

Highland Council: Questions: 12 December 2024**Member Questions****1. Mr A Christie****To the Leader of the Council**

Please can you provide a list of all secondary schools who cannot presently provide a sheltered, dry, warm, and safe space for their pupils to take lunch due to building limitations or to having to provide space for too many children over the lunch time period together with an estimate as to how many children are impacted?

Response:

Given the varied arrangements that exist for each secondary school we will require additional time to survey each school to provide the level of specific detail on dining arrangements that has been requested.

I will arrange for a further information to be circulated once all dining arrangement surveys have been completed. I expect this to be in the new year.

2. Mr A Christie**To the Leader of the Council**

Please can the Leader provide an itemised redacted departmental list of all current and past employees who have had a salary overpayment between the period 1st April 2022 and 30th September 2024 together with the amount of the original overpayment and the current balance outstanding.

Response:

Salary Overpayments for the period 1 April 22 to 30 September 24 were £1.246m. The balance outstanding is £0.396m.

Salary overpayments, per Cluster, for the period 1 April 22 to 30 September 24 are as follows:

Cluster	Overpayments £m	Staff costs budget £m	Overpayments as % of staff cost budget
People	0.871	656.32	0.13%
Place	0.349	297.40	0.12%
Corporate	0.026	71.78	0.04%
Total	1.246	1,025.50	0.12%

3. Mr J Bruce

To the Leader of the Council

Will the Cairngorm Mountain Railway be fully operational by the year end? So far it has been intimated it will be ready for the skiing season. What will be the starting date if there is no snow?

Response:

This is a question that should be asked of Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Limited (CMSL) who operate the Cairngorm Mountain Railway.

4. Mr D Gregg

To the Chair of Education Committee

Could the Council please give a breakdown of what school subjects were available for pupils to take at each of our secondary schools, and via the Highland Virtual Academy, for Higher and Advanced Higher in the last three school sessions?

Response:

I have attached a summary (**Appendix 1**) Advanced Higher and Higher Courses offered by each school over the last 3 years, including the Highland Virtual Academy and the Digital School. Due to the significant data sets regarding the range of Highers and Advanced Highers available in each school over the past three school sessions, I have arranged for this information to be issued direct to all Members.

5. Mr M Reiss

To the Chair, Infrastructure, Environment and Economy Committee

Gully emptying machines are a vital part of our ability to reduce flooding, especially in town and village centres. What are the current numbers and actual availability of gully emptying machines across Highland Council?"

Response:

The Council has the following:

- Dedicated gully emptying vehicles: 3 no. 26t (1 in C&S, 1 in R&C & 1 in LNBS)
- Road sweepers with gully emptying capability: 9 no. 15t (1 in Caithness Roads & 1 in Sutherland Roads, LNBS Roads 1, Inverness roads 1)
- Of these 12 vehicles there are 7 based in Roads the rest are allocated to Waste.

On hire

Sweepers with gully emptying capability: 1 no. 15t inverness Roads.

In addition, the following are ordered:

- 1 No. Dedicated 18t 4x4 gritter for Inverness. Due within next few weeks.
- 8 No. Multipurpose 18T 4x4 gritters / tippers for various areas. Mainly Sutherland and Caithness. April 25 onwards for delivery
- 1 No. 15T road sweeper for Nairn
- 1 No. 26T Gully Emptier for Inverness – this may change to 2 No. 18T Gully Emptiers as discussions are ongoing re Finance.

6. Ms K Willis

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure Committee

The Council's Verge Maintenance Manual for Roads in Rural Areas was approved in July 2023. Please can the Chair provide a list of the Special Verge locations identified across Highland to date together with any special treatments agreed, as detailed in section 4.2 of the manual.

Response:

Inverness – no areas set aside as Special Verge Locations

Nairn - no areas set aside as Special Verge Locations

B&S - areas in and around Boat of Garten and along the B970 in Rothiemurchus

Ross and Cromarty – as per below:

Docharty Heights, Dingwall (Only cut corners due amenity reasons)

North Kessock R'bout (No cut of r/bout – community growing a meadow)

Morefield Rd, Ullapool (No cut in summer due to orchids)

Rhue Rd, Rhue (No cut due to orchids)

Lochaber – none currently identified.

Skye – some herbicidal treatments associated with Japanese Knotweed but no verges yet identified for biodiversity or conservation.

Sutherland - From A9 (Junction) at The Mound into Embo (Shore Road) – part of the SSSI.

Caithness – as per tables below.

Verge location Nearest village / settlement or farm	Grid ref of start & finish	No. on Map	Active management requirements
B855 Dunnet Head	ND213 743 to ND203 767	1	Cut once per year in late summer
Barrock	ND266 713 to ND287 722 Extended to ND315 722 to bridge just west of T-junction	2	Early high set cut if it can be done before end of second week of May. Late second cut September.
Moss of Greenland	ND260 653 to ND246 667	3	
Reay Bridge of Isaald to Reay school	ND977 651 to ND971 649	5	Could this get an early cut this year please and late cut in September.
Shebster to Broubster	ND017 638 to ND022 619 Extended to ND084 584 south end of loch Calder.	6	Late cut
Achscrabster to quarry	ND081 650 to ND082 637	7	Could this get an early cut this year please on both sides and a late cut in September.
Achavarn to Loch Calder	ND090 600 to ND080 605	8	
Hill of Forss to Newlands of Geise	ND080 675 ND090 658	9	
Bower to Hill of Watten	ND229 607 to ND244 583	10	Could this get an early cut this year please and a late cut in September.
Dunbeath Knockally Road	ND148 301 to ND146 294	11	One cut late August / Early September
Leodebest to Guidebest	ND185 343 to ND182 354	12	No cut
Beil of Duncansby	ND383 720 to road end ND386 711	14	No cut

Requested Verges			
Courtfall Loch (Dunnet Head)	ND216 742	4	Late cut when Dunnet Head has its late cut. Handmade sign will be put up.
St John's Pool	ND219 730	15	Late cut Handmade sign
Ulbster / Loch Watenan	ND 320 406	13	Late cut Handmade sign
Kirk Myreland	ND276 597 to ND292 582		Late cut (bee hive owner) Handmade sign

7. Mr R Stewart

To the Leader of the Council

To date what has been the total cost incurred by the Highland Council for the failed Academy Street project? This should include the expenses for the initial installation of the Spaces for People, the costs associated with the unlawful consultation, the subsequent legal challenge, the reinstatement of Academy Street, and any other related expenditures.

Response:

Costs are as follows:

- Spaces for People Costs (Covid interventions): £52,850 Fully funded by Scottish Government.
- Cost of Academy Street Project: £606,861 (Cannot separate out consultation costs). Fully funded by Scottish Government.
- Legal Expenses: £54,173.50 (Harper MacLeod invoices to 31 October 2024). This does not include any costs incurred by our in-house team.
- Reinstatement Costs: these costs are still being collated as this work was only recently undertaken.

8. Mr A Graham

To the Leader of the Council

Please provide details of letting income received for financial years 21/22, 22/23, 23/24 and 24/25-to-date for each of the undernoted schools:

Inverness High School
 Central Primary School
 St Joseph's Primary School
 Charleston Academy (excluding Community Complex)
 Muirtown Primary School
 Kinmylies Primary School

Response:

Please find set out below the annual lets income for the properties requested.

For Inverness High School the lets income increased significantly in 2023-2024 due to the HLH Music School bookings. However, the HLH Music School has relocated to Milton of Leys Primary School.

ASG	Location	2021 / 2022	2022 / 2023	2023 / 2024	2024 / 2025
Inverness High	Inverness High School	£8,834.36	£7,027.97	£20,689.99	£6,705.62
	Central PS	£0.00	£128.10	£1,268.19	£0.00
	St Joseph's PS	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Charleston	Charleston Academy	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
	Muirtown PS	£0.00	£0.00	£462.99	£0.00
	Kinmylies PS	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00

Inverness HS - 2023 / 2024	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total for 23/24
	2407.3	3613.97	6093.15	8575.57	20689.99
Inverness HS - 2024 / 2025	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total for 24/25
	2101.06	2374.59	2229.97	0	6705.62

9. Mrs H Crawford**To the Chair of Education Committee**

The Scottish Financial Secretary has demanded Westminster reimburses the additional National Insurance costs imposed in the recent Labour budget upon, amongst other areas, public Early Learning and Childcare providers.

How much will this Council require to be passed down from Holyrood to fully cover the additional National Insurance bill for our inhouse ELC providers?

Response:

The estimated additional cost of 2025/26 employers National Insurance increases, arising from the UK Government budget, is £0.6m for the Council's own in-house ELC settings.

10. Mr P Logue

To the Leader of the Council

Can you please outline the Council's policy on the unplugging of council operated electric vehicles by staff after the vehicle has completed charging?

Response:

Currently, there is no defined policy within the council regarding the unplugging of council-operated electric vehicles (EVs) by staff once charging is complete. Recent incidents have highlighted the need to address this gap to ensure efficient use of charging infrastructure and prevent potential disruptions. In response, toolbox talks are being developed within fleet as an interim measure to promote best practices among staff while the EV policy is under review and updated to reflect the council's operational and sustainability goals. This approach will help standardise procedures and enhance the effectiveness of the council's EV management.

11. Mrs I MacKenzie

To the Leader of the Council

Shopmobility Highland has provided a vital service for over 30 years, hiring out mobility equipment and offering transport for medical appointments, shopping, and social activities. These services promote independence, combat social isolation, and support individuals referred by NHS Highland after injury or illness, aiding recovery and avoid hospital "bed blocking." With no comparable service in the Highlands, Shopmobility Highland is a lifeline for many.

NHS Highland has announced it will cease funding the charity from March 2025, jeopardizing its future and the essential services it provides. Will the Highland Council engage with Shopmobility Highland and NHS Highland to explore solutions and ensure this invaluable service continues for years to come?

Response:

While I recognise the service that Shopmobility Highland provides, I can advise that the funding NHS Highland has available is £1.5m and of that amount it was agreed that half would be allocated to the support of carers. The evaluation process required all applicants to be scored in terms of the overall strategic direction and Shopmobility were ultimately not successful. NHS Highland indicated that they had 60 applications for the living well/staying well fund with a value of requests at £5.7m against available funding of £1.5m.

12. Dr M Gregson

To the Leader of the Council

The Scottish Human Rights Commission has highlighted that urgent action is needed to realise basic human rights to health, housing and food for many people in the Highlands and Islands. It further considers that people feel “unheard, disenfranchised, abandoned, and forgotten, with their human rights concerns discarded or minimised.”

Can the Leader detail what actions are needed to address what is an appalling and distressing situation?

Response:

The Council welcomes the report from the Scottish Human Rights Commission. It expresses the voice of a number of people living within our communities across the Highlands and Islands. I intend to write the Commission seeking an early meeting to explore their findings in more detail as it is important for us as a Council and for the wider public partnership in the Highlands, to understand the detail that sits behind the main findings.

The Council already recognises a number of the challenges identified in the report. This is why our delivery plan, that the whole Chamber agreed to last year, focuses upon adult care, creation of employment and creating integrated points of delivery and why as a Council we have agreed an investment plan to target investment in facilities across Highland and a Highland Housing Challenge to focus activity in working in partnership to build houses.

Given the cross-cutting nature of the findings I will be asking the Community Planning Partnership to review the findings of the report and consider where action may already be being taken as a result of the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan and the focus on tackling inequality, but also potential gaps.

13. Mrs J McEwan

To the Chair of Health and Social Care

Can you guarantee that there will still be localised Women’s Aid Centres in the existing areas?

Response:

Several Highland Council contracts are currently under review including the provision of domestic abuse services. The Highland Council is a member of a shared procurement service which leads on commissioning across Highland, Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire councils. As part of this exercise, we have taken advice from our shared procurement service in relation the contracts we currently have with the four Woman’s Aid groups that operate in Highland.

No final decision has been taken on the future funding and service delivery model and the process of review is very much in the ‘consultation’ stage. We hope that we can continue to work with a wide range of stakeholders including the views of victims of domestic abuse as we draft the contract specification.

We are actively consulting widely before considering our next steps in any tender process. We will continue to support the current funding model during until this process is concluded.

14. Ms M Smith

To the Chair of Communities and Place

In your committee on 27 November I asked if the Administration would consider engaging 1 or 2 more play park co-ordinators, as it seems to be the only way forward in assisting areas to raise money towards the capital and revenue investment of play parks in Highland; could you therefore confirm this is something you will give serious consideration to in your Budget talks?

Response:

Our first priority is to ensure that the current post of play strategy coordinator can be made permanent as it is currently funded by the Scottish Government until 31 March 2026. We will also consider engaging up to two more play park co-ordinators if sufficient revenue funding can be found.

15. Mr R MacKintosh

To the Leader of the Council

Given the prominence rise towards the social media platform BlueSky, will the council expand on it's social media outlet by joining the platform?

Response:

As with other public sector bodies, The Corporate Communications and Resilience Team keep a close eye on developments in social media. Accounts have been created on BlueSky and Threads in anticipation of any changes needing to be made in the near future and a request has been raised with ICT to get the BlueSky account verified.

16. Mr C Ballance

To the Leader of the Council

To ask the Council Leader Whether Extended Producer Responsibility Funds, scheduled to be collected from 2025, and assuming they come to local Councils as previously promised, will be ring-fenced to support community waste reduction projects across Highland Region?

Response:

At this stage it is not possible to provide detail on the use of any additional estimated funding, further detail is still required for 25/26 and the longer-term. The Extended Producer Responsibility financial implications will be considered by the Council as part of annual financial planning and budget setting.

17. Mr D Macpherson

To the Leader of the Council

What immediate steps are being undertaken by this Highland Council Administration to begin addressing the truly appalling and quite breathtaking conclusions of the Scottish Human Rights Commission, in their recent Report (November 2024) entitled "Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands?"

Response:

The Council welcomes the report from the Scottish Human Rights Commission. It expresses the voice of a number of people living within our communities across the Highlands and Islands. I intend to write the Commission seeking an early meeting to explore their findings in more detail as it is important for us as a Council and for the wider public partnership in the Highlands, to understand the detail that sits behind the main findings.

The Council already recognises a number of the challenges identified in the report. This is why our delivery plan, that the whole Chamber agreed to last year, focuses upon adult care, creation of employment and creating integrated points of delivery and why as a Council we have agreed an investment plan to target investment in facilities across Highland and a Highland Housing Challenge to focus activity in working in partnership to build houses.

Given the cross-cutting nature of the findings I will be asking the Community Planning Partnership to review the findings of the report and consider where action may already be being taken as a result of the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan and the focus on tackling inequality, but also potential gaps.

APPENDIX 1 - QUESTION 4

School	Total Courses Per School					
	2024		2023		2022	
	Advanced Higher	Higher	Advanced Higher	Higher	Advanced Higher	Higher
Alness	8	20	5	18	9	15
Ardnamurchan	7	18	9	17	7	17
Charleston	8	19	11	22	12	20
Culloden	9	24	10	23	14	24
Dingwall	14	24	9	25	12	24
Dornoch	8	14	6	15	11	13
Farr	0	10	4	11	4	10
Fortrose	14	19	10	19	10	20
Gairloch	7	13	6	16	6	15
Glenurquhart	7	16	9	18	9	19
Golspie	2	14	10	18	0	20
Grantown	9	19	12	17	12	16
HVA/Digital School	7	5	7	4	3	3
Invergordon	2	17	2	17	4	20
Inverness High	1	19	4	17	4	19
Inverness Royal	19	31	17	30	14	32
Kilchuimen	2	11	4	10	4	12
Kingussie	13	22	13	20	11	21
Kinlochbervie	0	7	0	5	1	9
Kinlocheleven	7	14	3	17	4	14
Lochaber	9	22	10	22	9	23
Mallaig	8	11	5	16	7	16
Millburn	17	35	13	30	16	29
Nairn	9	17	9	20	8	18
Plockton	13	18	9	20	9	18
Portree	11	18	14	19	11	19
Tain	8	20	8	19	5	20
Thurso	7	18	9	19	8	19
Ullapool	9	15	9	15	11	15
Wick	7	18	8	18	8	17