

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Corporate Resources Committee** held in the Chamber, Council Headquarters, Inverness on Wednesday 11 September 2024 at 10.30am.

Present:

Mr M Baird	Mr S Mackie
Mr R Bremner (Remote)	Mrs K MacLean (substitute)
Mr A Christie	Mr C Munro
Ms T Collier (substitute)(Remote)	Mr P Oldham
Mr R Gale	Ms M Reid
Mr A Jarvie	Mr M Reiss
Mr S Kennedy	Mrs T Robertson
Mr B Lobban	Ms M Ross (substitute)
Mr D Louden	

Non-Members also present:

Mr C Ballance (Remote)
Mr J Grafton
Mr T Maclennan (Remote)

Officials in Attendance:

Mr A Gunn, Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate
Mrs S Armstrong, Chief Officer - Revenues and Commercialisation
Mr S Fraser, Chief Officer - Legal and Corporate Governance
Mr B Porter, Chief Officer - Corporate Finance
Mr J Shepherd, Chief Officer - Business Solutions
Mr P Nevin, Interim ECO - Performance and Governance
Ms E Barrie, Head of HR
Mr C Donaldson, Principal Programme Manager
Ms M Mackenzie, Strategic Commercial Manager
Mr D Mackenzie, Trading Standards Manager
Mrs L Dunn, Joint Democratic Services Manager
Ms O Bayon, Committee Officer

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

Mr D Louden in the Chair

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

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr J Bruce, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mr G Mackenzie and Mrs M Paterson.

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

The Committee **NOTED** the following:-

Declaration of Interest:

Item 5: Mr J Grafton

Transparency Statements:

Items 7.c, 8, 15 and 16.iii – Mr A Christie
Item 12 – Mr A Christie and Mr S Mackie

3. Recess Powers

Cumhachdan Fosaidh

The Committee **NOTED** that the recess powers granted by the Council at its meeting on 27 June 2024 have not been exercised in relation to the business of the Corporate Resources Committee.

4. Good News

Naidheachdan Matha

As part of the latest phase of the restructuring of the Senior Leadership team, the Chair confirmed the recent appointment of four Chief Officers in respect of the Corporate Service cluster. He took the opportunity to congratulate and wish them every success in their new roles as undernoted:

- Sheila Armstrong - Chief Officer Revenues & Commercialisation
- Stewart Fraser - Chief Officer Legal & Corporate Governance
- Brian Porter - Chief Officer Corporate Finance
- Jon Shepherd - Chief Officer Business Solutions

The Committee **NOTED** the good news.

5. Late Submission of Expenses Claims

A' Cur A-steach airson Cosgaisean Anmoch

Declarations of Interest – Mr J Grafton made a declaration of interest in this item as a claimant and, in accordance with paragraph 5.6 of the revised Code of Conduct, left the meeting for this item.

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

Concern was expressed at the delay by Members in submitting expense claims, particularly given that some of these claims related to the previous financial year. In this regard it was stressed that Members must submit any financial claims timeously and within the 3-month period in accordance with the Council's policy.

The Committee **APPROVED** the following claims:

- Mr John Grafton - £702.15 for mileage in October, November and December 2023;
- Mr Karl Rosie - £1,575.90 for mileage in April, October, November and December 2023;
- Mrs Margaret Paterson - £164.52 for broadband expenses from April to December 2023; and
- Mrs Barbara Jarvie - £132.30 for mileage in January and February 2024.

6. Corporate Revenue Budget Update – Financial Year 2024/25 Cunntas às Ùr mun Bhuidseat Teachd-a-steach Chorpóra – Bliadhna Ionmhasail 2024/25

There had been circulated Report No RES/19/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate.

In discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- an explanation was sought and provided on the factors impacting on the profile of spend for the quarter against annual budget;
- the Council's Financial System would deliver a range of improvements and efficiencies and officers be thanked for the work involved. It was important Members exercised patience in relation to this transformational work;
- in response to a query, it was explained the Scottish Government had confirmed additional revenue funding and flexibility for the Council to repurpose its capital funding to support the offer made to the SJC pay group;
- highlighting that the latest forecasted outturn for the Income Generation Portfolio showed it was 99.6% on target and commending the work of officers in this regard;
- highlighting the success of the Storr Centre and the opportunity to replicate this model at other locations in Highland to augment visitor experiences;
- concerns in relation to some of the feedback and income generated by the Campervan & Motorhome Scheme and the potential for the Scheme to be reviewed;
- the challenges of the irresponsible behaviour the above Scheme sought to address as part of the overall approach to delivering sustainable tourism and actions to be taken in response be clearly specified and consideration given to potential gains such as provision for campervans/motorhomes on Council owned land adjacent to tourist routes. In addition, the potential for the ranger/traffic warden service to undertake enforcement be considered;
- the Campervan & Motorhome Scheme would be developed going forward with any new ideas being considered to ensure visitors enjoyed their experience but did not adversely affect the places they visited. The Scheme could be reviewed in due course if not considered to be working as intended;
- in response to a query, further clarity was provided in relation to slippage on income targets for Solar PV Council estate and battery storage. If required, a more detailed briefing could be provided outwith the meeting;
- an update was sought and provided on the position with Feed-in Tariff claims and treatment of any back payments received in terms of savings. It was confirmed a response would be provided directly to Mr C Ballance;
- the potential for Annex 2 of the report to be improved by including information on where savings forecasts under/over target would be carried forward to future years;
- in relation to Adult Social Care, clarification was sought and provided that the Council had agreed to set aside reserves to support Council and NHS Highland change and transformation and savings. Future reports to the relevant strategic committee would provide more detailed information on this matter;

- in response to a query, confirmation that more detailed information on DSM/digital school savings would be provided to Mr A Christie outwith the meeting; and
- confirmation was sought and provided that more detailed information would be circulated to Members in relation to hybrid working and Family First savings.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the:

- i. budget update as set out in the report;
- ii. forecast provided regarding budget savings;
- iii. update provided regarding the Income Generation portfolio.; and
- iv. that further information would be circulated on hybrid working and Family First savings.

7. Corporate Services Cluster: Revenue Monitoring Near Final Outturns 2023/24

Bagaid Sheirbheisean Corporra: Toraidhean Faisg air Deireannach Sgrùdadh Teachd-a-steach 2023/24

a. Depute Chief Executive Service Revenue Monitoring Near Final Out-turn 2023/24

Toradh Faisg air Deireannach Sgrùdadh Teachd-a-steach Seirbheis an Iar-Cheannaird 2023/24

There had been circulated Report No RES/20/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate.

The Committee **NOTED** the revenue monitoring position for the Service.

b. Performance & Governance Service Revenue Monitoring Near Final Out-turn 2023/24

Toradh Faisg air Deireannach Sgrùdadh Teachd-a-steach Seirbheis Coileanaidh & Riaghlachais 2023/24

There had been circulated Report No RES/21/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate.

The Committee **NOTED** the revenue monitoring position for the Service.

c. Resources & Finance Service Revenue Monitoring Near Final Out-turn 2023/24

Toradh Faisg air Deireannach Sgrùdadh Teachd-a-steach Seirbheis Ghoireasan & Ionmhais 2023/24

Mr A Christie made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item in his capacity as General Manager of Inverness Badenoch and Strathspey Citizens Advice Bureau. However, having applied the objective test, reviewed his position in relation to the item and any personal connection, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No RES/22/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate.

The Committee **NOTED** the revenue monitoring position for the Service.

**8. Corporate Services Cluster – Performance Monitoring Q1 2024/25
Bagaid Sheirbheisean Corporra – Sgrùdadh Coileanaidh R1 2024/25**

Mr A Christie made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item in his capacity as a Non-executive Director of NHS Highland and Inverness Business Improvement District, and as General Manager of Inverness Badenoch and Strathspey Citizens Advice Bureau. However, having applied the objective test, reviewed his position in relation to the item and any personal connection, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No RES/23/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- it would be useful for median targets also to be set for the number of working days per employee lost through sickness absence on the basis that long term absences involving a small number of staff could skew the figures and this would provide for a more realistic target;
- in addition to the above, a more detailed breakdown be provided in future reports in relation to sickness absence including length of absences. It was confirmed further consideration would be given to the potential to improve the information presented on sickness absence;
- further information was sought and provided on the training provided to managers on absence management and to improve the recording of absence data;
- the target to achieve a RAG status of green in relation to the issuing of committee papers on time should be over 90%;
- the improvement in performance in relation to the issuing of Committee papers on time be welcomed;
- in relation to freedom of information requests, confirmation was sought that there was an ongoing process to ensure as much information as possible was published on the Council's website for the benefit of the public and officers; and
- an explanation was sought and provided on the overview taken on the contributory factors in relation to mental health conditions accounting for the largest increase in FTE days lost in 2023/24, the feedback provided to services and monitoring through staff partnership meetings with trade union colleagues.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the performance of the Services.

**9. Treasury Management
Rianachd Ionmhais**

**a. Annual Treasury Management Report – 2023/24
Aithisg Stiùiridh Bhliadhnail an Ionmhais – 2023/24**

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

In discussion, Members raised the following main issues:-

- concern at the increase in external debt and loan charges in 2023/24. It was critical borrowing was responsible and prudent and in delivering the Highland Investment Plan a capital repayment programme was in place to ensure future generations were not left with a legacy of debt;
- the Highland Investment Plan would deliver a legacy for future generations in terms of new schools and improvements to roads repairs, harbours and other infrastructure and this could not be achieved without borrowing. The key issue was that the debt burden of the Council had to be affordable and the Highland Investment Plan allowed this to be the case; and
- an assurance was sought and provided that the Council's treasury activity complied with all relevant regulations and codes of practice. This included the Prudential Code of Practice that required capital programmes and borrowing plans to be affordable, prudent, and sustainable.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the Annual Treasury Management report for 2023/24.

b. Summary of Transactions Geàrr-chunntas Ghnothaichean

There had been circulated Report No RES/25/24 by the Head of Corporate Finance.

The Committee **NOTED** the Treasury Management Summary of Transactions report for the period from 1 April 2024 to 30 June 2024.

10. Corporate Systems Update – Finance, HR/Payroll and Pensions Programme Cunntas às Ùr mu Shiostaman Corporra – Ionmhas, Goireasan Daonna/Rola-ràighidh agus Prògram Pheinnseanan

There had been circulated Report No RES/26/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate.

The Chair advised that the Programme would deliver better quality, accurate and more timely information and benefit the Council as a whole and he thanked the Team for the significant amount of work involved.

In discussion, Members raised the following main issues:-

- an explanation was sought and provided on the efficiencies that would be delivered by updating the business systems that continued to use legacy ledger and supplier codes to use the new codes; and
- in response to a query, further clarity was provided on the progress being made towards achieving a cost-effective solution for storing historical financial data.

The Committee **NOTED** the:

- i. updates regarding the Finance, HR/Payroll and Pensions Programme;
- ii. review of governance arrangements and revisions to the Programme Board and respective Project Boards;
- iii. update regarding the Human Resources and Payroll project, including the commissioning of an external strategic review to support future strategy and decision making.

11. Annual Procurement Report 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024 Aithisg Bhladhnaid Solair 1 Giblean 2023 – 31 Màrt 2024

There had been circulated Report No RES/27/24 by the Head of Corporate Finance.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- information was sought on approved exemptions to the usual procurement process, noting this could be as a result of there being only one supplier, or only one interested party. It was requested that a report providing further information on approved exemptions be submitted to a future meeting;
- the community wealth building approach was welcomed;
- clarification was sought and provided on the 'animal and farming' categorisation, which was outwith the control of the Council, but which could relate to services not directly connected to animals or farming such as elements of road salt;
- information was sought and provided on plans to develop a 'meet the buyer' type event in 2025. Reference was also made to the development of a corporate procurement framework to deliver the Highland Investment Programme, which would involve supplier events, prior to the matter being taken to full Council;
- the increased involvement of Small to Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) with the Council was welcomed, including streamlined processes and training to facilitate this. It was queried whether the reported increase of nine SMEs to 32 was significant, and a summary was provided of the Scotland Excel Framework, which was a relatively small percentage of the Council's overall spend;
- in response to dismay that many business head offices were in Inverness, and that more should be done to encourage head offices in other locations in the Highlands, it was pointed out that the list in question was not all Highland Council suppliers, only those that had signed up to the Scotland Excel Framework;
- clarification was sought and provided on the level of financial efficiencies being sought in 2024-25; and
- information was sought on how Procurement captured data on community benefit accumulation resulting from development, for example the Uig harbour redevelopment on Skye. It was explained that a system to achieve this was being worked on, as this was currently being undertaken manually on a contract by contract basis.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the content and publication of the Highland Council Annual Procurement Report 2023-2024 (Appendix 1) and **AGREED** a report would be presented to the next meeting of the Committee on approved exemptions to the usual procurement processes.

12. Annual Report on Citizens Advice Bureau Contract Aithisg Bhliadhnaid mu Chùmhnant Biùro Comhairleachadh a' Phobail

Mr A Christie made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item in his capacity as a Non-executive Director of NHS Highland and General Manager of Inverness Badenoch and Strathspey Citizens Advice Bureau and Mr S Mackie as a Non-executive Director of Caithness Citizens Advice Bureau . However, having applied the objective test, reviewed their position in relation to the item and any personal connection, they did not consider that they had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No RES/28/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- the work of staff in the Welfare team and at the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) were thanked, and attention was drawn to the value of their work, especially during winter and challenging financial times. It was important these services were protected in future budgets;
- information was sought and provided on how the Nairn CAB fitted into the Highland contract and reporting structure, as well as some of the reported Universal Credit statistics;
- it was queried whether there was sufficient capacity to cope with increased demand and, while there was capacity to deal with the usual amount of additional services required during winter months, further demand would have to be monitored and reported as required;
- it was pointed out that over 10% of the Highland population had received support;
- attention was drawn to the increase in Universal Credit claimants since 2022, and information as provided on the Department for Work and Pensions policies in this regard;
- the importance of early intervention and prevention to avoid people experiencing trauma was highlighted, and assurance was sought and provided that trauma-informed practices were being developed and used; and
- assurance was provided that monthly meetings were undertaken between the Welfare team and CAB to avoid duplication and improve partnership working. Pathways to services were monitored and reviewed. The uniqueness of the partnership, which was a UK wide exemplar of joint working, was highlighted.

The Committee **NOTED** the undernoted performance:

- i. nearly 26,500 residents were supported by the Council's Welfare Support Team and Citizens Advice during 2023/24 with welfare, debt and housing advice services, resulting in more than 111,300 contacts (on average, 4 contacts per client). Assessing the number of contacts provided workload and throughput data and provided important context when reflecting upon the overall effectiveness and quality of welfare services being provided;
- ii. financial gains for clients exceeded £26.8 million. This represented a £17.32 return for every £1 allocated to these welfare services;

- iii. a total of £9.562m of debt (including £1.132m relating to mortgage/other secured loans) was presented by households seeking support to prioritise their bills, reduce and manage their debts, and wherever possible to lower the interest charges they were due to pay; and
- iv. support was provided for 3,132 clients (including social rented, private rented and homeowners) seeking housing-related advice, thus highlighting the demand for consistent accessible support on these critical issues.

13. Publication of Decisions at COSLA Leaders' Meetings Foillseachadh Cho-dhùnaidhean aig Coinneamhan Ceannardan COSLA

There had been circulated Report No RES/29/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate.

The Committee **NOTED** the report.

14. Employee Engagement Strategy Ro-innleachd Com-pàirteachadh Luchd-obrach

There had been circulated Report No RES/30/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- it was highlighted that, although the key objectives of the strategy aligned with trauma informed practice, there was no specific mention of it, and a summary was provided of the intention to embed trauma informed practice into the strategy;
- clarification was sought and provided on the statement that improved income might aid staff to remain or relocate to rural areas, and the importance of keeping or increasing all staff in rural areas was emphasised, with reference being made that increasing opportunities for promoted posts might assist staff to remain in the remoter areas;
- it was suggested that the statement that there was no impact on equalities only referred to negative impacts;
- the importance of including neurodiversity of all types in the strategy was emphasised, with particular reference to adult autism;
- it was queried how the staff who did not engage with the staff forum could be reached, and how to engage with 'silent' staff members; and
- information was sought and provided on pulse surveys.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the Employee Engagement Strategy; and
- ii. **NOTED** consultation would take place with Trade Union colleagues on implementation of the strategy.

15. Trading Standards Performance 2023/24 and Operational Plan 2024/25 Coileanadh Inbhean Malairt 2023/24 agus Plana Obrachail 2024/25

Mr A Christie made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item in his capacity as a Non-executive Director of NHS Highland and General Manager of Inverness Badenoch and Strathspey Citizens Advice Bureau. However, having applied the objective test, reviewed his position in relation to the item and any personal connection, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No RES/31/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- the Trading Standards team was thanked for their work, and reference was made to the breadth of the issues they covered, and their responsiveness to community needs. Attention was drawn to the team's standing in the Scottish and UK sector, with reference to the recent Chartered Trading Standards Institute Scottish Branch Conference;
- it was suggested that the name 'Trading Standards' was not sufficiently informative, and did not indicate the protective nature of the work;
- particular gratitude was expressed for the recent enforcement work undertaken against a shop that had been selling vapes to underage people;
- further information was sought and provided on work undertaken on children and nurseries unfair contract terms, and why this was still ongoing; and
- information was sought and provided on the notification process and timescales for reporting issues, with individuals directed to a national helpline, and businesses able to email directly for an initial response within 24 hours.

Thereafter, the Committee:

- NOTED** the performance of the Trading Standards team during the year 2023/24 as laid out in its Annual Report; and
- APPROVED** the Trading Standards Operational Plan for 2024/25.

16. Minutes of Meetings Geàrr-chunntasan Choinneamhan

Mr A Christie made a Transparency Statement in respect of item 16.iii in his capacity as a Non-executive Director of NHS Highland. However, having applied the objective test, reviewed his position in relation to the item and any personal connection, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

The following Minutes of Meetings were circulated and:

- NOTED** - Appeals & Disputes Committee held on 31 May 2024;
- APPROVED** - Central Safety Committee held on 12 June 2024;
- APPROVED** - Staff Partnership Forum held on 19 June and 21 August 2024;
- NOTED** – Non -Domestic Rates Appeals Committee held on 23 August 2024; and

v. **NOTED** – Employment Release Sub Committee held on 27 August 2024.

17. Exclusion of the Public
Às-dùnadh a' Phobaill

The Committee **AGREED** that there was not a requirement to exclude the public.

18. Debt Management
Stiùireadh Fhiachan

There had been circulated to Members only Report No RES/32/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate.

The Committee **AGREED** that this item be deferred to the next meeting.

The meeting was closed at 1.18pm.