

The Highland Council

Agenda Item	8.
Report No	EDU/24/23

Committee: Education Committee

Date: 23 November 2023

Report Title: Community, Sports, and Leisure Facility Strategy

Report By: Executive Chief Officer, Education & Learning

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report proposes a two-stage approach to the development of vibrant community hubs in Highland communities incorporating community, sports, leisure, library, and other services as follows:

- i. Stage 1 - the development of a Highland Council strategic framework for the development of community hubs as proposed in this report.
- ii. Stage 2 – the development of local plans at associated school group (ASG) area level which creates 29 plans for community, sport, leisure, library, and other facilities important to communities.

1.2 The proposed strategy recognises current constraints on capital investment and the challenging financial outlook. The strategy provides the opportunity to:

- i. ensure that best use of available capital investment is made, and opportunities to develop hubs within existing capital plans are recognised at an early stage in project planning,
- ii. supports the Council's asset rationalisation plan by looking to co-location of provision within communities,
- iii. supports the leveraging in of external funding, including from agencies such as sportscotland, through clear and articulated vision and strategy for facilities.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to agree to recommend to the Council:

- i. the community/sport and leisure facility strategy set out in this report; and
- ii. subject to (i) above, that a report(s) be considered at a future Education Committee meeting which details plans for each Associated School Group area.

3. Implications

- 3.1 Resource – Capital: The leveraging in of external funding may come with expectations around Council match funding. This work will be affected by future decisions the council may take on budget setting. The strategy will look in the first instance to the extent that existing capital project priorities and budgets can be utilised, e.g., within scope of school build projects. A business case approach will also underpin specific project decisions, with opportunities for increased income, efficiencies and savings from asset rationalisation being some of the potential benefits to be realised.
- 3.1.1 Resource – Revenue: There are operating efficiencies to be achieved through taking a hub approach and multi-disciplinary staff.
- 3.2 Legal – there are no legal implications for the Council arising from the recommendations in this report.
- 3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island) – there are some notable examples of the Council having created school and community facilities which have become vibrant community hubs. Agreement of a community facilities strategy will help the Council to develop facilities which contribute to the health of communities across the Highlands.
- 3.4 Climate Change / Carbon Clever - creating multi-use buildings where services can be co-located presents opportunities that will contribute to net zero targets.
- 3.5 Risk - there are no risk implications arising from the recommendations in this report.
- 3.6 Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, processes, or people) – there are no health and safety implications for the Council arising from the recommendations in this report.
- 3.7 Gaelic - there are no Gaelic implications for the Council arising from the recommendations in this report.

4. Background

- 4.1 At its meeting held on 17 November 2021 the Education Committee noted “the new approach to sports facilities investment being taken by sportscotland and its willingness to support the Highland Council’s strategic priorities for sports facility development as the Council develops its capital programme”. This was in the context of sportscotland having indicated a shift in its application-based facility funding model to one of working strategically with the Highland Council to support it in achieving its objectives, particularly where projects support equality, diversity, and inclusion.

- 4.2 While the discussion started with sportscotland wishing to partner with the Council on sports facilities, it is clear that Highland communities and the people living in them engage in a range of services and the highest increases in participation having been achieved in the past through the provision of multi-use facilities where, for example, libraries, sports facilities, community meeting spaces and service points have been co-located. There are many services which are trying to reach the same customers and co-location make this easier, more cost effective and is better for customers.
- 4.3 Considering facility provision on a wider basis also allows more of the strategic aims of the Council to be achieved. Other benefits of developing a strategic approach to community hub development investment include:
- Making facilities more cost effective (reducing costs to the Council through having a single staff team rather than different teams in different buildings).
 - Cost reduction through net zero and combining community buildings and services under one roof.
 - Combining development and funding opportunities to achieve the best results for communities such as:
 - The Council's schools capital programme.
 - External funding (e.g., **sportscotland**).
 - The Council's capital maintenance budget.
 - Developer contributions.
 - Opportunity funding applications (e.g., lottery applications)
 - Maintaining and developing existing facilities so that they stay relevant to communities; and
 - Supporting the overall health and wellbeing of communities in a way which is broader than just physical activity.

5. Introduction

- 5.1 It has never been more important for the Highland Council to have a strategic approach to investment in high quality, affordable community, sports, and leisure facilities. Equality, diversity, and inclusion are increasingly important as our whole society has been affected by the wider economic situation that we are living in as individuals, families, businesses, and the public sector.
- 5.2 Our children, young people, and older people in particular have seen longer-term impacts following the pandemic and local facilities and planning for their development is key to re-establishing and improving the health of our Highland communities. It is important not only to create places where people can be active, whether they want swimming lessons for their young child, to walk on a treadmill or participate in formal sports activities, but also to provide places which support healthy and engaged communities with good access to public services.
- 5.3 The challenges that we collectively face in the Highlands are common to those faced in many other areas and this strategy will support the Council's plans for: addressing decreasing public resources; net zero; asset rationalisation; efficiency; supporting communities and people continuing to live, work and study in the Highlands. On top of that are particular challenges posed by the geography of the Highlands and local facilities are critical to the health of our communities with local planning being fundamental to future investment.

5.4 To ensure that there is a long-term plan for our communities, this strategy seeks to ensure that key links are made, particularly with the future of the school estate (which often forms natural focus points for communities) and local development plans. This document sets out the principles for investment over the long-term and the next step towards ensuring the area is well served by appropriate facilities will be the development of individual plans for each of the Council's 29 associated school group areas.

6. Proposed Approach

6.1 There are 29 associated school groups (ASGs) across the Highlands which provide communities with long-established locations in what are widely accepted to be "natural" focal points. The location of secondary schools can also be used as a way of developing a reasonably equitable way of delivering services naturally, accounting for population size and rurality. It is recognised that the ASG approach works less well in the City of Inverness and would have to be adjusted.

6.2 Communities and schools have similar requirements, both require the following:

- Library
 - Integrated school and community libraries require a smaller footprint than separate facilities while offering improved opportunities for school pupils to access library services before and after the school day.
 - Combining libraries and leisure centres in schools and integrating front of house library/leisure roles allows staffing to be deployed efficiently to reduce costs, improve access, and increase levels of customer support.
 - A community library, in the context of a school community, creates an informal drop-in space which supports the wider health of communities.
- Sport/Leisure
 - Schools and communities both require similar facilities such as swimming pools, games halls, sports pitches, school gyms.
 - Communities also require exercise studios and fitness suites which generate income to offset operating costs. Day-time access is required to make this fully effective.
- Other services (HLH) – where other non-building-based services are co-located (e.g., youth work, active schools) synergies and efficiencies are created which support the Council's aims and make improvements for communities by having services under one roof.
- Other services (Highland Council) - There are opportunities to work collaboratively to establish better use of the Council's estate by co-locating a wide range of services, a good example are service points where co-location has both safeguarded accessibility to the service and delivered efficiencies in staffing and infrastructure.
- Other partners – it might be possible to plan future service delivery with other community planning partners if a long-term approach to developments can be taken.

6.3 While basing the strategy on a presumption of co-location of as many services under one roof as possible is challenging in the current capital funding context, it sets up the Council well in terms of capital planning, planning for developer contributions, being better able to attract extent funding, and in taking a planned approach to asset rationalisation and net zero strategies.

7. Proposed Vision

7.1 It is proposed that the Council's vision for its community, sports and leisure facilities be to create vibrant community hubs which bring together as many services as is possible under one roof.

7.2 What can be achieved through this is multi-faceted. First and foremost, it is about improving the quality of life for people and communities. This model creates facilities which are relevant to communities because there are multiple reasons to visit them. It creates social spaces where people can integrate, as well as providing opportunities to meet around common interests. These kinds of facilities are key to community, as well as individual health and wellbeing and make lives better for people living in them. It will:

- Deliver a vibrant community campus for learning and leisure that improves the lives of residents and visitors and supports multiple national and local priorities.
- Help people to be more active with all of the physical and mental health, quality of life and community health benefits that are associated with being more active.
- Support community health and wellbeing through the creation of vibrant community hubs. The more services that can be brought together under one roof, the more reasons people will have to visit and engage with facilities. Social engagement is increasingly recognised as being important for community and individual health, even delaying or lessening the effects on some health conditions.
- Work with community stakeholders to deliver a cohesive and dynamic programme of activities and an effective model for maximising community use of facilities.

7.2 This vision also allows the Council and partners to deliver a host of other objectives because integrated community hubs:

- Support the net zero and asset rationalisation plans through combining facilities and services under one roof, contributing to addressing challenges relating to the Council having an ageing estate.
- Are economically efficient through:
 - Being able to integrate staff, thereby creating operational efficiencies.
 - Being able to rationalise properties thereby lessening the property maintenance burden on the Council.
 - Creating energy efficient buildings contributing to net zero

7.3 This strategy will support other critical aims of the Council and partners:

- inform capital planning.
- link with development planning
- link with community planning
- support the implementation of other strategies such as the Active Highland Strategy.

7.4 Vibrant community hubs are good for communities and service providers alike and have a key role to play in individual and community health. Healthy communities with good, relevant local services support employment and business investment, further improving quality of life in communities.

8. Strategic Approach

- 8.1 Secondary school catchment areas have been long established in the Highland Council area and naturally take account of both population sizes and rurality. Secondary schools tend to be based in the main centres of population with primary schools providing options for smaller more locally based facilities where travel times to larger centres of population and/or local population sizes provide a rationale for stand-alone provision which supplements that provided in larger communities. Using associated school group (ASG) areas as a basis for planning community facilities forms a reasonably equitable way of establishing future investment needs.

The ASG approach:

- Naturally leads to the main provision being in the town in a locality being focused on secondary schools.
 - Creates the opportunity to take account of towns and villages outside of the place which hosts the secondary school, effectively creating a plan for each ASG so that larger towns can have some provision at primary schools. This will help support rural and reduce travel distances for people accessing services.
 - Would have to be adjusted in the City of Inverness to avoid over-provision and to take account of the need for the city, in a Highland context, as the most financially viable location for regional facilities.
 - Could lend itself to working with other Community Planning Partners who deliver local services or require having a local staff presence.
- 8.2 Until the wider economic situation improves it is difficult to use the ASG model as a basis for planning swimming pool provision with pools being costly to build and operate. It is considered impractical to increase the number of pools in the foreseeable future because of the cost of maintaining and operating the current stock, instead, the focus should be on increasing energy efficiency and seeking longer-term opportunities for co-location as described in this report.

9. Strategic Context

- 9.1 There are many policy and strategic aims of the Council and partners which would be supported by adopting this strategic approach. For example, the Active Highland Strategy was endorsed by the Highland Community Planning Partnership in 2016. In recognising the changes which have taken place since then, the Partnership has asked NHS Highland to develop a refreshed Active Highland Strategy which supports the outcomes of the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan (HOIP) and the Active Scotland Outcomes Framework (ASOF). With so many people of all ages living in Highland Communities being dependent on local facilities, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, facility planning, and investment is key to supporting the delivery of the strategy which seeks to support people to be more active in all areas of community life because of the significant health benefits that being active brings.

- 9.2 The Active Highland and national health and physical activity strategies highlight the importance of taking a whole system approach to help people to be active and healthy at all stages and areas of their lives. This includes links between school activity and sports clubs so that people can be supported to remain active throughout their lives, active travel, green health, play and community activities which support mental health and wellbeing, etc.

- 9.3 This approach would support a range of policy objective such as:
- Asset rationalisation.
 - Net zero.
 - Highland Outcome Improvement Plan (HOIP) objectives relating to improving the lives of people in communities.
 - Making the Highlands a more attractive place to live, work and do business.
 - The health promotion/preventative agendas.

10. Successful Examples

- 10.1 There are a number of examples of where the Council has built facilities which have improved community life over past capital programmes. These include:
- Aviemore Community Facility – this combined a primary school, library, leisure centre, service point and village hall facility. A community owned village hall and library were closed to build the new centre and the combination of the facilities has saved staff costs (by combining the reception role with the library one) and resulted in increased use. The centre is incredibly busy after the end of the school day and the library acts as an informal community meeting space particularly for parents of primary school aged children.
 - The Fingal Centre, Portree – when a new secondary school was being built the Council took the opportunity to incorporate: a joint school and community library; leisure centre; and archive centre into the facility. This allowed the former swimming pool and library, which were separate buildings, to be closed with the associated property cost savings. Community use of the facilities increased.
 - Sunart Centre – When the new Ardnamurchan High School was built, library, leisure and community space was included, partly through designing the school facilities in a way which allows community access. This approach allows provision to be made for school and community use without significantly increasing the footprint of the building compared with it being a standalone school and is a proportionate way of ensuring that there is provision for smaller communities.
 - East Caithness Community Facility – the creation of the new school allowed the Council to close the old town pool and library, generating property efficiencies while significantly improving services and increasing footfall to the library and leisure centre.
 - Grantown Service Point – the library and service point in Grantown were combined and even a modest example like this has led to increased visitors in both the service point and library.
- 10.2 There are examples of similar approaches in other local authority areas with one example being Clackmannanshire Council developing a wellbeing hub based on similar principles as the Highland examples above.

11. Implementation

- 11.1 Should the Council adopt this strategic approach of developing integrated school and community leisure and library facilities this could (from a capital resource perspective) be linked to the schools capital programme on a case-by-case basis in communities, taking account of existing facilities, their suitability and condition, leading to asset rationalisation opportunities. This will allow a planned approach which can also take advantage of external funding opportunities.
- 11.2 It is recommended that this report be adopted as the Council's strategic approach to community facility provision and that the next step be to carry out the detailed work on an ASG-by-ASG basis which will inform future Council capital planning work as well as supporting the work which it is doing on asset rationalisation, net zero, etc. through its thematic groups.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer, Education & Learning

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Background Papers: None

Appendices: None