

## **HIGHLAND COUNCIL - HOW IT WORKS and HOW TO CONTACT US**

The Highland Council is the largest Local Authority in the UK. It's often said that it's as big as Belgium or Wales. It extends to nearly 26.5 thousand square kilometres and has a population of 217,500 people. This gives it a population density of 8.2 people per square kilometre compared with the Scottish average of 66. From that alone you can see that Highland is very rural and this in itself causes particular problems for the Local Authority.

The Council has 80 elected members and there are four in Skye.

It employs nearly 12,000 staff.

The work of the Council touches the lives of everyone living, working and visiting the Highlands. Through its employment and the wages generated into economies and its spending programmes, it is the single biggest economic driver in the area.

Its revenue budget – that is the money spent on staff, wages and keeping services going is nearly £600m per year.

It has a capital programme of £65m a year and a £30m Housing Revenue Account. At nearly £700m - this is big money. This money isn't just spent by officers on what they think is a good idea. A big business like the Council needs to be organised.

There are 80 Elected Members as I've said and they represent 22 Wards throughout the Highlands.

All the Wards are multi member wards with 3 or 4 elected members in each Ward.

The boundaries of the Wards were not decided by the Council but by the Boundaries Commission which is an independent body. Their purpose in life is to set Electoral parity between Wards. Members were elected to Wards by the Single Transferable vote.

The Council organises its decision-making by Committee. This is not true of all Local Authorities – some of which operate a Cabinet system. These Council Committees reflect the division of services by and large.

So, all 80 members sit on the Highland Council. This meets in Inverness and sets policy and strategy for the Council and ratifies Strategic Committee minutes.

Members also sit on Strategic Committees. Not all the members sit on every single committee. They make up of Strategic Committees with one or two exceptions, is dealt with on political lines. Membership of Committee is determined by the number of Members in political parties. There is, effectively, a built in majority for the Administration which at present is formed of Independent and Liberal Democrat Councillors.

The Strategic Committees are:

- Resources – deals with financial affairs of the Council, personnel, health and safety, legal matters, training, non-housing property and information systems

- ECS – which deals with Education, Cultural, Recreational and sporting matters
- Housing and Social Work Committee which includes strategic Housing management and enabling functions, building maintenance, community care plans and children’s services plans
- Planning, Environment and Development Co0mmittee deals with Planning and Building Standards, Economic Development, Tourism, Environmental interests, countryside and heritage.
- TECS Committee – Transport, Environmental and Community Services – includes roads, harbours, ferries, flood prevention, transportation, waste management, consumer protection and public health.

There is also an Audit and Scrutiny Committee which reports directly to the full Council and scrutinises the standards and effectiveness of the work of the Council.

Additionally, there is also a Gaelic Committee which promotes the Gaelic language and culture.

In addition top these Strategic Committees, there is also an Inverness City Committee. This deals with matters pertaining to Inverness City only. Because of the size of the Council area, for operational purposes, Services are arranges and managed in three areas. There is a Corporate Manager for each area and Ward Managers for each Ward or combination of Wards in some cases. The three areas are Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, Ross, Skye and Lochaber and Inverness, Nairn and Badenoch and Strathspey.

There are Planning and licensing committees for these three areas and Members from the individual Wards serve on one or other of these Committees.

We also have a joint committee with the NHS on Children and Young People and joint boards with the Islands for Police, Fire and Valuation purposes.

It is for the Administration of the Council to set priorities and budgets. The priorities of the Council are set out in the Administration’s programme which is called ‘Strengthening the Highlands’. Copies of that are widely available through the Councils Service Point network and on the web. The expectation of the Administration and the Senior Management of the Council is that Officers will work to deliver that programme.

The Council is also monitors on its performance. Indeed, the Council was subject up to 100 regulatory visits of inspections of one sort or another during any calendar year. The Scottish Government has indicated that it intends to reduce that regulatory burden with Councils who become better at assessing their own performance and taking into account the views of the public on the ways that the Council operate.

Highland Council does publish considerable amounts of Performance Information all of which is available on the web but is also included, for example, in the Council Tax leaflet which is sent to all properties in the area.

There is a report published in local newspapers and individual inspection results are available when they are published.

In addition the Council and various partner agencies in Highland have signed up along with the Government to what is called the Single Outcome Agreement.

The Agreement sets out what the Council intends to achieve along with its partners for the people of Highland. This is increasingly seen as the way in which the Council and its partner agencies will deliver Scottish Government objectives. Inevitable, Single Outcome Agreements will be the way in which public sector performance and ultimately budgets will be dealt with by the Government.

Whilst some of this is fairly high level strategy and policy, it still impinges on the day to day lives of everyone in Highland. These policies and strategies influence the way in which the Council operates its business and the way in which services are delivered to individual communities.

It is clear from the performance information that we collect and publish that not everything we do meets with universal acclaim. This is not surprising given the size of the organisation and the business. We all know that when we deal with businesses large and small, that things could have been dealt with better and improvements can always be made.

So – how do you contact the Council to make enquiry or comment or complaint, or indeed, to say when things are well done.

Mainly people still contact us by phone or letter. People also make face to face visits to offices and Service Points. These will inevitably remain the main ways in which people contact us. However, increasingly people wish to use the internet to contact the Council, or to transact business with the Council at times which suit them. To deal with the volume of telephone and transactions, the Council has a service Centre in Alness and a network of Service Points throughout the Highlands. People can also e mail Services directly and people can fill in comments/ complaints forms on the web and have them dealt directly by the Council.