

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Education Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Wednesday 26 February 2025 at 9.35 am.

Present:

Ms S Atkin	Mr R Gale
Mr A Baxter (substitute) (remote)	Ms M Hutchison
Mrs I Campbell (remote)	Ms L Johnston
Mr A Christie	Ms L Kraft
Mrs M Cockburn	Ms M MacCallum
Ms H Crawford	Mr D Macpherson
Ms L Dundas	Mr J McGillivray (remote)
Ms S Fanet	Mr D Millar (Vice Chair)
Mr J Finlayson (Chair)	Mr R Stewart

Religious Representatives (non-voting):

Rev C Caley
Ms S Lamont

Youth Convener (non-voting):

Ms L McKittrick

Non-Members also present:

Mr M Baird	Mrs I MacKenzie (remote)
Mr J Edmondson	Mr A MacKintosh
Mr D Fraser (remote)	Mr D McDonald (remote)
Mr J Grafton	Ms J McEwan (remote)
Mr A Graham	Mr C Munro
Dr M Gregson	Mr P Oldham (remote)
Mrs B Jarvie (remote)	Mrs M Reid
Mr P Logue	Mrs T Robertson
Mr G MacKenzie (remote)	Ms M Ross

In attendance:

Ms K Lackie, Assistant Chief Executive – People
Ms F Grant, Chief Officer – Secondary Education
Ms A Jansson, Interim Chief Officer – Early Years and Primary Education
Ms F Malcolm, Chief Officer – Integrated People Services
Ms C Macklin, Head of Education, Lifelong Learning and Gaelic Services
Ms A MacPherson, Strategic Lead – Resources
Ms H Brown, Senior Manager Early Years
Ms F Shearer, Area Education and Learning Manager (South)
Mr I Jackson, Education Officer
Mr R Campbell, Strategic Lead – Capital Planning and Estate Strategy
Ms F Dalgetty, Chief Executive, Fèis Rois (Third Sector)
Ms G Rodger, Chief Officer, Inspiring Young Voices (Third Sector)
Ms M Chemonges, Highland Parent Council Partnership
Ms M Murray, Principal Committee Officer
Ms R Ross, Committee Officer

Also in attendance:

Ms J MacDonald, Centre Manager, Family Centre Inverness

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

Mr J Finlayson in the Chair

Business

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

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr D Gregg.

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

There were no Declarations of Interest.

The following Members made general Transparency Statements but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that they had an interest to declare:-

Mr J McGillivray, on the basis that he was still registered with the General Teaching Council for Scotland, and as a retired member and former Highland District Secretary of the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association.

Mr A Baxter on the basis that he had two children that attended a High School in the Highland Council area.

Mr D Macpherson, on the basis that a close family member was a Primary School Teacher.

The Committee **NOTED** the position.

**3. Presentation: Family Centre Inverness
Taisbeanadh: Ionad Teaghlaich Inbhir Nis**

Jennifer MacDonald, Centre Manager, Family Centre Inverness, gave a presentation showcasing the work of the Centre, what it was like to be a two-year-old and a day in their life whilst at nursery.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chair thanked Ms MacDonald and all staff at Family Centre Inverness for the positive work they did with families and young people. He encouraged Members to contact Ms MacDonald directly if they had any questions, and to arrange to visit the Centre.

The Committee **NOTED** the presentation.

4. Revenue Budget Monitoring and Service Performance Reporting for Quarter 3 Sgrùdadh Buidseat Teachd-a-steach agus Aithris Coileanadh Seirbheis airson Ràith 3

There had been circulated Report No EDU/1/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- in response to a question, it was explained that the underspend in respect of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) was not solely a result of unfilled vacancies but a better than anticipated position in terms of income relating to the Council's childcare offering;
- given the high number of absences in respect of non-teaching staff, it was queried what steps had been taken to resolve issues using Occupational Health, and how many scheduled appointments had been missed. The Strategic Lead – Resources undertook to revert to Mr R Gale in that regard;
- information was sought on the response time from when a complaint was received at the call centre, how complaints were processed, and what had caused the spike in numbers in some quarters. In addition, examples were requested of complaints that might take 5 or 20 days to resolve;
- information was sought, and provided, on the costs associated with processing Freedom of Information (FOI) requests as well as the time it took for staff to process such requests and how that impacted on the service;
- in relation to teaching staff absences, information was sought, and provided, on whether adequate support was being provided during periods of absence, the support available to Head Teachers in terms of absence management, and how the figures for Highland compared to the national position;
- section 5.2 of the report referred to a reduction in Devolved School Management (DSM) spend due to falling school rolls being a factor in service underspends, and it was questioned how that had arisen given school roll projections should enable DSM budgets to be set fairly accurately. In response, it was confirmed this was something officers had been looking at and, in future years, budgets would be set at the beginning of the year based on anticipated school rolls;
- attention was drawn to the underspend of £1.808m on staff costs, and, in response to a question, it was confirmed that there had been no feedback from schools that the time taken to recruit to vacant posts was having a detrimental impact on children and young people. The Chair added that there were recruitment challenges in some secondary subjects and areas such as Gaelic Medium Education, and this was something the service was very conscious of;
- with regard to the Performance Indicators in section 7 of the report, it was queried whether school attendance rates for Care Experienced Young People (CEYP) referred to all CEYP or those who were currently Care Experienced, and it was confirmed it was the latter. It was also queried whether absence rates for Young Carers were recorded as that could be an important indicator linking into the Whole Family Wellbeing Team. In relation to the percentage of the Highland population with a *highlife* card, it was questioned why the RAG rating was Red for 22/23 and Green for 23/24 when the percentage figure was the same. The Strategic Lead – Resources undertook to seek clarification from High Life Highland in that regard and revert to Ms L Johnston;
- concern was expressed regarding the rate of staff turnover within schools and its affect on performance. It was questioned why teachers were leaving, and it was

suggested that independent exit surveys be carried out to understand what could be done to support teaching staff. Parents were concerned that, without specialist teachers for key subjects, they were unable to develop their children's ability to their full potential, which was a right in terms of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It was important to do as much as possible to support young learners and staff, and there was a lot that could be done to ensure the Council was an employer of choice. As a Committee, it was necessary to better understand what was going on within schools, and it was proposed that the quarterly monitoring report should include data on the rate of staff turnover within the service and the length of time posts remained vacant, broken down by grade. All Members wanted what was best for schools and communities, and having this information available would allow work and scrutiny to be focused on where the biggest difference could be made to the lives of young people in Highland. The Chair confirmed that officers would explore whether it was possible to provide the data requested;

- the number of FOI requests indicated that information was not being made readily available. Members were increasingly submitting FOI requests as information was not forthcoming, and it was suggested that there was not the same appetite to share information within the Highland Council as there was in neighbouring Councils such as Argyll and Bute and Moray. Other Members added that FOI requests had become the first resort rather than the last, and that the information was often available although it was sometimes hard to find;
- it was understood that 24% of Highland Council Chromebooks came back damaged compared to 4% in Lothian, and it was questioned why this had not been shared with Members. However, other Members commented that this had been discussed previously at a Committee;
- reference was made to instances of Members writing to officers with a question and receiving a response thanking them for their FOI request. However, it was explained that should not be the case unless the request was marked as an FOI. The Chair added that both he and the Assistant Chief Executive - People would wish to be informed if Members were not receiving answers to their questions;
- information was sought, as provided, as to whether officers considered that the absence statistics masked the detrimental impact any extended period of absence was having in smaller rural High Schools. An example was cited, and it was suggested that the support being provided in such circumstances was inadequate and letting down Head Teachers, teaching staff and pupils;
- further to earlier comments regarding staff turnover, concern was expressed regarding the loss of teaching staff early in the academic year, particularly in the senior phase of secondary schools as it disrupted the learning process at a key stage, and it was queried how this could be reviewed; and
- information was sought, and provided, as to what support was available to Head Teachers when recruitment was required on an urgent basis. It was suggested that, in such circumstances, there should be a "fast-track" procedure whereby adverts could be issued immediately rather than having to wait for the next recruitment window as every week was important when pupils were preparing for their exams. It was confirmed that fast-tracking had taken place but the recruitment challenges being experienced, not only across Highland but nationally, meant that sometimes there were no applicants.

The Committee:-

- i. scrutinised and **APPROVED** the Service's revenue monitoring position;

- ii. scrutinised and **APPROVED** the Service's performance and risk information;
- iii. scrutinised and **APPROVED** the Service's update on outstanding audit action; and
- iv. **AGREED** that the possibility of including data on the rate of staff turnover within the service and the length of time posts remained vacant, broken down by grade, in future monitoring reports be explored.

5. Draft Learning Estate Strategy Ro-innleachd Oighreachd Ionnsachaidh

There had been circulated Report No EDU/2/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

The Chair explained that the Council's Learning Estate Strategy had been developed using the guiding principles of the government's approach but with a Highland-specific focus, as well as consideration of the unique geography and challenges in Highland and the Council's ambitious plans which were part of the Highland Investment Plan.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- with reference to section 7.4 of the Strategy, it was queried how much had been spent on maintenance of Beauly, Dunvegan and Park Primary Schools and St Clement's Special School since the Capital Programme had been agreed in September 2023. The Strategic Lead – Capital Planning and Estate Strategy undertook to revert to Mr R Gale in that regard. In terms of progress with the potential new build for St Clement's School, this would form part of the report to Full Council in March;
- information was sought on the current thinking in terms of enhanced provision and whether, if there was good provision in one secondary school, other schools would be able to access it;
- 10 schools in Highland were over 90% capacity and, more concerningly, 5 schools were over 100% capacity which meant that over 2000 pupils were in overcrowded facilities. Section 4.8 of the Strategy stated that the optimum occupancy level was around 90% capacity, which meant that in excess of 4000 children in Highland were learning in sub-optimal conditions;
- with reference to section 3.5 of the Strategy, disappointment was expressed that Category D and Category C schools had been listed together. It was necessary to recognise the extent of the challenge to make the strongest case possible, at a national level, for additional investment in the Council's learning estate, and not listing the Category D schools, which were some of the worst in the country, separately did a disservice to the children and school communities concerned;
- section 6.8 of the Strategy referred to GIRFEC (Getting It Right For Every Child) and the fact that children and young people should be treated with dignity and respect. That being the case, it was queried whether all schools in Highland had adequate provision of single-sex spaces to ensure the safety, privacy and dignity of women and girls in the care of the Council. This was particularly important following advice from the Equalities Commission to NHS Fife and recent worrying events across Scotland including hidden cameras being placed in mixed-sex spaces. It was added that feedback from parents was that they were not in favour of mixed-sex toilets in schools, and it was questioned on whose directive they were being implemented. It was also hoped toilet designs in new schools would not be subject to cutbacks. Other Members commented that young people were more concerned about sharing with different age-groups as toilets were a place where

bullying could happen. In responding to the points raised, the Strategic Lead – Capital Planning and Estate Strategy confirmed that there would be an appropriate level of toilet provision in schools for both single-sex use or other use, and that officers worked closely with Education colleagues and Head Teachers to ensure that provision in new build or refurbished schools met legislative requirements for all pupils;

- concern was expressed regarding the way in which school capacity was measured. Section 4.1 of the Strategy stated that planning capacity was a measure of the number of pupils that could be accommodated in a school, and it was suggested it should be based on the substantive school building before any temporary accommodation had been added. Basing it on the school building plus any temporary accommodation was misleading and didn't take the capacity of infrastructure such as canteen and toilet facilities into account. With reference to earlier comments regarding 90% capacity being optimal, Culloden Academy was at 90% capacity but if the numerous temporary classrooms were taken out of the equation the figure would be much higher. There were several schools in the City of Inverness area that were over 90% capacity, and children were being done a disservice. It was necessary to be cautious and not be overly optimistic as had happened in the past, and it was proposed that the Strategy be revised to take account of the point raised and brought back to a future meeting of the Committee. The Chair confirmed that the point raised would be considered as the Highland Investment Plan progressed. The Strategic Lead – Capital Planning and Estate Strategy, explained that where modular accommodation had been purchased and installed in a school, and was being used effectively as good quality classroom accommodation, it was treated as permanent. The impact on other elements of the school, such as toilets, came under suitability which was assessed separately from condition and capacity. Whilst 90% capacity was optimal, one size did not fit all, and the position in respect of Culloden Academy could be reviewed;
- when looking at school populations, it would be helpful to know, for each school, how many pupils came from within the catchment area, how many were there as a result of a placing request, and where any placing requests had come from;
- it was encouraging to see the framework for the new Nairn Academy building being constructed, and that the new nursery at Charleston Academy was coming on at pace;
- it was understood that Daviot Primary School was to be mothballed, and it was queried how quickly the new demountable unit at the school would be brought into use elsewhere;
- reference was made to instances of pupils eating lunch on stairwells, in corridors and outside due to there being insufficient canteen facilities, and it was necessary to address that;
- in relation to the design and build of learning support bases, information was sought, and provided, as to whether consideration had been given to things that could cause sensory overload, such as noisy fans, ticking clocks, heating that could not be adjusted etc;
- it was queried whether energy efficiency measures could have a positive impact on school budgets due to funding not being spent on heating;
- it was understood that in the region of £50k had been spent on maintaining the former Strontian Primary School building which had lain vacant since 2018. The need for a much clearer process as to how any redundant school buildings would be dealt with was emphasised, and it was confirmed that would be picked up, not only through the Learning Estate Strategy but through the Highland Investment Plan and the Strategic Asset Management Plan;

- in response to a question, it was confirmed that no impact assessment had been carried out on toilet provision in schools specifically. It could potentially be looked at on a project-by-project basis;
- a request was made that a meeting of the Nairn Academy Stakeholder Group be arranged;
- it was hoped that a substantive decision would be made in respect of Charleston Academy in the near future. It was highlighted that Inverness High School was also in need of urgent work, the games hall currently being closed for health and safety reasons;
- the guiding principles in section 2.3 of the Strategy were commended. However, it was suggested there was a slight gap in number 8 in terms of keeping parents informed, and it was requested that be looked at going forward; and
- further to earlier comments regarding Culloden Academy, serious concern was expressed about the fact that the modular accommodation at the school was being classed as permanent. Parents had given up a lengthy fight and accepted that there would be an 11-year delay on the extension that had been promised, and it was questioned if there would now be an even longer delay.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the Integrated Impact Assessment Screening in Appendix 1 of the report; and
- APPROVED** the Learning Estate Strategy included in Appendix 2 of the report.

6. Statutory Consultation: Creation of new Primary School for Tornagrain – Final Report
Co-chomhairleachadh Reachdail: Cruthachadh Bun-sgoil Ùir airson Tòrr na Grèine – Aithisg Dheireannach

There had been circulated Report No EDU/3/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

During discussion, the following points were raised:-

- Local Members expressed support for the proposal, commenting that Tornagrain had already established itself as a good community and the new school would help it to gel further. The decision to retain Croy Primary School was welcomed, as were the proposed measures to mitigate any adverse effects in terms of existing friendships and to enable siblings to attend the same school;
- in response to a question, it was clarified that there was an error in section 3.2 of the report and no closure was proposed; and
- Inverness was expanding, and Members looked forward to future investment in school buildings in the area. The need to be cognisant of infrastructure requirements, not only in terms of education but in terms of health services etc, when considering planning applications for new housing developments was emphasised.

- * The Committee **AGREED TO RECOMMEND** that the Highland Council establish a new primary school to serve the Tornagrain housing development and amend the delineated area (catchment area) of the current Croy Primary School in order to create the catchment area for the new school.

7. Statutory Consultation: Closure of Duror Primary School – Final Report Co-chomhairleachadh Reachdail: Dùnadh Bun-sgoil Dhùrair – Aithisg Dheireannach

There had been circulated Report No EDU/4/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the Chair stated that he would like to make a change from the recommendation by officials to discontinue the provision of education at Duror Primary School. The school was part of a management cluster with three other schools, and in recent weeks he had been engaging with the community personally. The building was being used by a local playgroup as well as for nurture activities offered to pupils across the four-school cluster. Most significantly, since the report had been written, representations had been received about a possible increase in the roll in future years. Having reviewed these representations, he considered that the Committee should not approve the recommendation to discontinue education at the school and that Duror Primary School should remain open. He therefore moved that the Highland Council does not discontinue education at Duror Primary School, and this was unanimously supported;
- thanks were expressed to officers for the work that had gone into the report, and to the Chair for the engagement he had had with the local community;
- with regard to interaction with other children, Local Members shared a typical week at Duror Primary School which included the Stay and Play playgroup, visitors for art activities, ski lessons in Glencoe with children from other schools, visitors from other schools in the cluster as part of confidence-building sessions for children who needed time in different environments, and visits to St Bride's Primary School for assembly and PE;
- in terms of the impact on the community, the school was the last remaining employer in the village, and there would be an economic impact if it was closed. The Local Place Plan mentioned the need for the expansion of childcare in the village, and there had been discussions regarding extending the role of the school beyond the current weekly playgroup. That would attract families into the village, and the toddlers who attended the playgroup would be future pupils for the school. The playgroup was also attended by parents, and mothers experiencing postnatal depression would be adversely affected by the loss of interaction if the school closed;
- the school had enormous potential for a vibrant future. In that regard, it was highlighted that a local marine and coastal conservation group, MaCCOLL, was close to the stage of employing staff and planned to include the school as a key partner, turning it into a unique marine and coastal education and learning hub. The Scottish Association of Marine Science (SAMS), based in Oban, had already started working with the school, details of which were provided. SAMS employed a STEM officer and was currently recruiting another as STEM funding capacity was growing. This was part of a new initiative to provide hands-on activities and inspire a future generation of scientists. Duror Primary School was the first school passed when driving into Highland from Argyll and Bute and would be turned into a hub that would benefit children from other schools. SAMS needed Duror Primary School, which was in a unique location with privileged access to the beach in Cuil Bay. Members of the community were training to become snorkel guides to enhance provision of water-based activities to the children of Lochaber. Duror

Primary School would be more than just a school – it would be a stepping stone into other schools in Lochaber and beyond. Closing the school would be a huge mistake, and it was asked that the Council keep it open. However, business as usual was not enough, and Members were encouraged to engage with MaCCOLL and SAMS to explore and maximise the potential of the school. Members added their thanks to Ms S Fanet for her role in the marine environment work;

- the Education Scotland report appended to the report stated that children currently attending Duror Primary School had a very positive learning experience, and staff and the school community should be commended in that regard;
- in recent years, the Duror community had experienced loss of services, employment, and the local Post Office and shop, and the Primary School was cherished as a result;
- the proposal for closure had been set in motion over a decade ago when funding for the Care and Learning Alliance-operated nursery school had been withdrawn and children had been moved elsewhere. The mothballing of the nursery had been resisted by the community, who had warned that it would lead to permanent closure which would, in turn, possibly lead to the closure of the primary school as the school roll declined;
- thanks were expressed to Duror and Kentallen Community Council who had consistently taken an active interest in education provision in their area. Members commended their dedication, hard work, experience and hands-on approach, and drew attention to their analysis of the consultation report which refuted the argument for closure. The Chair endorsed the comments made, adding that his engagement with the Community Council and members of the community had been carried out in a respectful and informed way;
- primary schools were not just educational institutes but part of the social fabric of rural communities, and it was necessary to take that into account when having difficult discussions about school closures;
- the Duror community had overwhelmingly opposed the proposed closure, and it was good to see that they had been listened to;
- past experience showed that when schools closed in rural communities, families with young children would stop settling there;
- in recent years, remote working had increased the appeal of living in more remote and rural communities, and families were prioritising local schools when choosing where to settle. It was necessary to do more to keep rural schools open to encourage families to move to the area and keep communities alive;
- closing rural schools went against the Council's stated aim of reversing rural depopulation, and it was necessary to take a holistic approach and work with colleagues in the Housing Services and other areas of the Council to look at what could be done to support small and fragile communities to become sustainable in the long term;
- it was hoped today's decision would be a precursor to lending more support to small rural communities where schools were at risk. Particular reference was made to Edderton Primary School and Gledfield Nursery in Sutherland;
- the Rural Services Network had stated that the closure of a school caused a domino effect leading to diminished community resources; and
- it was hoped that the perspective that bigger schools were better could be changed.

* The Committee **AGREED TO RECOMMEND** that the Highland Council does not discontinue education at Duror Primary School.

**8. Statutory Consultation: Closure of Badcaul Primary School – Final Report
Co-chomhairleachadh Reachdail: Dùnadh Bun-sgoil a’ Bhaid Choill – Aithisg
Dheireannach**

The Committee **NOTED** that this item had been withdrawn to allow additional engagement to be carried out and would be brought to the Committee on 4 June 2025.

**9. Workforce for the Future Portfolio Board Update: Delivery Plan Budget
Monitoring & Progress
Cunntas às Ùr bho Bhòrd Cùraim-roinne Feachd-obrach airson an Ama ri
Teachd: Sgrùdadh Buidseit & Adhartas a’ Phlana Libhrigidh**

There had been circulated Report No EDU/6/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- in relation to digital learning, it was disappointing that the online offering would not be expanded until the matters raised within the dispute tabled by the Teachers’ Panel had been resolved. In response to a question in that regard, it was confirmed it had been indicated that a national agreement needed to be reached on teachers’ terms and conditions around the delivery of online learning. However, engagement was still taking place at a local level with a view to achieving a local outcome. Other Members added that the potential of the digital school was huge, and it was hoped a resolution could be found. It was also queried whether there was any way of involving other stakeholders in endeavouring to move matters forward;
- information was sought, and provided, as to what discussions had taken place with other employability organisations across Highland with a view to developing a more coordinated approach;
- it was questioned whether the “Amber” RAG status in respect of the Employability Toolkit and Tailored Employment Support was too optimistic given there were still a number of vacant posts, and an update was sought, and provided, on what recruitment had taken place since the report had been written;
- the current report format was confusing, and Members endorsed reviewing it to make it easier to read;
- it was understood that pupils in the digital school could attain higher marks than those in a conventional school setting, and it was queried whether this good news could be shared with other Members and if a piece of work could be undertaken to find out why. It was important to take a data-driven approach, and if it was understood what factors had led to the higher performance they could be emulated as part of the journey of raising attainment across Highland. The Chief Officer – Secondary Education confirmed that information on the subjects presented at the digital school could be provided in the attainment report to the September Committee;
- it was encouraging that a lot of flexibility had been built in as a “one size fits all” approach did not work in Highland;
- positive destinations were not the same for everyone. Not all young people went on to further and higher education, some preferring to go to work or get an apprenticeship, and it was important to take cognisance of that and work with the strengths of individual pupils;

- digital learning provided opportunities in terms of subject choice that pupils, particularly those in small rural schools, might otherwise not get;
- in response to a question, it was explained that the DSM saving of £1.5m referred to in the financial summary had already been achieved as it had been a surplus rather than a cut, and it was not anticipated that a saving would be made through digital activities or employability;
- whilst the alternative method of learning the digital school provided was welcomed, it was still necessary to address teachers leaving and to offer bigger incentives to encourage teachers to move to Highland; and
- information was sought, and provided, on the range of young people being taught digitally. In particular, it was queried whether home-schooled children had access to the digital school, whether those with Additional Support Needs found it easier or more difficult to learn digitally, and what happened when pupils disengaged.

The Committee scrutinised and **NOTED** the report.

10. Person Centred Solutions Portfolio Board Update – Early Learning and Childcare Progress
Cunntas às Ùr bho Bhòrd Cùraim-roinne Freagairtean Stèidhichte air an Neach – Adhartas Tràth-ionnsachaidh is Cùraim-chloinne

There had been circulated Report No EDU/7/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- it was exciting to learn how much work was going on to create flexible and sustainable early learning and childcare (ELC) provision to match the needs of all communities, and thanks were expressed for the positive report;
- funding from the Addressing Depopulation Action Plan had allowed for research into the needs and aspirations of families who lived, and might live in the future, in some of the most fragile communities in Highland, and more partnership and multi-service working were welcome elements of this vitally important project;
- section 5.7 of the report referred to a milestone, in March 2025, relating to engaging with Members and communities to agree next steps and solutions for settings under pressure due to falling roles, and it was questioned whether it was first necessary to do more work to identify and pilot flexible models of childcare. Part of the Northwest 2045 addressing depopulation work was to explore the creation of new “rural childcare practitioner” or “childminder without domestic premises” versions of childminding, both of which were mentioned in Appendix 3 of the report. Feedback from rural communities was that even a subsidised childminder model was unattractive unless barriers, such as those set out in section 1.1 of the Project Brief appended to the report, were removed. Such changes would require revised legislation which would take time, and assurance was sought that due time and consideration would be given to all the information and feedback gathered, including the outcomes of the recent consultation in the Northwest 2045 area, before any actions were taken forward, even if that meant moving the milestone in section 5.7 back;
- an invitation was extended to the Chair, Vice Chair and officers to visit the community in Strontian, where Local Members had met with parents and consultants appointed by Highlands and Islands Enterprise to discuss the issues surrounding ELC provision on the various peninsulas in Ward 21. The Strontian

community had built a new primary school, and had the talent, expertise and willingness to take a new and innovative approach to ELC provision. The consultants' report on provision and alternative models was due to be published within a few weeks, and a plan could be ready to be implemented that could be an example, not only to the Highland Council area but to the Scottish Government, of how to support ELC provision in remote rural areas that were facing the challenges of depopulation. The Chair accepted the invitation and requested sight of the consultants' report when it was available;

- the use of the word “remote” was often frowned upon because it suggested, as stated in the Scottish Government’s Addressing Depopulation Action Plan, that people needed to “get out to get on” and portrayed areas as lacking in people, culture and enterprise. On the other hand, large areas of Highland met the Scottish Government definition of “remote rural” and “very remote rural” areas, and it was suggested it was necessary to be mindful of the language used when discussing and promoting the more rural areas in Highland, and how to address the contradictory messaging going forward;
- clarification having been sought regarding the £7.9m savings referred to in section 5.8 of the report, it was explained that this was against the whole Person Centred Solutions Portfolio and related to the delivery of adult social care. The ELC workstream was not anticipated to deliver any savings in the current financial year; and
- the intention to increase the number of childminders, particularly in remote and rural areas, was welcomed, and it was suggested consideration should be given to employing childminders and supporting them to work through the Care Commission’s many rules and regulations which were a barrier to potential childminders.

The Committee scrutinised and **NOTED** the report, including progress to date and next steps.

11. Attainment Update – Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels (ACEL) Cunntas às Ùr mu Bhuileachadh – Coileanadh Ìrean a’ Churraicealaim airson Sàr-mhathais

There had been circulated Report No EDU/8/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

The Chair explained that the report covered the latest ACEL data for Highland schools. As had previously been stated, the Council was on a journey of improvement and, while there was still a way to go, the data indicated a trend of improvement. As had been requested by Committee Members, additional measures were being brought in and consolidated, in association with schools, to continue to improve year on year.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- Scotland’s attainment performance had deteriorated further compared to previous years and the other home nations. Whilst the improving position in Highland was to be welcomed, it was a fragile situation and the Council needed to double its efforts, both because attainment in Highland impacted on the national position and to continue to close the gap with other Scottish local authorities who would also be seeking to improve;

- the next steps set out in section 8 of the report, such as the establishment of 8 operational areas, were innovative and key to the methodology around improving attainment. It was disappointing that more information had not been appended to the report and it was hoped it would come to a future meeting;
- concern was expressed that primary attainment was reported to one meeting of the Committee and secondary attainment to another, and it would be useful to have an agenda item that took a holistic view of attainment from 3-18;
- there was a lot to take comfort from in the report. However, it would be good to see more pace and urgency coming through, and there was a need for more frequent attainment items on the Committee's agendas;
- national benchmarking was essential, and it was queried why this was the first time the Scottish Government's Broad General Education Benchmarking Tool had been used to measure improvement;
- in responding to the above points, the Chair explained that it had not been possible to include more information on the new structure in the report as engagement with staff members was ongoing. He proposed that, once the engagement process had concluded, a Members' briefing session be arranged. This could also include a more in-depth discussion on attainment from 3-18. In terms of more attainment papers coming to the Committee, Members needed to understand not only the attainment figures but the programmes and strategies being implemented and the impact they were having, and that would be taken forward;
- getting attainment right in the early years was the foundation for everything that came after;
- information was sought, and provided, as to whether it was known which schools were moving forward and which were struggling and, in relation to the latter, whether any contributing factors had been identified;
- the aim was for attainment in Highland to be above average, and it would be helpful to set out, in future reports, how Highland compared to the top performing local authorities and what could be learned from them. The Assistant Chief Executive – People confirmed this could be looked at. It was added that attainment reports to Area Committees presented an opportunity for Members to interrogate the data in respect of schools in their wards/areas;
- the dedication and hard work of teachers and school staff and the forbearance of parents and pupils was recognised;
- it was reassuring to hear the improvements that had been made and the acknowledgement that the Council was on a journey in terms of attainment. However, it was also necessary to recognise the bad news and use it as a stepping stone from which to improve;
- the proposed Members' briefing was welcomed, and it was suggested it should be extended to include input from parents, teachers and other interested stakeholders who could bring valuable insight to the table. Parents had suggested it was necessary to start with the basics such as the condition of school buildings, which were the fabric of schools and communities. They had also commented that disruptive behaviour in classrooms made it difficult for pupils to learn. In that regard, reference was made to a recent press article regarding the worrying increase in violence and aggression in schools, and it was commented that it was understood there was a violent incident in Highland schools every half an hour, which was surely impacting on the attainment of young people. In response, the Chair drew attention to the Vision 30 Improvement Programme, referred to in section 8 of the report, which covered some of the points raised. He concurred regarding the importance of the Capital Programme and ensuring new school buildings were provided where needed. Behaviour in schools was an ongoing

issue that efforts were being made to address. In terms of engagement with parents, he and the Assistant Chief Executive – People were scheduled to meet with representatives of the Highland Parent Forum the following week, and the points raised would be taken on board;

- consistency for teachers had been established in terms of moderation and assessment processes and it was queried whether, as part of the Vision 30 Improvement Programme, similar consistency would be established in programmes of learning for literacy and numeracy across primary schools from the point of view of equity and supporting teachers in shared goals. It was added that this could accelerate attainment for deprived children and those who were struggling;
- the clarity of approach to learning and delivery of the curriculum and the opportunities for development and support were welcomed;
- the link with the early years was welcomed, and it would be good to see some pioneering work in that regard in smaller communities;
- it was necessary to recognise some of the good things taking place in Highland. In that regard, it was highlighted that Highland was one of the few local authorities where all schools had access to advanced qualified school nurses;
- it was important to be ambitious for young people in Highland, that they were happy and able to go forward in whatever they wished to do, and that they wanted to come back to Highland or encourage other people to come to Highland;
- further to earlier comments regarding engaging with parents, teachers and other stakeholders, it was also necessary to open up a conversation with pupils, some of whom had an experience that was not as engaged and positive as Members and officers would like. It was highlighted that a Gaelic conference was scheduled to take place at Eden Court, and it was questioned why a similar event could not be arranged in respect of attainment. This would enable all stakeholders to share their thoughts on the various issues, consensus to be built, and the Council to go forward constructively and positively. In relation to parental engagement, the Chair emphasised that schools were the first port of call for discussions about attainment and any other issues pertaining to the education of a child. There was a Parental Engagement Strategy as well as a Pupil Engagement Strategy, and the Assistant Chief Executive - People confirmed it was intended to bring a review of the Parental Engagement Strategy to the Committee in June 2025;
- in response to a question, it was confirmed that an offer to extend the proposed Members' briefing session could be extended to Parent Council representatives and Trade Unions; and
- an update having been sought on the rollout of the SEEMiS Progress and Achievement Module, it was confirmed it was being used to support attainment analysis at school level and was working well. In terms of the rollout of the latest version of SEEMiS, the Vice Chair confirmed it was progressing slowly. Concerns had been raised and assurance had been provided at the last SEEMiS Board meeting that target dates would be met. The next Board meeting was scheduled to take place on Thursday 6 March and an update could be provided to Mr A Graham thereafter.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the Council's commitment to improving attainment and achievement at all stages through strategic initiatives developed in collaboration with school staff;

- ii. **NOTED** the accelerated improvement in Achievement of a Curriculum for Excellence Level in Literacy and Numeracy at key learner stages in comparison to previous years;
- iii. **NOTED** full implementation in primary schools of a tracking and reporting system module on SEEMiS with supporting analysis data dashboard tool for all;
- iv. **NOTED** implementation of Attainment Boards to drive improvement in secondary schools;
- v. **NOTED** that attainment meetings take place in January/February 2025 with targets for improvement agreed with Headteachers and monitored thereafter;
- vi. **NOTED** the impact of target setting, tracking and resources and interventions used by schools to raise attainment and address learner attainment gaps at school, Associated School Group and local authority level;
- vii. **NOTED** the next steps outlined in section 8 of the report; and
- viii. **AGREED** that, following the conclusion of the engagement process, a Members' briefing session be arranged on the next steps set out in the report, and on attainment from 3-18.

12. Minutes **Geàrr-chunntas**

The Committee **NOTED** the following draft Minutes:-

- i. Local Negotiating Committee for Teachers (Annual General Meeting) – 3 December 2024;
- ii. Local Negotiating Committee for Teachers (Ordinary Meeting) – 3 December 2024; and
- iii. Educational Trust Fund Sub-Committee – 16 December 2024.

13. High Life Highland – Appointment of Independent Directors **High Life na Gaidhealtachd – Cur Stiùirichean Neo-eisimeileach an Dreuchd**

The Committee was advised that recommendations had been received from the High Life Highland Nominations Committee in relation to the appointment of Independent Directors as follows:-

Mr Michael Boylan
Ms Alli Vass

The Committee **AGREED** the recommendations as detailed.

The meeting concluded at 12.45 pm.