video footage of the site, and a summary was given of the recent additional representations received. Issues raised by the additional representations were included and addressed as part of the presentation, with several of them not being material planning considerations.

Members queried whether a site visit should be undertaken by the Council, and the Convener drew attention to the fly-by video footage of the site that had not previously been available to the Committee.

Questions

Members sought and received further information on the following issues:-

- no response had yet been received to the letter sent to the Scottish Government's Chief Planner seeking formal planning guidance on battery energy storage facilities and reference was made to the guidance that had been produced in England;
- the discrepancy in the information provided in the report on a similar battery storage facility was highlighted;
- information was sought, and provided, on the monitoring of noise, drainage, water courses and possible contamination, including into the River Ness, and whether these issues were material planning considerations and could be included in the conditions;
- compensation and mitigation for the possible loss of the green space;
- the nature of the paths across the green space, with one being formal, the others the result of footfall;
- confirmation that 2-3% of the green space would be required for the facility;
- the distance from the facility to the nearest house, which was 90m;
- the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's (SFRS) lack of response to the application and the need for an emergency response plan. It was queried whether the application should be deferred pending a response from the SFRS and whether fire safety issues were materially relevant to the application;
- the nature and uses of bunding and swales;
- whether there were other battery storage facilities in Highland;
- whether a building warrant and/or a license would be required for the facility;
- whether there was a hierarchy of planning policies, which there was not, with the most recently, in general, being given more weight in the event of a conflict;
- it was queried whether other sites had been considered;

- the functioning of the battery storage system was queried;
- the role and designations of the Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan were summarised;
- information was sought, but was not available, on the cooling load calculations for the proposed facility;
- clarity on Class 4 and Class 5 land uses were sought, and provided;
- it was confirmed the applicant had not sought formal pre-application advice; and
- it was queried, but not known, what percentage of the electricity that would be stored in the proposed facility would be from renewable sources.

Debate

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- the Notice of Amendment had been brought to the Council because, as a result of the application being deferred on 20 November 2023, then subject to a site visit on 7 February 2024, the number of Members of the South Planning Applications Committee eligible to participate in the final decision had been reduced to five, which was considered too few for a significant application, which had generated considerable public interest, including from four Community Councils;
- several of the original objections had been resolved or addressed;
- concern was expressed at the possibility of thermal overload at the facility, and the risk of fire. It was disappointing the Scottish Government had not yet produced formal planning guidance on battery energy storage facilities, as there was in England, and that, as a result, no response had been obtained from the SFRS in relation to the application;
- concern was expressed about various issues which were not in the report as they were not material planning considerations, such as the prevailing wind, given the proximity of the proposed facility to houses and businesses, and the need for two entrances, to provide an alternative in the event of a fire;
- the issues of water containment after a fire due to possible toxicity was of concern;
- Members had received considerable correspondence from both objectors and supporters of the proposed facility and while some Members reported having felt intimidated by the tone of some of the correspondence, others felt it had been acceptable and a welcome part of democracy;
- Members were urged to ensure the application was decided on the basis of Planning policy only;
- the loss of green space and loss of amenity for local residents was emphasised;
- with reference to Policy 11 of the National Planning Framework, attention was drawn to the importance of encouraging the efficient use of energy, which this facility would offer, and some Members felt the advantages of this outweighed the loss of green space;
- attention was drawn to the number of jobs that would be created at the proposed facility, although it was also pointed out that most of these would be during the construction phase only;
- objections had been received from four Community Councils, representing around 13,000 residents, and it was suggested that while the facility itself was beneficial and necessary, this was not the appropriate place to locate it. The green space allocated in the Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan should be respected;
- other Members pointed out that many of the objections raised by the Community Councils were not material planning considerations and that in view of the declared climate emergency, it was appropriate to lose a small percentage of green space for this facility;
- the need for supplementary planning guidance on this type of facility was urgently required; and

- in response to concerns about safety, Members pointed out that there was energy infrastructure of different types across the city, and that appropriate mitigation would be put in place to address safety risks. It was suggested that all areas should have a renewable energy project plan to assist with applications such as this.

Mr T MacLennan, seconded by Mr P Oldham, **MOVED** the recommendations as detailed in the report.

Ms M Smith, seconded by Mr K Rosie, moved as an **AMENDMENT** that, acknowledging that NPF4 Policy 11 Energy lent support for development proposals for all forms of renewable, low carbon, zero emissions technologies, including battery storage facilities, the proposal was approved because while it was acknowledged that the development would result in the loss of a small amount of open space, the development would encourage, promote, and facilitate renewable energy storage and so would comply with policy 11 of NPF4. It was considered that the benefits gained under policy 11 of NPF4 outweighed the loss of open space and therefore the application should be granted, with power delegated to officers to draft conditions in consultation with Local Members.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 30 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 23 vote, with 3 abstentions. The **MOTION** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:

For the Motion:

Ms S Atkin, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr I Brown, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mr A Christie, Mrs M Cockburn, Ms S Fanet, Mr L Fraser, Mr R Gale, Mr K Gowans, Mr M Green, Mr A Jarvie, Ms E Knox, Ms L Kraft, Mr D Louden, Ms M MacCallum, Mr A MacDonald, Mr R MacKintosh, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr C Munro, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mr M Reiss, Mr A Rhind, Mrs T Robertson, Mrs M Ross, Mr A Sinclair, Ms K Willis.

For the Amendment:

Mr M Baird, Mr A Baldrey, Mr J Bruce, Mr M Cameron, Mrs B Campbell, Mr D Fraser, Mr J Grafton, Mr R Gunn, Ms L Johnston, Mr R Jones, Mr S Kennedy, Mr P Logue, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mrs A MacLean, Ms K MacLean, Mr J McGillivray, Mr H Morrison, Ms P Munro, Ms L Niven, Mr K Rosie, Mrs L Saggars, Ms M Smith, Mr R Stewart.

Abstentions: Ms M Hutchison, Mr B Lobban, Mr D Macpherson.

Decision

The Council **REFUSED** planning application 23/00497/FUL subject to the conditions laid out in the report.

**4. Presentation – Director of Public Health – Annual Report
Taisbeanadh – Stiùiriche Slàinte Phoblaich – Aithisg Bhliadhnail**

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/02/24 by the NHS Highland Director of Public Health and Health Policy, accompanied by a presentation on the NHS Highland Director of Public Health Annual Report.

In the first part of the presentation the Director of Public Health highlighted several areas of health inequality within Highland including life expectancy, number of years spent in poor health, causes of ill health later in life, deaths from certain conditions and drug deaths. He then addressed the topic of medication covering the areas of environment, where the problem of pharmaceuticals in the water was highlighted; hepatitis C, where the good news of a new effective oral treatment was welcomed; social prescribing which could be used alongside, or as an alternative to, medication; and prescriptions for pain, where the involvement of prescription medications, including opiates, in drug deaths was highlighted.

The Council **NOTED** the 2023 Director of Public Health Annual Report.

5. 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 14 December 2023 (continued on 11 January 2024) and the Special Council held on 29 February 2024 as contained in the Volume which had been circulated separately – which were **APPROVED**.

6. 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 following Minutes of Meetings of Committees as contained in the Volume which had been circulated separately:-

	Date
Black Isle and Easter Ross Area Committee	22 January 2024
Nairnshire Committee	22 January 2024
Lochaber Area Committee	23 January 2024
Sutherland County Committee	23 January 2024
Audit Committee (Special Meeting)	24 January 2024
Caithness Committee	29 January 2024
Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Committee	29 January 2024
Housing and Property Committee	31 January 2024
City of Inverness and Area Committee	5 February 2024
Isle of Skye and Raasay Committee	12 February 2024
Badenoch and Strathspey Area Committee	12 February 2024
Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee	14 February 2024
Economy and Infrastructure Committee	15 February 2024
Dingwall and Seaforth Committee	19 February 2024
Education Committee	21 February 2024
Pensions Committee	22 February 2024
Nairnshire Committee (Special Meeting)	4 March 2024
Communities and Place Committee	6 March 2024
Corporate Resources Committee	7 March 2024

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

Sutherland County Committee, 23 January 2024

***Starred Item: Additional Urgent Item – Winter Maintenance**

The Sutherland County Committee had 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 had machinery capable of clearing snow from the roads that were 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.

However, it was pointed out that Workshops had been held on such arrangements and this was to be considered further at the Redesign Board.

Accordingly, the Council **AGREED** that this matter be referred to the Redesign Board.

Audit Committee (Special Meeting), 24 January 2024

***Starred Item: Item 5 – Risk Management**

The Council **AGREED** the updated Risk Management Strategy and new Risk Appetite Statement and that it be named the Corporate Risk Management Policy.

Education Committee, 21 February 2024

***Starred Item: Item 10 - Review of Statutory Consultation Exercise- Closure of Gergask Primary School**

The Council **AGREED** that education be discontinued 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.

Nairnshire Committee, 4 March 2024

The Council **AGREED** that the Minutes be amended to read as follows –

Item 3, Fifth bullet point - “the invitation to pay scheme for the NCGF Links amenity facilities was welcomed but the CCTV in the area needed to be updated”.

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

Transparency Statement: Mr A Christie made a Transparency Statement in respect of Item 6.i 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 17 November 2023 (approved by the Board on 9 February 2024) which were **NOTED**; and
- ii. Community Planning Board held on 5 December 2023 (approved by the Board on 1 March 2024) which were **NOTED**.

7. Question Time Am Ceiste

Transparency Statement: Mr A Christie made a Transparency Statement in 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.

The following Questions had been received by the Head of Corporate Governance:-

Public Question

(1) Mr D MacKenzie

To the Leader of the Council

Are the terms of reference for the Economic Impact Assessment on the Academy Street project intended to seek support for the council's proposals?

The response had been circulated.

Member Questions

(1) Mr A Christie

To the Leader of the Council

Please could the Leader detail the rationale or calculations that led to the Budget sums that were included in the papers that were presented to Council on 29th February in respect of Transient Visitor Levy £10m in 26/27, Strategic Operating Model Saving (CS:4)£1.67M across three years, Income from campervan and motorhome charging (CS:18) £1.5m across three years and the Earmarked Reserves of £20m for Adult Social Care -Redesign?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was asked that, in achieving the adult social care saving of £12.6million, whether an assurance could be given that no additional adult care packages would be cut?

In response, the Leader of the Council stated that there was no guarantee of the shape of any service and how these might look in the continued future.

(2) Mr A Christie

To the Leader of the Council

Please could the Leader explain on the following budget items presented to Council; Reconfiguring School Assets (CS:28) and Childrens Services - Family First Approach (CS:22) the schools likely to be mothballed or closed and any children's homes that potentially could be closed?

The response had been circulated.

There was no supplementary question.

(3) Mr M Baird

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

As a result of the recent snow falls and many of the roads in Sutherland being effected, is it not time to assist the normal council gritting staff to be joined by a voluntary workforce of Crofters/Farmers (those with JCB's and tractors with blades) to assist in lesser road clearances?

The response had been circulated.

There was no supplementary question.

(4) Mr J Grafton

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

Can the chair please clarify what percentage increase in the income generated from EV charging has been made by the council, since the increase in charges. As against the income prior to the increase?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was queried that, with regards to the net income and the negative figure, could it be clarified that this figure was caused by infrastructure costs?

In response, the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure explained that this information was not available at the time of asking but that this had been requested and would be circulated to all Members.

(5) Mr A Baldrey

To the Chair of Communities and Place

Under the Community Empowerment Act (Scotland) 2015 one of the duties placed on Local Authorities is the provision of land for allotments.

Notwithstanding the report to the recent C and P Committee which largely dealt with allotment policy and rules, please can you tell me what actions Highland Council is taking to actively increase the availability of allotment plots?

The response had been circulated.

There was no supplementary question.

(6) Mr C Ballance

To the Leader of the Council

In view of the recent press reports that there are 334 potential breaches of planning law currently under investigation in the Inverness area alone, including 50 in my ward of Aird and Loch Ness, how many planning enforcement officers are currently employed in the South Planning Area?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was asked that, given there were three planning Enforcement officers across the Council, whether there were enough Enforcement officers and if there were plans to increase the number of Enforcement officers?

In response, the Leader of the Council explained that if the Council could employ many more officers, they would. There needed to be a balance between affordability and availability and that this was constantly reviewed. The Leader did not advocate that planning conditions should be ignored.

(7) Mr R MacKintosh

To the Chair of Housing and Property

Since it is a requirement for all short-term premises to obtain a short-term licence, including those accommodations that are shared with residents, can the Highland Council give me the full break down of all short-term licences that have been applied in every local area, a breakdown of the number of applications received, the number processed and the number still outstanding by local ward area?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was queried how long it would take the Council to get through the backlog of short term lets applications?

In response, the Chair of Housing and Property did not have the requested information to hand but would contact Mr MacKintosh and circulate to other Members when possible.

(8) Mr D Macpherson

To the Leader of the Council

Could the Leader of the Council please detail how much money Highland Council received in European funding in each of the last 3 years of the European funding programmes, compared to how much this Council has been awarded from the replacement funding schemes from the UK Government of the Levelling Up Fund and the Shared Prosperity Fund, since their introduction?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was asked if the Leader of the Council would consider writing to the UK Government asking if they could give a more accurate comparison of the European money invested in the Highlands and what had been considered as its replacement funding stream for the area?

In response, the Leader of the Council thanked the Member for their initial question as it highlighted how it was very difficult to make comparisons. He would also like to see how the Council benefitted now it did not have these funds available. The Leader of the Council would be more than happy to work with Mr Macpherson to get a more accurate response.

(9) Mr A Graham

To the Leader of the Council

Charleston Academy: please provide details of the present situation with survey work being undertaken in connection with RAAC (Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete) including expected date of receipt of final report(s) and when they will be reported to Housing & Property Committee?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was queried that, given the continued use of Charleston School, despite ongoing survey work in connection with RAAC, what did the think Leader would give the pupils and parents hope of improvements in the school environment?

In response, the Leader of the Council confirmed that the challenges that teachers and pupils faced across the Highlands was wholeheartedly understood. It was clarified that plans for education would be discussed at Agenda item 13. The Leader was more than happy to work with Mr Graham to see what could be done to specifically help Charleston Academy alongside other Schools across the Highlands.

(10) Mr P Logue

To the Leader of the Council

Do you agree that there should be equity in educational provision across Scotland and, if so, is that being delivered by Highland Council?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was asked if a meeting time had been agreed with representatives of the Save Our Rural School's Campaign?

In response, the Leader of the Council confirmed that a meeting had not been agreed. The Leader was more than happy to follow up and take action regarding this question.

8. Membership of the Council Ballrachd na Comhairle

The Council **NOTED** that Mr Colin Aitken had tendered his resignation as a Member of the Council with effect from 12 February 2024. In this regard, a By-Election for Ward 19 (Inverness South) would be held on Thursday 11 April 2024.

9. Membership of Committees etc/Appointment of Chair of Climate Change Committee Ballrachd Chomataidhean msaa/Cur an Dreuchd Cathraiche Comataidh Atharrachadh na Gnàth-shìde

The Council **NOTED** that Mr P Logue had joined the Scottish Liberal Democrats and that Mr K Rosie had left the SNP and was now a member of the Alba Party. On that basis, the political make-up of the Council was as follows:-

SNP – 21 / Highland Independent – 18 / Scottish Liberal Democrats – 14 / Scottish Conservative and Unionist – 8 / Highland Alliance – 5 / Scottish Green Party – 4 / Labour – 2 / Alba Party – 1.

The formula in respect of the number of places on Strategic Committees was 5/5/4/2/2.

On that basis, the Council **AGREED** revised Committee memberships which were tabled at the meeting.

Nominations for appointments to South Planning Applications Committee in respect of Wards 19 and 21 were also tabled at the meeting.

The Council **AGREED** to appoint Mr D Macpherson and Ms S Fanet to the South Planning Applications Committee with Mr A Sinclair and Ms K Willis as substitutes respectively.

The Council also **AGREED** Ms S Fanet be appointed as Chair of the Climate Change Committee.

**10. 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 H Crawford, the Council were invited to appoint a Director for Highland Opportunity (Investments) Limited.

In this regard, nominations were received as follows:-

Mrs J Hendry
Mrs M Ross

On a vote being taken, Mrs J Hendry received 24 votes and Mrs M Ross received 38 votes, with 2 abstentions, the votes having been cast as follows:-

Votes for Mrs J Hendry:

Mr C Ballance, Dr C Birt, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Ms G Campbell-Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Ms T Collier, Ms S Fanet, Mr K Gowans, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Ms E Knox, Ms L Kraft, Mr D Louden, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr C Munro, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Ms K Willis.

Votes for Mrs M Ross:

Ms S Atkin, Mr M Baird, Mr B Boyd, Mr J Bruce, Ms B Campbell, Ms A Christie, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Mr R Gale, Mr A Graham, Mr J Grafton, Mr M Green, Mr D Gregg, Mr R Gunn, Mr A Jarvie, Mr R Jones, Mr S Kennedy, Mr P Logue, Ms M MacCallum, Mr A MacDonald, Mr J McGillivray, Mr W MacKay, Ms I MacKenzie, Mr A MacKintosh, Ms A MacLean, Mr D Macpherson, Mr H Morrison, Ms P Munro, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mr M Reiss, Mr A Rhind, Mrs T Robertson, Ms L Saggars, Mr A Sinclair, Ms M Smith, Mr R Stewart.

Abstentions

Mr A Baldrey, Mr B Lobban.

Decision

The Council **AGREED** Mrs M Ross be appointed as a Director for Highland Opportunity (Investments) Limited.

**11. Resetting the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan (HOIP)
Ag ath-shuidheachadh Plana Leasachaidh Buil 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 Report No. HC/03/24 by the Chief Executive.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- thanks were expressed for the report and the work that had gone into it;
- the strategic direction set out provided an excellent framework for partnership working in terms of supporting people, ensuring sustainability of communities and enabling a prosperous and thriving Highland;
- the original iteration of the HOIP had been agreed in 2017. The world was now a different place and it was necessary to respond to that;
- it was pleasing to see the opportunities for alignment with the Council's Delivery Plan;
- it was emphasised that the HOIP was a strategic plan and would be followed by the delivery plan, the development of which it was hoped all Members would get involved in;
- it was welcomed that the engagement events had resulted in tackling inequality remaining as part of the overarching ambition of the HOIP. However, it was difficult to hold back the tide of poverty, inequality and deprivation being imposed by central government. In addition, it was queried whether it might be necessary to define "inequality" as it was a broad term;
- in relation to the design principle "to be ambitious and bold in vision and action within the resources available", it was easy to be bold and ambitious in vision but in action it was more difficult when there were no spare resources available. Other Members suggested that "within the resources available" should be removed as this was limiting and it was necessary to investigate all possibilities;
- the Community Partnership that had been most successful had been resourced by a Development Trust with enough income from wind farms to provide significant staffing support. If the HOIP was to be effective all Community Partnerships had to be properly resourced. This had not been addressed in the review of the HOIP and it was questioned how the delivery plan was going to address it;
- it was necessary to start to address the depopulation crisis Highland was facing and it was queried whether it should somehow be woven into all the themes of the HOIP delivery plan;
- the Community Planning Partnership (CPP) Board purported to support the aspirations and ambitions of communities across Highland and concern was expressed that, having considered the Council's recommendation that it should meet in public in future, it had agreed to continue to meet in private. If there were agenda items that were of a private nature the Board could go into private session, and the decision was not acceptable;
- the report stated that the next step was to develop the delivery plan and that it, and the final HOIP, would be considered by the CPP Board in June. However, there was little hope of the delivery plan being delivered if the Council did not agree with it and it did not align with the Council Programme. It was therefore proposed, for good governance, that the delivery plan be an agenda item and discussed at the Council meeting on 27 June 2024, and this was accepted;

- the aspirations set out in the report were to be applauded. However, some of the statistics in the evidence summary at Appendix 2 to the report were cause for concern. Particular reference was made to the percentage of people in Highland who lived in remote and/or rural areas. Highland was, by nature, spread out and made up of small diverse communities, and it was necessary to focus on that going forward. Reference was also made to the reduction, in 22 years, in the number of 0-15 year olds in Highland, and the need to address depopulation was reiterated. In 2021, 43% of children had been identified as having Additional Support Needs yet the algorithm agreed by the Education Committee was geared towards reducing Pupil Support Assistant provision. Similarly, 75% of referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) were for young people between 12 and 17 years of age yet it was known from previous reports that referrals were taking up to a year to come to fruition. Finally, 24.5% of people of working age were neither employed nor seeking work, which was a distressing statistic, and it was necessary to understand why that was the case and put actions in place to try and resolve it;
- it was known that transport, childcare and housing provision were key factors in addressing depopulation, but it was questioned what was being done about them;
- the Community Partnership system worked very well. However, they did not have a budget to employ people and provide services so were dependent on the third sector and the input of councillors to drive things forward, and it was necessary to look at how they might evolve. Sutherland Community Partnership was looking at setting up a company that would work hand in hand with it to deliver services, and it was suggested that was the way forward;
- given the 70% increase, in 22 years, in people aged 75+, and the 9% reduction in the working age population, it was questioned what future-proofing was being done. If the plan was to provide care at home where possible, it would be necessary to depend more on Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other services to address some needs. Loneliness and isolation were badly affecting mental health, and technology was already providing some companionship, information and reassurance via Telecare and voice assistants such as Alexa. Third sector services such as Morning Call also helped. It was suggested that all new builds should have built in Wi-Fi and plug in points near beds and in kitchens so people with mobility issues and cognitive impairment could easily access help. It was necessary to encourage future community workers with shared skills, whether they looked after children, disabled people or older people. Care should be local and on a salary scale commensurate with training. Combined with intelligent digital care, it might be possible to address the increase in need;
- there was a landscape of many partnership plans across Highland and it was questioned how partners could address the challenges facing communities, avoiding duplication, and ensure that the ideas in the report were effectively implemented, particularly in light of the current economic pressures;
- in relation to participation requests, a plea was made that community experts be viewed as good partners, their local knowledge be respected and there be transparency in any dealings with them;
- there were many components of the HOIP which sat best with individual Strategic Committees such as the Education and Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committees;
- it was questioned whether reports such as this should have a rurality impact assessment;
- the importance of prevention, which was a key enabler in the HOIP, was emphasised;
- it was queried why the educational attainment outcomes were not more explicitly connected to Prosperity and People. They also fed into tackling inequality and mental health issues in young people, and the importance of not thinking in silos was emphasised;

- the increase in the number of infants with developmental concerns recorded at the 27-month Health Visitor check was alarming. Information having been sought on the timeframe and whether it was related to Covid, the Head of Community Support, Contact and Engagement undertook to liaise with colleagues and respond to Ms S Atkin outwith the meeting;
- delivering adult social care was going to become increasingly difficult if rural depopulation was not addressed, and the ideas in the report were very much needed;
- in relation to CAMHS referrals for young people between 12 and 17 years of age, it was queried whether these needs emerged at these ages and were there opportunities to intervene earlier. The Head of Community Support, Contact and Engagement undertook to respond to Mr D Gregg outwith the meeting;
- in relation to CAMHS referrals, it was also necessary to support the parents but Adult Services were already under-resourced so it was questioned how that could be done;
- the report highlighted that a 10-30% higher income was needed to achieve a living wage in a rural area, and it was queried whether the Council and other public sector organisations factored that in when setting wages for rural employees;
- in relation to the vision set out in the HOIP, it would be helpful to include measurable objectives rather than broad aims, and information was sought, and provided, as to how it was intended to measure success or otherwise and how this would be presented;
- the statistics in the report were an unfavourable assessment of the current position but they provided an opportunity to improve, and the success of the HOIP would be measured in terms of seeing the benefits being delivered on the ground in communities;
- concern was expressed regarding the response to a letter to the First Minister asking for a review of the Care Home Contract. There was a lack of understanding from both the UK and Scottish Governments about the unique challenges Highland faced in terms of its large landmass and low population density, and how a “one size fits all” model did not work in Highland, and it was necessary to be aware of that when looking at how it was intended to deliver on the HOIP;
- it was necessary to target resources at biggest opportunity and the biggest threat, and the biggest opportunity in Highland was renewable energy. The Secretary of State for Scotland and the UK Government Minister for Energy were key to the prosperity of Highland and, reference having been made to a previous Motion to Full Council, a call was made for the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive to secure an appointment with them and ensure the Council had a seat at the top table. The biggest threat was the shortage of care home beds, which was an impending crisis;
- it was necessary to teach the subjects employers wanted, and the need for more STEM subjects in schools was emphasised. STEM jobs paid £10k a year more than jobs in humanities, and more young people studying STEM subjects would enable them to stay, live and work in Highland;
- the importance of communicating what was taking place at the Community Planning Partnership Board was emphasised;
- it was important to engage with older people and encourage them early in life to take steps to live well for longer. There were an amazing number of community groups in rural areas, and it was queried how they would get involved in providing feedback. Inverness, although very large, was cut off in some ways, and many older people were not digitally able;
- it was necessary to think about age-friendly communities at an early stage in the housing development process, and consider aspects such as outdoor space, transport, social participation, community support and health services etc;
- tackling depopulation and many aspects of the HOIP required numerous organisations to work together, but it was right for the Council to reflect on the part it played;

- it was questioned whether some of the language used in the HOIP would be understandable to communities, and it was suggested that the use of Plain English would help;
- with particular reference to Caithness and the significant reduction in the number of young people over the past 22 years, it was suggested the “Prosperity” theme should be more practically focussed – for example, speed up the rollout of superfast broadband; small improvements to the A9, which could be done by Transport Scotland without any other agency being involved; reinstate consultant-led maternity services at Caithness General; improvements to mental health services, particularly for young people; and apprenticeship provision;
- rural communities would no longer be designated as “remote” in the Scottish Government’s Depopulation Plan, and the terms “Inner Highland”, where the population was growing quite quickly, and “Outer Highland” where the population was rapidly dropping, were suggested. Other Members added that the use of the word “remote” was a sign of a centralised culture, and that no community was remote depending where you started from;
- further to earlier comments regarding renewable energy, Drew Hendry MP had managed to arrange a meeting with the Energy Minister specifically to discuss the issue of energy prices in the Highlands, and this was welcomed;
- the intention to tackle the root cause, rather than the symptoms, of inequalities and depopulation was welcomed;
- in relation to school closures, keeping a school open was not enough to sustain a rural community, and it was necessary to look at the reasons why rural school rolls had declined and address aforementioned issues such as housing, transport and childcare;
- it had been said there was no demand for housing in some parts of Highland, but not all families who wanted to move to the area were on the Housing Register;
- it was welcomed that consideration was being given to how to attract investment into communities;
- it was queried what was being done about the 8% of school leavers not mentioned in the chart on page 35 of the papers;
- on the point being raised, an assurance was provided that third sector partners would be a key part of the Partnership Development Day referred to in the report;
- the need to work closely with the third sector and communities had been highlighted and, on the point being raised, an assurance was provided that third sector partners would be a key part of the Partnership Development Day referred to in the report;
- when Community Partnerships had been established, it had been understood they were going to be combined with Area Committees. If consideration was being given to reducing duplication and sharing resources, it was suggested this should be looked at again as it was often the same people that attended both meetings; and
- there were organisations that were lifting communities out of poverty, and it was necessary to work with them given many Highland residents were in poverty, and in-work poverty was on the increase.

The Council:-

- NOTED** the engagement work that had been undertaken to date and the feedback received to reset the HOIP;
- AGREED** the revised draft HOIP;
- NOTED** the next steps for developing a delivery plan which would set out the actions for delivering the revised HOIP; and
- AGREED** that the delivery plan referred to at section 7.2 of the report be an agenda item and discussed at the Council meeting on 27 June 2024.

12. Highland Council Delivery Plan 2024-2027 Plana Lìbhrigidh Chomhairle na Gàidhealtachd 2024 – 2027

Transparency Statement: Mr A Christie made a Transparency Statement in respect of Item 6i 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/04/24 by the Chief Executive.

During discussion the following main points were raised:-

- the Council Leader explained that the delivery plan took forward the budget that had been approved in February 2024, and addressed some of the region's biggest issues, including growing the economy, developing the workforce, promoting net zero and energy security, and looking after the vulnerable. The plan demonstrated how the Council could make best use of its resources for a successful and sustainable future for Highland communities. The plan represented a unique joined-up, strategic approach, linking the Council's programme, the Highland Outcome and Investment Partnership budget, and the performance plan to provide a framework for governance and delivery. Extensive engagement and partnership working across all areas was expected;
- turning to the mentoring programme, the Leader provided assurance that, despite media reports to the contrary, the programme for young people would continue to deliver its valuable work, but was transitioning from a Glasgow-based to a Highland-based third sector organisation. It was hoped the mentors would be retained;
- the Leader of the Opposition highlighted the number of strategic, delivery and service plans that had been developed, and suggested it was important to ensure action and delivery. He welcomed the high-level service delivery plan but considered that it lacked detail on how the desired outcomes would be achieved. The issue of depopulation was not adequately addressed in the plan and, as an example, he highlighted the effect on remote and rural communities of the loss of a school, and the positive impact of creating community hubs. A quarterly rather than an annual review was requested;
- the reference in the plan to protecting families and ensuring opportunities for all school leavers was welcomed;
- plans for income generation, including augmented visitor experiences, were welcomed;
- the plan had been delivered late to Members. It lacked detail, with particular reference to workforce outsourcing and redeployment; reductions to childcare and carers, which should be discussed with trade unions; the future plans for the High Life Highland Ranger Service; lack of information in relation to the assessment of the school estate, noting this could cause worry to parents; insufficient information on solar PV panels and whether the milestones would be achieved within a two year period;
- important issues included the use of plain English, the provision of suitable homes, especially for the elderly, and continued engagement with the third sector;
- it was important to follow up on ensuring energy investment and innovation in the Highlands brought financial benefit to the Highlands;
- transformative change was key to future success and should be embedded across all services. The net zero portfolio was welcomed and the action plan should be considered by the Climate Change Committee on a regular basis;
- it was acknowledged that a more detailed plan would be presented in May 2024 and, in the meantime, the commitment to align with partners for a progressive and ambitious future was welcomed;
- capacity building for early learning and childcare was important to support communities and ensure sustainability. Pathways to positive destinations for the senior phase of education were also vital;

- education was not only about preparing young people for the work force, and the value of primary skills was highlighted. The academy model was summarised;
- in relation to plans for a single property service, it was important to support local contractors;
- the format of the report was welcomed;
- it was hoped there would be no cuts made to the MCR Pathways programme;
- effective communication with third sector partners was vital;
- more milestones were required for some initiatives, with specific reference to the motorhome scheme;
- Members were reminded that the detail of the plan would be presented to the relevant Strategic Committees, with points of clarification to the Full Council in May 2024;
- work with NHS Highland on Adult Social Care was referenced, and it was explained that this was reported regularly to the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee. The importance of shifting the balance of care to the community was emphasised and, in relation to this, carer burn-out should be addressed. Inappropriate reduction in care packages should be avoided. More should be done to entice young people into careers in the care sector, noting that the provision of care at home packages were less costly than care home places;
- further detail on roads investment was sought; and
- the Leader reiterated the draft nature of the plan and that all Members would be involved at strategic committee level.

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** to delete the word “annual” and” insert the word “quarterly.”

On a vote being taken , the **MOTION** received 40 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 24 votes, with no abstentions, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion

Ms S Atkin, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr J Bruce, Ms G Campbell-Sinclair, Mr M Cameron, Ms B Campbell, Mrs M Cockburn, Ms T Collier, Ms S Fanet, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Mr K Gowans, Mr M Green, 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 G MacKenzie, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr C Munro, Ms P Munro, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mr A Rhind, Mr K Rosie, Mrs M Ross, Ms K Willis.

For the Amendment

Mr M Baird, Mr A Baldrey, Mr C Ballance, Mr J Bruce, Mr A Christie, 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, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms A MacLean, Mr D Macpherson, Mr J MacGillivray, Mr M Reiss, Mrs T Robertson, Ms M Smith, Mr R Stewart.

Decision

The Council **NOTED**:-

- i. the Draft Council Delivery Plan for 2024-2027 as presented;

and **AGREED**:-

- ii. that following engagement with partners, the Final Delivery Plan come forward for Member approval at Council on 9 May 2024.

The Council also **NOTED**:-

- i. the Council Delivery Plan 2024-2027 would underpin the implementation of Council Programme 2022-2027, the Performance Plan 2022-2027 and the Budget Strategy for 2024-2027 and support the delivery of the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan;
- ii. Delivery Plan progress would be reported on an annual basis to Council, with workstreams reported to the appropriate Strategic Committees and Boards; and
- iii. resources for the delivery of the workstreams were provided in part from core Service budgets, including the Strategic Improvement Team, augmented by earmarked reserves, as agreed at Council on 29 February 2024.

13. Place Based Approaches to Strategic Capital and Asset Management Dòighean-obrach Stèidhichte air Àite a thaobh Stiùireadh Ro-innleachdail Calpa agus So-mhaoin

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 K Gowans - as a close family member was an employee of HLH
Mr H Morrison - as a close family member was employed with the Council's local Road section**

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

During discussion the following main points were raised:-

- the challenges with the current Capital Programme and those faced annually by successive Council Administrations in relation to capital funding were recognised. Innovative ways of realising funding had to be considered to provide for a long term investment plan to remedy roads infrastructure, school estate, Council depots and other infrastructure across the Council's asset base. This included creating sustainable income streams;
- a proposal was suggested that, no earlier than the Council meeting on 9 May 2024, a report be brought forward for Member consideration on a Highland Investment Plan, including a strong focus on the school estate;
- concern was expressed that Members needed to receive the above report in advance of the Council meeting on 9 May 2024 for their consideration;
- concern at the equity of educational provision for the vulnerable children attending St Clement's School, Dingwall was highlighted due to the poor condition of the estate and lack of facilities for pupils and staff;
- there was an opportunity to take immediate action on St Clement's School by supporting an amendment that outlined how a new school could be built with no impact on the Council's budget and to use the same funding source to agree, at the next Council meeting, on the next school to be constructed from the LEIP 3 list, namely Beauly Primary, Dunvegan Primary and Park Primary Schools;
- the Council had to take ownership of, and deliver, a plan to provide solutions for St Clement's School and other schools in priority need in Highland and there was a need to move forward in a considered manner;

- the proposals in relation to Corran Ferry infrastructure and approach to funding a replacement vessel was excellent news in the current economic and budgetary climate. Council Members and officers, UK and Scottish Governments and partner agencies were commended on the concerted work undertaken on this issue;
- the Corran Ferry proposals were a step closer to a sustainable solution which had to be achieved through a creative approach and working together with the UK and Scottish Governments and local communities;
- the above did not negate the need for a short term solution for a new vessel for the Corran Ferry rather than relying on ageing or chartered vessels;
- the proposed Corporate Asset Management strategy together with service specific strategies would achieve a more strategic, structured and efficient approach;
- the proposed approach to area mapping and consultation, and the development of a network of community hubs to support future service delivery, was highlighted;
- in progressing the approach to developing a community hub network for Highland, concern around the use of SIMD was recognised as a flawed concept regarding where need really might be in communities;
- there was concern the East Link proposal was a backward step in terms of climate change and rural depopulation. Building more roads encouraged car use and there was a need for additional investment in public transport and the potential to request the repurposing of this element of the City Region Deal;
- the East Link would improve connectivity, open up the area for development and provide much needed housing in Highland, including the demand associated with the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport which would help tackle depopulation;
- the more prosperous an area was the more likely it would benefit from good biodiversity schemes;
- there was a query on the prioritisation matrix set out in the report and the weighting applied to improving sustainability and carbon impact compared to improving infrastructure;
- investment priorities should be based on improving the condition of the Council's school estate ahead of roads infrastructure, reference being made to the above mentioned schools and Charleston Academy;
- the significant additional investment in roads was essential in many areas and would improve connectivity for people in the Highlands and tourists visiting the area;
- it was queried how and where road infrastructure works would be progressed given capacity issues with current staffing levels;
- further information was required on the benefits of the Single Property Service given that the same staff and budgets under current arrangements would move into the new model;
- the increase in letting fees for school premises needed to be reviewed given the impact on the ability of voluntary organisations and charities to continue to use these community facilities;
- the Drumbuie Council Office was important for jobs and the Sutherland economy and should be retained and potentially considered for further investment;
- there was support for the repair and rationalisation of the Council's depots. This had been a concern for a number of years;
- there was a need to facilitate conversations on improving the Thurso school estate, on the basis the Council owned it, and for communities to explore the opportunities;
- it was queried how funding for maintenance programmes for Thurso High School and others with structural issues was decided if there was no timescale for their replacement;
- more detail needed to be provided to Members on how additional capital spending was affordable for the Council given its current budgetary challenges;

- the backlog that existed in terms of the maintenance of buildings and schools was highlighted and concern voiced that the challenges were not addressed by the strategy; and
- a capital investment plan was required that would deliver all needs over a period of time and not some projects in the short term.

Thereafter, Mr R Bremner, seconded by Mr B Lobban, **MOVED** to agree the recommendations as set out in the report along with the following additional recommendation:-

- ix. that no earlier than the Council meeting on 9 May, a report be brought forward for Member consideration on a Highland Investment Plan; to provide a strategic approach to delivering major capital investment in Council assets across the Highlands, including a strong focus on the school estate.

Mr A Christie seconded by Mrs A MacLean moved as an **AMENDMENT** to insert a new recommendation iv. as shown below and re-number the other recommendations set out in the report accordingly:-

- iv. the Council note that Scottish Government have confirmed an additional baselined 24/25 revenue funding of £62.7m Scotland wide as a consequence of the UK Spring Budget. Whilst the Council was awaiting clarification of our share of the funding it was expected to be in the order of £2.8m per annum on a recurring basis.

In view of the new revenue stream available the Council agree to approve the sum of £20m to build a new St Clement's School and include a fully funded scheme in the Capital Programme. The loan charges for St Clement's at the peak were in the order of £1.18m well within the anticipated funds mentioned above.

The phasing of the build and loan charges to be presented to the relevant Committees at an early meeting in the future together with a target completion date. The Council further agree to receiving a report at the next Council Meeting on utilising the balance £1.62m (£2.8m less £1.18m) to decide on the next school to be constructed from the LEIP 3 list namely Beaully Primary, Dunvegan Primary and Park Primary Schools.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 39 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 24 votes, with 1 abstention. The **MOTION** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion:

Ms S Atkin, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Ms B Campbell, Ms G Campbell–Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Ms T Collier, Ms S Fanet, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Mr K Gowans, Mr M Green, 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, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Mr C Munro, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Ms M Reid, Mr A Rhind, Mr K Rosie, Mrs M Ross, Ms K Willis.

For the Amendment:

Mr M Baird, Mr A Baldrey, Mr J Bruce, Mr A Christie, Mr R Gale, Mr A Graham, Mr J Grafton, Mr D Gregg, Mr R Gunn, Ms B Jarvie, Mr P Logue, Ms M MacCallum, Mr A MacDonald, Ms I MacKenzie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mrs A MacLean, Mr D Macpherson, Mr J McGillivray, Ms P Munro, Mrs M Paterson, Mr M Reiss, Mrs T Robertson, Ms M Smith, Mr R Stewart.

Abstention:
Mr C Ballance

Decision

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the updates and next steps for rationalisation and/or cost reduction approaches across the Council's property and non-property assets, in line with the budget agreed at Council on 29 February 2024;
- ii. **APPROVED** the proposed investment in Corran Ferry Infrastructure, Roads and other Non-Building Capital Projects as set out in Section 6 of the report;
- iii. **AGREED** the approach to funding a replacement Corran Ferry vessel based on the option set out in Section 6 of the report;
- iv. **APPROVED** the development of a Corporate Asset Management strategy covering all Council assets, and the development of Service-specific Asset Management strategies as might be appropriate;
- v. **APPROVED** the proposals in respect of a strategic capital planning approach across all Council assets;
- vi. **APPROVED** the proposed approach to area mapping and consultation, and the development of a network of community hubs to support future service delivery;
- vii. **NOTED** the draft Strategic Capital Bid Application Process and Prioritisation Matrix attached as Appendix 1 to the report;
- viii. **NOTED** the updated position with regards to the creation of and implementation of a Single Property Service (SPS) and that the final detail on the shape of the SPS required to be linked to the restructuring of the Council's senior management team; and
- ix. **AGREED** that no earlier than the Council meeting on 9 May, a report be brought forward for Member consideration on a Highland Investment Plan; to provide a strategic approach to delivering major capital investment in Council assets across the Highlands, including a strong focus on the school estate.

14. Developing a Community Wealth Building Strategy A' Leasachadh Ro-innleachd airson Saidhbhreas Coimhearsnachd a Thogail

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/06/24 by the Chief Executive.

During discussion the following main points were raised:-

- this strategy was about keeping the Highland pound in Highland, using local resources, building resilience within communities, supporting local enterprise and addressing the issue of depopulation by enabling people to thrive in Highland;
- there had already been conversations with partners, third sector organisations and local businesses and there would be a Member workshop, which all Members were encouraged to attend, to help develop the strategy;
- it was hoped that the organisations contacted would look at this meaningfully;
- community wealth building provided a people-centred approach to economic development;

- the importance of fair employment by recruiting from priority groups, paying the living wage and building progression routes for workers was emphasised;
- it was hoped that the Highland Employability Partnership, My Future My Success and the Council's apprenticeship and graduate programmes would see further support from this strategy; and
- although the Council would no longer be using the external agency MCR Pathways, a more bespoke programme to improve transition planning between schools, partners and adult employability services would now be created.

The Council **AGREED** the draft Community Wealth Building Strategy found at Appendix 1 to the report and **NOTED** that a period of public engagement on the draft would now commence, with a final strategy coming back for consideration in September 2024.

15. Highland Council Digital Strategy and Ambition Ro-innleachd agus Àrd-amas Didseatach Chomhairle na Gàidhealtachd

Transparency Statement: Mr A Christie made a Transparency Statement in 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/07/24 by the Interim Depute Chief Executive.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- thanks were expressed to the Head of ICT and Digital Transformation for the report, and for addressing Members' concerns about some of the technical risks in advance of the meeting;
- the Digital Strategy stated an aspiration to reach level 5 of the Gartner Digital Maturity model by 2027, which meant that the Council would get to a point in 2027 where accurate real-time data, which was needed to make good decisions, was available, and there was a focus on the end user, the customer. Attention was drawn to other methodologies in the report including The Open Group Architecture Framework (TOGAF), Lean 6 Sigma and the Define/Measure/Analyse/Improve/Control method;
- three words that were key to the report were strategy, ambition and benefit;
- to achieve streamlined processes, gain maximum benefit from income generation and give the people of Highland an accessible, straightforward user experience, it was essential to keep the Digital Strategy on the agenda;
- people were at the heart of what the Council did, and Members wanted to be at the stage where automated processes, which benefited both customers and the Council, were commonplace. Giving customers the option of being able to opt out or continue with their renewal using automated direct debit or card payment would give the customer the freedom of not having to reapply each year, and the Council would not have the additional administrative tasks of sending reminders and chasing for payments. Natural drop offs would be reduced and resource time would be better spent. Streamlining processes took time, resource and needed to be future-proofed, but it was necessary to proceed steadily and carefully. The data foundations were essential and would take time and specialist input to work effectively and be secure for customers and the Council. It was necessary to have a greater understanding of AI and be in control of it. The "My Council" programme was progressing on target with strategic steps to fulfil an advanced end-to-end customer journey, not just digitally but by other channels, to ensure accessibility for all. The programme would work because the My Council Board were putting the citizen at the centre of customer engagement. There was a lot of work being undertaken to progress with the Council's digital ambition, which would be monitored regularly at the Redesign Board. Confidence was

expressed that the Digital Strategy was realistic and achievable within the next couple of years, and support was expressed for the recommendations;

- if the Strategy was successful, Members would be able to monitor performance indicators in real time and address issues as soon as they started to arise, which would help the Council to improve performance;
- services such as NDAS (Neuro Developmental Assessment Service) and CAMHS were done in partnership yet the Council and NHS Highland were using different IT systems, and it was questioned where the digital ambition was in terms of them using the same system so notes could be shared and services for children with severe challenges and needs could be improved;
- it was important to remember that many people, such as those who were living in poverty or homeless, did not have tablets or smartphones and visited agencies such as the Citizens Advice Bureau to use the telephone. It was questioned what was being done to ensure that disadvantaged people were not further excluded from society and suggested that there should be a major strand in the Strategy in that regard. As an example, it was suggested that terminals could be provided in Council buildings that people could come in and use, perhaps with some mentoring or support;
- TOGAF was comprised of a number of pillars, one of which was data, and it was essential for the Council to get better at using and sharing data to support the outcomes it wanted to achieve;
- one of the biggest ways digital technology impacted service delivery was the Council's website and, it having been queried whether there were any plans to make it easier to navigate, it was confirmed that the redesign of the website was within the scope of the "My Council" programme;
- information was sought, and provided, as to whether consideration had been given to the provision of case management software for Elected Members, which would help in gathering information when subject access requests were received;
- it was hoped that the "My Council" programme would make it easier for the public and groups such as Community Councils and Parent Councils to contact the right person;
- reference was made to intergenerational work that had taken place elsewhere whereby young people had attended lunch clubs, for example, and shown older people how to use laptops, tablets etc;
- with reference to the earlier item on community wealth building, it was queried how, through the Digital Strategy process, the Council could help communities and whether there was a way of increasing digital connectivity by supporting community groups that could not afford to purchase the digital equipment they needed;
- it was queried how many citizens had been involved in health-checking the Strategy;
- 14% of households in Highland still could not access superfast broadband and many did not have a good mobile phone signal;
- the more things were digitised the greater the legal risk and the risk of cyber attack, and information was sought, and provided, as to what assessments had been made in that regard;
- the Council should be capturing information once and using it for greater efficiency, and examples were provided in that regard;
- it was important to be aware that digital carbon was a real cost in the current climate emergency, and statistics were cited on the carbon cost of working from home using digital technology and of mobile phones versus landline phones;
- information was sought in relation to recruitment and whether there was a robust process in place to ensure that the Council did not lose IT staff to other public sector agencies after investing in their training;
- a plea was made that the Council adhered to the first line in the proposed Digital Ambition, namely, to design Council services with customers at the centre, supporting the customer journey through to its outcome. It was added that this should not just be

digital customers, and the importance of answering phone calls and letters and keeping Service Points available was emphasised;

- it was suggested that lessons could be learned from NHS Highland and the integration of GP and hospital IT systems;
- it was queried whether the Council was looking at what other local authorities were doing in terms of digital efficiency as there might be an existing blueprint that could be adapted;
- reference was made to the pop-up chat window that appeared on some websites, and it was queried whether there was scope for something similar on the Council website;
- for approximately the next 20 years there was going to be a proportion of society that was not digitally able, and it was questioned how the Council could work with third sector organisations such as AbilityNet and Red Chair Highland in that regard;
- landlines would be obsolete by 2025 and, whilst telecommunications companies would have a responsibility to advise people, there would be those who would not be keen to use digital technology;
- speaking to a human adviser was what many people wanted;
- it was important to engage with groups such as the Highland Senior Citizens Network which represented older people across Highland;
- there was a good deal of distrust of digital technology in terms of data security, and people also feared catastrophes such as the Post Office scandal. An assurance was therefore sought that there would be sufficient human oversight of IT systems to identify any issues in good time;
- digital technology should be viewed as providing additionality to the customer experience rather than a replacement for traditional service delivery methods;
- the use of the term “customer” implied an element of choice, and it was suggested that taxpayer, citizen or resident would be more fitting;
- as websites became more advanced there was a tendency to include more interactive media such as videos, and it was important to be mindful that this rendered such websites unusable by those with very slow broadband, which was the case for many people in Highland;
- examples were provided of data being used to inform service delivery and make efficiencies, such as three local authorities overlaying their procurement services data which had led to huge economies of scale;
- with reference to comments regarding older people not using digital technology, it was commented that it was not all about typing and screens; voice assistants such as Alexa could be used to great effect;
- reference was made to complaints that forms on the Council’s website were in PDF format which meant they had to be printed out to complete, and it was suggested that forms should be digital, allowing online completion, and people could be taught how to attach electronic signatures;
- concern was expressed regarding instances of digital discrimination in Nairnshire where pockets of poor signal meant that people could not access the mobile internet and those who could afford were paying excessive sums for satellite internet. Not having Wi-Fi also excluded people from having electric vehicles; and
- the need to learn about digital technology was not restricted to older people, and it was suggested there was a need for in-person classes in local areas.

Thereafter, the Council:-

- i. **APPROVED** the proposed Digital Ambition in section 6.3 of the report;
- ii. **NOTED** the proposed implementation approach in section 7 of the report;
- iii. **NOTED** the proposed approach to deliver Digital Foundations could be fully resourced for two years from ICT earmarked reserves; and

- iv. **NOTED** that, during the two year period, an assessment would be made of the effectiveness of the use of resources and a case made for continuation if justified.

16. Annual Report – Statutory Performance Indicators (SPIs), Benchmarking and Best Value 2022/23

Aithisg Bhliadhnaidh – Taisbeanairan Coileanaidh Reachdail, Tomhas-mheasaidh agus an Luach an Fheàrr 2022/23

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 K Gowans - as a close family member was an employee of HLH

Mr D Gregg - as an employee of NHS Highland

There had been circulated Report No. HC/08/24 by the Chief Executive.

During discussion the following main points were raised:-

- thanks were expressed to officers for the detailed and informative report. Members appreciated the easy-to-read layout;
- the challenges in gathering timeous data for the report was acknowledged;
- significant improvements were highlighted within the report, although there was still room for further improvement. In this regard special thanks were conveyed to officers for their part in improving the Council's performance;
- as 20% of the targets had no significant progress, it was felt that regular review of these services would be important;
- the KPI for sickness - days lost per employee - was concerning as it was 50% higher than 2021. In this regard, it was queried why this was and what was being done to address the issue;
- information was sought and provided how carbon emissions had risen since last year but the performance was marked as 'on target'. In this regard, it was queried if the targets had been aligned with the Administration's 2035 target and also if the emissions targets could be revised downwards to reach Net Zero earlier. Members were reminded that Net Zero was not the end goal as this only meant that things would not get worse;
- it was highlighted that the target for accidental injury was significantly higher than the actual figure. It was suggested that the target be reduced as part of striving for continual improvement;
- it was felt that targets set by benchmark figures with other local authorities could be changed to benchmark against our own previous years' performance;
- regarding planning application performance, significant concern was raised against the poor performing major development category as this might contribute to a suggestion of Highland being closed for business, or anti-business. However, praise was conveyed to the Planning Service for their ongoing hard work despite challenges faced such as staff shortages and complex cases;
- information was sought and provided on how the reduction of costs for School Meals had been achieved;
- regarding School Transportation it was queried if the Council would be able to achieve the target and make the required savings;
- clarification was sought why the net cost per visit to Libraries performance was red despite performance being below the target;

- it was confirmed that, as of 1 March 2024, the performance of Kinship was at 26% of children in formal kinship care which exceeded the 2026/27 target. Commendation and congratulations were expressed to officers for their hard work;
- it was queried if blank data performance cells would be updated in the next report. In this regard it was highlighted that missing data would be included at future meetings for local governance;
- concern was raised regarding School Attendance performance indicators of 90% and the target of 90.2%. It was felt that 10% school absenteeism every day was too high and the Council should strive to improve this. In this regard it was queried how the target of 90.2% compared to other local authorities and if Friday absenteeism was affecting the overall performance. Further to this it was suggested that Area Committee data for school attendance figures should be standardised across Highland with reference to the whole of Highland and Scottish figures;
- further background statistics were sought regarding school absenteeism data, such as condoned absenteeism. In addition, the Council was urged to not forget the small percentage of absenteeism cases even if attendance percentage targets were met;
- it was requested to include clear cross referencing between the same measures within appendices 1 & 2 of the report for additional clarity;
- it was felt that the performance indicators were remarkable in view of the local authority funding provided by the Scottish Government;
- the delivery plan should include meaningful stretch aims to strive for continuous improvement;
- regarding the now closed Avonlea care establishment for children and young people, it was queried what had happened to the residents housed there for care and what the reason for the closure was;
- regarding the Care Inspectorate Report it was queried if the actions were derived from self-assessment, and what date the next Care Inspectorate Report was due. In addition, concern was raised that reported weak performances could negatively impact on the recruitment of new foster care families;
- the value of the KPI data in guiding the Council to care for the community was highlighted;
- congratulations were expressed to local housing officers for their hard work to reduce rent arrears. In this regard, it was confirmed that the Cost of Living (Scotland) Act, passed on 6 October 2022, had suspended evictions in most circumstances and this would run to the end of March 2024;
- information was sought why streetlighting energy consumption had dropped by approximately 10%;
- whilst women managers in top 2% of earners was 41.1%, it was queried why this was not 50%;
- further information was sought on NHS care delivery contracts which had been handed back by the providers and what the strategy was to overcome this;
- it was suggested that Housing Repairs prioritise maintenance plans to reduce the need for emergency type repairs. In addition, it was hoped that void house repairs would be prioritised to have the properties readily available as soon as possible;
- concern was raised regarding a number of unintended consequences of operational decisions which had impacted on the Council's performance figures;
- regarding Adult Services, it was queried what percentage of adults 65+ who required care, were receiving it. In addition, further data was sought at Area or Ward level how performance had dropped to 31st despite the target being 16th;
- it was queried if some Council Services were suffering from a lack of Scottish Government (SG) guidance to support them and if the Council should urge SG for guidance when required; and
- considering community values was emphasised when contemplating changes to amenities or services within a community.

Thereafter, the Council **NOTED**:-

- i. performance of the Council's SPIs for 2022/23 outlined in Appendices 1 and 2 of the report;
- ii. Local Government Benchmarking Framework emerging trends set out in section 5.4 of the report; and
- iii. new approach being undertaken by Audit Scotland with regard to the audit of Best Value as detailed in section 6.1 and the outcome of their reported work for 2022/23 in section 6.2 of the report.

17. Contract Standing Orders Gnàth-riaghailtean Cùmhnaint

There had been circulated Report No. HC/09/24 by the Interim Head of Corporate Finance.

During the discussion the following main points were raised:-

- the inclusion of Sustainable Procurement in the Contract Standing Orders was commended, particularly the Council's commitment to working towards embedding the principles of sustainability at all stages of procurement activities;
- in relation to Sustainable Procurement, information was sought, and provided, regarding whether the best value economic and environmental outcomes listed were given equal status in terms of evaluating tenders, and how they would be weighted. Further, it was asked how environmental and community outcome successes would be measured, if officers would be evaluated when carrying out procurement processes and if the Climate Change Team would be involved to give advice in terms of carbon emissions; and
- in response to a question regarding supporting local businesses and communities, the Chief Executive advised Members that as processes were nuanced, the team aimed to get value at macro level out of contracts, and there was ambition to support local businesses. It was stated that it was an ongoing challenge but one the team was aware of, and they would continue to think about how best they do it.

The Council **APPROVED** the changes to the Contract Standing Orders and **AGREED** that these become effective from 1 April 2024.

18. Treasury Management Strategy Statement Aithris Ro-innleachd Stiùiridh Roinn an Ionmhais

There had been circulated Report No. HC/10/24 the Interim Head of Corporate Finance.

During discussion the following main points were raised:-

- in terms of the Scheme of Delegation, and while acknowledging the CIPFA Code of Practice, consideration needed to be given to the potential for the report to be presented to the Corporate Resources Committee in future;
- concern was expressed at the overall amount of debt the Council was carrying and that more should be done to either curtail the level of borrowing or increase repayments;
- more focus was required on the repayment of capital given the significant and increasing impact of loan charges on the Council's revenue budget and to protect communities and future generations;

- in common with all local authorities, borrowing was essential to fund new schools, roads and bridges and other infrastructure and a balance had to be achieved. It was recognised the cost of those borrowings had increased as a result of the cost of living crisis;
- a key issue was improving the understanding of the complexities around managing the Council's debt and its affordability to make it work for the Council and communities to improve infrastructure and to adjust levels according to need;
- various scenarios should be provided to the Corporate Resources Committee on the impact of refinancing the debt if interest rates increased to very high levels and what the Council should be doing to protect its position;
- a key change for the Council might be around the general power of competencies and the ability of local authorities to borrow and lend money;
- in relation to the Council's investment strategy it was queried how environmental, social and governance factors were balanced against the need to maximise returns on investment; and
- an update was sought, and provided, that as a consequence of the UK Spring Budget additional revenue funding would be allocated to Scottish local authorities in 2024/25 and that confirmation was awaited on the Council's share of this funding.

The Council **APPROVED** the Treasury Management Strategy Statement and Investment Statement for 2024/25 and the Prudential Indicators as detailed in Appendix 1 of the report.

19. Decision of Standards Commission for Scotland – Hearing Co-dhùnaidhean Coimisean Inbhean na h-Alba – Èisteachd

There had been circulated Report No. HC/11/24 by the Head of Legal and Governance/Monitoring Officer.

The Council **NOTED** the decision of the Standards Commission of Scotland.

20. 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 14 December 2023 which were **NOTED**.

21. Exclusion of the Public Às-dùnadh a' Phobail

The Council **RESOLVED** that, under Section 50A(4) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, the public were excluded from the meeting for item 22 only on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 7A of the Act.

22. Reconfiguration of the Senior Leadership Team of Highland Council Ath-rèiteach Prìomh Sgioba Ceannardais Chomhairle na Gàidhealtachd

There had been **circulated to Members only Confidential** Report No. HC/12/24 by the Chief Executive.

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

**23. Notices of Motion
Brathan Glusaid**

Declarations of Interest – The undernoted Members made Declarations of Interest in respect of item 23 iv as owners of campervans and, in accordance with paragraph 5.6 of the revised Code of Conduct, left the meeting for this item:-

**Mrs A MacLean
Mr P Oldham**

Transparency Statement: Mr M Cameron made a Transparency Statement in respect of item 23 ii as a croft owner and a member of the Scottish Crofters Federation. However, having applied the objective test, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

The following Notices of Motion had been received by the Head of Corporate Governance:-

(i) This Council:

- Abhors the attack, killing, raping and kidnapping carried out by Hamas in Israel on 7th October 2023;
- Is horrified and appalled by the excessive loss of life in Gaza since the Israeli attack on it;
- Recognises the gravity of the 26th January order by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to the State of Israel regarding the right of the Palestinian people to protection from genocide;
- Acknowledges that the UK government, as a signatory to the 1948 Genocide Convention, is obliged to take all steps to prevent genocide, and calls on the UK government to ensure that the State of Israel complies with the interim measures issued on 26th January by the ICJ;
- Is further appalled by the spreading violence and killing spreading from Gaza across the Middle East;
- Calls for a complete bilateral ceasefire at the earliest opportunity;
- Hopes that a two state solution for Israel and Palestine may emerge after subsequent international negotiations

Signed: Dr C Birt Mrs A Maclean Mrs K MacLean Mrs T Robertson
Mr D Gregg Mr R MacKintosh Mr A Baldrey

Section 95 Officer assessment of financial implications:

This Motion was not anticipated to have a financial implication to the Council.

Following a summary of the Motion, reference was made to the humanitarian disaster currently taking place in Gaza and of the horrors that had taken place in Israel on 7 October 2023 when innocent civilians, going about their daily business, were killed and kidnapped. It was highlighted that the first duty of any government was to protect and defend its citizens and to ensure that those who had been kidnapped were returned safely to their families and the state of Israel's right to do so was acknowledged. However, the world had witnessed the indiscriminate killing of people who were victims of the war. The world could only watch the daily struggles of the people caught up in the war, while trying to find safe routes into Gaza to provide essential humanitarian aid. It was important that the views of people in Highland about this conflict be known and Council was asked to support the Motion.

It was highlighted that a ceasefire would save lives and that it had to happen now and it was requested that the Motion be amended to reflect that a ceasefire be immediate and permanent. This was supported by the Council.

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

This Council:

- Abhors the attack, killing, raping and kidnapping carried out by Hamas in Israel on 7th October 2023;
- Is horrified and appalled by the excessive loss of life in Gaza since the Israeli attack on it;
- Recognises the gravity of the 26th January order by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to the State of Israel regarding the right of the Palestinian people to protection from genocide;
- Acknowledges that the UK government, as a signatory to the 1948 Genocide Convention, is obliged to take all steps to prevent genocide, and calls on the UK government to ensure that the State of Israel complies with the interim measures issued on 26th January by the ICJ;
- Is further appalled by the spreading violence and killing spreading from Gaza across the Middle East;
- Calls for a complete, immediate and permanent bilateral ceasefire;
- Hopes that a two state solution for Israel and Palestine may emerge after subsequent international negotiations

- (ii) Highland Council recognises; the contribution made by the farmers, crofters, growers, and the wider food and drink industry to the Highland economy, environment, and community.

Agrees, as part of tackling the environmental priorities for Highland Council, the Council will consider ways to encourage residents, where possible, to shop locally, taking advantage of home-grown, affordable, and nutritious produce, including meat, dairy, and plant-based options, thus reducing food miles and boosting the local economy. Agrees, to further enhancing our partnerships alongside our arable, livestock, and dairy farmers. by, where possible, encouraging that all food and drinks provided by the council are sourced from local suppliers, and always include meat and dairy option, alongside plant-based produce.

Signed: Mr R Stewart Mr A MacDonald

Section 95 Officer assessment of financial implications:

This Motion was not anticipated to have a financial implication to the Council.

During discussion, Mr MacDonald, as seconder, spoke in support of the Motion, but suggested the following revision:

“I call for Highland Council to consider what could be done to improve the opportunity for local buying to help crofters and other producers in the Highlands.”

In addition, Ms Willis also suggested a further amendment in that the second paragraph be deleted and replace with the following:

“Agrees, as part of tackling the environmental priorities for Highland Council, that Council will continue to work with the Highland Good Food Partnership to develop the Highland Good Food Nation Plan, and will consider responding to the Scottish Government Good Food Nation Bill consultation.”

Both these additions were accepted and the Council **AGREED** the amended Motion as follows:

Highland Council recognises; the contribution made by the farmers, crofters, growers, and the wider food and drink industry to the Highland economy, environment, and community.

Agrees, as part of tackling the environmental priorities for Highland Council, that Council will continue to work with the Highland Good Food Partnership to develop the Highland Good Food Nation Plan, and will consider responding to the Scottish Government Good Food Nation Bill consultation.”

And for Highland Council to consider what can be done to improve the opportunity for local buying to help crofters and other producers.”

- (iii) In the Holyrood Stage 3 budget debate in February, the Deputy First Minister announced that the Scottish Government will now explore options for introducing a Power of General Competence to give local authorities significantly greater powers to act in the way they think fit for their area.

This Council agrees to ask the Leader to write to the Deputy First Minister to express our support for such a Power to be introduced as soon as possible, and to engage actively with COSLA, as a matter of urgency, to explore all the viable options, including in particular, the ability to raise revenue from activities which cause harm to our land, or disbenefit our people.

Signed: Mr C Ballance Ms K Willis

Section 95 Officer assessment of financial implications:

This Motion was not anticipated to have a financial implication to the Council.

Following a summary of the Motion, it was highlighted that a Power of General Competence was potentially transformative that could have positive changes to local democracy and Councils. At present Councils could not do anything unless they were specifically empowered to in legislation. The Power of General Competence would allow Councils to do things unless it was specifically prohibited in legislation and was an immense change. The Motion would authorise the Leader of the Council to lobby the Deputy First Minister to express the Council's support for such a power and engage with CoSLA to explore viable options.

The Council **AGREED** the Motion.

(iv) Tourist Tax and Motorhomes

In January, MSPs voted to exclude motorhomes and campervans from the new Tourist Tax unless they are staying at a campsite. This will further incentivise roadside parking and camping in the Highlands, where overnight parking by motorhomes and campervans, and “wild camping”, is already creating significant problems in many rural areas.

Local Authorities will be given the powers to administer the Tourist Tax and introduce their own charges, therefore this Council agrees to write to Scottish Ministers asking them to reconsider their decision to exclude motorhomes and campervans from the Tourist Tax, and to allow Local Authorities to decide what is excluded from the Tourist Tax in their area, and how the tax revenue is spent.

Signed: Ms K Willis Mr C Ballance

Section 95 Officer assessment of financial implications:

This Motion was not anticipated to have a financial implication to the Council.

During discussion the following main points were raised:-

- an estimated 200,000 motor homes (etc) visited the Highlands every year and already many did not stay overnight in caravan sites, partly due to the lack of facilities to deal with this volume. Anecdotal evidence suggested that for every night staying on a camp site, another 2-3 nights would be spent in car parks, laybys or other non-payment areas. This was likely to increase if the Tourist Tax was only charged to those staying at camp sites;
- due to end of NatureScot's Better Places funding, there would be no Highland Council seasonal rangers patrolling tourist hotspots and consequently problems of inappropriate parking and behaviour would be further exacerbated;
- the inclusion of all motor homes in the Tourist levy, not just those staying in camp sites, would generate considerable revenue for Highland Council to invest in infrastructure, facilities and services which would improve the visitor experience and the lives of Highland residents. Revenue could also be used to rebuild the Ranger Team and to supplement the Team with seasonal Rangers;
- not all motor homes using car parks caused problems and, instead of a regional response, perhaps a local Area approach would be more appropriate;
- it was acknowledged that the levy would be harder to implement for those motor homes not staying in camp sites. Although modern technology could be a way forward, there had to be a well thought out process in place;
- the decision as to what was and was not included in the Tourist Tax should be a decision for local authorities;
- these proposals were already being considered by the Administration but it was important to take into account that the effect this had on Bed and Breakfast establishments who were obliged to collect the Tourist Tax;
- the current voluntary proposal of £40 disadvantaged the formal camp sites and drove camper vans into off site locations, thus increasing littering and waste;
- it was suggested that camper vans, motor home and caravans users spent less than other tourists in the local economy but yet used ferries, very much to the disadvantage of locals, and also benefited from the Road Equivalent Tariff (RET) which, it was argued, Scottish Tax payers were subsidising. It was suggested therefore that a mechanism be put in place to ensure that such vehicles displayed a disc indicating they had paid the levy and that they would not then be entitled to the RET on ferries. It was suggested that the Council write to CalMac in this regard;
- it was contended that there was economic benefit to the Highland economy, given the cost of hiring motor homes locally and many would also visit local restaurants etc;

- sometimes motor homes were used due to the lack of available holiday accommodation and there was a potential, therefore, of having an unintended negative economic consequence; and
- it was questioned how to define Highland residents using camper vans and how were these identified.

Mr A MacDonald, seconded by Mr A Graham, moved the following amendment to be added to the motion:

“That all vehicles with sleeping accommodation, i.e. caravans and campervans are required to have a carnet/disc displayed on their windscreen to verify that £40 tourist tax has been paid via the Highland Council website, that authorises that vehicle to travel in Highland Region for a week or part thereof.

Furthermore these vehicles will no longer be entitled to the low price ‘road equivalent tariff’ on Caledonian MacBrayne ferries.”

However, this amendment was ruled as not competent and consequently Mr A MacDonald withdrew his amendment.

The Council **AGREED** the motion as presented.

- (v) This council recognises the importance of meaningful debate when discussing matters relating to the business of the Full Council. That being the case an amendment to standing order 19 will be made to increase the time allowed for each speaker from 5 minutes to 10 minutes.

Signed: Mr R Gale Mr A Christie

This Motion was not accompanied with a financial assessment. Therefore, in accordance with Standing Order No.12, this Motion was therefore not debated and was deferred until the next Council meeting.

The meeting ended at 2.43pm.