

The Highland Council
No.8 2024/2025

Minutes of Meeting of the Highland Council held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Thursday 12 December 2024 at 10.20am.

Bill Lobban in the Chair

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

Present:

Mrs S Atkin
Mr M Baird
Mr A Baldrey
Mr C Ballance
Mr A Baxter
Dr C Birt
Mr B Boyd
Mr R Bremner
Mr I Brown
Mr J Bruce
Mr M Cameron (and remote)
Mrs I Campbell
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair
Mr A Christie
Mrs M Cockburn
Mr S Coghill (remote)
Mrs T Collier (remote)
Ms L Dundas
Mr J Edmondson
Ms S Fanet
Mr J Finlayson
Mr D Fraser
Mr L Fraser
Mr R Gale
Mr K Gowans
Mr J Grafton
Mr A Graham
Mr M Green
Mr D Gregg
Dr M Gregson
Mr R Gunn
Mrs J Hendry
Ms M Hutchison (remote)
Mr A Jarvie
Mrs B Jarvie (remote)
Ms L Johnston

Mr R Jones
Mr S Kennedy (remote)
Ms E Knox
Ms L Kraft
Mr B Lobban
Mr P Logue
Mr D Louden
Ms M MacCallum
Mr W MacKay (remote)
Mr G MacKenzie
Mrs I MacKenzie
Mr S Mackie
Mr A MacKintosh
Mr R MacKintosh
Mrs A MacLean (and remote)
Ms K MacLean
Mr T MacLennan (remote)
Mr D Macpherson
Mr D McDonald
Mrs J McEwan
Mr J McGillivray (remote)
Mr D Millar (remote)
Mr H Morrison (remote)
Mr C Munro (remote)
Ms L Niven
Mr P Oldham
Mrs M Paterson
Mrs M Reid (remote)
Mr M Reiss
Mrs T Robertson
Mr K Rosie
Mrs M Ross
Mrs L Saggars
Mr A Sinclair
Mr R Stewart
Ms K Willis

In Attendance:

Chief Executive
Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate
Assistant Chief Executive - People
Assistant Chief Executive – Place
Chief Officer – Legal and Corporate Governance
Joint Democratic Services Managers

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mrs H Crawford and Ms M Smith.

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

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

Item 4 – Mr M Cameron, Mr A Christie and Mr D Gregg
Item 7 - Mr A Christie and Mr D Gregg
Item 9 - Mr A Christie and Mr D Gregg
Item 10 (Question 3) – Mr B Lobbam
Item 10 (Question 11) - Mr A Christie and Mr D Gregg
Item 16.1 – Mr D Gregg

3. Medium Term Financial Plan: 2025/26 – 2027/28 Plana Iomhasail Meadhan-ùine 2025/26 gu 2027/28

There had been circulated Report No. HC/41/24 by the Chief Officer – Corporate Finance.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the detail of the Scottish Government's grant settlement had not yet been received and officers would require time to analyse the impacts on the Council's financial plans;
- given the workload of officers in preparing the budget for 2025/26 to be considered at the Special Council meeting on 6 March 2025, it was proposed a recommendation be added that Members agree not to hold a special meeting to consider any aspects of the budget in the interim;
- the role of the Opposition was to scrutinise and improve upon the Administration's budget and the above proposal removed the democratic right of Opposition Members to requisition a special meeting of the Council to discuss the budget;
- concern that details of new and additional savings proposals and other strategies would therefore not be shared with Opposition Members until the Special Council meeting on 6 March 2025;
- constituents would expect all Members, irrespective of political allegiances, to be involved in open discussions as part of the budget setting process in the interests of transparency and to allow for more Member and public scrutiny;
- the report repeated the information previously reported to Council on the budget gap, uncertainties, pressures and inflation and concern there was no urgency from the Administration in response to these issues;
- proposed increases in Council Tax did not recognise the pressures on people's domestic budgeting, projected low pay awards, increased use of food banks and the impact of the increase in national insurance contributions on charities, third sector and businesses;
- it was important to recognise the report had been issued prior to the Scottish Government's budget and settlement being confirmed;
- the Scottish Government's settlement for local authorities was better than expected and it provided the Council with choices and a new canvas for the work around the budget. The Administration would seek to ensure the budget reflected the priorities of Members and the people of the Highlands;

- the additional recommendation had been brought forward on the basis that the significant volume of officer time required to deliver the budget in March 2025 would have to be diverted into preparing papers for a special meeting;
- the Administration welcomed the input of any Member who wished to bring forward proposals as part of the budget setting process;
- the Administration had actively sought to protect Highland communities from the level of Council tax rises implemented by other local authorities and would continue to do so as part of the work to be undertaken prior to the scheduled Council budget meeting in March 2025;
- concern that local Members had not been consulted on, included in any review, or made aware that earmarking of reserves was no longer required for the Badaguish Outdoor Centre. This proposal should be withdrawn until local Members had been fully briefed and all possible uses of these reserves in Ward 20 fully explored;
- further clarification was sought, and provided, that official confirmation had not yet been received in relation to how much of the increase in national insurance contributions for the public sector would be covered by monies from the UK and Scottish Governments. The wider partner impact and associated implications for the Council was also being highlighted as a risk;
- there was a need to restructure the Council to make it more efficient, and ensure the maximum use and prudent management of its finances and the importance of not investing in projects that did not enjoy overall public support;
- the potential for engagement with the public on the budget to be undertaken outwith the festive holiday period in future given this was one of the busiest times of year for Highland residents;
- concern at the Scottish Government's rationale for the Council not receiving a further share of Learning Estate Investment Programme (LEIP) funding for a substantial part of its new school estate and that as a result Council tax payers in Highland were being asked to fund investment in new schools;
- further clarity was sought, and provided, on the reasons for repurposing of earmarked reserves in respect of Mental Health Officers, Phase 3 of the Investment Fund – Green Energy Hub, Phase 2 Investment Fund - Environment/Climate Change – Renewables, and Phase 1 Investment Fund - Visitor Management Strategy. It was emphasised that the relevant Services had been fully involved in the review of earmarked reserves;
- further clarity was sought, and provided, on the reasons for repurposing of earmarked reserves in respect of Period Poverty and Staffing Conditions and Development Fund - Consolidation of Living Wage. In addition, it was explained that earmarked reserves continued to be in place to support change and transformation around depots and office rationalisation;
- further clarity was sought, and provided, on the reasons for repurposing of earmarked reserves in respect Education Transitional Funding and Phase 4 Investment Fund - Innovation in Education. It was emphasised that reserves could only be used for one off or non-recurring items and that the element required to support the Workforce for the Future Portfolio continued to be for education related delivery; and
- a proposal to repurpose the £700K from the Education Transitional Fund directly into the Education budget to help improve the attainment performance across the Highlands and for additional PSA support.

Thereafter, Mr R Bremner seconded by Mr B Lobban **MOVED** the recommendations in the report and the following additional recommendations:-

- i. repurposing of Earmarked Reserves in Appendix 3 of the report be withdrawn and the Badaguish reserve remain as it was, and where it was, until local Members for Badenoch and Strathspey had been fully briefed as to the status of this reserve and all possible uses for this reserve in Ward 20 had been fully explored; and
- ii. not to hold any special meeting of the Council in relation to the review, discussion of or receipt of an update in respect of the Council's annual budget or budget preparation work in respect of the annual budget prior to the Special Meeting of the Council on 6 March 2025.

As a **FIRST AMENDMENT**, Mr R Gale, seconded by Mrs B Jarvie, moved the recommendations in the report and the following additional recommendations:

- i. repurposing of Earmarked Reserves in Appendix 3 of the report be withdrawn and the Badaguish reserve remain as it was, and where it was, until local Members for Badenoch and Strathspey had been fully briefed as to the status of this reserve and all possible uses for this reserve in Ward 20 had been fully explored; and
- ii. to repurpose the £700K from the Education Transitional Fund directly into the Education Budget to help improve the attainment performance across the Highlands and for additional PSA support.

As a **SECOND AMENDMENT**, Mr A MacKintosh, seconded by Mr D Gregg, moved the recommendations in the report and the following additional recommendations:

- i. repurposing of Earmarked Reserves' in Appendix 3 of the report be withdrawn and the Badaguish reserve remain as it was, and where it was, until local Members for Badenoch and Strathspey had been fully briefed as to the status of this reserve and all possible uses for this reserve in Ward 20 had been fully explored; and
- ii. that this Council allows special meetings called by councillors to discuss the forthcoming budget before the already timetabled meeting.

On a vote being taken between the **MOTION** and **FIRST AMENDMENT**, the **MOTION** received 42 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 28 votes, with no abstentions. The **MOTION** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion

Ms S Atkin, Mr A Baldrey, Mr C Ballance, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Mrs I Campbell, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Mrs T Collier, Ms L Dundas, 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 Louden, Mr G MacKenze, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Mr C Munro, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mr K Rosie, Ms M Ross, Ms K Willis.

For the Amendment:

Mr M Baird, Mr A Baxter, Mr J Bruce, Mr A Christie, Mr J Edmundson, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Mr D Gregg, Dr M Gregson, Mr R Gunn, Mr A Jarvie, Mrs B Jarvie, Mr P Logue, Ms M MacCallum, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr S Mackie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mrs A MacLean, Mr D Macpherson, Mr D McDonald, Ms J McEwan, Mr J McGillivray, Mr M Reiss, Mrs T Robertson, Mrs L Saggars, Mr A Sinclair, Mr R Stewart.

On a vote being taken between the **MOTION** and **SECOND AMENDMENT**, the **MOTION** received 43 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 27 votes, with no abstentions. The **MOTION** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:

For the Motion

Ms S Atkin, Mr A Baldrey, Mr C Ballance, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Mrs I Campbell, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Mrs T Collier, Ms L Dundas, 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 Louden, Mr G MacKenze, Mr R MacKintosh, Mr W MacKay, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Mr C Munro, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mr K Rosie, Ms M Ross, Ms K Willis.

For the Amendment:

Mr M Baird, Mr A Baxter, Mr J Bruce, Mr A Christie, Mr J Edmundson, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Mr D Gregg, Dr M Gregson, Mr R Gunn, Mr A Jarvie, Mrs B Jarvie, Mr P Logue, Ms M MacCallum, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr S Mackie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mr D Macpherson, Mr D McDonald, Ms J McEwan, Mr J McGillivray, Mr M Reiss, Mrs T Robertson, Mrs L Saggars, Mr A Sinclair, Mr R Stewart.

Decision

The Council:-

- i. **NOTED** the update provided relating to the UK Government Budget;
- ii. **NOTED** the update provided relating to the 4 December 2024 Scottish Government Budget;
- iii. **NOTED** the update relating to Medium-Term Financial Planning, the forecast budget gap, and actions and workstreams being taken forward;
- iv. **NOTED** the update provided regarding review of Earmarked Reserves;
- v. **AGREED** to the re-allocation of re-purposed reserves into the Future Investment Capacity Fund;
- vi. **NOTED** the update provided regarding the potential Highland Investment Plan (HIP) funding implications and Capital Quantum, and relevance to the separate HIP update provided on the agenda for this meeting;
- vii. **NOTED** the update provided regarding Budget Engagement;
- viii. **NOTED** the proposed draft Financial Sustainability Indicators with these to be updated and incorporated into the report to Special Council on 6 March 2025;
- ix. **AGREED** repurposing of Earmarked Reserves' in Appendix 3 of the report be withdrawn and the Badaguish reserve remain as it was, and where it was, until local Members for Badenoch and Strathspey had been fully briefed as to the status of this reserve and all possible uses for this reserve in Ward 20 had been fully explored; and
- x. **AGREED** not to hold any special meeting of the Council in relation to the review, discussion of or receipt of an update in respect of the Council's annual budget or budget preparation work in respect of the annual budget prior to the Special Meeting of the Council on 6 March 2025.

4. Highland Investment Plan (HIP) – Progress Update Plana Tasgaidh na Gàidhealtachd – Cunntas Adhartais

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 M Cameron – as a family member was an employee at Charleston Academy

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/42/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place, who gave a presentation in amplification of the report.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the Administration had launched the HIP to provide a way forward that would continue the Council's sustainability and substantially increase investment in roads across Highland, particularly in the areas that needed it most. The HIP would also invest in the Council's school estate, with a particular focus on Dingwall and Thurso. Additionally, there would be a focus on Community Points of Delivery (PODs) and other investment in capital infrastructure. The HIP was considered to be one of the most innovative programmes by a local authority in Scotland, supporting the ability to deliver a capital programme that could not have been realised without it. It was based on a sound financial footing, and the importance of support and buy-in from communities was emphasised;
- attention was drawn to section 7.3 of the report relating to flood mitigation work in Dingwall, which was welcomed as businesses and development at Dingwall Business Park had been badly affected for years by flooding in the area;
- St Clement's School had been mentioned at 14 Full Council meetings since the current Administration had come into power in 2022, and the new school would have been completed if the Council had gone ahead with it when it had originally been moved. Other Members added that St Clement's School had been the subject of discussion for many years prior to 2022, and welcomed the fact that something was now being done about it;
- concerns raised previously regarding secondary school pupils who were unable to eat their lunch in a dry, warm and secure place were reiterated, and disappointment was expressed regarding the response to the Member Question in that regard;
- whilst there were some good elements in the HIP, such as the approach to procurement, it was not holistic;
- the primary reason the HIP had been established was the failure of the Scottish Government to award LEIP funding for five new school buildings, and it had been the right thing to do. However, it was questioned how the money that was being borrowed was going to be repaid, and what impact that repayment would have on future Councils;
- investment in schools and improving the educational environment and learning experience for young people in Highland was to be welcomed, but it was necessary to be realistic;

- the HIP would allow the Council to improve services across local communities. The proposed PODs would include, where possible, new schools, leisure and community facilities, external sports provision, Service Points, office spaces, partner services and improved depots. The HIP would be transformational for Highland, adopting a place-based approach to service delivery and providing key partners, such as NHS Highland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, NatureScot, the emergency services and others with opportunities to co-locate, enabling a range of essential public services to be delivered from a new or refurbished local accessible site. It was crucial that all future place-based projects supported further integration and enabled the evolution of lifelong services for Highland communities;
- the internal design team had made excellent progress with the development of concept POD designs, and Members commended the most recent design video, which brought the concepts to life, providing a 3D view of how PODs could enable communities and act as a catalyst for the delivery of modern integrated Council services;
- the HIP would be a key economic driver, increasing Highland-wide job opportunities including apprenticeships, and would help maximise community benefit and support the Council's drive to sustain Highland communities;
- it was important to acknowledge the ambition and vision being shown by the Council in terms of the HIP;
- in relation to procurement, the proposed partnership approach was welcomed, and information was sought, and provided, as to whether there was facility within the proposed approach to use local contractors, as that was important, and who would be responsible for carrying out quality assurance. With regard to the Phase 1 projects, it was welcomed that the traditional means of procurement would probably be used as this meant the projects could proceed at pace. Other Members reiterated the importance of using local contractors, both in terms of community wealth building and build quality. Experience in Caithness and North Sutherland, particularly in the nuclear industry, had shown that whilst procurement frameworks could offer significant benefits there was sometimes a reliance on Tier 1 contractors to deliver significant pockets of work and, where they were not available, that could present challenges. Due to the remote location and the cost base of delivering there, sometimes only Tier 2 or 3 contractors were available and, where small parcels of work were available, it might be that the added social value was reduced. Local contractors needed to be supported to scale to the Council's needs, and offering them a clear pipeline of work into the future could give them clarity and potentially the confidence to invest in their plant equipment and staff;
- it was important to ensure the Demonstrator Project in Portree, whereby a number of public agencies were involved in moving into one location, was a success and was used as a model of good practice;
- the proposed Learning Estate Strategy that would be reported to the Education Committee worked alongside the Sports Strategy. Engagement with **sportscotland** indicated they were impressed by what the Council was doing in terms of the HIP, and it was hoped this would facilitate match funding being made available;
- the importance of supporting officers was emphasised, and information was sought, and provided, as to whether there were sufficient staff resources to drive forward the work in the HIP;
- several Members spoke to the proposals in respect of St Clement's School, during which it was emphasised that pupils from several Wards attended the school, and it was necessary to include more Elected Members in the engagement that was taking place. The proposals were exciting and positive, and some Members supported the idea of co-location on the proposed POD

site, adjacent to Dingwall Primary School, as this offered the best educational outcomes for young people. However, it was frustrating for parents and the wider community that, once again, consultation was taking place on a different site. Parents had asked for the delay in making the final decision on where the school would be because they did not have enough information. They had also asked Local Members to say that their preferred site was the existing school site;

- Dingwall Leisure Centre had just celebrated its 50th anniversary and needed upgrading, and Local Members would welcome working in partnership with High Life Highland to try to improve the facilities. Reference was also made to Highland Disability Sports, and it was suggested there was an opportunity to build a Highland-wide centre of excellence in Dingwall;
- reference was made to the opportunities associated not only with the Dingwall workstream but the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport, and it was hoped there would be consultation with NHS Highland regarding the need for increased hospital provision in the area;
- attention was drawn to the feedback in Appendix 3 of the report which indicated that extensive free parking in Dingwall was greatly appreciated;
- thanks were expressed to officers for the significant amount of work that had gone into the HIP, and the pace at which work was progressing;
- on the point being raised, it was clarified that there was a typographical error in the report, and that the final paragraph of section 6.10 summarised the partnership procurement model;
- schools were the foundation of communities, and it was extremely disappointing that Highland had the worst school estate in Scotland, with issues including damp, mould, rodents, asbestos and RAAC (Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete). Particular reference was made to the condition of St Clement's School, where some of the most vulnerable children were educated, which should have been addressed years ago. Concern was expressed that previous requests to investigate whether the condition of schools had any impact on attainment, and to carry out an analysis of the schools that could not provide a warm dry place for pupils to eat lunch, had been refused, and it was suggested that Members needed to look at how they could work together to make things better for some of the most vulnerable and needy in society;
- in terms of the financial viability of the HIP, a similar model of ringfencing revenue to generate capital had been used successfully, over a period of 25 years, to build infrastructure in New York;
- given that the HIP was a multi-billion-pound programme, it could offer fantastic opportunities for local communities beyond the buildings themselves being fit for purpose;
- Local Members welcomed the ongoing dialogue with officers regarding the Thurso workstream, and it was hoped that the community would be brought along as part of the process and there would be as much buy-in as possible;
- if the Council was making a generational commitment to Highland it was only right that the Scottish Government did so too, and it was suggested the Scottish Government should be called upon to look at the HIP. Hundreds of millions of pounds had gone to the Scottish Government as a result of ScotWind leases and consents, many of which lay along the Highland coast, and it had been promised that the funds would be used for transformational change. There was nothing more transformational than investing in young people in Highland and giving them the school estate and public services they would need for the jobs of tomorrow and the ability to stay, work and thrive in the communities they grew up in;

- reference was made to forthcoming housing development at Balloch, Tornagrain and Inverness East, and the development at Ardersier Port which was anticipated to lead to 3,500 jobs, and a plea was made that consideration be given to a community POD for Inverness East because services were already struggling;
- housing played an integral role in supporting the health and wellbeing of an aging population, and it was necessary to look to the future and implement housing solutions to meet the demands of a rapidly aging society. Information was sought, and provided, as to where these points came into the HIP;
- the inclusion of Fortrose Academy, which had not previously been in the Capital Programme, in the HIP was welcomed, as was the fact that the school estate had been looked at in the round and a methodology had been implemented to ensure that the schools in the worst condition were focused on first;
- an assurance was sought, and provided, that end users would be consulted on concept designs for future PODs, and staff safety, health and wellbeing would be prioritised;
- if the HIP came to fruition, it would deliver a totally regenerated level of infrastructure across Highland, and it was welcomed that Golspie, Dornoch and Brora featured highly in the first 10 years. However, concern was expressed that future generations would be left to repay the debt, and a request was made for a review looking at how the burden of debt could be reduced and the capital, and not just the loan charges, could be repaid. Conversely, other Members did not see the HIP as burdening future generations. The borrowing was for a purpose, which was why it was widely supported by the public, and would leave a legacy of much improved infrastructure; and
- in relation to the options appraisal process in respect of St Clement's School, Option B would require a statutory consultation. Attention was drawn to the lengthy timescale associated with statutory consultations, and it was queried whether consideration would be given to holding a Special Meeting of the Education Committee to expedite the process in the event such a consultation was required. An assurance was provided that every effort would be made to accelerate matters.

Decision

The Council:-

- NOTED** the potential indicative quantum of capital funding available over the five-year period and the associated financial implications;
- NOTED** the procurement approach to develop the five agreed Phase 1 projects to tender stage and the progress in exploring procurement routes for the delivery of other future HIP projects;
- AGREED** the proposed location for a Community Point of Delivery (POD) development in Dingwall and to commence discussions with the landowner regarding the future purchase of the required site area;
- AGREED** a contribution of £150,000 from the approved capital programme towards the flood mitigation work being carried out in Dingwall;
- NOTED** the progress in identifying the short-list of options to be taken forward to the next stage of the options appraisal process for the Community POD location in Thurso and that the Stage 3 outcome would be reported to the Council meeting on 26 June 2025;
- NOTED** that the outcomes from Stage 2 of the options appraisal process for each of the five other prioritised Phase 1 locations at Alness, Brora, Dornoch, Golspie and Invergordon (i.e. a short list of options for each location) would be reported to Council on a phased basis throughout the course of 2025.;

- vii. **NOTED** the progress in developing concept designs for future Community POD arrangements and the work being progressed in relation to how these facilities should operate differently in future;
- viii. **APPROVED** the timeline of future decisions on the Highland Investment Plan in 2025, as described in section 11.4 of the report; and
- ix. **NOTED** the progress in developing a Learning Estate Strategy and that the final version would be reported to the Education Committee meeting on 26 February 2025.

5. **Exclusion of the Public** **Às-dùnadh a' Phobaill**

The Council **AGREED** to **RESOLVE** that, under Section 50A(4) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, the public be excluded from the meeting for Item 6 only on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 6 and 9 of Part 1 of Schedule 7A of the Act.

6. **Highland Investment Plan – Investment** **Plana Tasgaidh na Gàidhealtachd – Tasgaidh**

There had been circulated separately to Members only Confidential Report No. HC/43/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

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

7. **Proposed Change to the Model of Integration** **Atharrachadh ga Mholadh a Thaobh a' Mhodail Amalachais**

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 to Report No. HC/44/24 by the Chief Executive.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- reference was made to the unprecedented challenges facing Adult Social Care (ASC), and the need for a new governance model that aligned with that used by all other Local Authorities and Health Boards in Scotland, for the benefit of the Council, NHS Highland, third sector partners, and service users. Change could lead to uncertainty, so it was critical a transparent communications strategy was put in place;
- if correctly implemented, there should be no detrimental impact for service users, and the new model would help to tackle the challenges being faced;
- timelines and target dates were required for the transition;
- it was queried how the financial challenges would be addressed during the transition period, and what the shorter term impacts might be;
- information was sought, and provided, on the stakeholders for the proposed steering group, whether lessons could be learnt from other Integration Joint Boards, the anticipated duration of the engagement process, and what pressure was being put on the Scottish Government to address the funding challenges in ASC;

- the reasoning behind the proposed change of model was summarised, and reference was made to the representations that had been made to the government in relation to the unique challenges facing ASC in Highland;
- the new integration model provided an opportunity to strengthen the collaboration between the Council and NHS Highland and improve the shift to more community based care;
- the importance of supporting families and unpaid carers through the new model was emphasised;
- with reference to the Scottish Government's suspension of implementation of the national care service bill, it was suggested that the proposals could have had a detrimental impact on ASC; and
- a summary was provided of the planned changes to governance and the anticipated benefits, which included improved access to services. If the proposals were agreed, work would commence to develop timelines and move at pace, though within NHS governance structures, with a further report anticipated in the early 2025, with input from the steering group, and the development of a risk register.

Decision

The Council **AGREED**:-

- to reconsider the model of the Scheme of Integration, including the option of moving from a Lead Agency Model to a body corporate model;
- that preparatory be undertaken to identify the optimal future integration model in Highland and to make recommendations on modifications to the model currently in place in Highland;
- a strategic Steering Group be created to oversee the required work with representation from both lead agencies including councillor and officer representation from The Highland Council and executive and non-executive director representation from NHS Highland; and
- the approach to joint communications advised in this report, to ensure that all stakeholders were fully appraised of plans as they evolved and had the chance to shape them.

8. UK Government Consultation: Electricity Consenting in Scotland Co-chomhairleachadh Riaghaltas na RA: Aontachadh Dealain ann an Alba

There had been circulated Report No. HC/45/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the Government consultation sought views on the right to appeal for initiating a challenge to a consenting decision of Scottish Ministers for onshore electricity infrastructure be reduced to 6 weeks (currently 3 months). The proposed response agreed with this timescale and the reason for this was queried as some community groups had highlighted concerns that this would not be sufficient time to submit an appeal. There was a general view amongst Members that 6 weeks to lodge an appeal was not sufficient and the majority of Members were fundamentally opposed to this;
- the proposals contained in the consultation process were designed to make the process for consenting electricity infrastructure in Scotland faster. It was felt that rushed decisions were often poor decisions. Removing the democratic right of Highland Council to call for a public local enquiry was an attempt to

centralise control and undermine the role and responsibilities of the Council. Concerns about double handed consenting could be resolved by decisions being made locally by the Council and not by the Energy Consent Unit;

- one of the arguments for quicker planning decisions was in relation to constraint payments. In 2023 constraint payments to generators were £1.4 billion in the UK and was estimated to rise to £8 billion by 2030. OFGEM should advise energy generators that the network was constrained and if they choose to build extra capacity the constraint payments would be capped. The current system rewarded developers at the expense of consumers;
- constraint payments hit the pockets of many hard working people in the Highlands that faced disproportionate high levels of fuel poverty;
- in the pre-application stage communities needed to be fully involved in order that they could trust the process; and the consultation process required to be properly defined, agreed and funding needed to be available to Community Councils to assist them with responding to major applications. In terms of public inquiries, these were an important part of the planning process and in no circumstances should the automatic right to have an inquiry be removed from local authorities. If implemented this change would have dire consequences for the Highlands;
- the push by the Government to transition to green energy to address climate change and for cheaper energy bills was behind the proposals to speed up the consenting process. The long term view of tackling climate was of utmost importance and local communities should be given all the support the Council could provide in the planning process; and
- it was stressed that the best people to make decisions about matters affecting local communities were local Elected Members.

Decision

The Council:-

- NOTED** the officer response set out in Appendix 1 to the report; and
- AGREED** to reflect further points raised at the meeting in the Council's formal response. Changes made to the response would be shared with all Members of the Council.

9. Members' Learning and Development Programme Prògram Ionnsachaidh agus Leasachaidh Bhall

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/46/24 by the Chief Officer, Legal & Corporate Governance.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- thanks were expressed for the report and to officers for their hard work to prepare the 2025 framework;

- Members were encouraged to participate in the training and briefing sessions as much as possible, as this contributed to the Council's scrutiny and decision-making processes along the way;
- thanks were expressed to the business teams for agreeing to implement shorter Member surveys which would encourage participation;
- Members were also encouraged to attend the all Members event 2025 which provided an opportunity to put forward any learning and development suggestions for future workshops. In this regard, it was suggested that self-care of Members and officers be included as concern was raised that some were working after hours, over weekends, and during recess periods which could impact their health;
- regarding 7.2 of the report, it was highlighted that training and workshops should include adaptation as part of the net zero approach; and
- it was felt that Member training should include courses that provided transferable recognised qualifications in the event that Members had to seek employment out with local government. In this regard it was requested that the Chief Executive provide a report on this to a future relevant committee.

Decision

The Council:-

- APPROVED** the refreshed Members' Learning and Development Framework;
- APPROVED** the draft Members' Learning and Development Programme for 2025;
- AGREED** the Members' Learning and Development Programme for 2025 be kept under review by the Governance Review Steering Group;
- AGREED** a future report was considered at Council on 11 December 2025;
- AGREED** Committee Chairs, in consultation with Committee Members, establish individual committee learning and development pathways;
- AGREED** to deliver an all Members event in 2025; and
- AGREED** to bring a report to the relevant committee on supporting Members with training qualifications which would support out with Council employment.

10. Question Time Àm Ceiste

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:-

Item 10.3 - Mr B Lobban- as a director of Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd
Item 10.11 - Mr A Christie – as a Non Executive Director of NHS Highland
Item 10.11- Mr D Gregg – as an employee of NHS Highland

There had been circulated Members Questions and responses received by the Chief Officer - Legal and Corporate Governance.

Member Questions

1. Mr A Christie

To the Leader of the Council

In terms of a supplementary question, As Vice Chair of the Redesign Board, the Leader would have been aware that options were being considered to create a staff welfare area which would include a canteen and coffee shop, it was queried what message the Leader had for the children of Inverness Royal Academy and Culloden Academy who had to eat their lunch in the carpark or the street.

In response, it was confirmed that the existing issues in each school would be investigated and programme would be developed to address them.

2. Mr A Christie

To the Leader of the Council

In terms of a supplementary question, it was queried whether assurances had been sought from the Chief Executive that there would be no further significant overpayments to employees.

In response, it was confirmed that this would be looked into with the complexities of paying 10,000 employees being taken into consideration.

3. Mr J Bruce

To the Leader of the Council

There was no supplementary question.

4. Mr D Gregg

To the Chair of Education Committee

In terms of a supplementary question, a report to Education Committee was requested to look at how subject availability could be improved across all schools.

In response, the Chair of Education indicated his willingness to look into this.

5. Mr M Reiss

To the Chair, Infrastructure, Environment and Economy Committee

In terms of a supplementary question, information was sought on the location of the five road sweeper vehicles not mentioned in the original answer.

In response, the Chair of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee confirmed that the information would be circulated.

6. Ms K Willis

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure Committee

In terms of a supplementary question, it was queried when special verge locations and the specialist management requirements, including appropriate care of mature trees along roadsides, would be identified in Lochaber.

In response, it was clarified that the roads department did not routinely identify special verges for management but they did work with Nature Scot, the Council's environment team, Community Councils and other interested parties to identify these.

7. Mr R Stewart

To the Leader of the Council

In terms of a supplementary question, it was asked if the Leader of the Council would take responsibility for the failure of the Academy Street project.

In response, the Leader stated that decisions regarding the project were made by the City of Inverness Area Committee.

8. Mr A Graham

To the Leader of the Council

In terms of a supplementary question, it was asked if the Leader wished to comment on the usage and low level of income generated by school property lets.

In response, the Leader felt it would be appropriate to review this in the future.

9. Mrs H Crawford

To the Chair of Education Committee

There was no supplementary question.

10. Mr P Logue

To the Leader of the Council

In terms of a supplementary question, it was asked if Members would be kept informed as the electric vehicle policy progressed.

In response, it was confirmed that this would be the case.

11. Mrs I MacKenzie

To the Leader of the Council

In terms of a supplementary question, it was asked if the Council would consider funding the Shopmobility Highland service.

In response, it was said that funding of this nature would need to be considered as part of the Council's budget process.

12. Dr M Gregson

To the Leader of the Council

In terms of a supplementary question, it was asked if the Leader agreed that the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation was not fit for purpose in terms of rural areas.

In response, the Leader indicated that he had already made contact with the Scottish Government, and officers had been asked to put together a brief in terms of what the Council was doing to mitigate what was in the report and how to corporately move forward.

13. Mrs J McEwan

To the Chair of Health and Social Care

In terms of a supplementary question, it was asked if there was a timescale for the completion of the domestic abuse services review.

In response, it was said that the pan-Highland review was in the early stages of the procurement and consultation process. A timescale would be provided once available and a paper would be issued to all Members in due course.

14. Ms M Smith

To the Chair of Communities and Place

There was no supplementary question.

15. Mr R MacKintosh

To the Leader of the Council

In terms of a supplementary question, given the importance of Highland Council having a presence on social media platforms used to expand communication and engagement with the public, should Highland Council also be looking to depart social media. Police have moved away from the platform called X, previously known as Twitter. Will the Council be planning a move away from this platform also.

In response, it was advised that there were currently no plans to move away from social media platforms.

16. Mr C Ballance

To the Leader of the Council

In terms of a supplementary question, will costs in dealing with waste packaging material being dealt with by the producer rather than Highland Council. Will there be a commitment if money comes into Highland Council, that it goes to waste removal services.

In response, there was no ability to make such an assurance, and this would have to be fed into the budget process between now and March 2025.

17. Mr D Macpherson

To the Leader of the Council

In terms of a supplementary question, what pleases you most and least about the report titled "Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands?"

In response, acknowledgement was made regarding the whole report. There would be a requirement to identify any outstanding issues of concern to people across the Highlands.

11. Membership of the Council Ballrachd na Comhairle

The Council **NOTED** that, following the By-Election held on 21 November 2024, Mr Andrew Baxter had been elected as a Member of Ward 21 (Fort William and Ardnamurchan).

In this regard, Mr Baxter was welcomed to the Council and responded accordingly.

12. Membership of Committees etc Ballrachd Chomataidhean msaa

It was **NOTED** that Mr S Mackie had joined the Scottish Liberal Democrats and as a result of the By-Election the political make-up of the Council was as follows:-

SNP – 21 / Highland Independent – 16 / Scottish Liberal Democrats – 15 / Highland Alliance – 7 / Scottish Conservative and Unionist – 6 / Scottish Green Party – 4 / Labour – 2 / Alba – 1 / Non-Aligned - 2.

It was also **NOTED** that the formula in respect of the number of places on Strategic Committees remained the same, 6/4/4/2/2.

Revised Committee membership lists had also been tabled at the meeting and were **AGREED**.

13. Appointment of Office Bearers Cur an Dreuchd Luchd-oifis

The Council **AGREED** that Mr P Oldham be appointed as Vice Chair of Pensions Committee.

14. Appointment of Members to the Highland Licensing Cur Bhall an Dreuchd gu Comataidh Ceadachd na Gàidhealtachd

Following the resignation of Mr P Oldham from the Highland Licensing Committee, the Council was asked to appoint a Member from Wards 11-21.

In this regard, nominations were received as follows:-

Cllr K MacLean
Cllr D McDonald

On a vote being taken, Ms K MacLean received 45 votes and Mr D McDonald received 26 votes, with no abstentions, the votes having been cast as follows:-

Votes for Ms K MacLean

Ms S Atkin, Mr A Baldrey, Mr C Ballance, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Mrs I Campbell, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Mr S Coghill, Ms T Collier, Ms L Dundas, Ms S Fanet, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Mr K Gowans, Mr J Grafton, 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, Ms M MacCallum, Mr W MacKay, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mr K Rosie, Ms M Ross, Ms K Willis.

Votes for Mr D McDonald:

Mr M Baird, Mr A Baxter, Mr J Bruce, Mr A Christie, Mr J Edmondson, Mr R Gale, Mr A Graham, Mr D Gregg, Dr M Gregson, Mr R Gunn, Mr A Jarvie, Mrs B Jarvie, Mr P Logue, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mrs A MacLean, Mr S Mackie, Mr D Macpherson, Mr D McDonald, Ms J McEwan, Mr J McGillivray, Mr M Reiss, Mrs T Robertson, Mrs L Saggars, Mr A Sinclair, Mr R Stewart.

Decision

The Council **AGREED** Ms Kate MacLean be appointed as a Member of the Highland Licensing Committee.

15. Deeds Executed Sgriobhainnean Lagha a Bhuilicheadh

The Council **NOTED** the list of deeds and other documents executed on behalf of the Council since the meeting held on 31 October 2024.

16. Notices of Motion Brathan Glusaid

Transparency Statements: Mr D Gregg declared a connection to item 16.1 as an employee of NHS Highland but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that he had an interest to declare:-

The following Notices of Motion had been received by the Chief Officer - Legal and Corporate Governance –

1. Council notes the 46 privately run care homes across the Highlands will not get any reimbursement for costs related to recent National Insurance changes.

Council notes 85% of our care homes already operate at a financial disadvantage due to the National Care Home Contract, which assumes 50 beds operating at 100% capacity.

Council notes the loss of 218 care home beds since 2022, and the distress each of these closures has caused to residents, their families, and local communities.

Council requests the council leader, and the Chair of Health and Social Care Committee, writes to the UK Government

- 1) to request an exemption from recent National Insurance changes for Highland care home providers to avoid additional financial pressures on our already vulnerable care homes,

- 2) to invite the Secretary of State for Scotland to meet Council Group Leaders first hand to discuss the specific circumstances affecting Highland care homes to help develop policy solutions to secure their future

Signed: Mr D Gregg Mr J Grafton Mrs T Robertson Mrs J McEwan
 Mr M Baird Mr A Baxter Ms M MacCallum Mr A Graham
 Mr R Gunn Mr R Gale

Section 95 Officer assessment of financial implications:

This motion is **not** anticipated to have a financial implication to the Council. There will be the requirement of Member/Officer time involved in the preparation of proposed letter and arrangements for the proposed meeting. It is assumed can be managed within existing time/resources.

This financial implication assessment is limited to the direct implications and actions within the motion as worded. Any subsequent implications could only be assessed were there to be any subsequent change, and assessment of implications at that time.

Integrated Impact Assessment:

The motion seeks a letter to be written to the UK Government and discussions to take place, in relation to the impact national insurance changes will have on care homes. As a result, there are no anticipated direct impacts as a result of the motion.

During a summary of the Motion, Mr D Gregg indicated that Mr D Fraser had proposed an amendment which he had accepted. Mr Fraser commented that the Motion showed one of the pressures care homes were under. He thanked Mr Gregg for bringing it forward and for accepting his amendment, which was to include care at home as well as care homes.

Decision

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

Council notes the 46 privately run care homes across the Highlands will not get any reimbursement for costs related to recent National Insurance changes.

Council notes 85% of our care homes already operate at a financial disadvantage due to the National Care Home Contract, which assumes 50 beds operating at 100% capacity.

Council notes the loss of 218 care home beds since 2022, and the distress each of these closures has caused to residents, their families, and local communities.

Council requests the council leader, and the Chair of Health and Social Care Committee, writes to the UK Government

- 1) to request an exemption from recent National Insurance changes for Highland care home providers to avoid additional financial pressures on our already vulnerable care homes,
- 2) to request an exemption from recent National Insurance changes for Highland Care at home providers to avoid additional financial pressures on our already care providers,

- 3) to invite the Secretary of State for Scotland to meet Council Group Leaders and Chair of Health & Social Care first hand to discuss the specific circumstances affecting Care delivery in the Highlands in respect to Highland care homes and Care at Home to help develop policy solutions to secure their future.

2. Break up the Highland Council

This Council acknowledges and welcomes the repeated acknowledgement and statements from multiple senior elected members of the Scottish Government, that the Highland Council area is geographically too large. The increasingly frequent statements in support of reviewing the governance arrangements of the Highland Council area, with some going as far as openly supporting breaking up the area into smaller Councils, are welcome support for the unique issue we face.

No amount of good intentions and efforts from this chamber and Council can realistically deliver the best for such a diverse population. The issues we face are structural in nature and were forced upon this area nearly 30 years ago in nothing more than an experiment, with no regard for the needs of the people and communities across the Highlands.

Under current arrangements, we can only do the best within a very flawed system.

Therefore, this Council agrees to take up offer made by several members of the Scottish Government and Parliament to seek a review into what a new local authority and/or governance arrangements would better serve the vast and wide range of needs of our Highland communities. The first steps being the Council Leader formally writing to the Scottish Government to express the agreement made and for Council to make initial steps to capture Member views in more detail with the establishment a workshop and working group for the delivery of local democracy

Signed:	Mr A Jarvie	Mr A Baxter	Mr M Reiss	Mr R Stewart
	Mr L Fraser	Mr D Macpherson	Mr A Christie	Mr S Mackie
	Mrs B Jarvie			

Section 95 Officer assessment of financial implications:

This motion is not anticipated to have a financial implication to the Council. There will be the requirement of Member/Officer time involved in the preparation of the proposed letter to Scottish Government and preparation for/attendance at the proposed workshop and subsequent analysis. This may be significant. It is assumed this can be managed within existing time/resources, but potentially with implications for other work priorities.

This financial implication assessment is limited to the direct implications and actions within the motion as worded. Any subsequent implications could only be assessed were there to be any subsequent change, and assessment of implications at that time.

Integrated Impact Assessment:

The motion seeks that the Council writes to the Scottish Government seeking support and sets up a working group for the delivery of local democracy. At this stage, there are no anticipated direct impacts as a result of the motion however any review or work undertaken to review local democracy should consider assessment of impacts as part of that process.

During discussion, Mr Jarvie summarised his motion and the significant changes that had taken place in the economy since the establishment of the Highland Council. He emphasised the challenges that resulted from the large geographic area and called for a review, as detailed.

Ms Willis suggested that remote and rural areas would suffer without being part of a larger Council, and made reference to various significant projects that had been undertaken in Lochaber, including Caol flood protection, the Corran ferry upgrade, and the take-over of Moss Park Care Home. Instead of asking the Scottish Government to break up the Highland Council, she suggested instead undertaking a review of governance and funding of Area Committees.

Some Members spoke in favour of the motion, suggesting the Highland Council covered too large a geographic area, with diverse local challenges, and that local priorities were not being adequately addressed, leading to population decline, housing shortages, centralised decision-making, and lack of economic development. Smaller local authorities could respond better to local needs and ensure decision making was undertaken at a local level. The widely differing needs of an urban centre like Inverness, compared to some of the remote and rural areas of the Highlands, were highlighted.

Other Members referred to the economies of scale that were achieved through being part of the Highland Council, and that areas with low populations would receive proportionately lower funding, which could lead to reduced services in remote and rural areas. It was suggested the current Area Committee structure was the best means of ensuring effective local democracy and a review of this system should be undertaken, while remaining under the broader Highland Council umbrella.

Thereafter, Mr Jarvie, seconded by Mr Baxter, **MOVED** the motion as detailed, with the following addition from Mr Rosie: 'Further, looking at the potential future outcomes which could come as a result and the desire to be proactive, a report will come to a future meeting outlining the costs and opportunities of a Commission on Highland Democracy being established. As well as the possibility of Highland citizens being involved in the final decision via a vote on the potential options.'

As an **AMENDMENT**, Ms K Willis, seconded by Mr B Lobban, moved to replace text in the motion with the following: This Council acknowledges that Highland is geographically very large. It is important that Council recognises the importance of devolved governance to Area Committees in order to fully represent our diverse local communities and to deliver the support and services that people of the Highlands, quite rightly, demand. Therefore, this Council agrees to review the governance and funding arrangements of Area Committees so that they may better serve the needs of their local communities. The first step being to capture Member views in more detail with the establishment of a workshop and working group for the delivery of local democracy.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 31 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 37 votes, with 2 abstentions, and the **AMENDMENT** was **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion

Mr M Baird, Mr A Baxter , Mr J Bruce, Mr A Christie, Ms L Dundas, Mr L Fraser, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Mr D Gregg, Mr M Gregson, Mr M Green, Mr R Gunn, Mr A Jarvie, Mrs B Jarvie, Mr P Logue, Ms M MacCallum, Mr S Mackie, Mr D McDonald, Mrs J McEwan, Mr W MacKay, Ms I MacKenzie, Mr A Mackintosh, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D MacPherson, Mr M Reiss, Mrs T Robertson, Mr K Rosie, Mrs L Saggars, Mr A Sinclair, Mr R Stewart.

For the Amendment

Mrs S Atkin, Mr A Baldrey, Mr C Ballance, Mr C Birt, Mr R Bremner, Mr B Boyd, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Mrs I Campbell, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Mr S Coghill, Mrs T Collier, Ms L Kraft, Mr D Fraser, Mr J Finlayson, Mr K Gowans, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Mr R Jones, Ms E Knox, Mr S Kennedy, Mr B Lobban, Mr D Loudon, Ms K MacLean, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr R MacKintosh, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Mr C Munro, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mrs M Ross, Ms K Willis.

Abstentions

Mr J Edmondson, Ms S Fanet

Decision

The Council **AGREED** the amendment as detailed above.

3. As we continue to look at public transport options to address Climate Change it is time we considered trains.

Promises made over the years have not been fulfilled.

The Far North Line takes up to 40 minutes longer than it did in 2000. If running late this service can be held for 40 minutes at Muir of Ord.

Highland Main services to Edinburgh and Glasgow no longer arrive to suit the working day- a service that was introduced in 2000 to aid business. Transferring waste services to rail will affect capacity on the line.

Inverness to Aberdeen improvements to reduce travel time to 2 hours have not been completed.

The Highlands must have fit for purpose railway connections if we are to reduce the number of vehicles on our roads. Rail services that enable our business community to be connected to wider markets.

As a council we must become more vocal to ensure we have connections suitable for the economic changes we anticipate as the Green Freeport and all associated business comes to Highland.

I seek support for a discussion session with all interested parties to ensure we bring these issues to the fore.

Signed:	Mrs T Robertson	Mr A Graham	Mrs J McEwan	Mr J Grafton
	Mr D Gregg	Mr M Baird	Mrs A MacLean	Mr J Edmondson
	Ms M MacCallum	Mr R Gunn		

Section 95 Officer assessment of financial implications:

This Motion was not anticipated to have a financial implication to the Council. There would be the requirement of Member/Officer time involved in arranging and progressing proposed discussions, which it was assumed could be managed within existing time/resources.

Integrated Impact Assessment:

The Motion sought a discussion session to explore issues surrounding rail services in the north. As a result, there were not anticipated to be any direct impacts as a result of the Motion.

Prior to discussion, Mrs T Robertson confirmed that she had accepted an amendment by Ms K Willis and this was shared with Members.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- it was asked if all routes within the Highlands could be included and it was confirmed that this would be the case;
- this would be welcomed by many users of the rail network;
- if Members chose to support the Motion, the Leader would be happy to raise it with the Minister of Transport;
- the current train service was poor, with outdated carriages, and the lack of facilities on long journeys was concerning;
- connectivity was important and it was felt that single lines contributed to delays;
- an appropriate conversation with Network Rail might be beneficial and Members welcomed further discussion;
- the Fort William train offered transport into the town which could include school transport;
- it was felt the railway should be considered as a nationally important strategic asset; and
- provision for those travelling with disabilities was questioned and better provision for bikes was requested.

Thereafter, the Council **AGREED** the amended Motion as follows:-

“As we continue to look at public transport options to address Climate Change it is time we considered trains.

Promises made over the years have not been fulfilled.

The Far North Line takes up to 40 minutes longer than it did in 2000. If running late this service can be held for 40 minutes at Muir of Ord.

Highland Main services to Edinburgh and Glasgow no longer arrive to suit the working day- a service that was introduced in 2000 to aid business. Dualling the Highland Main Line from Inverness would significantly increase capacity and service frequency on the line.

Inverness to Aberdeen improvements to reduce travel time to 2 hours have not been completed.

The HITRANS “Fort William Opportunities Around Rail” report has identified numerous opportunities to improve train services on the West Highland Line to Fort William and Mallaig. We need action to take these forward.

The Highlands must have fit for purpose railway connections if we are to reduce the number of vehicles on our roads. Rail services that enable our business community to be connected to wider markets.

As a Council we must become more vocal to ensure we have connections suitable for the economic changes we anticipate as the Green Freeport and all associated business comes to Highland.

I seek support for a discussion session with all interested parties to ensure we bring these issues to the fore”.

4. The Council notes that Education officials have been tasked with producing a review for the next Education Committee, in light of the 2024 SQA results. Whilst recognising that officials and school staff are working at a challenging time, this Council asks for thorough and clear reporting on the implications of the following:

- The removal of Principal Teacher posts from many Primary schools
- A substandard school estate
- Inadequate provision for children with Special Educational and Support Needs
- Disappointing Senior phase attainment, including deteriorating standards in 10 out of 15 key standards
- Prevailing Job insecurity for teachers and assistants
- Inadequate support for Newly Qualified Teachers
- Persistence with a ‘No School Exclusions’ policy in the face of disruptive pupil behaviour
- Continuing poor attendance levels
- Inadequate curricular and syllabus support
- Inadequate transition data across ASGs
- Failure to recruit and retain school staff at all levels and in all localities

Signed: Dr M Gregson Mrs H Crawford Mrs B Jarvie

Section 95 Officer assessment of financial implications:

This motion was not anticipated to have a financial implication to the Council. There would be the requirement of Officer time involved in the preparation of proposed reports. This might be significant given the number of topics listed. It was assumed this could be managed within existing time/resources, but potentially with implications for other work priorities.

Integrated Impact Assessment:

The motion sought that the review to be undertaken as a result of SQA results considers the implications of specific factors. As a result, there were no anticipated direct impacts as a result of the motion.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the Highland school estate was sub-standard with a third of schools being categorised as poor in terms of building quality and many schools such as St Clements School, Charleston Academy, Culloden Academy, Park Primary and

- Dunvegan Primary in urgent need of refurbishment or replacement;
- there was a lack of support for children with Additional Support Needs (ASN) as the number of ASN staff had decreased while the number of pupils with identified support needs had increased. It was suggested that this could have had an impact on worsening pupil behaviour;
- there had been an increase of violence and reports of incidents of knife crime in schools, putting the safety of staff and pupils at risk;
- attention was drawn to the low levels of job security for newly qualified teachers, the high number of teacher vacancies, the large number of staff absences within education and learning and poor pupil attendance figures;
- clearer information on the problems faced by the Education Service was requested;
- the decision to remove Principal Teacher posts in Primary Schools was criticised;
- disappointment was expressed at the poor performance in numeracy in Primary 1, 4 and 7, and the growing attainment gap between the most and least deprived pupils;
- poor levels of attainment were causing Highland pupils to be at a disadvantage when applying for university;
- the need for a balanced view on the current situation was emphasised, while there were a lot of areas within Education that needed improvement, there were areas where improvements were being made and many achievements that were worth celebrating;
- the close links between the school and community demonstrated by the success of events such as the Dingwall Academy Christmas Fair and Christmas Concert were commended;
- it was highlighted that attainment figures nationally were lower than expected and that attainment in Highland had improved in several areas;
- all permanent teaching and non-teaching posts were advertised as such and a review of staffing was carried out each spring where all temporary posts were assessed;
- in reference to the condition of the school estate, it was highlighted that significant funds from the Highland Investment Plan would be spent on building and improving schools;
- the total spend on Additional Support for Learning in Highland was one of the highest in the country;
- all probationary teachers were supported by a probationer officer and had a dedicated induction and learning programme as well as support from a mentor within their school;
- Highland did not have a no exclusion policy and that the power to exclude pupils was devolved to senior management within a school;
- there was concern nationally about the fall in school attendance levels since 2019 and officers had been working with pupils and staff across Highland to get attendance back to pre-pandemic levels and a strategic plan for improving attendance was in place;
- disappointment was expressed at the number of negative statements and lack of understanding around Education issues and it was suggested that non Members of the Education Committee attended future meetings of the Committee to gain a better understanding of these issues;
- it was suggested that many of the points raised would have been best raised at Education Committee or with local Education Officers;
- the improvement in early-years language was highlighted;
- attention was drawn to two pupils who had achieved outstanding marks in their Higher and Advanced Higher exams, and the importance of celebrating young people's achievements;

- the hard work of Education staff was also commended;
- the Education Service had held several workshops for Members;
- it was important to consider ways of encouraging teachers to apply for jobs in Highland; and
- the issues mentioned in the Motion were already being addressed and reports would come to the Education Committee at the appropriate time.

Thereafter, Dr M Gregson, seconded by Ms H Crawford, **MOVED** the Motion as detailed.

As an **AMENDMENT**, Mr J Finlayson, seconded by Mr D Millar, moved that the Education Committee would continue to include in its agendas, reports that were strategically within the remit of the Committee and relevant to the work of the Committee and which were not politically motivated.

These reports would continue to be brought at times during the calendar year when they are most appropriate in consultation with the Chair of Education, Members of the Education Committee and in consultation with relevant Education Officers.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 26 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 40 votes, with 1 abstention, and the **AMENDMENT** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion:

Mr M Baird, Mr A Baxter, Mr J Bruce, Mr A Christie, Mr J Edmondson, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Mr D Gregg, Dr M Gregson, Mr R Gunn, Mr A Jarvie, Mrs B Jarvie, Mr P Logue, Ms M MacCallum, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr S Mackie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mr D Macpherson, Mr D McDonald, Ms J McEwan, Mr M Reiss, Mrs T Robertson, Mrs L Sagers, Mr A Sinclair, Mr R Stewart.

For the Amendment:

Ms S Atkin, Mr C Ballance, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Ms G Campbell-Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Ms T Collier, Ms L Dundas, 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 W MacKay, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr R MacKintosh, Mrs A MacLean, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mr K Rosie, Mrs M Ross, Ms K Willis.

Abstentions:

Mr S Coghill

Decision

The Council **AGREED** that the Education Committee would continue to include in its agendas, reports that were strategically within the remit of the Committee and relevant to the work of the Committee and which were not politically motivated. These reports would continue to be brought at times during the calendar year when they were most appropriate in consultation with the Chair of Education, Members of the Education Committee and in consultation with relevant Education Officers.

The following motions were tabled but not debated in accordance with standing order 12.2

5. Women's Aid

Highland Council notes:

- 1) The valuable work done by the Women's Aid groups across the Highlands in helping to keep our communities safe
- 2) That more than 2300 reports of domestic abuse were recorded by Police Scotland in 2022-2023
- 3) That although the vast majority of domestic abuse cases affect women and children men can also be subjected to domestic abuse
- 4) The physical and emotional needs of men and women and children while coping and recovering from domestic abuse are not the same

The Highland Council are urged to continue its financial support for all of the Women's Aid groups in the Highlands.

The Highland Council is urged to rethink the proposed commissioning strategy that would result in a 'gender neutral' service run by a single contractor across the Highlands. This strategy would lead to a centralised service unresponsive to the needs of domestic abuse survivors across the Highland area.

This would lead to closure of Women's Aid groups across the Highlands and reduce the level of safety for the survivors of domestic abuse.

Signed: Mr A MacKintosh Dr M Gregson Mr R Stewart Mrs B Jarvie
 Mrs I MacKenzie Mrs J McEwan

6. I urge that this chamber supports an immediate increase in ASN support to relieve some of the multiple stresses across our schools. Whilst we request the newly appointed Chief Officer of Education to fully engage and address the many inherited issues with empathy and a commonsense supportive approach.

Signed: Mrs B Jarvie Dr M Gregson Mrs H Crawford Mr R Stewart
 Mr A Jarvie Mrs I MacKenzie

17. 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 31 October 2024 as contained in the Volume which had been circulated separately – which were **APPROVED**.

18. 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 Minutes of Meetings of Committees contained in Volume circulated separately as undernoted:-

Black Isle and Easter Ross Committee	4 November 2024
Nairnshire Committee	4 November 2024
Housing and Property Committee	6 November 2024
Climate Change Committee	7 November 2024
Caithness Committee	11 November 2024
Dingwall, Seaforth Committee	11 November 2024
Wester Ross, Strathpeffer & Lochalsh Committee	12 November 2024

Lochaber Area Committee	12 November 2024
Sutherland County Committee	12 November 2024
Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee	13 November 2024
Economy and Infrastructure Committee	14 November 2024
City of Inverness Area Committee	18 November 2024
Gaelic Committee	20 November 2024
Comataidh na Gaidhlig	20 An T-Samhain 2024
Education Committee	21 November 2024
Badenoch and Strathspey Area Committee	25 November 2024
Isle of Skye and Raasay Committee	25 November 2024
Communities and Place Committee	27 November 2024
Audit Committee	28 November 2024
Corporate Resources Committee	5 December 2024
Pensions Committee (Special)	6 December 2024

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

Climate Change Committee, 7 November 2024

***Starred Item 4: Net Zero Programme Update**

The Council **AGREED** the approval of the project brief templates in Appendix 2 of the report for inclusion in the Council's Net Zero Action Plan.

Starred Item 10: The Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy (LHEES) Delivery Plan Update

The Council **AGREED** the approval of the draft LHEES Delivery Plan Strategic Approach set out at Appendix 1 of the report, and the draft Delivery Plan contained in Appendix 2 of the report.

***Starred Item 11: Innovation Funding**

The Council **AGREED** the approval of the proposal to develop a more focused and consistent approach to bid writing around the Net Zero agenda supported by the climate and energy team as part of the innovation and investment workstream in the Council's Our Future Highland Delivery Plan.

Lochaber Area Committee, 12 November 2024

***Starred Item 6: Fort William Common Good Asset Register**

The Council **AGREED** to the:-

- iii. publication of the Fort William Common Good Asset Register; and
- iv. re-classification of the properties included on the asset register and to the creation of the Fort William Common Good Fund.

Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee, 13 November 2024

***Starred Item 11: Champions Update**

The Council **AGREED** that Ms Sarah Atkin be appointed as a Children's Champion.

Audit Committee, 28 November 2024

***Starred Item 8: Audit Committee Annual Report 2023/24**

The Council **AGREED** to acknowledge that the necessary assurances had been provided by the Audit Committee to demonstrate that it had fulfilled its purpose and could demonstrate its impact for 2023/24.

Corporate Resources Committee, 5 December 2024

***Starred Item 6.a: Corporate Revenue Monitoring to 30 September 2024**

The Council **AGREED** that further consideration would be given to the remit of the Corporate Resources Committee and a report brought back to a future meeting of the Council.

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

- i. Highland and Western Isles Valuation Joint Board held on 23 September 2024 (approved by the Board on 20 November 2024) which were **NOTED**;
- ii. Community Planning Board held on 20 September 2024 (approved by the Board on 4 December 2024) which were **NOTED**;
- iii. Recruitment Panel held on 28 October 2024 (approved by the Panel on 19 November 2024) and 19 November 2024 which were **NOTED**; and
- iv. Redesign Board held on 20 November 2024 which were **APPROVED**.

The meeting concluded at 5.55pm.