

Highland Council: Questions: 15 May 2025**Member Questions****1. Mr A Christie****To the Leader of the Council**

Please could the Leader detail the number, nature (e.g. bullying and harassment, relationship with managers or colleagues, unrealistic workloads, working conditions, disputes over pay, benefits or terms and conditions etc), categorisation by Department including the outcome and corrective actions taken for all Staff Grievances received in 2022/23, 2023,24 and 2024/25?

RESPONSE

The information has been collated as follows: -

| Year (live case within date range 01/04 - 31/03) | Department | Total No. Grievance Cases | Not Upheld | Partially upheld | Upheld | Withdrawn / Addressed Informally |
|--|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------|------------------|--------|----------------------------------|
| 2022/2023 | Communities & Place | 5 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| | Education | 14 | 6 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| | Health & Social Care | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | |
| | Infrastructure Environment & Economy | 1 | | | | 1 |
| | Performance & Governance | 2 | 1 | | | 1 |
| | Property & Housing | 7 | 2 | 4 | | 1 |
| | Resources & Finance | 1 | 1 | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| 2023/2024 | Communities & Place | 3 | 1 | | | 2 |
| | Education | 18 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 9 |
| | Health & Social Care | 7 | 1 | 1 | | 5 |
| | Infrastructure Environment & Economy | 3 | 1 | | | 1 |

| | | | | | | |
|-----------|--------------------------------------|----|---|---|---|---|
| | Performance & Governance | 0 | | | | |
| | Property & Housing | 9 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 4 |
| | Resources & Finance | 2 | 1 | | | 1 |
| | Transformation | 1 | | | | 1 |
| | | | | | | |
| 2024/2025 | Communities & Place | 5 | | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| | Education | 11 | 2 | 4 | | 5 |
| | Health & Social Care | 2 | 1 | | 1 | |
| | Infrastructure Environment & Economy | 2 | 1 | | | 1 |
| | Performance & Governance | 2 | | 1 | | 1 |
| | Property & Housing | 3 | 1 | 1 | | 1 |
| | Resources & Finance | 0 | | | | |

2. Mr A Christie

To the Leader of the Council

Please could you detail the procedure and guidance (whether finalised or still in draft) that will be used as part of the Chief Executive performance appraisal process and how that may differ from the Assistant Chief Executives appraisal process?

RESPONSE

The appraisal process for The Chief Executive being developed is a Validated Self-Evaluation model. This model has been selected for its usefulness, practicality and meaningfulness to those involved.

The appraisal of Assistant Chief Executives is a matter for the Chief Executive as the Head of Paid Service of Highland Council and subject to existing Human Resources processes.

3. Mr M Reiss

To the Leader of the Council

Is Highland Council achieving, in the current financial year, the “standstill figure” for roads maintenance works across the council area?

RESPONSE

There is no standstill figure available for the current financial year. The standstill figure is not calculated on an annual basis. As you know, there is lot of work going on at Council in respect of how best we can provide for our roads network at the Roads’ Review which is currently going through the Redesign Board process

4. Ms K Willis

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

Last summer the bus service was reduced in Fort William, and the two new housing developments in Upper Achintore and on the Blar still do not have a bus service. Following the Councils recent acquisition of 64 buses, please can the Chair advise when buses will be made available to provide a bus service that meets the needs of residents in the Fort William area?

RESPONSE

It is acknowledged that the Bus Service timetable in parts of Fort William has unfortunately been reduced owing to congestion. To improve services in this area, and with regard to the new Housing developments, the Council has approached Care Lochaber and Lochaber Action on Disability to provide a supplementary car/ minibus service for residents at Neil Clark Way, Upper Achintore. In addition, the Council had re-submitted a bid to the Bus Infrastructure Fund 2025/26 for a new link road for residents on the Blar as well as one in Upper Achintore – a bid for this project was submitted previously to the Bus Partnership Fund but unfortunately that funding was paused last year and has now been incorporated, in reduced form, into the Bus Infrastructure Fund. We await a response from TS on this funding application, timeframes are challenging, and officers continue to work with landowners at both sites to resolve outstanding issues.

The Council's recent acquisition of 64 buses is in respect of a going concern, with the buses currently deployed on existing contracts and commercial work, outwith the Lochaber area. The future strategy for this business will be developed over the coming months. All council contracts are subject to re-tendering in 2026 – 2028, which should provide the opportunity for improved services across Highland. In the meantime, discussions are on-going with Shiel Buses regarding ways to address the current timetabling issues within available resources.

5. Mr A Baldrey

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

With the amendments proposed by the Council to Decriminalised Parking Enforcement (DPE) areas on Highland trunk roads expected to come into effect this summer, how many new parking enforcement officers does the Council plan to recruit across Highland?

RESPONSE

There are currently no plans to recruit any additional parking enforcement officers as a result of the proposed changes, we are currently recruiting two replacement officers for the Lochaber area to fill vacant posts.

6. Mr A Baxter

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

Following the closure of the Highland Council's Visitor Levy Consultation, can the Chair confirm whether the council administration's official position remains in support of the introduction of a local tourist levy, as set out by the Leader of the Highland Council, Councillor Raymond Bremner, in the press release issued on 25th May 2023, in which he stated:

"The Highland Council has long supported the idea of a tourist levy to enable the local authority to invest in local infrastructure and is a commitment in our Council Programme. The introduction of the Bill is good news and means we can now plan for the introduction of this local levy following approval of the Bill by Parliament."

If there has been any change in the administration's position or its plans for the implementation of the levy following the consultation, can the Chair provide details of how the implementation plan has been revised, the reasons for any changes, and what consultation feedback informed these revisions?"

RESPONSE

The Visitor Levy has the potential raise many millions of pounds to support tourism in Highland, therefore any proposals must be carefully considered towards providing the maximum benefit for all.

Following on from the conclusion of the extensive Visitor Levy Consultation and a broad range of engagement events that attracted a diverse range of business, organisations, communities and individuals, we have collated a substantial body of information which is currently undergoing analysis by officers. There are extensive amounts of quantitative and qualitative data to be processed. Once synthesised, this will inform a future report to be considered by all elected members at a forthcoming meeting of the Full Council to agree the next steps.

I am sure you will join me in thanking everyone who has taken time to engage with the consultation and the engagement process, and commend the rigorous approach taken by The Highland Council.

7. Mrs I Mackenzie

To the Leader of the Council

Can the Council outline what specific actions are being taken to bring long-term empty homes back into use, and how these actions are being aligned with efforts to provide affordable housing specifically for key workers across both the public and private sectors in Highland, so we can help support recruitment, retention, and community sustainability?

RESPONSE

By focusing on bringing empty homes/ ineffective housing stock back into use across key market areas the Council is contributing towards providing opportunities for enhancing housing options across all tenures, increasing the supply of local housing, improving the condition of housing stock and supporting the regeneration of communities currently in decline.

The Council employs an Empty Homes Officer with a specific remit to assist homeowners and communities in dealing with the complex issues around empty homes. This is particularly valuable given the continued high number of empty homes in Highland, despite the application of a 200% Council Tax premium after a property has been unoccupied and furnished for 12 months, or unoccupied and unfurnished for 24 months.

In 2024/25, the Empty Homes Officer helped bring 35 empty homes back into use. The current caseload is 126 properties. Many of the cases are complex and rely on the engagement of owners.

The most common reasons for houses lying empty are:

- the properties have been inherited but the new owners are unmotivated or undecided as to future usage;
- owners are struggling to finance or arrange refurbishment works;
- ownership has involved extended inheritance and/or legal disputes and complexities.

The Council has been working with the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership to look at all available options to bring empty homes back into use. It is intended that an Empty Homes Strategy be taken to Housing & Property Committee in August 2025 to consider these matters in more detail.

8. Mr R MacKintosh

To the Chair of Communities and Place

How much has the Highland Council managed to reduce it's Glyphosate usage compared with last year?

RESPONSE

Glyphosate Usage Over the last three years is as follows: -

- 2022: 111 kg
- 2023: 39.62 kg
- 2024: 47.64 kg

Glyphosate usage has fluctuated over the past three years, but the overall trend is downward. This year-on-year reduction is expected to stabilise soon, as we have implemented nearly all feasible measures to minimise its use.

Key factors influencing glyphosate usage include:

- **Weather Conditions:** Glyphosate is a non-persistent herbicide, making its effectiveness and requirement highly dependent on weather. In 2023, a hot and dry summer naturally limited weed growth, reducing the need for multiple treatments. Conversely, 2024 experienced a cooler, wetter summer, ideal for weed growth, resulting in the need for repeated targeted applications and a corresponding rise in usage.
- **Trial and Error in Reduction Efforts:** Reducing glyphosate use often involves a degree of experimentation. In some cases, lower application rates can lead to unacceptable levels of weed growth in public areas. When this occurs, removing well-established weeds later in the season can require more herbicide than would have been needed to control young seedlings earlier. Nonetheless, such trials are valuable steps toward achieving long-term reductions in chemical weed control.
- **Service Requests and Expanded Areas:** Occasionally, additional areas are added to the treatment schedule or services request weed control in locations not previously treated. These changes can create apparent inconsistencies in the downward trend of usage.

9. Mr D Macpherson

To the Leader

The Highland Council declared a Housing Challenge in 2024 and held a Housing Summit, while other Scottish local authorities declared a Housing Emergency.

Creating adequate affordable housing for the population it serves, in our city and towns and also in our remote and rural communities is the key to addressing the depopulation of the Highlands and Islands that our region is currently experiencing.

How many second homes are there in the Highland Council area by Ward, and how much money is generated for the Council in second home Council Tax charges?

RESPONSE

The information requested is as follows:

| AREA (Information not available at Ward level) | Number of properties subject to second homes charge |
|--|---|
| CAITHNESS | 142 |
| SUTHERLAND | 551 |
| ROSS & CROMARTY | 672 |
| SKYE & LOCHALSH | 504 |
| LOCHABER | 422 |
| INVERNESS | 397 |
| BADENOCH & STRATHSPEY | 656 |
| NAIRN | 109 |
| TOTAL | 3,453 |

Total value of Council Tax Second Homes for 2025/26 as at 7 May 2025 is £5,823,396.

Motions: 15 May 2025

1. The Council notes that both UK and Scottish Governments have recently issued guidance on the use of mobile phones in schools, enabling increased monitoring and improved management. The Highland Council has a good record of supporting and encouraging good digital and online practice.

The excessive use of mobile phones is a significant issue, and some studies suggest it can have the characteristics of addiction. This is particularly significant for children and young people in an educational context. We have a responsibility to reduce distraction and the potential for bullying and invasion of privacy. We believe a strong Council policy can support schools in introducing and implementing appropriate measures.

This Council instructs schools to consult on how best to ensure pupils' use of phone screen time does not adversely affect their learning. Chromebooks remove the need for phones as educational tools. Consulting the whole school community – school managers, parents, teachers and pupils – will ensure the development of policy at local level, in order to agree what the appropriate use of mobile phones should be for their particular areas. The Council further commits to give fulsome support to schools seeking to implement a ban on pupil use of phones during the school day.

Signed: Dr M Gregson Mrs H Crawford

Section 95 Officer assessment of financial implications:

This motion is anticipated to have a financial implication to the Council.

The Scottish Government guidance on the use of mobile phones delegates the decision making to Head Teachers in consultation with their school communities. Consultation across the whole school estate would require additional staff resource, including legal guidance around how the UNCRC legislation could be met. This is not currently incorporated in the Revenue Budget. Such matters would require consideration as part of future budget planning.

All secondary schools across Highland have been asked to have a mobile phone policy position.

Integrated Impact Assessment:

| Area for Assessment | Assessment Summary |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| Equality | Positive impact – young people |
| Poverty | No impact |
| Human Rights | No impact |
| Children's Rights | Positive impact |
| Data Rights | No impact |
| Rural/Island | No impact |
| Climate Change | No impact |

Summary of Assessment:

The motion proposes that schools undertake a consultation and that this would specifically include consulting with young people as part of that process. That would have a positive impact upon children's rights to have their views considered in matters that affect them.

The assessment does not consider the appropriate use of mobile phones and the impact of any reduction, as this would require to be part of any consultation. A screening for impact would be required as part of any change in policy at individual school level, reflecting specific school circumstances.

- At the beginning of April, the Scottish Government introduced free ferry travel for young islanders under 22 living on Orkney, Shetland, and the Outer Hebrides. Free ferry travel will help offset some of the extra costs and higher bills that families and young people living on islands already experience and encourage young people to continue living in their island communities.

This Council agrees to write to the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Transport requesting that young people living on the Small Isles (Rum, Eigg, Muck and Canna) and Knoydart, which is only accessible by ferry, are also able to access free ferry travel within their Local Authority.

Signed: Ms K Willis

Mr A Baldrey

Section 95 Officer assessment of financial implications:

This motion is **not** expected to have a direct financial implication for the Council.

Integrated Impact Assessment:

| Area for Assessment | Assessment Summary |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| Equality | No direct impact |
| Poverty | No direct impact |
| Human Rights | No impact |
| Children's Rights | No direct impact |
| Data Rights | No impact |
| Rural/Island | No direct impact |
| Climate Change | No impact |

Summary of Assessment:

The motion seeks the Council to write to the Scottish Government therefore there is no direct impact as a result of the motion.

Should there be a change in policy as a result of the action, it is anticipated that there would be a likely positive impact upon young people, a positive socio-economic impact and a positive rural and island impact.