

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Economy and Infrastructure Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Thursday, 21 August 2025 at 9.30am.

Present:

Mrs S Atkin (Substitute) (Remote)
Mr A Baxter
Mr M Cameron
Mr J Edmondson
Mr K Gowans
Mrs J Hendry (Substitute)
Mr R Jones
Mr P Logue

Mr W MacKay (Remote)
Mr D Macpherson (Remote and in-person)
Mr H Morrison (Remote)
Ms L Niven (Remote)
Mr P Oldham
Mrs T Robertson
Mr R Stewart (Remote)
Ms K Willis

Non-Members also present:

Ms T Collier (Remote)
Mr J Finlayson (Remote)
Mr D Fraser (Remote)
Dr M Gregson

Ms L Kraft (Remote)
Mr R MacKintosh (Remote)
Mr T MacLennan (Remote)
Mr J McGillivray (Remote)
Mr D Millar (Remote)

Officials in Attendance:

Mr M MacLeod, Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy
Ms D Sutton, Chief Officer - Operations & Maintenance
Mr A Maguire, Head of Development & Regeneration
Ms T Urry, Head of Roads & Infrastructure
Ms C Pieraccini, Strategic Lead Finance (Place)
Ms N Wallace, Service Lead, Environment, Development & Active Travel
Mr D Mudie, Strategic Lead – Planning and Building Standards
Mr N Young, Active Travel Manager
Mr N Osborne, Climate Change Manager
Mr A Webster, Economy & Regeneration Manager
Ms L MacKellaich, Road Safety Manager
Miss J MacLennan, Joint Democratic Services Manager, Performance & Governance
Mrs O Bayon, Committee Officer, Performance & Governance

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

Mr K Gowans in the Chair

Business

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

Apologies were intimated on behalf of Mr I Brown, Mr J Bruce, Mr M Green and Mr A Sinclair.

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

There were no declarations of interest/transparency statements.

3. Recess Powers Cumhachdan Fosaìdh

The Committee **NOTED** that the recess powers granted by the Council at its meeting on 26 June 2025 had not been exercised in relation to the business of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee.

4. Good News Naidheachdan Matha

The Committee **NOTED** the following items of Good News:-

Storm Floris Response

The Roads Team's response to Storm Floris, including the subsequent clean-up operation, had been very well received. Congratulations were extended to all teams involved.

Scottish Government Funding – Building Standards Profession

The Building Standards Team had successfully secured an allocation of £30,800 from the Scottish Government to support ancillary costs associated with the introduction of four Graduate Apprentices. The funding would assist the apprentices with their studies.

Student Placements – In-house Bus Team

Seven students had undertaken placements within the In-house Bus Team, giving up their time to work at The Highland Council. Each student had been presented with a certificate in recognition of their dedication and commitment across various departments.

Flow Country World Heritage Site – Royal Town Planning Institute Award

The Flow Country World Heritage Site had won the 'Best Plan' category at the 2025 Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) Awards for Planning Excellence, Scotland. The award had been presented to Highland Council representatives Nicole Wallace (Service Lead – Environment and Sustainable Transport) and David Cowie (Principal Planner) at a ceremony held on 16 June at the Grassmarket Community Project in Edinburgh.

Nature Restoration Funds – 2025/26 Allocation

The Council had been awarded £600,000 in Nature Restoration Funds for financial year 2025/26. The funding would be directed towards community grants and internal Council greening projects. The community grant scheme would open on 21 August, with approximately £250,000 available to support nature recovery and biodiversity enhancement initiatives.

Transport Scotland – Bus Infrastructure Tier 1 Fund

The Sustainable Transport Team had secured a direct grant award of £1.15 million from Transport Scotland's Bus Infrastructure Tier 1 Fund. The funding would be used to deliver essential bus infrastructure improvements across the Highlands. In addition, the Team had submitted a bid to the Tier 2 Fund, which for this year was focused on legacy Bus Partnership Fund projects in Inverness and Fort William.

Following the good news update, Members welcomed the positive developments and acknowledged the Communications team's efforts in sharing recent achievements. The importance of ensuring that Elected Members were briefed in a timely manner, ahead of public communications, was emphasised. It was confirmed that current practices followed the Council's agreed communications protocols.

5. Revenue Budget Monitoring Report for the period Q4 2024/25 and Q1 2025/26 Aithisg Sgrùdadh Buidseit Teachd-a-steach airson na h-ùine R4 2024/25 agus R1 2025/26

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/26/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- clarification was sought on the status of mitigation plans referenced in the report, with Members querying whether these had already been implemented or were still in development. It was confirmed that plans were being prepared and would be brought forward for Member scrutiny in due course;
- concern was expressed regarding the lack of progress with the Visitor Levy proposals. Members had recognised that earlier commitments to bring forward recommendations had not been fulfilled and had requested that a clear timetable be provided for when the matter would return to Committee. Members had expressed concern that ongoing delays were affecting confidence in the process and that the business community required greater certainty;
- Members reiterated ongoing concern regarding the Corran Ferry, particularly in relation to service failures and associated costs. It was recognised that recent outages had again impacted communities and Members called for greater transparency in communications and a full debrief on the most recent incident. The importance of progressing the infrastructure and vessel

replacement projects was emphasised and the efforts of staff in maintaining the service were formally acknowledged;

- a proposal was brought forward to recognise the MV Maid of Glencoul as a vessel of national historic significance, marking her 50th year since launch and continued service. Officers were requested to explore the feasibility of seeking inclusion on the National Register of Historic Vessels (NRHV) as part of this recognition;
- concern was raised regarding the allocation of Directorate savings, with Members requesting greater clarity on how these would be distributed across services. It was confirmed that this would be addressed in the Quarter 2 monitoring report;
- Members highlighted structural issues within the Council's engineering capacity, particularly in relation to bridge design and inspection. It was suggested that outsourcing certain tasks could improve efficiency and reduce delays. Further concern was expressed regarding the Council's ability to recover costs from third parties responsible for damage to infrastructure, and Members requested information on reporting procedures and engagement with insurers;
- the underachievement of parking income was explored, with Members recognising that delays in implementing new pay-and-display sites had contributed to the shortfall. Questions were raised regarding the operational status of proposed sites in Lochaber and Skye, and Members requested updates on implementation timelines and enforcement capacity. It was confirmed that agreed sites would be progressed as soon as possible and that enforcement staffing levels were under review;
- Members also queried the implementation of mandatory charges for campervans and motorhomes, and it was confirmed that these had been introduced;
- concern was expressed regarding the underperformance of building warrant income, with Members questioning the reliability of future income projections. It was acknowledged that wider economic conditions and a shift in development patterns had contributed to the shortfall, although planning income remained strong; and
- Members welcomed the positive performance of Sconser Quarry and commended the local team for their efforts. It was suggested that more positive stories of this nature should be highlighted at future meetings.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the final budget position for 2024/25 as set out in the report and Appendices 1 and 2 of the report;
- ii. **APPROVED** the forecast financial position for 2025/26 as set out in the report and Appendices 3 and 4 of the report;
- iii. **NOTED** the explanations provided for any material variances and actions taken or proposed; and
- iv. **NOTED** the update provided regarding savings delivery.

6. Capital Monitoring Q4 2024/25 and Q1 2025/26 Sgrùdadh Calpa R4 2024/25 agus R1 2025/26

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/27/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- disappointment was expressed regarding the absence of funding from the Strategic Timber Transport Scheme in the current year, with reference made to its previous value to the Council;
- concern was raised about Harford Bridge, completed in November 2020, which remained under traffic light control. Members sought clarification on its status within the Capital Programme and requested that updates be shared with relevant Ward Members;
- the anticipated reopening of the Infirmary Bridge in early September was welcomed. Members acknowledged the swift progress made following storm damage and noted that the works were subject to confirmation of no underlying structural issues; and
- in relation to Uig Harbour, Members raised concern about the substantial cost increase following changes made after the contract had been awarded. Questions were raised regarding the governance arrangements for contract amendments and emphasis was placed on the importance of ensuring contracts were robust.. At the same time, the complexity and high-risk nature of the project was acknowledged. Members commended the progress achieved, recognising that the decision to split the outage period had followed representations from stakeholders, including the Western Isles Council. The successful installation of the linkspan, transported from Poland, was highlighted as a significant achievement.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the outturn for the year 2024/25 as set out in the report and Appendix 1 of the report;
- ii. **APPROVED** the forecast financial position for the year 2025/26 as set out in this report and Appendices 2 and 3 of the report; and
- iii. **NOTED** the explanations provided for any material variances and actions taken or proposed.

7. Sustainable Transport Team Update Còmhdhail Sheasmhach – Cunntas Bliadhnaidh

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/28/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

- the comprehensive report was welcomed, with commendation for the scale of investment and delivery across the Highland area;
- appreciation was expressed for the geographic spread of projects, recognising that improvements had been delivered not only in Inverness but also in Wick, Culbokie, Thurso, Fort William and other communities;

- concern was raised regarding the planning process for new housing developments, with specific reference to Upper Achintore, where the lack of accessible active travel infrastructure had necessitated remedial works by the Council. The importance of embedding active travel and bus access requirements at the planning stage of future developments was emphasised;
- in terms of road safety, targeted interventions were called for, particularly in relation to motorcyclists and older road users. Support was expressed for the Safe Systems approach, and concern was raised regarding seasonal risks and collision patterns on rural routes. Reference was made to the A861, where the temporary reduction to 40mph during the Corran Ferry outage in 2023 had improved safety. Part of the A861 formed the National Cycle Network Route 78 cycle route and further consideration of a permanent speed limit reduction was requested to ensure the safety of all users, including cyclists, tourists and residents;
- the introduction of Behaviour Change Officers was positively received, with interest expressed in engaging with officers locally and supporting their work in schools and communities. The importance of parental confidence in enabling children to walk or cycle to school was highlighted and increased provision of school crossing patrollers was advocated. Suggestions were made to explore the use of local influencers to promote active travel and to ensure that behaviour change initiatives were supported by adequate infrastructure and incentives;
- concern was expressed regarding the reduction of bus services in both rural and urban areas. The impact on vulnerable residents, workers and young people was recognised and continued investment and strategic planning were called for to address transport poverty. Support was expressed for community transport and in-house bus services and the allocation of funding to expand these provisions was welcomed;
- small-scale accessibility improvements, such as dropped kerbs and tactile paving, were welcomed with recognition of their significant impact on wheelchair users and others with mobility challenges. Reference was made to specific schemes in Fortrose and Nairn, and continued delivery of such interventions was encouraged;
- further clarity was requested on casualty reduction targets, with a suggestion that future reports include trend lines to better assess performance across both local authority and trunk road networks;
- questions were raised regarding the Inverness bus station and other listed projects. Members sought assurance that meaningful consultation had been carried out with stakeholders, communities and businesses and that feedback had been carefully considered and appropriately addressed;
- Members expressed interest in the development of quiet routes, with requests for updates on progress, particularly in relation to signage and implementation delays; and
- the level of external funding secured was welcomed, and the team's efforts in delivering a wide range of sustainable transport initiatives across the region were praised.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the progress made by the Sustainable Transport Team in delivering active and sustainable transport and road safety initiatives across the Highland area;
- ii. **NOTED** the progress made to the 2020 national road casualty reduction targets;
- iii. **AGREED** the successful securing of external funding to support low-carbon transport infrastructure and associated programme delivery; and
- iv. **AGREED** to endorse the continued delivery of active and sustainable transport and road safety initiatives aligned with the Council's strategies and national priorities.

8. **National Planning Improvement Framework: Improvement Action Plan Cùmhnaid Baile Roinne Inbhir Nis agus na Gàidhealtachd – Aithisg Bhliadhnail 2024/25**

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/29/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- appreciation was expressed for the comprehensive report and the clarity of the Improvement Action Plan, with recognition of the scale of work undertaken across the service;
- concern was expressed regarding the qualifications gap within the Planning Service, particularly in relation to specialist roles such as tree officers and structural advisors. Clarification was sought in this regard, and it was confirmed that such roles generally fell within the remit of the Environment Team and were supported externally, rather than being part of the Planning Development Unit;
- the importance of feedback mechanisms was highlighted, with reference to staff engagement across Highland and the need for transparency in how planning conditions were discharged following consent. It was suggested that this information be made publicly available to improve accountability and align with obligations under the Aarhus Convention, which promoted public access to environmental information and participation in decision-making;
- reference was made to challenges with the Idox system, which was used by the Council to manage planning applications and related data. There were historical limitations and delays in implementing changes, including issues with email domain compatibility and system responsiveness. A request was made to explore greater flexibility and improved functionality, particularly in relation to public access and document handling;
- questions were raised regarding the breakdown of upheld applications and the engagement process for strategic and local plans. The Council's approach to community engagement was commended, with encouragement to further support communities in developing Local Place Plans;
- positive feedback was provided on the enforcement function, with recognition of improved responsiveness and a more proactive approach. Concern was expressed regarding the sustainability of relying on access officers for enforcement support and clarification was sought on future recruitment plans. Assurance was given that a new enforcement officer had been appointed and

that access officers would continue to play a complementary role rather than replacing dedicated enforcement staff;

- concern was raised regarding delays in processing smaller applications, with reference to workload pressures and the need for improved efficiency;
- the Sumitomo cable factory at Nigg was cited as an example of successful community engagement and condition management, with praise for the positive relationships established between the developer, the community and the Council;
- a correction was highlighted regarding the Black Isle Local Place Plan, with clarification that the board was not yet in place;
- observations were made regarding the statutory consultee status of Community Councils, with a call for improved engagement and parity of treatment with other consultees. The importance of fostering a culture of inclusion and responsiveness was emphasised. A suggestion was made to establish a Community Council forum in Inverness to facilitate direct engagement with planning and licensing officers and improve understanding of Council processes; and
- workplace culture was discussed, with particular reference to hybrid working and the need to maintain team cohesion, support staff wellbeing and ensure effective mentoring for newer staff. Assurance was provided that less experienced staff were being supported through increased office presence and supervision and that technology was being used to maintain connectivity across remote locations.

The Committee **NOTED** the content of the Performance Assessment contained within Appendix 1 of the report and the Improvement Action Plan contained within Appendix 2 of the report.

9. Community Wealth Building Strategy Ro-innleachd Togail Beairteas Coimhearsnachd

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/30/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the report was welcomed and commended for its clarity, comprehensive coverage and ambition, with recognition of the extensive work undertaken across the five pillars of the Community Wealth Building strategy;
- reference was made to the importance of retaining and reinvesting the Highland pound within the region, with support expressed for the Social Value Charter and its contribution to maximising local benefit from renewable energy developments;
- the potential for communities to move beyond benefit-sharing and towards direct ownership of renewable energy projects was raised. It was confirmed that this was a live area of work, with further updates to be brought to Committee in due course;
- the rural childcare pilot was highlighted as a particularly important initiative, with Members emphasising the need for flexibility in service delivery models to overcome legislative barriers and support population retention in remote

areas. The Pathfinder pilot was welcomed and support was expressed for continued innovation in childcare provision;

- the importance of local employment was emphasised, with Members observing that enabling people to work locally supported wider economic resilience and community sustainability;
- attention was drawn to paragraphs 6.1.3 and 6.1.4 of the report, which were praised for their focus on breaking down procurement into smaller lots to support local supply chains and SMEs (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises). Members emphasised the importance of this approach in ensuring that public spending delivered maximum benefit for Highland communities;
- support was expressed for the continued development of the Highland Project Bank and the Employer Charter, with recognition of their potential to embed fair work practices and strengthen local economic capacity;
- the strategic importance of aligning Council services and partner activity was acknowledged, with Members welcoming the establishment of the Highland Community Wealth Building Partnership and the mapping of existing initiatives to avoid duplication and maximise impact; and
- Members supported the view that monitoring and evaluation of Community Wealth Building outcomes should be embedded across all Strategic Committees and Full Council, rather than reported in isolation to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee.

The Committee:-

- i. **AGREED**, as set out in section 6 of the report, progress against the Community Wealth Building Action Plan; and
- ii. **NOTED** the next steps in terms of embedding Community Wealth Building as an approach and updating the action plan.

10. Delivery Plan Budget Monitoring and Progress Update Q1 2025-26 – Net Zero, Energy, Investment & Innovation (NZEII)
Sgrùdadh Buidseit agus Cunntas air Adhartas a’ Phlana Lìbhrigidh R1 2025-26 – Neoni Lom, Lùth, Tasgadh & Ùr-ghnàthachadh

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/31/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** progress to date of projects as outlined in this report;
- ii. **APPROVED** the progression of the Tain North and Tain South solar PV projects to Outline Business Case stage, including the commencement of planning, legal and financial due diligence; and
- iii. **AGREED** that outcomes of this next phase would be reported back to Members ahead of any Final Investment Decision.

11. Performance Monitoring Report Q1 2025/26
Aithisg Sgrùdadh Coileanaidh R1 2025/26

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/32/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

Reference was made to the age profile of the Council workforce, with specific mention of paragraph 5.2 of the report, which related to Service Attendance Management. An age profile was available and that there was a notable reliance on staff in the later stages of their careers. The existence of a direct correlation was not confirmed, and further information was to be sought from Human Resources.

The Committee **NOTED** the Service's performance information.

12. Membership of the Harbours Management Board
Ballrachd Bòrd Stiùiridh nan Calachan

The Committee **AGREED** to appoint Mr W Mackay and Mr P Oldham as Members of the Harbours Management Board.

13. Minutes
Geàrr-chunntas

The Committee **NOTED** the Minutes of the Planning Applications Committees (PAC) for:-

- i. North PAC – 23 April 2025;
- ii. South PAC – 14 May 2025;
- iii. North PAC – 11 June 2025;

and, **APPROVED**:-

- iv. Harbours Management Board held on 23 May 2025; and
- v. Inverness Cromarty Firth Green Freeport Monitoring Group held on 12 June 2025.

The meeting ended at 12:05 pm.