Agenda Item	**6**
Report No	**RDB-11-25**

The Highland Council

Committee: **Redesign Board**

Date: **20 November 2025**

Report Title: **Amenities Review and Roads Improvement Project 2 - Budget Monitoring & Progress Update**

Report By: **Assistant Chief Executive – Place**

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 The Amenities project has been established in accordance with project management principles. The project will be managed using work packages. Work packages will be created linked to each project objective. The Highland Council Roads Redesign Project – Phase 2 builds upon the foundational work of Phase 1, focusing on modernising service delivery, enhancing operational efficiency and improving stakeholder satisfaction.

As Members will be aware the restructure carried out for the Place Cluster has allowed much closer managerial and operational synergy between Roads and Amenities activity, and the two redesign projects will be taken forward in tandem, ultimately leading to much more joint working between teams. Many of the back-office functions are similar in nature so any solutions identified will be service neutral and may well have application across other parts of the Council as we move forward.

1.2 This report provides the Redesign Board with an update on progress of project delivery, including financial, performance, risk and general information on the following Projects:

- Amenities Review and Roads Improvement Project 2

1.3 The content and structure of the report is intended to:-

- assist Member scrutiny and performance management;
- inform decision making and aid continuous improvement; and
- provide transparency and accessibility

2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:-

i. **Scrutinise and note** the report received from the Association of Public Service Excellence consultant on proposed future operating model for Amenities grounds maintenance service as detailed in Appendix 1 of the report; and
ii. **Consider and note** the updates on the Roads Redesign project.

3 Implications

3.1 **Resource** – The Amenities project will consider all the resourcing issues including workforce, plant, materials, income generation and community capacity for sustainable proposals to be developed for Members to consider. A budget of £100,000 to be met from reserves was agreed at the Council meeting on 6 March 2025 to deliver this project: Grounds Maintenance development of a future operating model – project delivery. Resources required for outcomes from the Roads Redesign Project will be determined at a later date.

3.2 **Legal** – This report contributes to the Council's statutory duties to report performance and secure best value in terms of; Section 1(1)(a) of the Local Government Act 1992, and Section 1 of the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, respectively. The Council also has a duty to maintain the road network to a reasonable standard and to manage risk effectively.

3.3 **Risk** – There are no risk implications arising as a direct result of this report. Project/Programme risks are identified via the council risk management process and monitored through the Portfolio Boards and are reported by exception only in paragraphs 5.4 and 6.4.

3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 outlines control measures that the Council must take to protect the Health and Safety of its employees and members of the public when using chemicals such as weed killer. Any changes to current practice will incorporate the appropriate control measures. Glyphosate use is licensed only until December 2026.

3.4.1 Play areas are not a statutory service; however, where they are provided, we must comply with the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Occupiers Liability (Scotland) Act 1960 for employees and members of the public attending play areas. We must also comply with our duties under the Equality Act 2010 and the Fairer Scotland Duty. Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to relax and play, and participate in a wide range of cultural, artistic and cultural activities.

3.5 **Gaelic** – There are no known Gaelic implications.

4 Impacts

4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.

4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.

4.3 This is a monitoring and update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5 Amenities Review – Summary of APSE Report

5.1 The proposed operating model will address key aspects including cost management, mitigation of inefficiencies, enhancement of productivity, scheduling, route optimisation, identification of commercial opportunities, and ensuring equity of service provision across all council wards and service types.

5.2 The service arrangements are required to be structured around resource allocation according to asset type and maintenance frequency, incorporating profiling for high priority tasks and providing flexibility for remediation based on Land and Audit Management System (LAMS) grading, safety works, and commercial opportunities. This approach includes cross-boundary collaboration when it enhances service delivery and cost efficiency.

5.3 In principal grass cutting should occur approximately every two weeks; however, this schedule is often disrupted by weather conditions, staff absences, mechanical failures, and staff being deployed on burial duties. Greater discipline should be introduced, including the adoption of a consistent cycle for each location and the allocation of reserve activity time. When planning routine tasks in various climatic regions, adjustments to standards may be necessary.

5.4 Considering alternative staffing options for those staff employed on a seasonal contract. This approach could assist staffing absences and provides support for snow clearing and winter tasks.

5.5 There is a need to dispense with historical practices and for the Service to be driven by the agreed outcome specification, which must be equally applied to all areas, as a baseline to then make variations by usage and local issues, site specific (rain, excess growth etc). There is a need for equitable distribution of resource, to work as flexibly as possible.

5.6 The current Asset Management system functions solely as a GIS mapping tool, documenting site locations and measurements, but lacking capabilities for operational planning, work scheduling, productivity tracking, or cost management. It serves primarily as a basic database identifying sites and, where available, associated landowners, maintainers, and budget holders. The necessity of deploying a new asset management system is essential.

5.7 There is a need to quantify the overall tree asset, in terms of location, type and species. In addition, the Roads Service (under the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984) need to be aware of trees on adjacent land which may at some point interfere with the road user. The tree management service will need to be adequately resourced, not only to establish the inventory, but to be able to respond to issues identified within the survey and ongoing maintenance as this is a key area of risk.

5.8 Overall Project RAG Status

The overall RAG status of the Amenities project is Green as it is on track to deliver on time by end of March 2026. The report has been received from the APSE Associate. The project is currently being delivered within the allocated budget.

5.9 Key Milestones & Requests for Change

The project is progressing on target. There are no requests for change.

5.10 Financial Summary

Amenities Review:-

i) A budget of £100,000 to be met from reserves was agreed at the Council meeting on 6 March 2025 to deliver this project: Grounds Maintenance development of a future operating model – project delivery.
ii) Investment – spend on consultant for APSE is £15,000

Roads Improvement Project 2

As the various projects are developed, any additional investments will be determined and, if required, will be reported to committee at a later date.

5.11 Key Risks

There are no significant risks at present.

5.12 Forward Plan

5.12.1 The next steps are to consider the APSE reports recommendations as required in developing a future operating model.

5.12.2 Develop an action plan for the next stage of the Amenities review, alongside the Roads redesign project.

6 Roads Improvement Project 2

6.1 When available, the RAG status from the project will be included in future reports.

6.2 **Key Milestones and Requests for Change**

Roads Redesign Phase 2:

The Council has signed up to the service provided by the vendor and data gathering to set it up is currently ongoing.

Development is ongoing with the Temporary Traffic Regulation Order (TTRO) project. The development site has been released to internal users, and user testing including feedback is ongoing. Significant work has been completed in ensuring all required legal templates have been uploaded within the new software, and that the customer application form contains all required information. The software is expected to go live in November.

Permanent Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) project development is set to commence, with the initial working group meeting planned for the end of October.

Market research has been completed for the Road Defect Monitoring (AI) project. This has involved:-

- Meetings with a number of different suppliers, with follow up meetings to discuss in further detail where required.
- Meetings with other councils who have already adopted similar software.
- One-to-one interviews with Road Operations Managers (ROMs) to identify primary internal use cases, desired benefits and risks.

From this, a final market research report has been completed, and the desired specification, high-level benefits, and primary risks have all been defined. Next steps are to complete the specification to inform procurement, and to further develop project plan.

Similar work is ongoing for the Route Optimisation software project:-

- Market research has been conducted to define the state of the market, and meetings are ongoing with suppliers.
- Engagement with additional local authorities is also planned once appropriate contacts are received from suppliers.
- One-to-one meetings with ROMs are planned.
- Engagement with the Waste Team took place in September to gain an understanding of how they use their Route Optimisation software.

Market research has begun on the Job Card Digitisation project:-

- Market research has commenced.
- Agenda item on quarterly amenities staff meeting in Dingwall to begin to scope project internally.
- Similar engagement to be planned with Roads, Finance and Business Support teams.
- Network Request has been placed through Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) to receive information from other Local Authorities.
- Engagement with Business Analyst team is also ongoing, to aid with process mapping, scoping and review of the Council's currently existing software estate.

Work is planned for early new year in order to progress the next Roads Finance Workshop.

Ongoing Road Service improvements

The service has progressed the revision of its web pages for the new Council website.

At the time of writing this report, the service was in the final phases of moving its road asset management database to the cloud-based version. This will enable further system developments to take place, including potential links with the CRM system (including reports of defects).

It is proposed that at the next redesign board meeting, a presentation will be given to demonstrate progress on the Roads Redesign programme so far.

6.3 Financial Summary

As the various projects are developed, any additional investments will be determined and, if required, will be reported to committee at a later date.

6.4 Key Risks

There are no significant risks at present.

6.5 Forward Plan

The work described in section 6.2 will continue on all projects throughout the next reporting period.

7 Joint Review Approach

7.1 With Amenities and Roads being under the Operations and Maintenance Service these projects will be aligned to progress together with some progress being made on joint initiatives.

7.2 Managementors are consultants who were appointed to look objectively at the Roads and Amenities operations. The focus for their review was Inverness and Ross and Cromarty Areas to provide a mix of the operations and areas. This work was carried out throughout August; they started with interviewing key managers and then worked with delivery teams for two weeks.

7.3 An initial report has been received from Managementors which is being considered by the Chief Officer and Assistant Chief Executive on next steps.

7.4 Other projects to be progressed together will be the Asset Management System, which will be fit for purpose for both Amenities and Roads functions and the digitalisation of the manual job card process.

Designation:	Assistant Chief Executive – Place
Date:	3 November 2025
Author:	Debbie Sutton, Chief Officer Operations & Maintenance Tracey Urry, Head of Roads and Transport Elizabeth Maciver, Principal Engineer Brian Robertson, Project Manager
Background Papers:	Road Improvement Project Report – June 2025
Appendices:	Appendix 1 – APSE Report for Highland Council

Amenities Services Review

Highland Council

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ISO 14001: 2015 Environmental management REGISTERED Certificate No:99162003
ISO 27001: 2013 Information security management REGISTERED Certificate No:128072006

This report has been prepared by Richard Hayes in September 2025

Final Version 1.0

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Amenities Service Review

Highland Council

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1. Executive Summary

1.1 Highland Council (HC) is undertaking a review of its current Amenities services, which include grass cutting, grounds maintenance, and other related activities, to ensure effective service delivery and the development of an optimal operating model. This new model will consider HC's requirements—currently managed through SLAs and output specifications—as well as factors such as rurality, historical working practices, and resource allocation, all of which have been identified as areas for improvement.

1.2 The proposed operating model will address key aspects including cost management, mitigation of inefficiencies, enhancement of productivity, scheduling, route optimization, identification of commercial opportunities, and ensuring equity of service provision across all council wards and service types.

1.3 The service arrangements are required to be structured around resource allocation according to asset type and maintenance frequency, incorporating profiling for high priority tasks and providing flexibility for remediation based on Land and Audit Management System (LAMS) grading, safety works, and commercial opportunities. This approach includes cross-boundary collaboration when it enhances service delivery and cost efficiency.

1.4 There has been a historical pattern of resource allocation challenges, compounded by insufficient management of end-to-end processes and a prevailing culture of working in silos.

2. Introduction

2.1 This review has been undertaken by APSE Associate, Richard Hayes. Richard is a freelance consultant practising in Highway and Asset Management. He is also a trainer, in these and other subjects, and provides professional consultancy advice to individuals and organisations including the Institute of Highways Engineers (IHE) and APSE. Richard was President of the IHE from 2012-2014 and was appointed Chief Executive in June 2016. Since stepping down in 2020, he has worked with several local authorities across the UK, as well as private sector clients.

2.2 Up until 2012, Richard was the Western Area Manager for Northumberland County Council’s Local Service Department, where he was responsible for an area of 2,468 km^2 located around the town of Hexham. He was also responsible for the County's Construction Division, which delivers capital works on highways structure and street lighting. He was with the County Council from 2003 and, before moving to Northumberland, worked for Stockton on Tees Borough Council for 25 years in highways maintenance.

2.3 Richard undertakes expert witness advice to legal clients and provides technical advice to numerous private sector clients. He continues to represent the IHE on several external bodies including the NWSRG as well as being a member of Skills England's Construction Route panel.

2.4 I have been instructed to undertake a review of the current arrangements within the Amenities Service which sits within the Communities and Place Service

2.5 To fulfil its functions, the Amenities service is divided on an area basis (North and South) and is sub divided into geographical areas for day-to-day activities The Strategic Leadership Group (SLG) of HC has recently approved the development of a future operating model. Additionally, HC will allocate further financial resources to drive improvements and deliver a more effective service.

3. Project Considerations

3.1 To consider:

- New Management System
- Defined workload per area, including commercial prospects.
- Integrated services with shared resources by season/activity (e.g., extend seasonal staff to Roads in winter)
- Staffing levels based on operational area, asset type, and asset condition, aligned with Highland Council Output standards.
- Updated service delivery model with Best Value analysis.
- Performance management through published KPIs and ward reports
- Customer Services
- To consider where existing structures, could be implemented and current work amended , additional activities, and future demands to determine if adjustments to the Service structure are necessary.
- To Examine ongoing recruitment issues related to seasonal employees.
- To Evaluate how a future operating model could be developed, its potential structure, and identify commercial opportunities to support service capacity.
- To Assess the functioning of each element of the service and provide proposals for improvements.
- The services under consideration include:
- Cemetery maintenance
- Grass management

- Play areas.
- Designated sports areas
- Bowling greens
- Areas designated for biodiversity.
- Formal planted areas
- Tree management
- Support for individuals who require Garden Aid
- For each service element, as applicable, consider each of the following areas:
- Budgetary models
- Customer expectations
- Service level agreements.
- Specifications
- Place-based activities.
- Asset management
- Planned/unplanned work ratios.
- Customer communication arrangements, and levels of community or volunteer involvement

4. Methodology

4.1 I have been supplied with several documents relating to the service, its organisational structure and reports.

4.2 I have conducted a full literature review of the above documents and researched further information available on the HC website.

4.3 I have conducted interviews with key members of staff.

4.4 I have conducted extensive research into UK local authorities' policies and plans relating to Grounds and Amenities Services.

5. Findings

5.1 **Service delivery**

HC seeks to manage the entire service using a standard approach to staff and service delivery, ensuring consistency given historical resource and practice constraints. This review aims to align actual service levels with established standards by implementing a unified, cross-service council model., the review has considered options such as subcontracting or engaging community groups and SMEs when travel times make in-house service inefficient. Unprofitable routes can be balanced with commercial opportunities to improve service quality and better manage costs or generate income.

The provision of these services may require staff to acquire additional skills and potentially increase recruitment during service delivery, particularly for tree maintenance. It also necessitates maintaining and regularly reviewing a set of required competencies for operational staff.

The current arrangement allocates resources primarily to grass cutting and internments during the summer and to winter maintenance and internments in the off-season. There are higher levels of grass cutting and variations in service delivery among the 21 wards.

Recruiting and retaining both permanent and seasonal staff is challenging, leading to delays in regular work cycles and impacting other projects. Although works are divided into north and south areas, real differences exist due to historical resource allocations, resulting in inconsistent output standards. The main objective is to eliminate silo mentalities, promote collaboration, and enhance efficiency by removing artificial boundaries—HC aims for a unified, one service, one council model.

Some of these differences are attributed to local factors such as the location and availability of resources; overall, this has resulted in varying levels of service delivery across the Council area, which has been noted by Council members and staff. The current in-house arrangement provides more control over resource deployment; however, the existing financial reporting system does not deliver sufficient or timely data to fully utilise this flexibility. All in-house services are provided at cost, and there is a notable budget deficit within the Service. which is reported to HC in detail

Performance management is relatively weak and, although HC are part of the APSE performance networks, there are few service comparisons that can be made with this data.in terms of output.

The current system, Bbits, records on-site standards during inspections; however, it does not address key areas such as cost, productivity, resource management, or planning. As a result, it provides limited insight into how resources are managed and allocated, how service demands are met, or how cost control is exercised.

An inventory exercise to electronically map assets was initiated in 2014, resulting in accurate records and confirming that HC has documented information about its assets, including internal service ownership.

5.2 **Play areas**

HC currently manages 311 play areas across the Council region, providing over 2,500 pieces of play equipment. While the provision of playparks is not a statutory obligation, the inspection and maintenance of installed equipment are mandatory requirements. HC adheres to established standards for both inspection and maintenance; however, these standards would benefit from a review in this area.

The Scottish Government made a manifesto commitment to renew playparks across Scotland, so that all children have access to quality play in their own community, backed by £60 million over the period of the Parliament. The first allocation was £5m of capital grant nationally, made in 2021/22. Highland Council's allocation was £234,000 and was followed by £245,000 in 22/23, £488,000 in 23/24, £732,000 in 24/25 and £121900 in 25/26. A Strategy adopted by HC for the period 2023-2033 includes wide principles for play areas to be safe, inclusive (both in design and use) and for them to be environmentally and financially sustainable. Improvements of such a significant nature will require a stronger maintenance regime, which will have implications for the revenue allocation in future years, which currently stands at £58,000 per annum for the whole service. This is insufficient to maintain the current equipment and will lead to some areas having to have their facilities curtailed due to an inadequate level of maintenance.

5.3 **Cemeteries and Burial Services.**

HC manages 245 burial grounds and Inverness Crematorium at Kilvean, conducting about 1,300 cremations and 1,700 burials yearly. On 14 September 2023, the Council approved a Bereavement Services capital budget of £2.931m for 2024/25 and £3.068m annually for 2025/26–2028/29 to ensure adequate capacity across all areas. HC is committed to maintaining respectful standards at every location, considering resource needs for both open and closed sites. Intimations for the opening of lairs is supplied from a corporate source although in some rural areas Funeral Directors contact Supervisory staff to arrange time for burials etc.

5.4 **Designated Sports Areas**

HC, in coordination with local sports groups, is tasked with ensuring that facilities can accommodate the sports played at each location. These facilities are considered a priority by customers. A comprehensive review is planned, which will include an examination of local arrangements and maintenance of high-value council assets. Closed season maintenance is necessary at several sites, and there is a need for clear guidelines regarding special events and cost recovery. Standards for this area, are therefore established but there is an opportunity for local ownership as well as other local arrangements for certain activities.

5.5 **Bowling Greens**

HC, in partnership with local sporting organisations, ensures that facilities adhere to the specific requirements of each sport. The prevailing Output specification outlines the standards applicable to Bowling Greens, with corresponding lease agreements in place. Consideration may be given to local ownership and ongoing maintenance should sufficient demand be demonstrated.

5.6 **Set Aside areas**

HC have classified 'set aside areas' as those which require infrequent maintenance and only then to control any invasive species. HC have yet to agree standards for this area and are considering an increase in the extent of the arrangement which will have a different approach to maintenance. HC have introduced a biodiversity Officer to coordinate an overall response, but arrangements have yet to be concluded.

5.7 **Planted Areas**

Except for high-profile sites, HC does not maintain planted areas, only undertake occasional pruning or clearing. HC requires planting plans for all new developments (schools and housing) but not including a one-year maintenance period provides no ongoing maintenance budget. The council spends significantly on planning, construction, initial maintenance, and later clearing neglected plantings. This lack of maintenance funding remains a problem that needs to be considered.

HC maintains planted areas to provide horticultural features. Work has begun to reduce the number of seasonal flower beds and to provide lower maintenance regimes. HC have yet to agree standards and areas where such arrangements are to be placed.

5.8 **Tree management**

HC has several tree and woodland areas and established a Tree Strategy in 2023. The Council had originally outsourced this service, both for maintenance and emergency response, but the service is now delivered in house. HC has no overall tree management policy, although one is currently being developed. HC is vulnerable to claims from damaged or fallen trees, and this policy needs both endorsement by the Council and resourcing to deliver the required arrangements. The Service provided here has yet to be fully established and although being considered within this report the future arrangements will be in place at the earliest opportunity.

5.9 **Management of weeds and vegetation control**

In 2019 HC resolved to discontinue to use of weed killing products that contain glyphosate, in areas such as schools, sports areas, play parks and playgrounds. In other locations these products are still used, but glyphosate is only licensed for use in the UK until the end of 2025 and in the EU until 2033. This has led to many areas where weeds cannot be controlled adequately, as resources are not available for hand delivered options. HC has established a working group to develop policies and to demonstrate being proactive, rather than reactive, with the management of weed control. The group compiled an inventory of current chemical storage, including controlled disposal of old stocks, checking training of operatives and PPE issued. A focus for the group was to look at integrated weed control. To assist with the implementation of this, HC has developed a decision matrix, allowing a consistent approach to weed control across all areas and services. Members have yet to issue a directive on the appropriate method of controlling weeds, i.e. chemical or physical removal. The slight benefit to the ban of the chemical weedkiller is that the number of areas of biodiversity in 'Set Aside' areas can be increased, as included in 5.6 above. The Environment Team are currently drafting new Invasive Non-Native Species Guidance to support the Council in managing this issue in a consistent and robust manner, which accords with relevant legislation and good practice.

5.10 **Road verge cutting**

HC has a duty to maintain roadside verges, and cut grass on roadside verges, to protect sightlines at junctions in urban or semi-rural areas. The areas to be maintained, usually by a single cut, are determined by the Roads Service Verge Maintenance Manual, adopted by the Council in 2023, which gives provision for the Council, NatureScot and local conservation groups to agree Special Verge arrangements (in consultation with the Roads Operation Manager). Special Verges are verges of particular importance or interest for biodiversity and, where identified, will be recorded, mapped and appropriately managed, i.e. the verge may be cut earlier or later in the year to allow wildflowers to seed.

5.11 **Amenity Grass maintenance**

HC is responsible for maintaining all undesignated areas through regular grass cutting during the primary growing season, which spans from mid-March to mid-October. These areas collectively cover approximately 10 million square metres, with the frequency of mowing ranging from a single annual cut to weekly maintenance, depending on each area's specific requirements. Maintenance activities are carried out by in-house staff utilising a diverse array of equipment, including ride-on mowers, robotic mowers, hand tools, and leaf blowers. The practice of planting bulbs in grassed areas has been discouraged over time to facilitate uninterrupted grass cutting.

Notably, grass maintenance is the service area where the variance in standards is most apparent. Detailed data on total area maintained, categorized by land type, budget holder, and ward (or operational area), should be provided. This information should allow clearer recommendations for aligning service delivery to the Output Standard, organised by operational route. Such performance metrics will enable effective analysis and management, ensuring inefficiencies are addressed and consistent service standards are achieved across the Highland region.

Litter is collected prior to mowing; however, both Street Cleansing and High Life Highland (HLH) staff are involved in emptying bins, which can result in ambiguity regarding responsibility for litter removal at certain sites.

5.12 **Other services - Nurseries**

HC purchases nearly all plants from local nurseries, with a small number grown in the northern Council area; this volume is too low to warrant alternative procurement methods.

5.13 **Service Level Agreements**

Service Level Agreements (SLAs) are established with various areas of the Council, where the scope of work is agreed upon with the Client and delivered within an allocated budget. If it is necessary not to exceed the budget, the level of service provided is consequently reduced. For example, the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) funds grass cutting for the Council's social housing stock, as well as the 'Garden Aid' scheme, which supports residents (both social and private) who are unable to maintain their own gardens. The funding available through the HRA does not permit the same level of service offered in other Council areas, resulting in numerous complaints from tenants and a perception of a two-tier service.

Additional SLAs exist, such as those with the Education Service and the arm's length HLH service—which manages Country Parks and nature-related sites—as well as several smaller agreements with local organisations. In these instances, the available budget from the Client at the start of the season determines the level of service that can be provided. There are also special arrangements in place for events throughout the year, requiring amenities staff to collaborate with other departments; however, no dedicated budget is assigned for these activities. These arrangements include Common Good and third-party agreements, highlighting the need for a transition to a Corporate Budgeting approach and the elimination of current recharging practices.

The existing constraints of SLAs, combined with complex and sometimes competing service priorities and standards, limit opportunities for flexible working.

5.14 **Commercial activity**

Currently, services for private customers are limited, generating some income for the Service; however, labour constraints restrict the potential for expanding these offerings to additional clients. When availability exists within the grass cutting fleet, there is scope to develop a commercial branch delivering services such as weed control, grass cutting, play area inspection and maintenance, arboricultural work, and design consultancy at competitive rates. Strengthening the management of routine operations and addressing instances of over-provision could support this growth. A particularly significant opportunity lies in the future development of tree and arboricultural services, encompassing both advisory and physical tree works, with potential to generate revenue from both internal and external clients.

5.15 **Customer Complaints and Service Requests**

Currently, performance is measured through customer complaints and service requests; however, these metrics are not quantified or systematically analysed for improvement opportunities. Additionally, providing feedback to complainants is often slow, cumbersome, and challenging to monitor. Bbit inspections identify areas for improvement (C&D grades) with assigned response targets. Incorporating these processes into a new operating model may be possible with the implementation of a new asset management system.

5.16 **Plant and Equipment**

Most plant and equipment are owned and maintained by HC, with purchasing decisions made corporately. Extensive effort has been invested in preparing the tender for the new 5-year ground machinery contract (2025–2029). The current contract is valued at £550k per year, but a direct replacement would exceed £1.3m, resulting in equipment being used beyond its typical lifespan and increased maintenance costs and downtime. The service has been reviewed—including equipment, routes, and staffing—leading to a reduction in the mower fleet from 94 (2019) to about 70 for 2025, and fewer summer-hired vehicles. Some figures need clarification, so a review of equipment use versus resource allocation is necessary.

5.17 **Financial management systems**

The current system provides limited value to overall service management. While budget management is sometimes timely during the financial year, the available information does not support effective day-to-day budget control. Financial support for Amenities staff is minimal, and although employees record job assignment details, the current format is cumbersome and challenging to analyse. Implementing a real-time financial model that enables cost and productivity analysis and supports active work planning may be beneficial.

5.18 **Workforce resources**

The Council area is organised into North and South regions, each overseen by an Amenities Manager. Maintenance operations are performed by teams assigned to nine geographic areas, with each team managed by a Foreperson and supported by permanent and seasonal staff. Additional teams address arboriculture, sports facilities, and burials. In Caithness and Sutherland, for example, of 32 full-time equivalents, approximately five employees focus on burials, along with 15 seasonal staff distributed across depots in Wick, Thurso, Brora, and Lairg. A resource review is necessary and should be informed by asset maintenance requirements, considering variables such as site usage and amenity standards, rather than historical practices; this is intended to be a principal outcome of the report.

Within HC, staffing levels vary—some areas exceed expectations or operate efficiently with fewer staff due to improved equipment, while others face recruitment challenges and uneven staff distribution. Employee numbers fell from 83 in 2017 to 46 in 2024, resulting in a notable decrease (up to 30%) in seasonal grass cutting capacity. This shortfall increases pressure on permanent staff and negatively affects other services, sometimes leading to delays. Although local SMEs provide some support, their contribution remains limited.

No health and safety issues have been identified, and appropriate controls are in place for key risk areas such as hand-arm vibration and mowing on slopes. While these represent significant risks, the current measures appear to be sufficient.

6. Conclusions

6.1 **Service Standards**

The Amenity Services Output Specification document, produced and adopted in 2019, outlines service delivery objectives and outcomes. It serves as an exemplary framework for establishing service standards across all areas of service provision. The document specifies four inspection criteria to measure performance:

a - Completed to Specification

b - Predominantly Completed

c - Remediation Work Required

d - Poor or Unacceptable

At present, BBits data is reviewed during monthly team meetings and is also made available to others upon request. The Amenity Services Output Specification document serves as a preliminary reference for developing a formal Asset Management Policy for amenities activities, which would need official approval by the Council. In the appendix, a suggested format for this policy document is provided, including its potential use in clarifying the gap between available budget and service provision costs. Addressing this difference may generate various ideas for more efficient service delivery.

6.2 Current and Future Workload and Relative Staff Structure

Routine maintenance schedules are established routes, typically designed with spare capacity. Regular review of operational routes to ensure they follow set paths and outputs, preventing over-delivery. In principal Grass cutting should occur approximately every two weeks; however, this schedule is often disrupted by weather conditions, staff absences, and mechanical failures. Greater discipline should be introduced, including the adoption of a consistent cycle for each location and the allocation of reserve activity time. When planning routine tasks in various climatic regions, adjustments to standards may be necessary. Regular mowing operations should maintain sufficient flexibility to accommodate fluctuations in climate—such as rainfall or drought—and resource availability, yet deviations from the planned schedule should be minimised wherever possible. HC may consider adding a link on its website that allows customers to check grass cutting schedules in their area. Similar features have been implemented by several other local authorities in the UK.

HC, like many local authorities, faces significant challenges recruiting and retaining seasonal staff, impacting both manual and supervisory roles. These shortages have led to delays in cyclic maintenance and other work activities. Because pay and conditions are strictly regulated, HC cannot match the flexibility of the private sector. An apprentice programme would help grow staff numbers but can result in high turnover. Immediate staffing increases are especially needed for tree asset management.

Following the review of effective equipment usage and the transition to a more structured cycle of activities, areas with over- or under-resourcing of front-line staff are expected to be identified. Relocation within the HC area may not always be feasible, and some surplus staff could remain. Currently, such surplus can be managed by adjusting the number of seasonal staff, but further options may become apparent because of the utilisation analysis.

Another option is to consider alternative staffing options for those staff employed on a seasonal contract. This approach could assist staffing absences and provides support for snow clearing and winter tasks.

Deploying staff to remote locations often requires significant travel for relatively minor tasks. In these cases, staff can be assigned various responsibilities across the Service, such as including aspects of street cleansing and road maintenance. Implementing multitasking systems may help reduce unproductive time and support the delivery of a service that is responsive to customer needs.

6.3 Customer and service requests

Any issues raised by the public are recorded on HC's corporate complaints system and are passed through various officers to the operative/supervisor responsible for carrying out the response. The current arrangement is inappropriate for measurement of customer standards and feedback to customers and to allow the Service to review its performance on a regular basis. The existing Customer Management System requires updating or replacement to facilitate more direct transfer and return of service requests and related matters to front-line operatives. This may enhance customer response and enable more effective allocation of support staff resources. The Appendix includes recommendations for alternative systems that could meet these requirements.

6.4 **Amenity Grass and Planted Areas Maintenance**

As outlined in section 6.1 above, routine maintenance of grassed and planted areas is performed on a cyclical schedule throughout the growing season. The current HC Asset Management system functions solely as a GIS mapping tool, documenting site locations and measurements, but lacking capabilities for operational planning, work scheduling, productivity tracking, or cost management. It serves primarily as a basic database identifying sites and, where available, associated landowners, maintainers, and budget holders. The necessity of deploying a new asset management system is essential and detailed in the Appendix.

The extent of planted areas should be reviewed and adjusted as needed to optimise maintenance costs, particularly during the review of planning applications. This provides an opportunity to ensure that no areas are designated where maintenance would be difficult.

Arrangements for litter collection are clearly defined and included in the Appendices, in accordance with the Code of Practice on Litter and Refuse (Scotland) 2018.

6.5 **Road Verge cutting**

HC Roads Service delivers this activity on all road verges that exist outside the urban areas (outside 30mph limits), and it has not been considered within the review, although discussions have taken place and a draft SLA prepared for the urban areas. The level of resource required, and timing, could be reviewed to see if there would be any benefit by amalgamation into the regular grass cutting service arrangements.

6.6 **Cemeteries**

Service and maintenance of cemeteries is an extremely sensitive issue and HC has confirmed this is a priority for the public. Information for the opening of lairs, burials and cremations are well documented and available to the public and contain well-established procedures. The level of maintenance needs to be reconfirmed for grass cutting standards in both open and closed cemeteries, headstone inspection, removal of floral tributes etc. The charges for the service are established by HC and reviewed on a regular basis. There is no information on cost effectiveness in this area; improved financial information would greatly assist the service, particularly in setting charges and to allow the Council to identify any subsidy or returns that might exist. Future planning should also consider any changes in population and preferences on burial or cremation.

6.7 **Tree management**

There are a considerable number of trees within the ownership of Highland Council, and these are managed within the tree management strategy, approved in August 2023[1]. The Council states it will aim to adopt an appropriate tree inspection and management programme to ensure a tree population, which is in accordance with its strategy, although this is at any early stage. There is a need to quantify the overall tree asset, in terms of location, type and species. In addition, the Roads Service (under the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984) need to be aware of trees on adjacent land which may at some point interfere with the road user. The tree management service will need to be adequately resourced, not only to establish the inventory, but to be able to respond to issues identified within the survey and ongoing maintenance as this is a key area of risk for HC. In the event of any incident occurring, whereby a tree caused damage, HC could face significant financial loss. Across the UK recent incidents due to inappropriate arrangements have led to prosecutions from the HSE and substantial civil compensation claims. The standards to be implemented by HC will adopt a Risk-Based approach, be in line with National Tree Safety Group (NTSG) standards and will follow good practice for public bodies. As previously noted, as this segment of the service develops, there may be opportunities to pursue external projects that could generate additional income.

6.8 **Weed control**

As stated in paragraph 5.9 above, in 2019 HC agreed to ban the use of weed killing products containing glyphosate in certain areas and a working group has since been established to consider an integrated approach to weed management and vegetation control and to control weeds through the application of herbicide, manual and mechanical control systems. Considering the potential UK ban on the use of glyphosate, HC is considering how an effective and acceptable weedkiller can be utilised, however, without this, the service will be under pressure to remove weeds by hand or light machinery.

6.9 **Biodiversity and set aside areas**

Amenity Services are continuing to identify areas of amenity greenspace that can be managed more effectively for biodiversity. Successful initiatives, such as the six wildflower roundabouts in Inverness, continue alongside new initiatives to increase

[1] www.highland.gov.uk Tree management strategy

the area of greenspace set aside for nature. These include new ways to manage greenspace, for example, reducing management, only cutting paths through larger greenspaces, reducing verge cutting and creating wildflower and wildlife corridors. By the end of 2022, the area of reduced management had increased to 92,247m2 and many sites evidenced increased biodiversity, including the reestablishment of native wildflowers. Sites set aside in this manner take several years to mature and, in many ways, additional maintenance is required particularly litter control. A strong publicity campaign should accompany the project although the introduction of more areas may lead to changes in equipment being necessary as more collection of long grass may be required.

6.10 **Special Sports facilities**

The Amenities Service is responsible for maintaining various specialist sports grounds and pitches. The Service aims to adhere to manufacturers and Governing Body standards and guidance for maintenance of these facilities, though this may sometimes exceed the available budget. In the long term, it may be necessary to consider transferring certain responsibilities to users through leasing or revised charging arrangements.

6.11 **Play areas**

HC manages 311 play parks with about 2,000 pieces of equipment. A Play Park Strategy was approved in 2023 and reviewed in 2024; now, community groups must allocate 10% of funds raised to future maintenance. The Highland Council's strategy is recognised as best practice by other authorities. Currently, there is no capital budget except for Scottish Government awards. The 2024/25 revenue budget is £18,300, or £58 per park, while the backlog maintenance cost to meet safety standards totals £1,585,383. Several parks will close and have equipment removed as it becomes unusable. HC is working with voluntary groups to seek more funding, but without additional support, maintaining all current play parks is unsustainable. Statutory equipment inspections are required, making the current maintenance allocation insufficient.

6.12 **Commercial Opportunities**

The commercial opportunities for additional income generation should not be overlooked however, these will be extremely limited at this stage due to the service struggling to meet its current workload commitments.

6.13 **Service level agreements**

HC has SLAs in place with HC clients and a small number of external clients, and the report will look at several of these.

Housing (HRA) Service Level Agreement: The level of service required for the Housing service is significantly underfunded and has, for many years, been dealt with on a priority basis, as the HRA could not support similar levels of service to that provided on other Council maintained areas. This has led to many complaints from residents and areas looking unkempt and untidy. Ongoing discussions between Amenities and Housing have determined what level of service that can be delivered within the available budget, which has fluctuated from c£807k in 2022 to £602k in 2024, with no review for any inflationary pressures. Additional funding for weedkilling fell from £159k to £127k during the same period. Whilst ongoing discussions are being held for the next SLA review, the opportunity for equalizing out the standard across the Council base is extremely limited.

Education and High Life Highland: The budget allocated for the Education Estate does not meet the required specification, with actual costs (based on full compliance) amounting to £772,362.77 and a budget deficit of £406,363 in 2023. Discussions are ongoing regarding future budgets and the ownership of such budgets but opportunities to standardise provision across the Council are currently limited. There is an agreed Service Level Agreement process for cost recovery for any works carried out beyond the general amenity cutting standard.

6.14 **Plant and equipment**

HC is managing the contract for Grounds Maintenance equipment for the period 2025-2029. The current annual spend is limited to £585k, although a full replacement of equipment on a like-for-like basis would exceed £1.3 million. Equipment and vehicle numbers have been reduced by more than 20%, with further reductions under consideration, as there are still over 200 items ranging from strimmers to hedge saws and leaf blowers. The contract provides detailed breakdown processes that are free of charge; back-up equipment is available within 24 hours, and only chargeable repairs are billed. Breakdowns lasting more than 24 hours, unless a backup machine is provided, are eligible for cost recovery.

Feedback has highlighted issues related to fleet procurement and maintenance, specifically regarding downtime and the need for additional hires during repairs. Modifying the purchasing arrangement could offer alternative options for service continuity during breakdowns, and ongoing fleet utilisation analysis aims to improve the accuracy of downtime reporting.

A plant and equipment utilisation study is necessary to determine the actual operational time for any piece of equipment, plant, or transport. An acceptable level of utilisation should be established, likely at no less than 50%, to assess overall efficiency. The study may also indicate that vehicles used for transporting workforce to sites have a low usage rate; however, this outcome is expected and generally considered unavoidable.

7. Recommendations

7.1 **Service standards**

To reaffirm the 2019 service standards for all areas of service provision, including visit frequency, grass height, litter collection, cemetery maintenance, war memorial upkeep, floral displays, and park management.

To embed these service standards in a Corporate Asset management Policy for Amenity Services

To implement an asset management system for precise recordkeeping, job tracking, cost control, and resource monitoring.

7.2 **Grass and amenity area maintenance**

To maintain consistent mowing cycles throughout the area, it is recommended to implement a calendar-based schedule operating on a 9-day fortnightly rotation. An additional day allocated in a 10-day cycle as a buffer to accommodate weather or equipment failure and to facilitate supplementary tasks such as strimming on the 10th day.

Where feasible, planted areas should be removed or, alternatively, local groups may be invited to undertake planting initiatives.

To ensure that Existing plant and equipment contracts provisions should not interrupt mowing frequency

7.3 **Cemeteries**

To establish consistent standards and rules for both open and closed cemeteries, with input from customers.

7.4 **Play areas and equipment**

To maintain statutory inspections and remove equipment that is not usable, with current standards being applied to other comparable sites.

7.5 **Plant and Resources**

Conduct regular reviews of plant and machinery utilisation to ensure optimal productivity for each piece of equipment.

Assess the requirement for specialist equipment with a focus on adjusting operational constraints where feasible, rather than defaulting to alternative equipment.

Evaluate the appropriateness of short-term hire for equipment that is used infrequently, instead of maintaining permanent ownership.

7.6 **Service Level Agreements**

To remove SLAs with HC Internal clients and bringing maintenance of grassed areas under single client. This will reduce the bureaucracy in budget transfers and payments, as these activities add no value to the services. Where SLAs are still required to external clients, HC should negotiate a standard arrangement for consistency across each type of asset.

The shift in asset responsibility, consolidating all amenity-related services under a single budget holder, is intended to improve management of these areas. This change may not immediately result in uniform standards across all service areas, but it is expected to support development towards a standard acceptable to HC over a reasonable timeframe. Any existing differences in operations should be addressed within a period of up to five years, during which HC should aim to achieve the standard currently present in the managed asset. These adjustments could potentially impact the budget.

7.7 **Biodiversity**

To consider the consequential effects of any biodiversity project on the overall service standards and to consider how this will affect all aspects of the service e.g. collection of grass at the end of the season etc.

7.8 **Specialist activity sites including bowling greens and sports facilities**

To seek to maximise the number of local arrangements with clubs and voluntary groups to devolve maintenance of these areas to participants and residents.

7.9 **Tree management**

To accelerate the tree management policy to ensure HC does not face additional claims for lack of policy, to develop a Risk-Based approach to inspection, removal and enforcement for issues identified in initial tree inspection survey. Further to expedite the recruitment or upskilling of workforce to deliver the Policy

To assist the Roads Manager where issues are identified in roads inspection and to provide arboriculture advice where such encroachment or danger exists.

7.10 **Customer contact**

To minimise the reporting and response to complaints and requests through possible electronic transfer of activity etc.

7.11 **Financial management systems**

To consider a smarter method of recording time and costs to assist in providing a demonstration of value for money by the service.

7.12 **Working arrangements**

To consider implementing seasonal work hour arrangements to maximise daylight usage. The plan includes evaluating increased use of high output mowers and considering split week schedules for seasonal employees, resulting in six-day cutting rotations with a 39.5/34.5-hour distribution. Additionally, introducing alternative contracts for seasonal workers during the off season could help retain skills for use as needed. Any modifications to working hours arrangements will necessitate careful negotiation with Trade Unions, given their strong opposition to such changes.

To Increase the arrangements for multitasking where visits to remote sites are required.

7.13 **Integrated arrangements at remote sites**

To maximise the response to activity on remote sites with other HC sections to provide a one visit response wherever possible.

7.14 **Workforce Planning**

of operatives and support succession planning. This approach may have budgetary implications for staffing and might be assessed at the corporate level.

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