

The Highland Council
No. 3 2025/2026

Minutes of Meeting of the Highland Council held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Thursday, 27 March 2025 at 9.35 am.

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

Present:

Ms S Atkin
Mr M Baird
Mr C Ballance
Mr A Baxter
Dr C Birt
Mr B Boyd
Mr R Bremner
Mr I Brown
Mr J Bruce
Mr M Cameron
Mrs I Campbell
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair
Mr A Christie
Mrs M Cockburn
Mr S Coghill (Remote)
Ms T Collier (Remote)
Ms H Crawford
Ms L Dundas (Remote)
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 D Gregg
Dr M Gregson
Mr R Gunn
Mrs J Hendry
Ms M Hutchison
Mr A Jarvie
Mrs B Jarvie (Remote)
Ms L Johnston

Mr R Jones
Mr S Kennedy (Remote)
Ms E Knox (Remote)
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 (Remote)
Ms K MacLean
Mr T MacLennan (Remote)
Mr D Macpherson
Mr D McDonald
Mr J McGillivray (Remote)
Mr D Millar (Remote)
Mr H Morrison (Remote)
Mr C Munro
Ms L Niven (Remote)
Mr P Oldham
Mrs M Paterson
Mrs M Reid
Mr M Reiss
Mrs T Robertson
Mr K Rosie
Ms M Ross
Ms M Smith
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

Mr B Lobban in the Chair

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr A Baldrey, Mr M Green, Ms J McEwan, Mrs L Saggars and Mr A Sinclair.

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

The Council **NOTED** the following Declaration of Interest:-

Item 21 – Mrs A MacLean.

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

Item 3 – Mr Cameron, Mr Christie, Mr Gregg and Mr A Jarvie

Item 5 – Mr Cameron and Mr Christie

Item 6 – Mr Christie and Mr Gregg

Item 21 – Mr Cameron and Mr Oldham

Item 21.i – Mr Christie

3. Annual Report 2023/24 – Statutory Performance Indicators Benchmarking and Best Value Aithisg Bhliadhnail 2023/24 – Slatan-tomhais Taisbeanairean Coileanaidh Reachdail agus Luach as Fheàrr

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 close family member was a teacher at Charleston Academy

Mr A Christie - as a Non-Executive Director of NHS Highland

Mr D Gregg - as an employee of NHS Highland

Mr A Jarvie – as an employee of the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland

There had been circulated Report No. HC/02/25 by the Chief Executive.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- thanks were extended to all those involved in supporting the service performance of the Council and key areas of improvement were highlighted, namely - the time taken to process major planning applications; the support provided to vulnerable people in our communities especially children and young people; housing benefit and council tax services. Continued progress was being made on service areas that required improvement;
- Audit Scotland, in their report on the Council for 2023/24, reported that the Council had effective and appropriate arrangements to secure sound financial management;
- the number of weeks to process a homelessness application was deemed far too long (35 weeks) and a commitment was sought for the Redesign Board or the Housing and Property Committee to look at significantly reducing this average timescale. It was confirmed that a report would be submitted to the next Housing and Property Committee on homelessness;
- the Council's housing debt was a significant barrier to meeting the challenges in housing and this was out with the Council's control;

- reference was made to Adult Services aged 65+ care needs at home and that NHS Highland was facing greater challenges in meeting demand for personal care at home. While more people were receiving care at home, current funding levels were not enough to keep up with demand. A lack of resources made it difficult to recruit and retain staff and this put pressure on the ability to provide quality care to an ageing population. To address this, extra funding was required to stabilise the workforce, improve infrastructure and ensure a fairer wage for carers. A key issue in staff retention was highlighted as affordable housing for health care workers. Also, strengthening partnerships with independent providers and investing in their stability was essential;
- in terms of the data surrounding attainment, it was shown in the report that good progress was being made, however this was not reflective in the performance league tables in the local government benchmark report for 2023/24;
- Highland Schools were on a journey of improvement and many changes had been made to support and improve attainment in schools and Highland was one of the most improved Authorities in Scotland across all primary measures. Key information on improvements in literacy and numeracy was highlighted. Widening the curriculum offered more so young people could be aspirational in their academic choices and a Highland raising attainment strategy would be developed. Continued up to date information on performance in schools would be brought to the Education Committee;
- some of the attainment data was not encouraging and objective data was required as there were still gaps. There should be an acceptance there was an issue with attainment in our schools as a first step;
- while there were challenges in attainment, for the second year in a row there had been a rise in positive destinations for young people;
- school attendance was a key area of focus for the Council. Also, the Scottish Government was to launch a national campaign on the importance of school attendance next school term;
- the work of Criminal Justice Social Workers was commended, despite some performance indicators being RAG rated red and part of the reason for this was due to the Service waiting on data from the Criminal Justice system;
- despite the positive news reported in the performance report, a view was expressed that there were critical failings in service delivery in key areas of education, social care, infrastructure and housing. In particular, it was highlighted that SCQF Level 6 attainment by children from deprived backgrounds was one of the worst performances in Scotland and School attendance had dropped. In terms of statutory health assessments for looked after children only 56.5% had been completed on time. These were vulnerable children that the Council had a legal and moral duty to care for and they were being let down. The elderly were being let down as well with just over half of older adults receiving care at home. Further failings in community payback orders, adults with incapacity waiting lists were highlighted. Therefore, it was felt the Council's Administration was not capable of managing the administration of its services properly;
- information was sought, and provided, on data and targets for 2023/24 for SCQF Level 5 & 6 attainment by all children and SCQF Level 5 attainment by children from deprived backgrounds. Also, sickness days lost per employee for all staff showed a worsening trend and information was sought, and provided, on how targets were set and why the RAG rating was still showing green. Continuing care for adult placement service showed conflicting data on performance and an explanation was sought;
- in terms of school transport costs, the Council owning its own bus company would reduce costs. It was queried when this was likely to happen and whether other measures would be required to meet savings targets in this area. It was highlighted that, with over 300 transport contracts due for renewal in the next

three years, the Council was in a strong position to work competitively with the private sector on these contracts;

- information was sought on children health assessment targets; community payback order delays; which reports were missing and how to improve the process to reduce the waiting list for Adults with Incapacity;
- various suggestions were made to improve the efficiency of the care at home service, such as training nurses to become Occupational Therapists. There were not enough local care workers and it should be a gender balanced role with an appropriate wage for this skilled role;
- the biggest impact on adults with incapacity was delayed discharge because they did not have power of attorney or guardianship orders in place. People needed more support to access these legal orders;
- there were now more looked after children staying in Highland which was the right thing to do, and it also cost less than them being looked after out with the area;
- it was encouraging that the Children's Participation Strategy had seen a significant level of engagement from young people;
- Highland Council was the top local government authority for three years in a row for procurement spend on local enterprises which was a fantastic achievement and the Council should aspire to maintain this level of performance to support local businesses;
- while energy use had reduced, the increase in unit price of energy meant overall the Council's energy costs had increased. If the Council introduced its own energy company, as was looked at in the past, then costs could be reduced;
- despite the rollout of the new recycling scheme for refuse and significant investment in this, performance against other local authorities had reduced and on average only 36% of household waste was recycled which was a low amount. It was felt that the number of bins provided now was putting people off recycling, which did not encourage behaviour change. However, it was pointed out that a lot of investment in recycling had been made in the last year and therefore there would hopefully be improvements in performance data in the next annual report;
- Health and Social Care had a strategy for children and also a strategy for adults, the latter led by NHS Highland and both were showing areas of underlying improvement and the work of everyone involved in health and social care was commended;
- the accident rate of employees had increased again and the reason for this was due to improved reporting through the Council's new accident/incident reporting Assure system;
- a view was expressed that the Council had one of the most efficient council tax systems in Scotland, but set against a challenging economic environment; and
- there was a need to work with the public on educating them to stop littering.

Decision

The Council **NOTED**:-

- i. the performance of the Council's SPIs for 2023/24 outlined in Appendices 1 and 2 and 3 of the Report;
- ii. that the updated performance data for 2022/23 had been provided at Appendix 3 to the report;
- iii. the high level summary of the Draft Local Government Benchmarking Framework National Report set out in section 6.6 of the report; and
- iv. the outcome of the Best Value thematic review set out at section 7.2 of the report, that a full Best Value review would be undertaken during 2024/25 and the examples of Best Value set out in Appendix 4 of the report.

4. Treasury Management Strategy Statement and Investment Statement - 2025/26 Aithris Ro-innleachd agus Aithris Tasgaidh Ro-innleachd Stiùireadh Ionmhasail - 2025/26

There had been circulated Report No. HC/03/25 by the Chief Officer – Corporate Finance.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- the report emphasised the need for an affordable, prudent and sustainable approach and set out a way for the Council to proceed that would help provide the funding for the Highland Investment Plan (HIP). The earmarking of 2% of the Council Tax income to support the HIP was being considered by other Councils, thus Highland being seen as an exemplar. There were however challenges, such as higher than expected interest rates, but flexibility had been built into the HIP and the Council was now in a better position to deliver improvements to all of its services;
- the recent Council budget had earmarked £8m of investment for renewable energy which would bring Council costs down and generate income;
- the report stated that placing undue weight on the Environmental and Social factors in the decision-making process could have the unintended consequences of limiting the list of potential counterparty options and decreasing diversification. It was questioned how much weight was undue;
- clarification was sought as to what was meant by the term “war stock” investments;
- the ethics of investing in countries such as Abu Dhabi and Qatar, where concerns were voiced about human rights, was questioned. It was suggested the 2026/27 Treasury Management Strategy and Investment Statements should consider ethical criteria and a report on options be submitted to the Corporate Resources Committee. Whilst the Council’s treasury management was sound, it was important to take time to consider who and why investments were made and, if charities could invest ethically, then so could Local Authorities;
- confirmation was sought, and provided, regarding the prudential code relating to the commitment to repay loan fund advances for the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account;
- Audit Scotland’s view was that Highland Council had a sound financial plan in relation to its borrowing;
- it was too early to gauge the impact of the recent announcements made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer; and
- the Council’s investment priorities were security first, liquidity second and then yield. However, given the size of the investments the Council made, it could have implications for the market and therefore it was suggested that, in practise, liquidity was the most important.

Decision

The Council **APPROVED** the Treasury Management Strategy Statement and Investment Statement for 2025/26 and the Prudential Indicators as detailed in Appendix 1 of the report.

5. Highland Investment Plan – 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 close family member was a teacher at Charleston Academy

Mr A Christie - as a Non-Executive Director of NHS Highland

There had been circulated Report No. HC/04/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- critical decisions had been necessary regarding a capital plan which had been unaffordable and the need to address the investment challenges such as poor road surfaces and a deteriorating school estate. The HIP had set about tackling these issues and set out a long term and coherent approach;
- the report provided information on a number of fronts, including progress and time frames in respect of school build programmes, but there remained more information regarding the rest of the capital work and it was proposed that a full report would be submitted to the Council meeting on 15 May;
- a £2.1 billion pound investment plan was planned over future years but it was good to see timelines in place where already planned projects would be completed. In addition, it was pointed out that the current programme of school and road improvements represented £0.5m of investment;
- there were many benefits of co-locating schools including professional collaboration, educational flexibility, the development of life skills and ensuring young people achieved their full potential;
- representations had been received regarding the option to move St Clement's and Dingwall Primary schools to a Community Point of Development (POD) . Whilst there would be a clear demarcation in terms of buildings, teachers etc, it was suggested not all parents were in favour of the proposal. A statutory consultation was about to commence to determine the location of the new St Clement's and, while it was important that the needs and wishes of the Parent Council and existing parents were taken into consideration, it was also important no one group could jeopardise the entire project;
- the co-location of St Clement's and Dingwall Primary would provide two schools for the price of one but with their own facilities, close to the town centre and offering an ethos of inclusion when needed. However, there were others who preferred the Docharty site;
- it was important to be clear as to what would be included in a POD;
- the inclusion of Beaully Primary School and Charleston Academy was welcomed, although there was some scepticism about proposed delivery dates;
- Beaully Primary needed a new school, but a major relocation of services was not required. A re/co location of services could not delay the provision of a new school;
- disappointment was expressed that the 3–5-year completion date for Charleston Academy had slipped. A one phased redevelopment was preferred rather than on a three phase basis, to avoid disruption and potential future further delays;

- it was contended that the report before Members was positive given it represented investment in key services, especially in schools with Dunvegan, Thurso, Inverness High and Fortrose also being cited as examples, and engagement with communities and Local Members;
- the plans for these schools would generate many other benefits for communities and bring the school estate up to a point where it was suitable for purpose and supporting the educational needs of pupils. Members were encouraged to support the recommendations;
- nevertheless, clarification was necessary as to what exactly was intended for all these schools and assurances were sought that stakeholder groups would be established and communication enhanced. It was also important to act expeditiously as unnecessary delays were likely to result in increased construction costs;
- the large number of schools in Highland compared to other education authorities meant that the Scottish and Westminster Governments should treat Highland differently;
- reference was made to the unique community approach adopted during the delivery of Strontian Primary school. Despite its success the model had not been revisited;
- the report demonstrated how the Highland Council was investing in communities and the infrastructure network as well as tackling major capital challenges. It also had the potential to provide significant economic growth and employment opportunities;
- it benefited the construction industry for the Council to have a long term approach and it was hoped as much business as possible could be directed towards local contractors;
- whilst the range of investments was welcomed, it had come at a cost to some communities. Culloden Academy was one such example where, despite Development Plans having been in place for some years and the growth in housing development on the east of Inverness, pupils were still being taught in demountable classrooms. Inverness Royal Academy was also not fit for purpose and Drummond School was over subscribed;
- Hub North Scotland Ltd had been taken forward as the preferred HIP delivery partner and would be managed by the internal Property Team. This would ensure money would be spent wisely, that the best possible deals were sought and, where possible, economies of scale achieved. It would also align with Council policies and strategies. However, there was also scope for an alternative delivery proposal as this would build in flexibility and an agile approach to respond to change as and when required;
- a Communities Benefit Charter would be drawn up and this would reinforce the Council's commitment to community wealth building;
- an update was also provided in relation to the Moss Park Care Home in Fort William together with a brief description of the future delivery of care services in Lochaber. Whilst different models of care would be needed for each area, the work taking place in Lochaber would set the foundations for other areas;
- having a Strategic Outline Case for Adult Social Care was important and it was essential Lochaber Members were able to feed into this;
- it was hoped the HIP would be transformational but it was contended that the Highland Council had a good track record of planning and promising but not so good at delivering;
- progress with the Council's Strategic Asset Management Plan was also set out;

- there were opportunities for match funding for new regional facilities, notably an indoor tennis centre for the east side of Inverness. This type of development was in line with the Community Sports and Leisure Strategy agreed by the Education Committee in November 2023. It would also bring many mental and physical health benefits and Members were encouraged to support this proposal when it came before them for consideration;
- following on from the above, the need to upgrade the running track and athletic resource at Inverness Leisure was highlighted which could then be a flagship as a competitive and training facility; and
- the provision of better roads boosted economic growth and attracted inward investment and employment opportunities.

Decision

The Council:-

- AGREED** that following the market testing exercise that had been used to identify which, out of the existing Procurement Contract Regulations (PCR) 2015 compliant strategic partnering arrangements and centralised purchasing arrangements available, Hub North Scotland Ltd be taken forward as the chosen Highland Investment Plan (HIP) delivery partner, with the next steps as outlined at paragraphs 5.13 to 5.26 of the report;
- AGREED** that a Commissioning Approval Board, chaired by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place, be introduced as soon as possible to determine capital contract awards including but not limited to HIP;
- NOTED** the indicative HIP capital funding quantum as shown in section 6 of the report, which would be subject to future budget decisions to earmark revenue funding and annual review and revision to take account of factors such as capital project costs, phasing, and interest rates;
- AGREED** the allocation of capital funding to the first group of Phase 1 projects at Beauly, Charleston, Dingwall, Dunvegan, Fortrose, Inverness High and Thurso and the proposed project delivery timescales;
- AGREED** the recommended option to move to a Community POD development for St Clement's and Dingwall Primary schools, on the basis that this provided the greatest educational benefits for both schools, and the maximum economic benefit for the wider community;
- NOTED** that the relocation of St Clement's School would require a statutory consultation;
- AGREED** to immediately commence an informal consultation period of engagement with relevant stakeholders from both schools. This would inform the proposals for the above statutory consultation, to be presented to the Education Committee on 4 June 2025;
- AGREED** the approach to developing Early Smaller Scale HIP Investment Possibilities and working with potential funding partners to maximise investment opportunities; and
- AGREED** the commencement of work on the Strategic Outline Case for Lochaber Adult Care Provision.

6. Establishing a Poverty and Equalities Commission A' Stèidheachadh Coimisean Bochdainn is Co-ionannachd

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 and as General Manager of Inverness, Badenoch and Strathspey CAB
Mr D Gregg - as an employee of NHS Highland

There had been circulated Report No HC/05/25 by the Chief Executive.

In summarising the proposal to establish a Poverty and Equality Commission, the Chair of the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee outlined the challenges facing people in the Highlands, and referred to the need to identify, mitigate for, and prevent people falling into poverty, in partnership with other organisations. It was important that practical, sustainable solutions were developed to address poverty and inequalities, and to deliver effective services across urban and rural Highland. Cross-party support for the initiative was urged.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- it was important to listen to the views of people with lived experience of poverty;
- poverty was not a reflection on a person's character but related to a lack of resources, and it should not be happening given the overall wealth of the United Kingdom;
- it was suggested the Council's Administration should have considered the finances around the Commission more thoroughly when setting the Council's budget for 2024-25, however the amended decision to make the Chair of the Commission an unpaid position was welcomed;
- the importance of recruiting and working with the right people was emphasised, and various suggestions were made;
- it was vital the work of the Commission was action-focused and had the power to make the necessary changes;
- a job description for the Commissioner was required;
- tackling inequalities was as important as, and closely connected to, tackling poverty, however the report mentioned poverty more frequently than inequalities;
- reference was made to the various types of poverty being experienced in the Highlands, especially remote & rural issues, fuel & energy poverty, and to the plight of people in work but experiencing poverty;
- the rise in community projects such as sharing sheds, food banks and community fridges was highlighted and, while they were welcomed, it would be preferable if they were not required;
- it was important to harness the expertise in communities and within other organisations;
- the impact of inequalities and poverty on the quality and length of people's lives was highlighted;
- it was suggested the topics of poverty and inequality were too large to be considered together;
- a request was made for a Members' workshop before the Council meeting in June 2025;
- it was felt the causes of rural poverty were well documented and included fuel and energy costs, low wages, lack of public transport and distances to services;
- the issue of cold homes could be partly tackled by improving insulation levels in social housing;
- although the Highland Council had a relatively low Council tax level, it was a higher percentage of the local population's average income;

- concern was expressed at the amount of unclaimed benefit, including pension credit, and information was sought and provided on the statistics around this, and the efforts being undertaken to improve the uptake of benefits to which people were entitled;
- given the rich natural resources available in Scotland, including the ability to produce renewable energy, it was of concern that fuel poverty was such an issue in Highland;
- the initiative would provide a useful blueprint for the Scottish Government to roll out elsewhere;
- the need for investment to secure the provision of future services was emphasised, and this had to be balanced against shorter term economies;
- the number of children living in poverty was of significant concern, despite many having at least one parent in work;
- attention was drawn to the valuable work undertaken by the Citizen Advice Bureau network;
- while acknowledging the pressures already facing the Police service, it would be helpful to have Police involvement with the Commission; and
- Members were urged to submit a brief CV detailing their interest and relevant skills for their involvement with the Commission.

Decision

The Council **NOTED**:-

- i. the background and rationale for establishing a Poverty and Equality Commission;
- ii. the early work undertaken to establish the Commission; and
- iii. that an update report on progress would be considered at the June meeting of the Council.

7. Community Benefits from Net Zero Energy Developments: Consultation Co-chomhairleachadh Riaghaltas na h-Alba mu Bhuannachdan Coimhearsnachd bho Leasachaidhean Neoni Lom

There had been circulated Report No. HC/06/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- thanks were expressed to officers for the report, and the comprehensive and well-informed response to the consultation;
- not many areas in Europe were as vested in the renewables sector as Highland, and enhancing community benefit contributions by developers was extremely important going forward;
- it was unjust that Highland was rich in renewables yet people living in Highland paid more for their electricity than anywhere else in the UK;
- community benefits had allowed some communities to enhance and develop projects in their areas. However, most of those were not strategic, and introducing the Social Value Charter with an additional £7,500 per megawatt (MW) in developer contributions would enable the creation of a Strategic Fund which would mean everyone in Highland could share in the prosperity associated with Highland's natural resources. The consultation response set out how the Council would engage with communities and other stakeholders to ensure any money generated would be spent equitably;

- engaging with the Social Value Charter and the additional £7,500 per MW would be a responsible action by developers. However, it was currently voluntary, and the response to the consultation was urging that it be made mandatory to guarantee a sustainable and substantial Strategic Fund going forward. Other Members added their support for making community benefit mandatory;
- it was important to send a clear message to the Scottish Government and the renewables sector about the Council's ambition for Highland and how that could be facilitated;
- it was questioned why Members had not been made aware of the consultation before now, and what steps had been taken to get community feedback, specifically from Community Councils that were heavily impacted by planning applications for renewable developments. The closing date for the consultation was 11 April 2024, and it was asked whether an attempt could be made between now and then to engage with the most impacted Community Councils and get their feedback. Other Members added their support for involving Community Councils. However, some Members referred to instances of complaints by Community Councils about the number of consultations they received and were expected to reply to. In response, it was emphasised that it was a Scottish Government consultation, not a Council consultation. It was understood that the Scottish Government had held specific consultation meetings and there had been good attendance from Highland community groups. The Scottish Community Development Centre had also run sessions with their member groups, one of which had been in Inverness, so there had been an information flow to those most affected;
- given so many people were voicing concerns regarding Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) planning applications, it was queried why there was no mention of them in the risk implications in section 3.3 of the report. Other Members spoke to BESS applications in their ward whereby developers had stated they were not subject to community benefit, which was incorrect. In addition, the need for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to be a consultee on BESS applications was emphasised;
- with reference to section 4 of the report, it was queried why an impact assessment was not required;
- communities did not want large-scale renewable developments, and it was questioned what was going to be done for the people who were going to be living next to a super substation or pylon lines. No amount of community benefit would compensate them for the loss of value of their homes, noise, disruption etc, and many were under an immense amount of stress. The Council needed to recognise that and stand up for those affected;
- many people saw community benefit as a bribe from developers to secure planning permission from the Council;
- community benefit existed because communities were being asked to carry the burden of development. It should be for the affected communities, not the Council, to decide how the money should be spent, and it was questioned why communities that were not adversely impacted should benefit. Other Members argued that equitable distribution of wealth was long overdue. Some small villages had so much money they did not know what to do with it, and they wanted to support projects in other areas but could not do so because the money was restricted to their postcode;
- it was suggested that Members were being asked to accept a situation where local voices were overridden, decisions were made far away from the communities affected, and community benefit money was used to top-up Council budgets, which was not community empowerment but centralisation;
- communities had not asked for the Social Value Charter, and had been unaware of it until it had been finalised;

- 100% of community benefit money should be retained within the community it was intended for, and it should be for Local Members at ward level to determine how best to use the funding to support their communities;
- it was striking that community benefit was not a material planning consideration;
- a number of National Energy System Operator figures were provided relating to electricity generation in Scotland, which far exceeded peak demand. More grid capacity was needed to transport south the energy produced in the north of Scotland, and it was suggested that at least another three overhead lines would be required. Restrictions at the border with England until 2030 meant that producing more electricity in Scotland was going to lead to more constraint payments, Beatrice Wind Farm having already received approximately £1.2bn in subsidies and constraint payments. It was added that there were much more efficient ways of using the energy produced by Beatrice Wind Farm than had been the case to date;
- reference was made to a report by Aquatera, an Orkney-based company, which had looked at Scottish wind farms and which indicated that community-owned wind farms paid an average of £170,000 per MW per annum in community benefit, and it was suggested there was a link between that and the new school buildings and excellent roads in Orkney. If the same figure was applied, the cluster of wind farms in Caithness, for example, would generate approximately £16-17m per year which, in two years, would fund new primary schools in the two nearest villages. The additional £7,500 per MW set out in the Social Value Charter was a modest sum in comparison;
- in relation to planning applications, it was necessary to make use of holding objections to allow time to gather the facts and figures;
- community benefit contributions should be increased and index-linked, and it was hoped the Scottish and UK Governments would support this. Some Members suggested that, looking at electricity prices, community benefit contributions should be £15,000 per MW;
- the proposed involvement of the Highland Community Planning Partnership in the distribution of funding was welcomed;
- community benefit was subject to many conditions, and it was hoped that having read the consultation responses the Scottish Government would address the issues in that regard so the money could be spent more wisely and strategically;
- Members questioned the sense in a situation whereby community benefit was being sought to help lift people out of poverty when community benefit contributions were paid by electricity companies and high electricity bills were one of the factors pushing people into poverty to begin with;
- community benefit was being used to play communities off against each other, and anything the Council could do to stop that competition and conflict between local communities would be beneficial;
- it having been suggested it would be worth mentioning wave and tidal energy in the consultation response under question 1b, it was confirmed that would be taken on board;
- with reference to the Regional Economic Strategy, a key driver of growth was to achieve more effective approaches to community benefit and to ensure community-led development. The Social Value Charter could be a very helpful document but there had not been enough involvement of communities, and community engagement was key going forward;
- the Social Value Charter would allow community benefit money to be distributed to areas of high deprivation such as Merkinch in Inverness which would otherwise not receive any community benefit as there would never be a renewable development there;

- communities on the north side of the Black Isle did not receive any community benefit yet were impacted by views of wind farms, and it was unjust that there would be communities with vast pots of money adjacent to areas of poverty, particularly in Easter Ross;
- the major investment by Sumitomo was very welcome;
- in relation to electricity prices, it was hoped that the Review of Electricity Market Arrangements would be acted upon and consumers in areas like Highland would see some benefit in the years ahead. The cost of generating wind energy and hydropower had not increased when Russia had invaded Ukraine yet the cost to consumers had doubled. The single UK market for electricity did not work in favour of Highland, which effectively subsidised other areas, and this was an opportunity to recoup some of that money and grow the Highland economy;
- it was questioned whether the timescale for the consultation met the standards in the Community Empowerment Act regarding engagement with communities;
- where communities were not able to spend their community benefit money, it was not due to a shortage of need or ideas but the restrictive spending criteria;
- in response to a question, it was explained that there had been no attempt to retrospectively obtain community benefit on existing developments as it was currently voluntary;
- Members requested sight of the mapping of renewable energy developments that had previously been agreed; and
- it would be helpful to have a visualisation of the Beaulieu to Denny powerline as it crossed Highland so Members, constituents and government officers could see the extent of the impact and how compelling the case was for better funding for the Council.

Following summing up, Mr K Gowans, seconded by Mrs M Reid, **MOVED** the recommendations in the report.

As an **AMENDMENT**, Mrs H Crawford, seconded by Mr R Stewart, moved that recommendation iii. be re-written as follows:-

“ agree to urgently consult with impacted Community Councils regarding the Scottish Government’s Consultation on Community Benefits from Net Zero Developments, to include the outcome of that within The Highland Council’s response as detailed in Appendix 1 to the Report, and submit it to the Scottish Government.”

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 42 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 23 votes, with 2 abstentions. The **MOTION** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion:

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

For the Amendment:

Mr M Baird, Mr A Baxter, Mr J Bruce, Mr A Christie, Mrs H Crawford, Mr J Edmondson, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Dr M Gregson, Mr R Gunn, Mr A Jarvie, Mrs B Jarvie, Ms M MacCallum, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr S Mackie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mrs A MacLean, Mr D Macpherson, Mr J McGillivray, Mr M Reiss, Mrs T Robertson, Mr R Stewart.

Abstentions:

Mr D Gregg, Mr P Logue.

Decision

The Council:-

- i. **NOTED** that there were two sections to the consultation: Offshore and Onshore;
- ii. **NOTED** that the Council's response was aligned with the principles of the Highland Social Value Charter and the Highland and Islands Regional Economic Partnership position on community benefits (offshore wind); and
- iii. **AGREED** to the submission of Highland Council's response to the Scottish Government's Consultation on Community Benefits from Net Zero Developments as detailed in Appendix 1 to the report.

8. Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004 (Remuneration) Amendment Regulations 2025
Iaghailtean Atharrachaidh 2004 Achd an Riaghaltais Ionadail 2025 (Pàigheadh)

There had been circulated Report No HC/07/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate.

Decision

The Council:-

- i. **NOTED** the implementation of the Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004 (Remuneration) Amendment Regulations 2025;
- ii. **AGREED** the salary of the post of Civic Head be set at the maximum of 75% of the post of Leader as prescribed in the Regulations; and
- iii. **AGREED** that a percentage increase equivalent to the percentage increase in councillors' salaries was also made to senior councillors who were in receipt of a Special Responsibility Allowance as follows:-
 - a) Leader of the Opposition;
 - b) Chair and Vice Chair of Corporate Resources Committee;
 - c) Chair of Audit Committee;
 - d) Chair and Vice Chair of Housing and Property Committee;
 - e) Chair and Vice Chair Economy and Infrastructure Committee;
 - f) Chair and Vice Chair of Communities and Place Committee;
 - g) Chair and Vice Chair of Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee;
 - h) Chair and Vice Chair of Education Committee; and
 - i) Leader of Inverness and Area.

9. Update to the Scheme of Delegation Cunntas às Ùr mun Sgeama Thiomnaidh

There had been circulated Report No. HC/08/25 by the Chief Officer - Legal and Corporate Governance.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- the Scottish Government's rush to get Section 36 and Section 37 applications processed was regrettable causing a procedural change to be made so that the Council's views could be taken into account;
- it was suggested that, the change to the Scheme of Delegation in respect of planning would lead local communities to feel that big planning decisions were being made without public scrutiny;
- National Planning Framework 4 made it harder for local communities to stand against applications from large energy companies and the proposed update would worsen this problem;
- previously Special Meetings of planning committees had been arranged at short notice to ensure that responses to major applications could be made timeously;
- it was highlighted that local Planning Applications Committee memberships and decisions were made on a politically neutral basis;
- the timescales for planning officers to produce complex and detailed reports were very tight which put them under immense pressure;
- it was important to look at the resource levels within the planning department and was suggested that there could be a review to assess whether staffing levels were adequate;
- it was suggested that a way to streamline the planning applications process was needed so that large, important items with long reaching impacts could be given the appropriate amount of time in discussion without increasing the length of Planning Applications Committee meetings;
- the public perception of the Scottish planning system was not complimentary;
- it was queried whether Planning Applications Committees could meet more regularly to accommodate the large number of complex applications as it was important that these be given the correct amount of consideration even if this came at an increased cost; and
- this change would give Officers the ability to put in a holding objection to applications to allow sufficient time for Members to be given all the relevant information, allowing them to make a considered decision.

Mr P Oldham seconded by **Ms K MacLean** moved the recommendations detailed in the report.

As an **AMENDMENT**, Mr R Stewart, seconded by Mrs H Crawford, moved to agree the changes the Scheme of Delegation except for the planning elements.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 54 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 7 votes, with 3 abstentions, and the **MOTION** was **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion:

Ms S Atkin, Mr M Baird, Mr C Ballance, Mr A Baxter, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Ms I Campbell, Mrs M Cockburn, Mr S Coghill, Mrs T Collier, 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 D Gregg, 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 P Logue, Mr D Loudon, Ms M MacCallum, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D McDonald, Mr J McGillivray, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Mr C Munro, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mrs T Robertson, Mr K Rosie, Ms M Ross, Ms M Smith, Ms K Willis.

For the Amendment:

Mr J Bruce, Mr A Christie, Mrs H Crawford, Mrs B Jarvie, Ms I Mackenzie, Mrs A MacLean, Mr R Stewart.

Abstentions:

Dr M Gregson, Mr D Macpherson, Mr M Reiss.

Decision

The Council **AGREED** the changes to the Scheme of Delegation and Administration as detailed in Appendix 1 to the report.

**10. Contract Standing Orders
Gnàth-riaghailtean Cùmhnaint**

There had been circulated Report No HC/09/25 by the Chief Officer – Corporate Finance.

During discussion concern was expressed that the new clauses 3.15 and 3.16 in respect of advertising were too restrictive and contractors should be able to promote the work that they were undertaking on behalf of the Council.

Decision

The Council **APPROVED** the changes to the Contract Standing Orders and **AGREED** that these become effective from 1 April 2025.

**11. Question Time
Àm Ceiste**

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

Public Questions**1. Mr R Thompson****To the Leader of the Council**

Which councillors will be required to leave the room for any vote on a Visitor Levy, due to a Declaration of Interest?

The response had been circulated.

2. Ms A Robertson

To the Leader of the Council

St Clement's School is very unique. It's a primary and secondary school with the most amazing pupils from the ages of 5 to 18. These learners are some of societies most disadvantaged and vulnerable and face challenges with all aspects of their activities of daily living. Give the history surrounding the years of unmet promises of a new school for St Clement's students and The Highland Councils commitment to GIRFEC and the principles it underpins, what assurances can be given that a new stand alone, fit for purpose school with its own identity and management structure will be built/delivered on the already acquired site at Docharty Brae?

The response had been circulated.

Member Questions

1. Mr A Christie

To the Leader of the Council

In the Budget passed on the 29 February 2024 a reserve of £20m for Adult Social Care Redesign was established. The purpose of the reserve was "to support the Adult Social Care budget on a multi-year basis, and the process of change and transformation."

Please could you detail, with a descriptive analysis and value that would enable a good understanding of the aims of the project, the proposals that have been approved up to the 6th of March and any that are due to be decided by 31st March 2025?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, Mr Christie queried why the items listed had not been approved at the relevant committee.

In response, the Leader indicated that guidance would be sought on whether it was necessary for this to be approved at the relevant committee. A written response would be circulated to all Members.

2. Mr A Christie

To the Leader of the Council

The Learning Estate Strategy approved at the last Education Committee states that:

Occupancy Levels: The optimum occupancy level across all settings is generally around 90% of the Planning Capacity. This level is used as a benchmark to assess the sufficiency of the estate in general, and to support the consideration of future options around individual schools or groups of schools.

Could the Leader name all the schools above the 90% threshold after modular and temporary buildings are deducted from the planning capacity figure?

The response had been circulated.

There was no supplementary question.

3. Mrs T Robertson

To the Leader of the Council

When will we see the outcome of the Area Committee Review?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, Mrs Robertson queried if the Leader believed one ward was sufficient to merit an Area Committee.

In response, the Leader advised that this was something to be considered by all Members of Highland Council.

4. Mr A Baxter

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

As repeatedly requested by community representatives on the Corran Ferry Steering Group will you publish the detailed high level programme for the replacement Corran Ferry? This information should include:

Infrastructure Milestone Dates:

- Final funding approval
- Design
- Land and wayleaves
- Contractor tender
- Purchase order complete with contractor
- Access date
- Construction start on site
- Breakdown of civil works
- DNO connection and procurement of transformer
- Energisation
- Contact completion
- Handover

Electric Ferry Milestone Dates:

- Final funding approval
- Design
- Tender
- Purchase order
- Marine builder starts build of ferry
- Completion (including sea trials)

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, Mr Baxter asked what assessment and contingency plans were in place for the considerable risks of further lengthy delays maybe beyond 2030 for the provision of the electrical infrastructure required to service an electric ferry.

In response, the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure advised that contingency plans were being factored into any professional plans and project management process. Work was still ongoing and information would be provided when it became available.

5. Mr M Reiss

To the Chair of Health, Social Care and Wellbeing

What is the planned date for the reopening of Thor House, Thurso for respite breaks?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, the Chair of Health, Social Care and Wellbeing was asked for his opinion on the fact it was five years since Thor House offered respite care albeit recognising Covid took out two years of those five years.

In response, the Chair of Health, Social Care and Wellbeing acknowledged this was a complex question to respond to in brief detail. However, it was suggested this could be taken up in more detail out with the meeting and the response circulated to all Members.

6. Mrs H Crawford

To the Leader of the Council

The undernoted Motion on Major Electricity Development Applications & Community Engagement was approved by this Council on 30th September 2024, with the backing of over 60 Community Councils across The Highlands and cross-party support from our Councillors. Can you please provide an update in detail, outlining what action has been taken to implement the Motion, including the likely date that the Real Time Mapping will go live?

“Motion - Major Electricity Development Applications & Community Engagement

This Council:

Notes there are a number of major proposed electricity generation, storage and transmission developments, which have been or are likely to be presented to The Highland Council for planning permission, or for a response as a Consultee, in the near future.

Acknowledges that, without prejudice to future determinations, such major infrastructure developments are very likely to have significant scheme specific and cumulative environmental and socio-economic impacts upon communities and landscapes within the Highlands.

Recognises it is desirable that communities across Highland are fully engaged in the consultation and planning process and are suitably empowered to respond on an equal basis given the resources deployed by the developers, SSEN and statutory consultees.

Notes that currently these major development applications are not considered in a Highland wide context, rather they are lodged individually in a piecemeal, fragmented fashion and therefore considered individually, without reference to the effects from the entirety of developments across Highland being considered and

therefore with a lack of understanding as to what the totality will mean for our communities and our environment.

Therefore, this Council **Agrees:**

(1) Real Time Mapping - To produce a real time map, publicly available online, showing all the major renewable energy related developments within Council's knowledge, existing and proposed, including those which are or will come to Council for planning and or the Energy Consents Unit, be they operational, permitted developments or otherwise. In so far as legally permissible, the map will also include an indication of anonymised approaches made to Highland Council for pre-planning advice. This map will therefore present a holistic overview of the applications that are currently in the pipeline, including but not limited to, all proposed electricity generation, storage and transmission developments, grid connection, energy generation stations, BESS, and wind farms.

(2) The Approach To Applications

- i. The Leader will continue dialogue with the Scottish Government to ensure that the full cumulative aspect of developments, including the potential grid connection, is considered within the submission of an application under S36 of the Electricity Act for an energy generation station, and for all BESS applications of whatever scale, and the Leader to report regularly to Group Leaders regarding progress, and
- ii. If an increase in the MW threshold for applications under S36 of the Electricity Act is implemented so that some additional generating stations would fall within the Town and Country Planning Acts, the Council will update its Planning Guidance for such developments to ensure that the cumulative impacts are considered in full, including the grid connection aspects of a development.

(3) Community Council Major Application Planning Training

To take urgent action to better equip communities regarding the planning process and how to present their case, by providing planning training to Community Councils by the Planning Advisory Service and external experts specifically regarding such major applications.

(4) Community Engagement

Without ever expressing a prior opinion on the determination of any application, to engage with our communities regarding the anticipated environmental and socio-economic impacts, given that some within our communities are concerned about a wide range of issues, and to review what actions the Council can legally take to further ensure that local community views are considered in the planning process and for Officers to present a paper to the next Full Council for consideration.

Proposer: Cllr Helen Crawford, Aird & Loch Ness Ward"

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, Mrs Crawford queried what dialogue had the Leader had with Scottish Government and when did you update the group leaders.

In response, the Leader confirmed that the information that was available in relation to this would be reviewed and a response provided.

7. Mr C Ballance

To the Chair of Corporate Resources

How much paper has been saved since June 2023 when Council agreed to end the practice of automatically copying all committee papers to all members, together with the approximate financial savings in resources and officer time.

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, Mr Ballance queried whether it could be agreed that going green had both short long-term advantages.

In response, the Chair of Corporate Resources agreed that this had had long and short-term benefits.

8. Mr R Stewart

To the Leader of the Council

Is the council content that bodies under its control are following their legal obligations to provide single-sex facilities?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, Mr Stewart queried how many of the Council's schools currently comply with the Schools' Premises General Requirements and Standards, Scotland Regulation – 1967.

In response, the Leader confirmed that the Council complied with the Equalities Act 2010 and the Gender Recognition Act 2004.

9. Mr A Graham

To the Leader of the Council

For the most recent dates available, what is the average time taken to answer customer phone calls at the Service Centre?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, Mr Graham queried, what steps had been taken to lower response times at the Service Centre.

In response, the Leader indicated that he intended to visit the Service Centre and would follow up with Cllr Graham thereafter.

10. Mrs I MacKenzie

To the Leader of the Council

What is the total financial cost incurred by Highland Council over the past five years in defending legal actions brought against the council.

This should include all legal costs (both in-house and external counsel), court costs, settlements, compensation payments, and any other related expenditures.

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, given that a single figure could not be provided due to the broad scope of legal actions and current limitations in financial record keeping, Mr Mackenzie queried whether a system would be implemented to track and categorise legal expenditure, specifically related to defending legal actions, for the sake of transparency and so that the cost to the tax-payer could be quantified.

In response, the Leader indicated that advice would need to be sought and more clarity would be needed on the desired outcomes before anything could be put in place.

11. Mr D Macpherson

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

Can you please advise me and fellow members with the production of a timetable for the rollout for the replacement of old inefficient amber streetlights in my ward and others, in favour of the much more economical LED lights, in order to cut costs, improve efficiency and to achieve Net Zero in the Highland Council's self-proclaimed Climate Emergency?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, Mr Macpherson queried why has the change over to LED street lighting had taken so many years when the savings were so obviously beneficial to the Council and its tax-payers.

In response, the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure advised that over 60,000 lightbulbs had been changed over so far and the Council was on target to complete this project by 2028.

12. Membership of the Council Ballrachd na Comhairle

The Council **NOTED** that Mr Calum Munro would be resigning as a Highland Council Member with effect from 30 April 2025 and a By-election for Ward 10 (Eilean a' Cheò) would be held on 19 June 2025.

13. Membership of Committees etc Ballrachd Chomataidhean msaa

Decision

The Council **AGREED** the following:-

- i. Climate Change Committee – Mr S Coghill replace Mr R MacKintosh
- ii. Communities and Place – Mr S Coghill replace Ms M Smith and Mr C Ballance replace Mr A Baldrey
- iii. Gaelic Committee – Mr S Coghill replace Mr J McGillivray
- iv. Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee – Mr S Coghill replace Ms M Smith

- v. Pensions Committee – Mr S Coghill replace Mrs J Hendry and Mr R MacKintosh replace Mr C Ballance (and, for the latter, also on the Investment Sub Committee).

14. Appointment to Outside Bodies
Cur an Dreuchd gu Buidhnean air an Taobh A-muigh

(a) Eden Court Highlands

Following the resignation on 27 March 2025 of Ms S Atkin, the Council **AGREED** that Mrs M Reid be appointed as Director for Eden Court Highlands.

(b) Highland Children's Trust

The Council **AGREED** that Ms L Johnston be appointed to the Highland Children's Trust.

15. Timetable of Meetings
Clàr-ama Choinneamhan

Decision

The Council:

- i. **AGREED** that the Highland Council on 8 May 2025 be rescheduled to 15 May 2025;
- ii. **NOTED** that two additional Highland Licensing Committee meetings would be held on 29 April 2025 and 3 June 2025; and
- iii. **AGREED** the calendar of meetings from 1 January to 31 March 2026 as circulated.

16. Deeds Executed
Sgrìobhainnean Lagha a Bhuilicheadh

The Council **NOTED** the list of deeds and other documents executed on behalf of the Council since the meeting held on 12 December 2024.

17. Exclusion of the Public
Às-dùnadh a' Phobaill

The Council **RESOLVED** that, under Section 50A(4) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, the public be excluded from the meeting for Item 18 only on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 12 of Part 1 of Schedule 7A of the Act.

18. Planning Inquiry Decision
Co-dhùnadh Ceist Dealbhachaidh

There had been circulated to Members only confidential Report No. HC/10/25 by the Chief Officer – Legal and Corporate Governance.

The Council **NOTED** the recommendations in the report and **AGREED** that the Chief Officer – Legal and Corporate Governance be authorised to proceed with an application for judicial review.

19. Notices of Motion

Brathan Gluasaid

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

1. Lithium-ion batteries are increasingly common in many household products, including e-bikes and e-scooters, but they can pose a significant fire risk. The recent increase in fires caused by lithium-ion batteries demands that proactive steps are taken to address these risks and ensure the safety of our communities.

This Council resolves:

To write to Electrical Safety First and Lord Don Foster to express support for The Safety of Electrical-Powered Micromobility Vehicles and Lithium Batteries Bill. This Bill promoted by Electrical Safety First, and supported by, among others, The National Fire Chiefs Council, the Association of Ambulance Chief Executives, The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, and The Royal Society for Public Health.

To work through the Community Safety Partnership to gain a deeper understanding of data relating to fire risks from lithium-ion batteries and to use this understanding to mitigate risks.

To develop comprehensive safety guidance for Highland Council staff on battery safety, including the safe use, storage and disposal of lithium-ion batteries.

To work with relevant organisations to run an awareness campaign focused on the safe disposal of batteries, particularly lithium-ion batteries.

To work with council tenants to, wherever possible, provide them with safe spaces for charging e-bikes and e-scooters.

Signed:	Mrs T Robertson	Mr R Gale	Mrs A MacLean
	Mr M Baird		

Decision

The Council **AGREED** the Motion as presented.

2. The first duty of the government is the Defence of the Realm, keeping its subjects safe and secure.

The reliance on the United States of America to underwrite European continental security has reached an untenable juncture, where the people of Ukraine's fate will be arbitrated by those in the Oval Office and the Kremlin. America cannot be relied upon to be a pragmatic and predictable ally and fellow North Atlantic nations must step up to provide security on our own doorstep.

In the post-Cold War period, successive UK Governments have failed to invest in our country's strategic defence capabilities, hollowing out the armed forces and significantly reducing our comparative standing against belligerent adversaries. The British Isles are not immune to attack or territorial incursion. Chemical nerve agents were used in the Salisbury Poisonings, cyber warfare from foreign actors has been carried out against public and private institutions across the UK and incursions

into 'area of interest' airspace and waters by bombers, warships and submarines have occurred as recently as March this year.

This Council therefore welcomes the Prime Minister's commitment to increase defence spending and encourages a robust discussion across the political spectrum about the reality of our defence capability.

The Highlands has a long and proud tradition of hosting our armed forces and the local authority is home to establishments for both the Army at Fort George and Cameron Barracks and the Royal Navy's NRTE Vulcan facility in near Dounreay. Underpinning the defensive capability of these bases at home and abroad is the aerospace/defence industry and its associated supply chain.

Highland defence and aerospace contractors provide highly skilled employment and play a crucial role in supporting a national mission that keeps our fellow countrymen and women safe. In light of ongoing global insecurity and the pressing requirement to invest in defence, this Council believes it is appropriate to ask the Government to reassess its capability in Highland and invest against future threats.

This year, NRTE Vulcan in West Caithness celebrates its 60th anniversary as the UK's test bed for prototypical propulsion and submarine systems. An integral part of the Royal Navy's Submarine Delivery Programme, its principal contractor Rolls Royce is a prominent employer and investor in the local community.

This Council recognises the vital work at Vulcan in supporting the Navy's submarine programme and asks that the Government consider the unique skillset and capability hosted on the site. As future decisions, both financial and strategic, are made across the United Kingdom, this Council affirms that the existence of an authorised site with a motivated, loyal and skilled workforce is in the interests of national security to maintain.

NRTE Vulcan should therefore be considered for future missions as part of the Government's ongoing Strategic Defence Review and asks the Leader to make representations to the Secretary of State to that effect.

Signed:	Mr S Mackie	Mr A Jarvie	Mrs A MacLean	Mr M Baird
	Mr M Reiss	Dr M Gregson	Mr A Graham	Mr R Gale
	Mrs T Robertson			

Mr Mackie summarised his motion and provided a background to NRTE Vulcan, which included its role in training, research and operational capabilities. Its technology and the expertise of the workforce had been a key enabler in the strength of armed forces personnel. With over 280 jobs linked with the site, it had brought value to the local community and wider Highland region and it was thought to inspire the next generation of operators and engineers.

Mr Ballance spoke in support of his amendment. UK nuclear weapons were not operationally independent, and relied on the US in several ways. The effectiveness of nuclear weapons as a preventative measure was questioned. Mr Ballance branded them as useless and voiced that nuclear weapons had had no role to play in any conflict or threatened conflict during his lifetime. Examples were provided.

During discussion, the following points were raised:-

- NRTE Vulcan was an important resource, providing economic benefit to Caithness and the wider community;
- there was no guarantee that the US would stand side by side in the continued defence and protection of Ukraine;
- it was suggested that keeping the technology up to date allowed for it's success as a deterrent and the non-use of the deterrent should not mean it should be removed;
- this week, Rolls Royce and the Ministry of Defence had extended the NTRE Vulcan establishment for another two years and this was welcomed in Caithness;
- in an ideal world, there would be no nuclear weapons and it was said that finding peace should be a priority;
- the Highlands had a proud military tradition with a strong contingent of reservists;
- protection of our offshore and subsea infrastructure was important;
- the increase of the UK defence budget, although welcomed, should not come at the expense of the foreign aid budget and it was said that the cuts facing the foreign aid budget were unprecedented;
- benefits of having been employed at the NRTE Vulcan site were shared and it was said that the contractors were renowned for precision, reliability and commitment;
- from a local perspective, it was suggested that relationships should be developed with Rolls Royce and the Ministry of Defence as the loss of NRTE Vulcan would bring the loss of many skilled jobs; and
- it was important to provide a healthy, safe and peaceful nation for generations to come, as well as having the ability to defend the nation.

In summary, Mr Ballance stated that the first priority had to be peace. A change in UK attitudes towards defence, particularly nuclear, was needed. Warmongering was frightening.

In his summary, Mr Mackie thanked Mr Ballance for his amendment, however felt that the securing of jobs in Caithness should not be attributed to the, although regrettable, reductions in the foreign aid budget. Further clarification was provided in terms of the involvement of Rolls Royce with NRTE Vulcan.

On a vote being taken, there were 38 votes for the motion and 14 votes for the amendment, with 7 abstentions, and the **MOTION** was **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:

For the Motion

Ms S Atkin, Mr M Baird, Mr A Baxter, Mr R Bremner, Mrs I Campbell, Mr A Christie, Ms L Dundas, Mr J Edmondson, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Mr R Gale, Mr K Gowans, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Dr M Gregson, Mr R Gunn, Mr A Jarvie, Mrs B Jarvie, Ms L Johnston, Mr B Lobban, Mr P Logue, Ms M MacCallum, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr S Mackie, Mrs A MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Macpherson, Mr D McDonald, Mr H Morrison, Ms L Niven, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mrs T Robertson, Mr K Rosie, Mrs M Ross, Ms M Smith, Mr R Stewart.

For the Amendment

Mr C Ballance, Dr C Birt, Mr I Brown, Mrs M Cockburn, Mrs T Collier, Ms M Hutchison, Ms E Knox, Ms L Kraft, Mr D Loudon, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms K MacLean, Mr D Millar, Mr P Oldham, Ms K Willis.

Abstentions

Mr B Boyd, Mr M Cameron, Ms S Fanet, Mrs J Hendry, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mr C Munro.

Decision

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

3. Equal Rights Of Appeal In Planning

Planning Democracy, along with RSPB Scotland, Environmental Rights Centre Scotland, and Friends of the Earth Scotland, lodged a case in September 2022 with the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee (ACCC), a United Nations body tasked with upholding environmental rights, regarding the lack of community appeal rights in planning for members of the public in Scotland.

This follows a ruling by the ACCC that Northern Ireland is in breach of international law for its lack of community appeal rights.

Council notes that the case centres on the fact that members of the public in Scotland, who are not applicants for planning permission, and who seek to challenge a planning decision, do not have the same statutory appeal rights as applicants; that applicants for planning permission in Scotland enjoy statutory appeal rights which enable them to have the full merits of planning decisions reviewed at no or low financial cost,

The Scottish Parliament's Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee have launched a review into the workings of NPF4. Council therefore agrees to write to the Chair of that Committee, copying in the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, to support Planning Democracy's call for the government to initiate a review of equal rights of appeal.

Signed: Mr C Ballance Mr R MacKintosh

AMENDMENT

Signed: Mr R Stewart

To move the direct negative.

Mr Ballance summarised his motion, as detailed, adding that third party right of appeal would encourage improved pre-application consultation with communities and ultimately speed up the planning process, in addition to improving the inherent fairness.

Mr Stewart summarised his reasons for opposing the motion, which included that the planning system was based on local development plans on which communities were consulted. Adding a further layer to the appeal process would add to the workload and delays in the planning process.

During discussion, some Members spoke in favour of the motion, referring to the importance of equality in the justice systems, i.e. providing the same rights to third parties and to applicants to appeal. The provision of third party right of appeal would lead to further early consultation with third parties and speed up the planning process.

Other Members spoke in favour of Mr Stewart's amendment, pointing out that there was already a process in place for community consultation for Local Development Plans which, if adhered to would provide assurance to communities. The implementation of third-party appeal rights would further clog up the planning system, which already suffered backlogs and delays, and stifle the economy. Members also pointed out that another option to ensure fairness and equality would have been to take the right of appeal away from developers, rather than providing them to third parties.

On a vote being taken, there were 36 votes for the motion and 14 votes for the amendment, with 8 abstentions, and the **MOTION** was **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:

For the Motion:

Mr M Baird, Mr C Ballance, Mr A Baxter, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Mr A Christie, Mrs M Cockburn, Mrs T Collier, Mr J Edmondson, Ms S Fanet, Mr D Fraser, Mr K Gowans, Mr J Grafton, Mr R Gunn, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Ms E Knox, Ms L Kraft, Mr B Lobban, , Mr D Loudon, Ms M MacCallum, Mr S Mackie, Mr R MacKintosh, Mrs A MacLean, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr C Munro, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mr K Rosie, Ms K Willis.

For the Amendment:

Ms S Atkin, Mr L Fraser, Mr R Gale, Mr A Graham, Dr M Gregson, Mr A Jarvie, Mr P Logue, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mr D Macpherson, Mr D McDonald, Mrs T Robertson, Ms M Smith, Mr R Stewart.

Abstentions:

Mrs B Campbell, Ms L Dundas; Mr J Finlayson, Mrs B Jarvie, Mr G MacKenzie, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mrs M Ross.

Decision

The Council **AGREED** Mr Ballance's **MOTION** as detailed above.

20. 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 12 December 2024, Special Council held on 12 December 2024 and Special Councils held 13 February 2025 and 6 March 2025 as contained in the Volume which had been circulated separately – which were **APPROVED**.

21. 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 which had been circulated separately as undernoted:-

Transparency Statement: Mr A Christie made a Transparency Statement in respect of Item 21.i as a Non-Executive Director of NHS Highland. However, having applied the objective test, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

Caithness Committee	20 January 2025
Wester Ross, Strathpeffer & Lochalsh Committee	20 January 2025
Black Isle and Easter Ross Committee	27 January 2025
Lochaber Area Committee	27 January 2025
Housing and Property Committee	29 January 2025
* Climate Change Committee	29 January 2025
Communities and Place Committee	30 January 2025
City of Inverness Area Committee	3 February 2025
Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee	5 February 2025
Audit Committee	5 February 2025
Badenoch and Strathspey Area Committee	10 February 2025
Dingwall, Seaforth Committee	10 February 2025
Nairnshire Committee	10 February 2025
Pensions Committee	12 February 2025
Economy and Infrastructure Committee	13 February 2025
* Sutherland County Committee	17 February 2025
Isle of Skye and Raasay Committee	17 February 2025
* Education Committee	26 February 2025
Gaelic Committee	26 February 2025
Comataidh na Gaidhlig	26 An Gearran 2025
Corporate Resources Committee	20 March 2025

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

Climate Change Committee

*Starred Item: Item 4.i 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 Programme.

Sutherland County Committee

* Starred Item: Item 12 – Notices of Motion

Declarations of Interest: Mrs A MacLean made a Declaration of Interest as an owner of a camper van using camp sites and, in accordance with paragraph 5.6 of the revised Code of Conduct, she left the meeting for this item.

Transparency Statement: The following applied the objective test, reviewed their position in relation to these items and any personal connection and do not consider that they have an interest to declare:-

Mr M Cameron - as the owner of a camper van

Mr P Oldham - as the owner of a camper van but did not routinely park in the Council's car parks overnight

The Chair of the Sutherland County Committee asked the Council to agree the following Motion – “Given the impact of overnight parking of camper vans in Council car parks leading to inappropriate waste disposal and other anti-social behaviour, the Sutherland County Committee agrees to impose a ban on all overnight camper van and motorhome parking in Council car parks in the County of Sutherland with signage being put in place to direct them to alternative parking options in the local area.”

It was explained that discussion on this Motion would require a suspension of Standing Order 34 as it was contrary to a decision made by the Council at its Special Meeting on 6 March 2025.

Mr R Gale, seconded by Mr M Baird, **MOVED** the suspension of Standing Order 34.

As an **AMENDMENT**, Mr B Lobban, seconded by Mr R Bremner, moved not to suspend Standing Order 34.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 26 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 34 votes, with no abstentions. The **AMENDMENT** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion:

Ms S Atkin, Mr M Baird, Mr A Baxter, Mr A Christie, Mr J Edmondson, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Dr M Gregson, Mr R Gunn, Ms M Hutchison, 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, Mr J McGillivray, Mr H Morrison, Ms L Niven, Mrs T Robertson, Ms M Smith, Mr R Stewart.

For the Amendment:

Mr C Ballance, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Mrs B Campbell, Mrs M Cockburn, Mrs T Collier, Ms L Dundas, Ms S Fanet, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Mr K Gowans, Mrs J Hendry, Ms L Johnston, Mr S Kennedy, Ms E Knox, Ms L Kraft, Mr B Lobban, Mr D Loudon, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr C Munro, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mr K Rosie, Mrs M Ross, Ms K Willis.

Decision

The Council **AGREED** not to suspend Standing Order 34.

Education Committee

***Starred Item: Item 6 – Statutory Consultation: Creation of new Primary School for Tornagrain – Final report**

The Council **AGREED** 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.

***Starred Item: Item 7 – Statutory Consultation: Closure of Duror Primary School – Final Report**

The Council **AGREED** not to discontinue education at Duror Primary School.

Minutes of Meetings not included in the Volume had been circulated as follows:-

- i. Community Planning Board held on 4 December 2024 (approved by the Board on 21 February 2025) which were **NOTED**;
- ii. Recruitment Panel held on 18 and 19 December 2024 and 16 January 2025 which were **NOTED**; and
- iii. Redesign Board held on 20 March 2025 which were **APPROVED**.

The meeting ended at 5.55pm.