

## **The Highland Council Staff Partnership Forum – Elected Members/Staff Side Group**

Minutes of Meeting of The Highland Council Staff Partnership Forum held in Council Headquarters, Inverness on **Tuesday 19 August 2025 at 3.30 p.m.**

### **Present:**

#### **Employer's Representatives:**

Mr R Bremner  
Mr G Mackenzie (remote)  
Mr P Oldham

#### **Staff Side Representatives:**

Mr J Gibson, UNISON	Ms S Purdie (RCN)
Ms L MacAskill (GMB) (remote)	Mr M Smith (UNITE/UCATT) (remote)
Mrs C A Stewart (GMB)	Mr M Jackson, UNITE (substitute)

### **In attendance:**

Mr D Brown, Chief Executive  
Mr A Gunn, Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate  
Mrs K Lackie (**KL**), Assistant Chief Executive - People  
Mr M MacLeod, Assistant Chief Executive – Place  
Mr A Bell, Joint Secretary, Teachers' Side (remote)  
Ms R Fry, Chief Officer – HR & Communications  
Mr B Porter, Chief Officer, Corporate Finance  
Ms E Barrie (**EB**), Head of People, Corporate  
Ms N MacLennan, Programme Manager, Corporate  
Mr A MacInnes, Senior Committee Officer, Democratic Services

### **Mr R Bremner in the Chair**

#### **SUBJECT/DECISION**

#### **ACTION**

#### **1. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr K Gowans, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr B Lobban, Ms G Sinclair from the Employer's Side and Mr R Boyle (UNITE) from the Staff Side.

It was advised that some Elected Members could not attend this meeting, which had been rescheduled, given it clashed with another meeting they required to attend.

#### **2. Declarations of Interest/Transparency Statement**

There were no Declarations of Interest/Transparency Statements.

### **3. Budget Update**

A budget update was provided by the Chief Officer, Corporate Finance. By way of context, it was advised that there had been a number of reports from Audit Scotland, Accounts Commission and Internal Audit in relation to the budget and there had been positive comments from those reports on the Councils arrangements for financial control and budget planning. There had been best value reports to committee, with the latest one being submitted relating to transformation in order to meet the challenges of financial sustainability. Commentary on the headlines from the annual accounts for 2024/25 was provided. Highlighting a net overspend for the year, the main cost pressures and drivers of overspend, and some part mitigations in place.

The budget for 2025/26 had been agreed at the Council meeting in March and a number of the cost pressures in the budget were already known from the last financial year, and expected to continue into 2025/26 and require action to address. Additional funding had been approved by Members to address a number of cost pressures. Budget monitoring reports to Strategic Committees had been revised to provided better focus on the Council's financial position going forward and there were budget recovery plans to bring service areas facing budget pressures back within budget. The Council's new financial system was providing improved access to financial information for budget holders and efforts will continue to be undertaken to deliver further improvements.

The Council had agreed to a multi year financial planning approach and preparation was already underway to planning for the 2026/27 and future years budgets. A report on this would be submitted to the Council meeting in September and trade unions would be engaged in the budget process in due course.

In discussion, it was noted that there is budget holder training for some managers and it was queried if it was checked that mandatory training for staff had been completed. It was advised that the Council's Trainee system would flag up to managers who should undertake certain training and who had not completed training. If training had not been completed this would be addressed.

In terms of the budget for staffing, there were significant vacancies in Health and Social Care. It was queried if the budget took account of a full staff establishment or was reduced to take into account vacancies. It was advised that there would always be vacancies in such a large organisation and sometimes savings could be made from this and in other service areas it would be budgeted for filling vacancies due to operational demands, so how vacancies were dealt with in the budget assumptions varied. Underspends in Health and Social Care staffing had to be offset against additional costs of hiring agency staff and

overtime. One of the reasons for a restructure in Social Work was to address the vacancies which could not be filled, but the restructure was not to be any more expensive than the current staff establishment. Vacancies were reducing as a result. Alongside this, the Service was undertaking a budget recovery plan to address an overspend in Health and Social Care. Further information on the restructure would be provided at the next meeting of the Health and Social Care staff partnership meeting.

In the Health Service, jobs were being re-evaluated upwards and hours were being reduced which would have cost pressures and concern expressed that staff would have to do the same job in less hours. It was advised that if there were cost pressures coming through due to statutory decisions for example, this would be addressed through the budget settlement process. It would be reflected on how best to communicate this to staff, for example at staff roadshows.

The Forum **NOTED** the budget update.

#### **4. Investors in People update**

The Forum were updated on progress relating to Investors in People (IIP). Investors in People was a recognition that an organisation looks to improve performance and realise objectives through the management and development of its people.

The pilot project in the Corporate Cluster had commenced under the Chief Officer – Legal and Corporate Governance. An IIP survey to ascertain how the organisation compared to the various elements of IIP had received an 83% return rate. The survey had been independently assessed and interviews held with selected staff. This would then lead to an action plan being developed. Going forward trade unions were invited to be involved in supporting action plans for the various Services. Information was provided on the plan to roll out IIP to the remaining Services and indicative timescales for this. Ways to ensure that as many employees as possible had access to the IIP survey were being explored and would be discussed with Clusters/Services as part of implementation, recognising the different work patterns, job types etc. between Clusters.

In discussion, the 83% return rate to the IIP survey was an impressive return and everyone involved was complimented. Trade Unions ideas on how best to reach as many staff as possible in the IIP rollout and for it to be more applicable to staff were welcomed. It was suggested that non teaching staff could be engaged on IIP at their in service days. When rolling out IIP, services required different times planned in for the roll out and IIP should be incorporated into the work that employees undertake. It was important that time was made available to staff, particularly in schools, to undertake the IIP survey, selected interviews and other mandatory training. Once the IIP survey results

had been fed back to staff, they needed to be involved in the identification of improvement actions and delivery of them.

It was queried if the previous staff survey had any low take up in some Services, as this could happen again in the roll out of IIP. While the response rate to the previous staff survey was around 46%, it was advised that the various work patterns of staff across the Council were known and when IIP was rolled out, it would be considered by Services how best to ensure staff had the best opportunity to complete the IIP survey.

The Forum **NOTED** the update on Investors in People.

## **5. Disciplinary/Grievance/Redeployment Statistics**

Disciplinary/grievance/redeployment statistics for quarter 1 2025-26 and Quarter 4 2024-25 were presented at the meeting and the following points were raised:-

- it was requested that a disciplinary case trend analysis between the Clusters be provided in future statistics to the Forum.
- An observation was made that to have very few disciplinary cases for a large organisation was a credit to the employees of the Council.
- School holidays did have an impact on timescales for completing disciplinary/grievance cases for teaching staff. Appeals could also lengthen the time for cases to be closed and it was acknowledged that the longer it took to close cases, placed a lot of stress on the individuals involved.
- Efforts were made to resolve grievances informally and this could involve working alongside trade union representatives.
- A point was made that some job re-evaluations through the job evaluation process can take longer , that individuals may raise grievances as a result. It was advised that there would be updated guidance provided, so that once a job re-evaluation request had been submitted, managers will have to submit a written response within certain timescales. If the employee was unhappy with the response or there were delays in the process, the employee could go to the HR team to progress, without having to raise a grievance.

The Forum **NOTED**:-

- i the disciplinary/grievance/redeployment statistics for quarter 1 2025-26 and quarter 4 2024-25; and
- ii that a disciplinary case trend analysis between the Clusters be provided in future statistics to the Forum.

**EB**

## **6. Minutes of Last Meeting**

There had been circulated the minutes of the last meeting of the Forum held on 7 May 2025, the terms of which were **APPROVED**.

## **7. Matters Arising from Minutes**

The following update on an action from the last meeting was provided:-

i Investors in People update. Action -. Discussions would take place at monthly meetings with the Unions, but a more general progress report would be considered at quarterly Forum meetings. Action completed.

## **8. Service Trade Union Liaison Meetings**

There were circulated the following Service Trade Union Liaison Minutes of Meetings, the terms of which were **NOTED**:-

- i. Corporate – 27 June, 2025;
- ii. Education – 12 May 2025; and
- iii. Health & Social Care – 7 August, 2025
- iv Place – 6 May & 21 July, 2025

Arising from the minutes, the following matters were raised:-

i HQ car park – it was noted that a no campervan parking sign had now been installed in the HQ car park which was welcomed. The Northern Meeting Park works had now been completed releasing further parking bays for use. A demolition contract for the Dochfour Drive huts had now been signed and would be used for overflow parking and relocating fleet vehicles.

ii Assure system for recording accidents, violent and aggressive incidents – there had been issues in the use of this system, and Education were continuing to use a different system. It was queried if these had been resolved. It was advised that Education did want to use the Assure system in line with other Services, and work was ongoing to achieve this.

iii Orbis RedAlert Professional, smartphone app which provided a 24/7 support service for lone workers – this smartphone app was being tested as a pilot in some teams and it was queried if there was any progress on this. There were a number of lone workers in various teams in the organisation and it was important that lone workers had the same system for seeking help if required. It was advised that this matter was being reported at the Central Safety Committee.

iv Social Worker vacancy rate – at the last Health and Social Care partnership forum meeting, it was advised that the Social Worker vacancy rate was 40%, and recently this had been updated to 25%. It

was queried how there was such a big change in a short space of time. It was advised that the statistics had been updated to reflect a recent assessment of the staffing establishment, such as reflecting the success of the trainee and apprenticeship schemes. An update on statistics relating to Social Worker vacancies would be provided to the Staff Side after the meeting, with a further update being provided at the next Health and Social Care partnership forum meeting.

**KL**

The meeting concluded at 4.40 p.m.