

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Corporate Resources Committee** held in the Chamber, Council Headquarters, Inverness on Thursday 5 June 2025 at 9.30am.

Present:

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|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Mr A Baxter | Mr D Louden |
| Mr R Bremner | Mr G Mackenzie |
| Mr J Bruce | Mr S Mackie |
| Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair | Mr P Oldham |
| Mr A Christie | Ms M Reid |
| Mr L Fraser | Mr M Reiss |
| Mr K Gowans | Mrs M Ross (sub for Mr B Lobban) |
| Mr A Jarvie | Mr R Stewart |
| Mr S Kennedy | |

Non-Members also present:

| | |
|----------------|-----------------|
| Mr J Finlayson | Ms K MacLean |
| Mr R Gale | Mr T MacLennan |
| Mr R Jones | Mr D Macpherson |

Officials in Attendance:

Mr A Gunn, Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate
Mrs S Armstrong, Chief Officer - Revenues and Commercialisation
Mr S Fraser, Chief Officer - Legal and Corporate Governance
Ms R Fry, Chief Officer – HR and Communications
Mr B Porter, Chief Officer - Corporate Finance
Mr J Shepherd, Chief Officer - Business Solutions
Ms E Barrie, Head of People
Mr D MacKenzie, Trading Standards Manager
Mr C Donaldson, Principal Project Manager
Mrs L Dunn, Joint Democratic Services Manager
Ms F MacBain, Senior Committee Officer

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

Mr D Louden in the Chair

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

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr M Baird and Mr B Lobban

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

There were no Declarations of Interest and the Committee **NOTED** the following Transparency Statements:-

Items 4 and 5: Mr A Christie and Mr R Stewart
Items 7, 9 and 13: Mr A Christie
Item 11.b: Mr S Kennedy
Items 10, 12: Mr R Stewart

3. **Good News** **Naidheachdan Matha**

The Committee **NOTED** the following good news stories and issued raised as follows:

- **Mental Health & Wellbeing Helpline Recognition**
It was confirmed the Employee Assistance Programme was available to Members as well as staff.
- **Business Solutions Restructure**
- **Investors in People**
This was welcomed and assurance sought and provided that this would be rolled out across the Council through 2026.

4. **People Strategy** **Ro-innleachd Dhaoine**

Transparency Statements: The following Members declared a connection to this item but, having applied the objective test, and reviewed their position, did not consider that they had an interest to declare:

- **Mr A Christie as a Non Executive Director of NHS Highland**
- **Mr R Stewart as a close family member was employed by the Council**

There had been circulated Report No RES/10/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- given the importance of redeployment as a means of retaining staff and avoiding redundancies, it was suggested redeployment should be incorporated into the strategy more explicitly;
- the improved communication with staff by senior management was welcomed;
- the positive impact on the gender pay gap was praised;
- the importance of embedding trauma informed practice across all services was emphasised;
- the award of the Armed Forces Covenant Gold level in 2021 and aim to seek revalidation towards the end of 2026 was welcomed; and
- the importance of training of Members as well as staff was highlighted.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the work which was being undertaken;
- ii. **AGREED** the revised People Strategy as contained in Appendix 1 to the report; and
- iii. **NOTED** the activity achievements of the People Strategy as contained in Appendix 2 to the report.

5. Flexible Working Policy Poileasaidh Obrach Shùbailte

Transparency Statements: The following Members declared a connection to this item but, having applied the objective test, and reviewed their position, did not consider that they had an interest to declare:

- **Mr A Christie as a Non Executive Director of NHS Highland**
- **Mr R Stewart as a close family member was employed by the Council**

There had been circulated Report No RES/11/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- while welcoming the policy, concern was expressed that home / hybrid working had become the default position and doubts were expressed as to the productivity levels and governance. It could be detrimental to forging productive working relationships and could cause staff to feel isolated. Assurance was provided that homeworking would only be considered where managers thought it appropriate, and not as a default position;
- concern was also expressed at the prospect of staff, especially senior staff, working outwith the Highland Council area, or even abroad and, in response, it was emphasised that overseas working would only be by exception and on a temporary basis, for example to care for an unwell relative, and that there were no permanent overseas working contracts in place. The reputational risk of employing staff who worked abroad was highlighted;
- the importance of providing employment within the Highland Council area, and especially outwith Inverness, was emphasised;
- the legal obligation on the Council to consider flexible working where possible was highlighted, as was the Council's aim to ensure jobs remained based within Highland wherever possible;
- assurance was provided that no member of staff would be obliged to work from home, that the policy was being introduced to ensure consistency and fairness, that it would be subject to ongoing review, and that it did not apply to all staff as many Council jobs did not facilitate home working;
- concern was expressed that the impact assessment was not sufficiently thorough and should be reviewed when the matter was next reconsidered;
- further information was sought and provided on the type of contracts which involved annualised hours (mostly school-based staff who did not work during school holidays);
- assurance was sought and provided that major incident preparation took home and hybrid working into consideration; and
- a summary was provided on the benefits of hybrid working.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the Flexible Workforce Arrangements Policy;
- ii. **NOTED** the Hybrid-Mobile Working Guidance and Flexible Working Guidance; and
- iii. **NOTED** that the policy would be subject to ongoing review and an annual update to full Council, which would include the staff survey outcomes as part of the Investor's In People process.

6. Corporate Debt Management Policy Poileasaidh Stiùiridh Fhiachan Corporra

Transparency Statement: Mr A Christie declared a connection to Item 6 as General Manager of Inverness Badenoch and Strathspey Citizens Advice, however having applied the objective test, and reviewed his position in relation to the item, did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No RES/12/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- Members thanked the Debt Recovery team for their work;
- clarification was sought and provided that the performance of the payment phone lines was monitored and reviewed;
- a summary was sought and provided of the various digital payment methods accepted, and the need to ensure as many methods as possible were accepted, while acknowledging that the cost of processing payments also had to be taken into consideration. Work was ongoing to enable frontline staff to process payments without having to refer customers to a specialised payment processing team; and
- staff were thanked for dealing with customers facing debt in a compassionate manner, and attention was drawn to the importance of early intervention. It was queried what methods could be used to measure the effectiveness of debt collection policies, and these included monitoring the percentage of debt write-offs and the age of debt.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the contents of the report; and
- ii. **APPROVED** the Council's Corporate Debt Management Policy.

7. Trading Standards Performance 2024/25 and Operational Plan 2025/26 Coileanadh Inbhean Malairt 2024/25 agus Plana Obrachaidh 2025/26

Transparency Statement: Mr A Christie declared a connection to Item 7 as a Non Executive Director of NHS Highland and as General Manager of Inverness Badenoch and Strathspey Citizens Advice Bureau, however having applied the objective test, and reviewed his position in relation to the item, did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No RES/13/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- the work of the Trading Standards team, its scope and its value to the Council and Highland communities, was commended;
- information was sought and provided on work being undertaken locally, and with neighbouring local authorities, to tackle the proliferation of companies in the domestic energy markets who were targeting householders, often elderly people, with the offer of bogus government grants etc;

- Members were urged to share intelligence with the Trading Standards team of any scams or other unlawful behaviour they became aware of;
- it was clarified that the new Regulatory Services modern apprenticeship was being delivered through Edinburgh and South Ayrshire College;
- concern was expressed about children buying vapes in bulk from the internet and using a proxy to purchase vapes from shops for them. The value of intelligence and test purchasing to tackle this and other similar violations, was emphasised, as was the role of the NHS in trying to prevent children using vapes;
- preventative work for many of the issues dealt with by Trading Standards was praised;
- an explanation was sought and provided on the definition of unfair commercial practices;
- with regard to the increasing levels of doorstep crime, the usefulness of cold calling prevention zones was highlighted and some of the issues around their set-up and monitoring were considered and would be discussed further with Mr A Christie outwith the meeting; and
- further information was requested on what people should be alert to with regard to the purchase of second-hand electric vehicles. This information would be circulated to the Committee after the meeting.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- NOTED** the performance of the Trading Standards team during the year 2024/25 as laid out in its Annual Report;
- AGREED** the Trading Standards Operational Plan for 2025/26; and
- NOTED** the steps being taken to modernise performance measurement in relation to Trading Standards.

8. Treasury Management – Summary of Transactions Rianachd Ionmhais - Geàrr-chunntas Ghnothaichean

There had been circulated Report No RES/14/25 by the Chief Officer – Corporate Finance.

During discussion, an explanation was sought and provided for the policy around repaying the loans outlined in paragraphs 6.4 and 6.5 of the report.

The Committee **NOTED** the Treasury Management - Summary of Transactions report for the period 1 January 2025 to 31 March 2025.

9. Corporate Services – Performance Monitoring Q4 2024/25 Seirbheisean Corporra – Sgrùdadh Coileanaidh R4 2024/25

Transparency Statement: Mr A Christie declared a connection to Item 9 as a Non Executive Director of NHS Highland, a Non-Executive Director on Inverness BID Ltd, and as General Manager of Inverness Badenoch and Strathspey Citizens Advice Bureau, however having applied the objective test, and reviewed his position in relation to the item, did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No RES/15/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- noting the increasing number of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests being received, various suggestions were made including charging for or refusing unreasonable FOIs, and publishing all received FOIs with their responses on the Council's website, to reduce the likelihood of requests for the same or similar information. It was requested that this be further investigated with the relevant officers outwith the meeting and reported back within six months;
- information was sought and provided on the target and maximum response rates for dealing with queries from Members, and consideration was given to the use of the FOI process by Members to obtain information from the Council. The Assistant Chief Executive (ACE) (Corporate) urged Members to contact the relevant ACE if they had requested information that had not been forthcoming; and
- with reference to the recent high profile cyber-attacks on some large organisations, it was explained in relation to concern about only 90% of active staff devices being up to date with security updates, this was partly due to devices held by people on annual leave or sick leave meaning that devices were not connected to receive the updates, or due to staggered issuing of security updates. The patching status of devices was a point in time and would not check the status of devices that had not been connected for a while. Members suggested that efforts to increase the 90% figure would be prudent, and urged that the automatic updating of computers be scheduled outwith working hours.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the performance and risk information for the Corporate Cluster and **AGREED** to return to the Committee within six months with a plan on how all FOIs could be published on the website and to update the publication scheme with links to the relevant statutory information.

10. Corporate Systems Update – Finance, HR/Payroll and Pensions Programme

Cunntas air Siostaman Corporra – Ionmhas, Goireasan Daonna/Rola-pàighidh agus Prògram Pheinnseanan

Transparency Statement: Mr R Stewart declared a connection to this item as a close family member was employed by the Council but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No RES/16/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- the Finance system and Pensions projects were welcomed as worthwhile and a good news item, and those involved in the delivery of these projects were thanked;
- it was good to see the projects being delivered at considerable pace and progress to closure;
- it was suggested that when preparing for the budget this year that some information was not able to be reported at the level of granularity required to answer Member questions. It was hoped these pieces of information would become easier to access from new system to help drive efficiencies and achieve best value; and

- the Human Resources & Payroll project was welcomed and it was hoped that having a new and more robust system would contribute towards eliminating issues such as overpayments and deliver best value.

The Committee **NOTED** the:-

- updates regarding the Finance, Pensions and HR/Payroll Programme; and
- updates regarding the HR and Payroll, including the commencement of the HR Data and Process Enablement Project.

11. Delivery Plan - Income Generation and Corporate Solutions Portfolios Update

Plana Lìbhrigidh – Cunntas air Togail Teachd-a-steach agus Cùraman-roinne Freagairtean Corporra

a. Delivery Plan Budget Monitoring & Progress Update – Corporate Solutions Sgrùdadh Buidseit & Cunntas air Adhartas a’ Phlana Lìbhrigidh – Freagairtean Corporra

There had been circulated Report No RES/17/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate.

The Committee **NOTED** the progress on the projects covered in the report.

b. Delivery Plan Budget Monitoring & Progress Update – Income Generation Sgrùdadh Buidseit & Cunntas air Adhartas a’ Phlana Lìbhrigidh – Togail Teachd-a-steach

Transparency Statement: Mr S Kennedy declared a connection to this item as an owner of an empty second home but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No RES/18/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- some Members felt the campervan and motorhome income generation scheme was not delivering as intended and should be discontinued, citing reputational risk to the Council. Others felt that as the investment in the scheme had been made and ongoing costs were low, there was merit in continuing with it, as had been agreed by full Council at the budget meeting, and noting that the decision made by the Council could not be revisited for six months without suspending standing orders. Seasonal rangers had been employed which should help to promote the scheme. The use of the Council’s website to purchase tickets was explained, and it was highlighted that knowledge that the scheme was voluntary was being shared among potential users;
- as an alternative to the campervan and motor home scheme, it was suggested that the Council should provide sites for such vehicles on Council-owned land adjacent to main roads. The Chair advised that any known locations for this should be provided to relevant officers;

- clarification was sought and provided that while the listed site for waste disposal in Lochaber had not been the preferred choice of local Members, investigation into the alternatives suggested had been undertaken. Officers would update local Members before proceeding; and
- assurances were sought and provided that, as the proposed site for possible income generation at Duncansby Head bordered common grazings land, engagement had been undertaken with the Common Grazings Committee.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the progress of each of the Income Generation projects.

12. Corporate Cluster Workforce Action Plan Update **Cunntas air Plana-gnìomha Feachd-obrach Buidheann Chorporra**

Transparency Statement: Mr R Stewart declared a connection to this item as a close family member was employed by the Council but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No RES/19/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate.

During discussion, the SWOT analysis was welcomed, although it was suggested the analysis detailed in the appendices could have been undertaken in more depth, and the decision-making process shared with Members. The 'threats' section seemed thin and did not include reputational risk. A holistic approach was urged.

The Committee **NOTED** the Corporate Cluster workforce planning report and updated action plan.

13. Minutes of Meetings **Geàrr-chunntasan Choinneamhan**

Transparency Statement: Mr A Christie declared a connection to Item 13 as a Non Executive Director of NHS Highland, however having applied the objective test, and reviewed his position in relation to the item, did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

The following Minutes of Meetings were:

- APPROVED** - Central Safety Committee held on 17 March 2025;
- NOTED** – Employment Release Sub-Committee held on 3 April 2025; and
- APPROVED** - Staff Partnership Forum held on 7 May 2025.

14. Exclusion of the Public **Às-dùnadh a' Phobail**

The Committee **RESOLVED** that, under Section 50A(4) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items on the grounds that they involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 12, 6 and 9 of Part 1 of Schedule 7A of the Act.

15. Non Domestic Rates Appeals Committee **Comataidh Ath-thagraidhean nan Reataichean Neo-dhachaigheil**

There had been circulated Report No RES/20/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate.

The Committee **AGREED**:

- i. the recommendations as set out in the report;
- ii. that the standalone non-domestic rates appeal committee panel comprise of the following Members:
 - a. Ms Morven Reid (Chair)
 - b. Mrs Campbell-Sinclair
 - c. Mr L Fraser
 - d. Mr K Gowans
 - e. Mr S Mackie; and
- iii. that Mr K Gowans replace Mr G Mackenzie on the Non-Domestic Rates Appeals Committee.

16. Debt Management Report **Stiùireadh Fhiachan**

There had been circulated to Members only Report No RES/21/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate.

Following discussion, the Committee **AGREED** the recommendations as set out in the report and **NOTED** that the response to the query raised by Mr A Jarvie would be circulated to the Committee.

The meeting closed at 12.35pm.