

**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 11 November 2025 at 3.00 p.m.**

Present:

Employer's Representatives:

Mr R Bremner	Mr G Mackenzie (remote)
Mr D Fraser	Mr P Oldham
Mr K Gowans	

Staff Side Representatives:

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

In attendance:

Mr A Gunn, Assistant Chief Executive, Corporate
Mrs K Lackie, Assistant Chief Executive, People
Mr M MacLeod, Assistant Chief Executive, Place
Ms R Fry (**RF**), Chief Officer, HR & Communications
Mr B Porter, Chief Officer, Corporate Finance
Ms E Barrie, Head of People, Corporate
Ms N MacLennan, Programme Manager, Corporate
Ms G Warburton, Joint Secretary, Teachers' Side
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 A Christie, Mr B Lobban of the Employer's Side and Mr R Boyle (UNITE), Ms L MacAskill (GMB) from the Staff Side.

2. Declarations of Interest/Transparency Statement

There were none.

3. Budget Update

A budget update was provided by the Chief Officer, Corporate Finance in terms of the 2025/26 budget and the planning for the next 3 years budgets to 2028/29. As at quarter 1 of 2025/26, the Council had forecast a £12.5m overspend which was required to be addressed and there was a focus on a range of budget recovery actions with a recovery plan for each area listed. Quarter 2 financial monitoring reports had been considered at the current round of Committees and measures to bring the budget back on target was moving in a positive direction.

Budget planning for the 3 years to 2028/29 was underway, with medium term financial plan reports being submitted to full Council. There was a rolling 3 year budget planning approach with continued review of budget assumptions, risks and uncertainties. The timeline for the UK and Scottish Government budgets were highlighted as was a budget forecast for 2026/27 to 2028/29. There would be continued budget engagement with trade unions.

In discussion, reference was made to the Children services budget recovery where the main focus was the overspend on looked after children. This budget could be influenced by monies the Scottish Government may wish to put into particular service areas. In terms of income received from the Government's waste levy, there had been a reduction in this funding to the Council last year, and how much would be allocated to the Council for the next financial year would be known soon. The consumer price index was used to calculate assumptions for pay awards in future years.

The Forum **NOTED** the budget update.

4. Future Operating Model Update

The Forum were provided with an update on the Future Operating Model which referred to the case for change which had led to the Council developing a progressive approach to how it delivers services with its key partners, whereby each local area would benefit from a network of services, as well as physical hubs where citizens and staff can connect. This approach was referred to as the Future Operation Model (FOM). It was explained:- what will be delivered: defining the FOM; how the FOM would be delivered; and next steps: rolling out the FOM.

In discussion, reference was made to co-locating services with key partners and it was advised that there was generally a move towards the Scottish single public sector estate as this was recognised as a sensible thing to do. There was a Highland Property Partnership Board with representatives from all public sector partners. This Board enabled much better engagement between public sector partners on co-locating services.

The Forum **NOTED** the update on the Future Operating Model.

5. Investors in People update

The Forum were updated on progress relating to Investors in People (IIP). Since the last update to the Forum, the Corporate Cluster was now the first Cluster to undergo IIP and feedback from this would be received soon. This would provide information on areas the Cluster was excelling in and what areas needed improvement. In particular, Legal & Corporate Governance had now received IIP accreditation which was a great accolade for that team. An action plan for this group was being developed and taken forward with staff in that group.

Planning for the rollout of IIP to other Clusters was ongoing. There had been extensive engagement on IIP with Services, trade unions and staff.

In discussion, it was queried by the Staff Side how it was being communicated to staff what IIP means, such as telling staff what they have done to get to this stage and what good work needed to be continued or improved. The response rate in the Corporate Cluster had been very high (83%) which was great news, but achieving such a high response was acknowledged as being more challenging in some of the other Clusters where staff did not have Council IT devices. In this respect, it was queried what progress was being made for all staff who were not office based to have a Council login so that they could access the Corporate systems. It was confirmed that the IIP survey would be available to staff that did not have Council IT devices. Managers would engage with teams and give staff the time, facilities and support to undertake the survey.

Feedback on outcomes and action plans would be shared with the Staff Side in due course. At staff Roadshows, feedback was being provided on the results of the IIP report on the outcomes from the Corporate Group 1, Legal & Governance survey. The importance of involving staff in this process was highlighted. Staff needed to be engaged in finding solutions to issues raised through the IIP process, so that improvements could be made and imbedded into the work and culture of the Council.

The Forum **NOTED:-**

- i. the update on Investors in People; and
- ii. an update would be provided on progress with all staff who were not office based to have a Council login so that they could access the Corporate systems.

**RF/
Business
Solutions**

6. Review of Disciplinary Appeal Process

A report on the review of the disciplinary appeal process was circulated. A number of people had been consulted as part of the review including Appeals Committee Members, Officers, trade unions to find out what was working well with the process and what areas could be improved. There were recommendations in the report, mainly around training for Committee Members and Managers who were investigating or presenting disciplinary appeal cases, and in relation to the composition of the Appeals Committee.

An undertaking was made to improve the gender balance on the Appeals Committee. Also, an opinion was expressed that this report should firstly have gone to the HR Sub Group which looked at HR policies and procedures.

The Forum **NOTED** the report on the review of the disciplinary appeal process.

7. **Disciplinary/Grievance/Redeployment Statistics/ill health & Capability cases**

Disciplinary/grievance/redeployment/ill health & capability case statistics for quarter 2 2025-26 were circulated. Efforts continued to be made to deal with these cases in a shorter timeframe. An undertaking was given to replace trade union representatives names with the name of the trade union in future statistics being reported to the Forum. **RF**

The Forum **NOTED** the disciplinary/grievance/redeployment/ill health & capability case statistics for quarter 2 2025-26.

8. **Minutes of Last Meeting**

There had been circulated the minutes of the last meeting of the Forum held on 19 August 2025, the terms of which were **APPROVED**.

9. **Matters Arising from Minutes**

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

- i. that a disciplinary case trend analysis between the Clusters be provided in future statistics to the Forum. Action Completed. Statistical information was circulated.

Commentary on the statistics was provided. It was difficult to benchmark against other organisations and sectors in what was an average level of disciplinary or grievances. However, a normal level of disciplinaries and grievances was - grievances: 1-2% of employees and disciplinaries: around 3% of employees. Highland Councils statistics were well below these levels. The number of grievances between the 3 Clusters in the Council were much the same, with there being slightly more disciplinary cases in the People Cluster, albeit the numbers were very low.

- ii. 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. Action completed.
- iii. Job Evaluation – there had been a request for additional guidance on job evaluation, so that it was clarified that when an employee asked for a job evaluation and a Manager did not respond within a certain timeframe, the employee would then have the right to raise this with the HR team. It was advised that the HR Sub Group will be asked to approve an update to Job Evaluation guidance making clear that managers should respond timeously and directing individuals to HR in the event that this does not happen.

10. 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 – 16 October 2025;
- ii. Education – 8 September 2025;
- iii. Health & Social Care – 15 October 2025
- iv. Place – 20 October 2025

11. Dates for Meetings 2026

The Forum **NOTED** the undernoted dates for its meetings in 2026:-

Thursday 26 February – 11.00 am
Wednesday 6 May – 10.30 am
Tuesday 18 August – 2.30 pm
Tuesday 10 November – 2.30 pm

The meeting concluded at 4.02 p.m.