

**The Highland Council
No.10 2025/2026**

Minutes of Meeting of the Highland Council held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Thursday, 30 October 2025 at 9.35 am and reconvened on Thursday 6 November 2025 at 4.00pm.

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

Meeting on Thursday 30 October 2025.

Present:

Mrs S Atkin	Mrs B Jarvie (Remote)
Mr M Baird	Ms L Johnston
Mr C Ballance	Mr R Jones
Mr A Baxter	Mr S Kennedy
Dr C Birt	Ms E Knox
Mr B Boyd	Ms L Kraft
Mr R Bremner	Mr B Lobban
Mr I Brown	Mr P Logue
Mr J Bruce	Ms M MacCallum
Mr M Cameron	Mr G MacKenzie
Mr S Cameron	Mrs I MacKenzie
Mrs I Campbell	Mr S Mackie
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair (Remote)	Mr A MacKintosh
Mr A Christie	Mr R MacKintosh
Mrs M Cockburn	Mrs A MacLean
Mr S Coghill (Remote)	Ms K MacLean
Mrs T Collier	Mr T MacLennan (Remote)
Mrs H Crawford (Remote)	Mr D Macpherson
Mr R Cross	Mr D McDonald
Ms L Dundas	Mrs J McEwan
Mr J Edmondson	Mr J McGillivray (Remote)
Mr J Finlayson	Mr D Millar
Mr D Fraser	Mr H Morrison (Remote)
Mr L Fraser	Ms L Niven (Remote)
Mr R Gale	Mr P Oldham
Ms C Gillies	Mrs M Paterson
Mr K Gowans	Mrs M Reid
Mr J Grafton	Mr M Reiss
Mr A Graham	Mrs T Robertson (Remote)
Mr M Green	Mr K Rosie (Remote)
Mr D Gregg	Mrs M Ross
Dr M Gregson	Mrs L Saggars
Mr R Gunn	Mr A Sinclair
Mrs J Hendry	Mr R Stewart
Ms M Hutchison	Ms K Willis
Mr A Jarvie (Remote)	

Meeting on 6 November 2025

Mrs S Atkin
Mr M Baird
Mr C Ballance
Mr A Baxter (Remote)
Mr B Boyd (Remote)
Mr R Bremner
Mr I Brown
Mr J Bruce
Mr M Cameron (Remote)
Mr S Cameron
Mrs I Campbell
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair (Remote)
Mr A Christie
Mrs M Cockburn (Remote)
Mr S Coghill (Remote)
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Mr J Grafton
Mr A Graham
Mr D Gregg (Remote)
Dr M Gregson
Mr R Gunn (Remote)
Mrs J Hendry
Ms M Hutchison (Remote)

Mr A Jarvie
Mrs B Jarvie (Remote)
Ms L Johnston
Mr R Jones
Mr S Kennedy
Ms E Knox
Ms L Kraft
Mr B Lobban
Ms M MacCallum
Mr G MacKenzie (Remote)
Mrs I MacKenzie
Mr S Mackie
Mr A MacKintosh
Mr R MacKintosh
Mrs A MacLean
Ms K MacLean (Remote)
Mr D Macpherson
Mr D McDonald
Mrs J McEwan (Remote)
Mr J McGillivray (Remote)
Mr D Millar (Remote)
Mr H Morrison (Remote)
Ms L Niven (Remote)
Mr P Oldham
Ms C Ramsay
Mrs M Reid
Mr M Reiss
Mrs T Robertson
Mr K Rosie (Remote)
Mrs L Saggars (Remote)
Mr A Sinclair
Mr R Stewart
Ms K Willis (Remote)

In Attendance:

Chief Executive
Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate
Assistant Chief Executive - People
Assistant Chief Executive - Place
Chief Officer - Legal and Corporate Governance
Chief Officer – Corporate Finance
Joint Democratic Services Managers

Mr B Lobban in the Chair

Apologies for absence, for 30 October 2025 were intimated on behalf of Mr W Mackay and Ms C Ramsay and, for 6 November 2025, on behalf of Dr C Birt, Mr M Green, Mr P Logue, Mr T MacLennan, Mrs M Paterson and Mrs M Ross.

Preliminaries

Prior to the commencement of the formal business, Mr A Graham paid tribute to former Councillors, Jimmy Thomson and Ann Glynne-Percy who had sadly passed away. The hard work and dedication of both councillors was recognised. In this regard, the condolences of the Council were conveyed to each of their families and friends.

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

The Council **NOTED** the following Transparency Statements:-

Item 3 – Mr A Christie, Mr D Gregg
Item 4 – Mr A Christie, Mr D Gregg
Item 5 – Mr A Christie, Mr J Edmondson, Mrs M Ross
Item 6 – Mr A Christie, Mr D Gregg
Item 7 – Mr K Gowans
Item 14.ii – Mr A Christie
Item 16 (Motion 3) – Mr A Christie, Mr D Gregg
Item 16 (Motion 5) – Mrs S Atkin

3. Medium Term Financial Plan Update Cunntas às Ùr mun Phlana Ionmhais Meadhan-ùine

There had been circulated Report No. HC/30/25 by the Chief Officer – Corporate Finance.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- a key benefit of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) was the ability to manage the Council's finances on a planned basis and spread recovery actions over the term of the Plan;
- mitigation and recovery plans were in place to reduce the Quarter 1, 2025/26 net forecast overspend of £12.6m by between £2.3m and £5.5m;
- a number of factors contributing to the increase in the forecasted budget gap had been outwith the Council's control or could not have been foreseen such as reduced Waste pEPR levy funding and pay award costs;
- the Council through its improved financial systems had full visibility, scrutiny and control of budgets at a core level than previously at this stage of the year and while there was still time to take corrective action based on informed decisions;
- in the next cycle of meetings Strategic Committees would review and scrutinise service budget recovery plans in detail and there was confidence an improved position would be reported in the next update to full Council in December 2025;
- it was queried as to why data for Quarter 2 could not have been provided in the report given the improved financial systems in place;
- there was concern that the Council's grant settlement would not be confirmed until well into January 2026 due the inconsistencies in the timing of the UK Government's budget;

- it was suggested a special meeting of Council be held in January 2026 to allow Members to discuss and review the budget, the Council's grant settlement, feedback from the budget consultation exercise and impact on the Highland Investment Plan. This would enable Members to make informed decisions based on up-to-date information;
- the above meeting should also consider the opportunities that existed to fund the Poverty and Equality Commission from April 2026 as opposed to April 2027;
- the essence of the work of the Poverty and Equalities Commission was to engage with communities and identify with partners the best way forward in terms of funding;
- meetings of the Strategic Committees, Corporate Resources Committee and full Council would be held prior to the budget meeting in March 2026 and therefore Members would have many opportunities for review without a special meeting being required;
- the HC/NHS Joint Monitoring Committee's approach to the projected £19.8m overspend on the Adult Social Care budget was outlined and ongoing consideration of an alternative to the current lead agency model would be reported to full Council at the appropriate time;
- the significant pressures Adult Social Care was placing on NHS Highland and the Council were acknowledged and further clarity was sought on what the additional funding provided by the Council had delivered in terms of transformation and savings, the detail of the budget recovery plan and potential future funding requirements;
- the process for developing a budget recovery plan for Children's Services was outlined as was the tracker for each placement type. This would be presented to the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee in November 2025;
- the recovery plans being put in place at this stage of the year were not sufficient to meet the challenges. The report highlighted overspends, rising pay pressures, unknown grants, and no provision for key national policies. This was not good news for Members and the communities they served and concern was expressed at the impact on taxpayers in Highland;
- it was questioned how the Administration proposed to engage with the public and those most likely to be impacted by any budget proposals over and above tried and tested methods;
- there was concern the Council had failed to engage with communities and businesses on changes to Corran Ferry fares, parents and teachers on the allocation of resources in respect of pupils with additional support needs, and third sector organisations, CABx, foodbanks and others on setting up the Poverty and Equalities Commission;
- a significant part of the overspend on the Economy and Infrastructure budget was due to repairs to the Corran Ferry and there had been regular meetings of the steering group; the Council was supporting communities with major investment in new ferry improvements, and the model of engagement going forward was to be discussed with Local Members;
- an assurance was sought that all options for a new Corran Ferry would be explored to deliver best value. Members were reminded that in purchasing a new ferry, the Council was subject to procurement rules and regulations;
- an assurance was sought, and provided, that all options for second homes and long-term empty properties were being discussed and would be included in the budget consultation;
- the impact on the budget due to the underfunding of national policies was highlighted and there was a need for representations to be made to both Governments on this issue;

- there was a lack of clarity from the Scottish Government on the costs to the Council of reducing class contact time in schools and this information needed to be provided at the earliest opportunity;
- there was concern at potential cuts in services due to the above underfunding and the need to reiterate the Council's policy of no compulsory redundancies;
- climate change had to be included in the MTFP as a risk given its impacts were being experienced with increasing frequency and intensity and with storm damage becoming an increasingly significant cost to the Council; and
- an assurance was sought, and provided, that considerations around the reinstatement of air services at Wick Airport would form part of the budget process going forward.

Following summing up, Mr R Bremner seconded by the Mr B Lobban, **MOVED** the recommendations as detailed in the report.

As an **AMENDMENT**, Mr A Christie, seconded by Mr D Gregg, moved to add a new recommendation vi to agree that a special meeting of Council be held in January 2026 to discuss and review the following:

- Any changes to the Budget gap of £36.7m as laid out at section 7.2.
- To review the grant settlement for the Highland Council following the publication of the Scottish Government Budget on 13 January 2026.
- To receive initial feedback from the Budget consultation exercises as detailed in sections 10.8 to 10.10.
- To receive interim recommendations or thoughts from the Poverty Commission to enable funding to be considered at the Budget Meeting of 6 March as opposed to allocating funding in February/March 2027.
- To consider any impacts to the Highland Investment Plan as a result of the Scottish Government Budget.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 36 votes, the **AMENDMENT** received 31 votes, and there was 1 abstention. The **MOTION** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion:-

Ms S Atkin, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Mrs I Campbell, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Mrs T Collier, Ms L Dundas, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Ms C Gillies, Mr K Gowans, Mr M Green, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Mr R Jones, Mr S Kennedy, Ms E Knox, Ms L Kraft, Mr B Lobban, Mr G MacKenzie, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mr K Rosie, Mrs M Ross.

For the Amendment:-

Mr M Baird, Mr C Ballance, Mr A Baxter, Mr J Bruce, Mr S Cameron, Mr A Christie, Mr S Coghill, Mrs H Crawford, Mr R Cross, Mr J Edmondson, Mr R Gale, Mr A Graham, Mr D Gregg, Dr M Gregson, Mr R Gunn, Mrs B Jarvie, Mr P Logue, Ms M MacCallum, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr S Mackie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mr R MacKintosh, Mr D Macpherson, Mr D McDonald, Mrs J McEwan, Mr M Reiss, Mr J McGillivray, Mrs T Robertson, Mrs L Saggars, Mr A Sinclair, Mr R Stewart.

Abstention:-

Ms K Willis.

Decision

The Council:-

- i. **NOTED** the update provided regarding the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) as set out in the report;
- ii. **NOTED** the updated financial gap forecast with a minimum estimated level of £36.7m over three financial years;
- iii. **NOTED** the range of risks, assumptions and uncertainties as related to the MTFP, and related actions and mitigations;
- iv. **AGREED** the timetable as set out in section 10 of the report; and
- v. **AGREED** that a further MTFP update report is considered by the Council at its meeting on 11 December 2025.

4. **Highland Community Planning Partnership 2024 – 2025 Annual Report** **Aithisg Bhliadhnaile 2024–2025 Com-pàirteachas Planadh Coimhearsnachd na Gàidhealtachd**

There had been circulated Report No. HC/31/25 by the Chief Executive.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the world had changed vastly since 2017 so it was a good time to review and plan for the future to be more reflective of current challenges;
- the work of Highland Property Partnerships would be crucial going forward;
- attention was drawn to the progress around models of childcare and the excellent work of the Suicide Prevention Plan;
- the biggest challenge faced in Highland was depopulation, with a decline in overall population and an increase in the population of older people. It was suggested that the Community Planning Partnership was not doing enough to tackle the problem of depopulation, particularly in the areas of transport, healthcare, housing and employment, although the work being done on childcare was commended;
- it was proposed that, in consideration of the risk depopulation posed to Highland, particularly in remote and rural communities, this issue be more fully addressed with clearer interventions identified by the Community Planning Partnership, in particular linking into the strategic framework of the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan on the areas of jobs, housing and transport; and this was accepted;
- attention was drawn to the Addressing Depopulation Action Plan which included the employment of two officers, further information was sought on their activities and the Chief Officer, Communities and Housing undertook to provide Cllr Reiss with this information;
- there was a huge amount of work being done to tackle depopulation, increase jobs and retain young people within the Highlands while making sure they had the ability to increase their skills without having to go away to Edinburgh or Glasgow;
- attention was drawn to the various ways in which the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan, supported young people, including support with careers advice, support and apprenticeships through Skills Development Scotland, Workforce Highland, Careers North; and activities delivered through schools to tackle social isolation and improve physical and mental health and wellbeing;

- praise was given to the Highland Whole Family Wellbeing Programme which had at least funded 51 projects for children and families;
- the importance of increasing the supply of housing of all types and tenures was emphasised and it was highlighted that housing was a key issue in all three areas of the HOIP, Place, People and Prosperity as well as being an important factor in addressing population decline and poverty;
- long periods living in temporary accommodation could have significant long term effects on children's education and wellbeing so the HOIP's specific target to reduce the number of families in temporary accommodation was vital and while progress was already being made through the work of the housing team, this would remain a challenge without a greater supply of housing;
- the need for housing in rural areas was highlighted, and it was explained that while it was more expensive to build houses in rural areas, in many communities a small number of houses would make a significant impact;
- it was queried whether there were being any additional resources committed to help achieve the targets set out in the HOIP;
- attention was drawn to the difficulties with health and social care access, digital inclusion and transport barriers faced by the older population, especially those in rural areas;
- it was queried, what evidence there was that partnership working was improving the lives of older residents, how the Community Planning Partnership was ensuring age friendly priorities, such as accessible transport, care integration and digital inclusion and, whether an Age Friendly Highlands could be made a cross-cutting theme in the Highland Opportunity Improvement Plan 2027-2037 with clear, measurable indicators on healthy aging and community participation;
- the need for an older people's policy and more intergenerational proposals, was expressed;
- the aging population should have been viewed as an asset and not a challenge;
- it was suggested that Age Friendly Communities and issues concerning older people should be included in Integrated Impact Assessments;
- the detrimental impact on peoples' health caused by the loss of the maternity hospital and lack of GPs in Caithness, was highlighted;
- although there was not a lack of available housing in Caithness, many of the available homes needed to be upgraded;
- a plan for the repopulation of Caithness and Sutherland was requested;
- it was queried, when the Health Inequalities Report would be provided;
- the report mentioned many projects that had been launched but more information about the outcomes of these projects, including figures and statistics, was needed and, assurance was sought that key performance indicators and outcomes would be included in future reports;
- thanks were extended to the Community Planning Partnership team in Badenoch and Strathspey for their hard work to encourage partnership working;
- the needs of each partnership area were being identified locally;
- the importance of the arts was emphasised both for young people and the older population;
- the life expectancy in Highland was longer than in the rest of Scotland but there was still a large difference in life expectancies between the richest and poorest people which emphasised the importance of working to reduce poverty;

- although the provision of foodbanks and free sanitary products was often viewed as a positive, the fact that they were needed was a negative as this was due to poverty. Many food banks were receiving fewer donations as people were less able to afford to donate and attention was drawn to the two community fridges in Dingwall and Seaforth ward that were originally set up to tackle food waste and were now being used to tackle food insecurity;
- hope was expressed that provision would be made in the upcoming budget to prepare for the recommendations of the Poverty Commission;
- concern was expressed about the Sutherland Community Planning Partnership, which after being very successful for many years was now in decline; and about the continued funding of the Kyle of Sutherland development trust whose support had been vital in allowing Members to lead work on housing and poverty in the area;
- many Community Planning Partnership meetings had declining attendance and low engagement from Community Councils, with many partners not having the availability to attend meetings due to staffing and resource pressures;
- the Council would need to accept that there would be a financial loss associated with the provision of childcare;
- the importance of reengaging with communities and Community Councils was emphasised;
- on the point being raised, it was explained that there was great excitement within industries for the work of Workforce North and that they were engaging with other local authorities to work of the development and attraction of jobs in a wider area;
- Community Planning Partnerships were a good way for bringing together statutory services and third sector organisations and provided valuable opportunities for networking;
- the importance of third sector organisations and the need to work closely with them within Community Planning Partnerships, was emphasised;
- the Children and Young People's Participation Strategy and the work done within the Council on the Promise to make sure that cared for young people were kept as close as possible to their communities and support networks, were commended;
- it was requested that the Employment Delivery Plan included links to the Armed Forces Covenant;
- attention was drawn to the lack of childcare provision outside of school hours in Ardesier, Croy and Smithton;
- in response to a question, it was confirmed that a total of 51 projects had been funded and it was then queried where the outcomes for these projects would be reported and scrutinised;
- clarification was sought on the third Place outcome and it was suggested that an additional outcome be added to future reports to look at the health, quality of life and support requirements of the older population, as age itself was less important than health, fitness and mobility in older people;
- thanks were extended to Sandra Brown of the Whole Family Wellbeing team, the Green Health Partnership for running a very successful event at the Botanic Gardens and the Creating Hope in the Highlands suicide prevention team;
- the difficulty of addressing poverty and inequality with limited money and resources was emphasised;
- disappointment was expressed by that lack of mention of the Net Zero Strategy in the report;

- the importance of establishing a corporate identity for Community Planning Partnerships was highlighted, as members of the public were aware of the activities of the partner organisations but often had little knowledge of the partnerships themselves;
- attention was drawn to the issue of volunteer fatigue, with many volunteers feeling over stretched and losing hope, it was further emphasised that many volunteers were older people which could further add to these challenges;
- the importance of reports being comprehensible to the public was emphasised;
- in response to a suggestion that funding for Community Councils be increased, the Leader of the Council explained that money needed to be channelled in various directions to make things work and encouraged all Members to engage in the budget-setting process;
- it was suggested that a report or a Members' briefing be provided on the work being done to tackle depopulation by organisations such as the Convention of the Highlands and Islands; and
- in response to a question, it was confirmed that Community Planning Partnerships had complete autonomy at local level within the framework of the HOIP.

Decision

The Council:-

- NOTED** the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan Annual Update for 2024-2025 which could be found at Appendix 1 of the report;
- AGREED**, in consideration of the risk depopulation posed to Highland, particularly remote and rural communities, to request that this issue be more fully addressed with clearer interventions identified by the Community Planning Partnership, in particular linking into the strategic framework of the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan on the areas of jobs, housing and transport; and
- AGREED** that a briefing be arranged, as part of Members' training and development sessions, on the work being undertaken by agencies to address depopulation.

5. Highland Investment Plan – Progress Update Plana Tasgaidh na Gàidhealtachd - Cunntas Adhartais

There had been circulated Report No. HC/32/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place. The Chief Officer – Property and Assets gave a presentation in amplification of the report.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- thanks were expressed to officers for the excellent report and presentation, and the significant amount of work taking place;
- the Highland Investment Plan (HIP) and funding mechanism had been agreed by the Council in May 2024, and the progress to date as detailed in the report was welcomed;
- it was good to see the combined impact of the core Capital Programme and the HIP;

- there was a lot going on in several areas throughout Highland, and the Council Leader was keen to see progress being reported in respect of the current phase of the HIP as well as preparation for future phases. He was also keen that Local Members were briefed regularly about projects in their areas and, as indicated by officers, the team was committed to that;
- in relation to Phase 1 schools, there was concern in communities regarding potential slippage, and reassurance was sought that the delivery dates in the report to the Council on 27 March 2025 were still on track. With regard to Beauly Primary School in particular, the delivery date that had been specified was January to March 2028 but a site had yet to be agreed, and it was hoped the preferred location would be confirmed at the forthcoming stakeholder meeting. It was added that people in Beauly simply wanted a safe, secure, warm school, but Beauly Primary School was now referred to in the report as a new build Community Point of Delivery (POD) and discussion was required in that regard. In response, it was explained that officers, in conjunction with the Council's delivery partner, Hub North Scotland, were working hard to achieve the dates previously set out, and Members would be updated as design teams were fully engaged and accommodation schedules were pulled together, enabling a more definitive timeline to be provided;
- in relation to the Highland Housing Challenge, the majority of the 250 sites identified were in Inverness or the Inner Moray Firth, and it was proposed that a report be submitted to the next Council meeting on schools in that area, including their capacity, condition and future role pressures. It was also proposed that the problem of developers not having the appetite to build houses in rural areas and small urban areas and towns such as Fort William needed to be addressed. If the Council was serious about tackling depopulation in such areas it was necessary to come up with better ways of encouraging developers to build housing, and a report setting out innovative solutions to be presented to the Special Council meeting on 6 March 2026 should be forthcoming. Other Members added their support, commenting that it was necessary to disperse development rather than allowing it to be driven by developer preference, resulting in disproportionate growth in Inverness and leaving other areas deprived and depopulated;
- there was sometimes disbelief in communities that projects would come to fruition, and it was necessary to consider how to communicate to the communities where planned developments had not yet started that they would happen – for example, by sharing what was happening in areas that were further ahead, such as Nairn and Tain;
- the proposed investment in sports facilities was welcomed, and it was suggested it was next necessary to look at investing in the arts and culture. Other Members added their support for investment in the arts, particularly in more remote and rural areas so people did not have to travel to Eden Court;
- in relation to the Thurso workstream, thanks were expressed for the engagement that had taken place with the groups detailed in the report. The next stage was to bring the public along and it was important to get the message across that the POD was going to happen as there was disappointment in the community that the anticipated NHS health hubs had been paused for two years by the Scottish Government. It was added that Thurso Community Council had now been reestablished, and it was expected there would be a lot of questions for officers at the next meeting;

- the progress being made in respect of the Broadford Primary and Dunvegan Primary projects was welcomed, as was the strategic approach being taken to the two projects which allowed for exploring opportunities for cost savings in terms of economies of scale;
- there was a need for new and upgraded sports facilities throughout Highland, and it was necessary to review the Community, Sports and Leisure Facility Strategy as soon as possible. This needed to be aligned with the School Estate Strategy that was being developed, and it would be helpful to understand the timescales for these strategies;
- the proposed allocation of funding to enable Tain Royal Academy Community Complex (TRACC) to be retained for up to five years was welcomed. The results of the community consultation in that regard had to be honoured, and Councillors Ross and Dundas were commended for the reflective and proactive way they had worked with the community to get to the current stage. Local Members added that TRACC had been a cornerstone of the community for over 50 years and could not be allowed to close when the new campus opened without the opportunity of putting a new sports facility in place. Such facilities helped combat obesity, heart disease and more and, at a time when NHS waiting lists were challenging and the mental health crisis was deepening, they were preventative tools. Beyond physical health, the social impacts were profound. Young people needed a safe and structured environment and TRACC provided that, keeping them away from anti-social behaviour and engaged in something positive. It taught discipline, teamwork, resilience and built confidence, and it was also inclusive, welcoming everyone from toddlers, children, young adults, pensioners, athletes and those with disabilities. It was a place where people felt they belonged, which was priceless at a time of rising loneliness and isolation. Thanks were expressed to officers for their support and willingness to listen and provide information to enable the current position to be reached;
- the proposed Construction Skills Academy and the stakeholder involvement in that regard were welcomed. £100bn of investment was expected across the Highlands and Islands, particularly in renewable infrastructure, and the Skills Academy was critical to addressing the workforce challenge to take advantage of what was a once in a generation opportunity. It would deliver hands-on training, apprenticeships and career pathways to equip local people with the skills needed for the future. However, other Members questioned how the requirement for an estimated 16,250 additional people would be met given only approximately 3000 people were currently unemployed in Highland. In addition, concern was expressed that new private sector jobs would draw staff away from the public sector, thereby impacting the delivery of vital public services. Furthermore, every person that arrived in Highland cost the Council money as it did not get suitable recompense from the UK Government;
- the current St Clement's School building had 10 rooms whereas the proposed new building had eight rooms, and there was concern amongst stakeholders that the new school was not going to be big enough and that rooms intended for other purposes would have to be used as classrooms. It was essential to ensure that there was sufficient space in the new school building and that stakeholders were kept fully updated;

- the proposed Centre for Excellence for Disability Sport at the Dingwall Community POD together with an upgrade of Dingwall Leisure Centre would make a huge difference for the people of Dingwall and the surrounding area. However, it was important to remember that other communities, such as Conon Bridge, Maryburgh and Muir of Ord, had sports facilities they were seeking to upgrade, and others, like Tore, had none;
- in relation to the proposed Community Benefits Plans for each project, information was sought, and provided, as to what the criteria would be and what mechanisms were in place for including what communities wanted. It was added that if the Council did not get this right, communities would be speaking directly to developers and vice versa;
- it was necessary to encourage the redevelopment of brownfield sites for housing;
- disappointment was expressed regarding the negative narrative that there was uncertainty about projects given there could be a change of Scottish Government, with different priorities, in 2026, or a new Highland Council Administration in 2027. The HIP presented solutions to problems that had been wrestled with for a number of years, and Members were encouraged to get behind it and engage in a positive and innovative manner;
- dissatisfaction was expressed regarding the lack of investment in East Sutherland in comparison with other areas such as Tain, Invergordon and Inverness. Particular reference was made to the poor condition of Brora Community Centre, Helmsdale Harbour and the PE facilities at Dornoch Academy, as well as the risk to seafront properties in Golspie due to coastal erosion, and issues with childcare provision in Brora;
- the Climate Change Impact Assessment was a core component of the Integrated Impact Assessment tool for all Council projects and activities and played a critical role in ensuring the Council met its statutory obligations in relation to climate change. It was queried whether Climate Change Impact Assessments had been undertaken for all HIP projects; whether the Climate Change and Energy Team (CCET) were fully involved in the design and procurement phase of each project; whether whole life carbon costs were being considered at the initial project design stage or were projects still focused on best value at the procurement invoice stage; and, in relation to TRACC and the proposed new LPG boilers, whether the CCET had been consulted regarding sustainable, low carbon alternatives. In the long term, the Council would reap benefits and cost savings when Net Zero, sustainability and circularity were embedded in every project, and involving the CCET in the design and procurement phases would ensure that was the case and avoid issues arising at a later stage that would lead to increased costs. It was added that the Council's Net Zero Strategy set out a clear commitment to embed climate change considerations into all aspects of decision-making, and it was questioned whether that was happening. In response, it was confirmed that the CCET was and would continue to be engaged with the design proposals, and that buildings were being designed to the Passivhaus standard in respect of energy efficiency. A model of whole life costing was already in place for Learning Estate Investment Programme projects and that would be applied to HIP projects. There were also technical standards to be met, and Members were assured that the team was well versed on what needed to be done to deliver low carbon buildings for the future. The Council Leader added that he was happy to meet with the Chair of the Climate Change Committee to discuss any improvements that could be made in terms of involving the CCET in the design phase of HIP projects;

- Fortrose Academy Associated School Group (ASG) had little in the way of sport and leisure facilities, and reassurance was sought that the proposed new synthetic sports pitch at Fortrose Academy would not be impacted by the opportunities that had arisen to provide synthetic pitches elsewhere;
- the Council was a member of KIMO, which had campaigned against microplastic runoff from artificial grass, and reassurance was sought that all proposed synthetic pitches would be designed in accordance with KIMO's guidelines for design and procurement specialists. In addition, information was sought, and provided, regarding public access to the new pitches, the importance of which was emphasised, and it was requested that research be carried out to ensure the pitches were suitable for all sports, as many sports could not be played on 5G pitches. It was explained that discussions had taken place with the Scottish Football Association regarding potential alternatives to traditional synthetic pitches that were currently being trialled in Scotland, and officers undertook to keep Members apprised in that regard;
- with reference to the Social Values Charter for Renewables Investment and SSEN's proposal to build worker camps which could then be demolished and handed over to the Council as fully serviced vacant sites for housing, it was queried whether the Council had asked SSEN to build accommodation which could be handed over as housing which only required modification and improvement. In response, it was explained that a report to the next meeting of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee would provide detail on the types of housing delivery that would be provided by SSEN, which included not only worker camps but new build and refurbishment of existing stock;
- the proposed funding allocation in respect of Queens Park running track was welcomed, as was the proposal to upgrade the Aquadome and Leisure Centre. In relation to Queens Park in particular, Inverness Harriers was likely to lose its registration to host regional events if the track was not resurfaced. The club had recently celebrated its first Olympian, Megan Keith, who had also been selected to represent Team Scotland at the Commonwealth Games, and losing this registration would have a negative impact on runners throughout Highland. Other Members added their support for the resurfacing of the running track, emphasising the need for urgency;
- ensuring people in Highland communities lived well and independently for longer was fundamental to the Council's ambitions, and support was expressed for any improvements to sport and leisure facilities in Highland. However, it was necessary to make informed decisions based on the best information available. In 2019, the City of Inverness Area Committee had agreed a proposal to use developer contributions towards an all-weather pitch at Inverness Campus. It had also been agreed to progress a feasibility study on a sports facility in east Inverness that would meet the needs of a fast-growing population from the campus to the new town at Tornagrain. The Community, Sports and Leisure Facility Strategy that had been reported to the Education Committee in 2023 had stated that the ASG proposals would not be a suitable strategy for the city of Inverness. A strategy for sport in the city had not progressed since then and was desperately needed, but a Highland-wide strategy that took into account the needs of all communities and areas was even better. It was necessary to understand what sports had relevant facilities and support and where there were gaps. Football, shinty and rugby, for example, appeared to be well supported, but there were no dedicated training facilities for basketball and gymnastics, both of which were currently showing great success in Highland. There were many other sports that would thrive with additional support and recognition, and the proposed Centre of Excellence for

Disability Sport was a great example of what could be achieved. The proposed review of the Community, Sports and Leisure Facility Strategy was therefore welcomed, and it was hoped this could consider all sports and facilities, including both public and private, professional and amateur clubs, and all offerings of community fun and fitness in village halls and community spaces;

- Members praised the work taking place in respect of Inverness High School;
- the inclusion of the Lochaber Care project was welcomed, and a request was made that recommendation vii, regarding the proposed preparation of a masterplan for the Blar Mhor site in Fort William, be amended to include the immediate establishment of, and ongoing consultation with, a community liaison group, and the exploration of a community development model for care as part of the considerations. In response, it was explained that the proposed masterplan related solely to physical infrastructure planning. The future model of care was being dealt with separately, and Members were assured that public engagement and consultation would be a key part of the process;
- it was queried whether there was flexibility within the HIP to incorporate upgrades to the B9006 road, particularly at narrow pinch points. The road was used as a secondary route to Inverness from the east, and there had been several accidents on the A96 in recent months that had heavily impacted it. It was extremely difficult for two articulated lorries to pass each other in places, and this was going to cause more problems in the future. In response, it was explained that the established way of dealing with such projects was through the allocation of roads capital funding to Area Committees, and it was suggested it be raised prior to the next City of Inverness Area Committee item on the Roads Capital Programme so it could be planned into the budget;
- many people with children in unsuitable school buildings were not concerned with matters such as Net Zero and simply wanted new schools to be built as quickly as possible. The need to work at pace and pull back any slippage was emphasised, particularly given the level of construction inflation, and it would be helpful for the Council to reaffirm its commitment to the agreed timescale for delivery;
- disappointment was expressed that the report did not include an update on the Highland Football Academy, which needed investment to sustain and upgrade it. Although the Football Academy was based in Dingwall and Inverness, it was for the whole of Highland and was well used and loved. An update was requested in advance of a meeting on 25 November 2025, which officers were invited to attend. Other Members added that some families had to travel considerable distances to attend the Football Academy, and there was a need for football facilities in other parts of Highland such as Caithness;
- attention was drawn to the Local Housing Strategy (LHS) vision for Highland as detailed in section 13.4 of the report, and proposals were sought on how it was intended to provide housing in the more remote and rural areas in north and west Highland such as Bettyhill, Tongue, Durness, Scourie and Assynt. It was recognised that building houses was more costly in such areas, but it was vital. Other Members queried whether the reference in the LHS vision to a “quality home” related only to new builds or would existing houses be upgraded;
- there was a need for a running track in Wick as many runners in the area had to run on unlit single-track roads;
- in responding to the points raised regarding housing, the Chair of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee highlighted that, at the next meeting of the Committee, there would be a report on Masterplan Consent Areas, some of which would not be in Inverness. In terms of rural housing, Albyn Housing Association had agreed to build many hundreds of homes in rural areas, and

there were energy efficient designs for new homes so heating would be more affordable. The Council was also looking to upgrade its housing stock in rural areas and, in terms of planning, was looking at rural exception sites, whereby developments that might not normally get planning permission could be looked upon sympathetically;

- the proposed investment in a new floodlit synthetic playing field at Inverness Campus was welcomed, as was the opportunity to provide a new synthetic pitch at Invergordon Academy. In relation to the latter, an assurance was sought that planning consent would be requested this year so preparations were in place to secure external funding for next year;
- in relation to the Alness and Invergordon workstream, it was suggested that Local Members had not been sufficiently consulted to move to the detailed work and engagement stage, and it was requested that be addressed as a matter of urgency. In addition, clarification was sought, and provided, as to when it was anticipated community engagement would commence;
- reference was made to a situation that had arisen in the Cromarty Firth ward due to a lack of communication and timely engagement which had resulted in undue pressure being put on Local Members. Similarly, it was commented that Lochaber Members had been unaware of the proposed masterplan for the Blar Mhor site prior to publication of the papers for today's meeting, and it was requested that an effort be made to proactively engage with communities and Members at an early stage going forward, including cross-ward briefings where necessary. However, the volume of engagement required due to the number of projects was acknowledged;
- getting both the UK and Scottish Governments and partners to unlock many of the financial barriers to building new homes in rural areas would make a significant difference, and it was queried what had been done to progress the call, at the previous meeting of the Council, for a rural housing deal;
- appreciation was expressed regarding the delivery of the new Nairn Academy building which was scheduled to open in August 2028, and Nairn Members looked forward to contributing to the proposed review of community, sports and leisure facilities; and
- leisure facilities had not had the profile they needed at Council and Committee level due to day-to-day management being undertaken by High Life Highland. In relation to the Aquadome in particular, the vortex flume, which was an important part of the facility, had been closed since August 2023, and it was hoped that would be addressed in the near future.

During summing up, the Council Leader reiterated the importance of ensuring Local Members and communities were well-informed and engaged, and he encouraged Members to notify senior Members and officers of any concerns in that regard going forward. In terms of the proposed amendment, it was important not to task Full Council with the work of strategic committees. Different officers were dealing with different aspects of the HIP, and the points the amendment focused on could be incorporated in the work of the appropriate committee. The Highland Housing Challenge was considering how to overcome the challenges of the cost of house building and development in rural areas, and the matter had been raised at COSLA.

Thereafter, Mr R Bremner, seconded by Mr B Lobban, **MOVED** the recommendations as detailed in the report.

As an **AMENDMENT**, Mr A Christie, seconded by Mr A Baxter, moved additional recommendations viii and ix as follows:-

- viii. recognising that the call for development sites to address the Housing Challenge has identified 250 sites of which the vast majority are in Inverness and the inner Moray Firth, that a report on all Inverness and Inner Moray Firth schools including their capacity, condition and future role pressures be presented to the next Council Meeting; and
- ix. that to address the difficulty to encourage house building outside the inner Moray Firth and in more remote and rural areas that a report be prepared that shows innovative solutions to address that issue to be considered as part of the Special Council Meeting Budget reports of 6th March 2026.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 39 votes, and the **AMENDMENT** received 30 votes, with no abstentions. The **MOTION** was therefore carried, the votes having been cast as follows:-

Motion:

Ms S Atkin, Mr C Ballance, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Mrs I Campbell, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Mrs T Collier, Ms L Dundas, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Ms C Gillies, Mr K Gowans, Mr M Green, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Mr R Jones, Mr S Kennedy, Ms E Knox, Ms L Kraft, Mr B Lobban, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mr K Rosie, Mrs M Ross, Ms K Willis.

Amendment:

Mr M Baird, Mr A Baxter, Mr J Bruce, Mr S Cameron, Mr A Christie, Mr S Coghill, Mrs H Crawford, Mr R Cross, Mr J Edmondson, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Mr D Gregg, Dr M Gregson, Mr R Gunn, Mr P Logue, Ms M MacCallum, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr S Mackie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mrs A MacLean, Mr D Macpherson, Mr D McDonald, Ms J McEwan, Mr J McGillivray, Mr M Reiss, Mrs T Robertson, Mrs L Sagers, Mr A Sinclair, Mr R Stewart.

Decision

The Council :-

- i. **APPROVED** the continuing work on progressing Phase 1 of the Highland Investment Programme (HIP), the procurement and delivery of the major projects, conducting place-based reviews and developing masterplans, all as outlined in sections 6 to 8 of the report;
- ii. **AGREED** that capital funding totalling £2.6M was allocated to Community, Sports, and Leisure projects and developments as set out in paragraphs 9.2 to 9.7 of the report;
- iii. **AGREED** that capital funding of £1.2M was allocated to enable the Tain Royal Academy Community Complex (TRACC) to be retained as a separate, standalone building for a period of up to 5 years once the new Tain Campus building was operational as set out in Section 10 of the report;
- iv. **APPROVED** the work to date in developing a Community Benefits Plan as set out in Section 11 of the report;
- v. **APPROVED** the work to date in considering the potential development of a Construction Skills Academy as set out in Section 12 of the report;
- vi. **APPROVED** the work to date in progressing various strategic initiatives related to the Highland Housing Challenge as set out in Section 13 of the report; and

- vii. **AGREED** that, to support the delivery of the Lochaber Care project, a masterplan be prepared for the Blar Mhor site in Fort William to identify available development land and infrastructure constraints as set out in Section 14 of the report.

**6. Developing a Future Operating Model for the Highland Council
A' Leasachadh Modail Obrachaidh do Chomhairle na Gàidhealtachd airson an Ama ri Teachd**

There had been circulated Report No. HC/33/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate.

There was commentary on the report by the Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate and referred to the case for change which had led to the Council developing a progressive approach to how it delivered 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 could connect. This approach was referred to as the Future Operation Model (FOM). It was explained what would be delivered: defining the FOM; how the FOM would be delivered; and next steps: rolling out the FOM. It was highlighted that public consultation was influencing service delivery; there was a clear vision and drive for improvement; and that the Council was at the forefront of innovation and transformation.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- reference was made for the need to change the way the Council delivered its services, as the demands on the public sector were increasing. There was a need for better use of technology to enable the public to interact with Council services. There had been extensive research and engagement to develop a progressive approach to delivery of service and the FOM would be taken forward through a range of pilot projects. The FOM would enable more joined up services, more support for charities and other bodies to access the Council's facilities or deliver local services. There would be more jobs devolved across the Highlands, which would help more people to stay and work in remote and rural communities. The FOM was at the heart of the type of Council, this Council aspired to become and communities that it wanted to prosper;
- Merkinch area of Inverness was 8th in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, one of the most deprived areas in Scotland, with worst access to services, least jobs, lowest incomes, most crime, least access to Education and worst Housing. It was essential that the Council invested in this area and it was a priority for the Inverness Community Partnership. It was queried how much money would be invested in this area and how would the Community Partnership be involved in planning this investment. There was also rural deprivation and there were studies that could be looked at to target these areas and measure the extent of deprivation better;
- this report was a first step in honouring commitments to make sure all communities benefit from the Highland investment plan and the FOM approach to make Council facilities come alive for the benefit of communities. There was also a need to help staff who travelled large distances benefit from Council facilities more, such as increasing their access to digital technology and welfare facilities, which would bring them closer to the Council and help connect the Council with its staff and communities;

- there was a need for various mediums for people to engage with the Council. For older people their preference was often to do this by telephone or face to face contact and this should be done in an acceptable timeframe. Young people were more likely to use services by e-mail or webchat. There was a need to change the culture of staff, communities and residents for this FOM to work;
- in relation to the aspiration to improve town centre vacancy rates, it was unlikely that this would be achieved quickly, for example, in Inverness and Fort William. There was a need to look at different uses for some of these vacant premises;
- using Schools as a place where the public could access services in communities should be considered and there would be a need for upskilling of staff to be able to multitask to provide services that people wanted;
- in relation to a review of policies for booking arrangements for facilities, complaints had been received about young children climbing the fence to access the all-weather pitch in Merkinch. The pitch was available to everyone in the community, via a booking system operated by High Life Highland. However, there had been problems with this system and therefore people had been unable to access the pitch. It was hoped these problems could be resolved, saving money in the long term;
- it was highlighted the concept of more devolution to communities in the way Council services were delivered, opportunities for local people to be more involved in certain decision making and services being more responsive to the needs of local people was very positive;
- there was a need to ensure that where efficiencies could be made through the FOM, the social and societal costs of these were understood, and that efficiencies were not to the detriment of people the Council were providing services for. The need for integrated working between different teams, such as Amenities and Roads teams and to look at prioritising work was highlighted and
- outsourcing some Council services could save the Council money. Also, there was a concern that more use of digital technology in the provision of services would leave behind some of the older population which was projected to increase.

Decision

The Council:-

- NOTED** the work and progress undertaken to date;
- AGREED** the definition, vision and design principles for the Future Operating Model (FOM) as detailed in section 7 of the report;
- APPROVED** the FOM Assessment Framework for assessing service delivery and service change with alignment with the FOM as detailed in section 7 and Appendix 4 of the report;
- NOTED** the range of related policies as detailed at Section 8 of the report designed and updated since 2024 to support the delivery of FOM;
- NOTED** the appointment of a Programme Manager and that three dedicated teams would be created and located across Highland supported by the funding (£0.500m) approved by Members on 6 March 2025;
- AGREED** the initial series of sites and projects for FOM as detailed at Section 8 of the report;
- APPROVED** further discussions to take place with Ward Members to inform the rollout of FOM across all areas; and

- viii. **NOTED** the initial performance metrics as detailed at Section 9 of the report to support project evaluation, governance and scrutiny and that these would continue to be reviewed as informed by the ongoing engagement and delivery of FOM.

7. Visitor Levy Update Report Aithisg Ùrachaidh mu Chis Luchd-tadhail

There had been circulated Joint Report No. HC/34/25 by the Assistant Chief Executives – Place and Corporate.

The Visitor Levy had been under discussion since 2018, with legislation passed in 2024. Members were advised that the scheme aimed to address longstanding underinvestment in tourism infrastructure and provide a sustainable funding mechanism. An independent economic impact assessment was nearing completion and would be shared with Members. Legislative changes were expected to be considered in future, including the possibility of introducing a flat rate option. A full paper was to be submitted to the December Council meeting to support informed decision-making.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- concern was expressed that the Administration had already formed a view on the matter, despite the Council having previously agreed to await further information before making any decision. Reference was made to the Minister's letter of 18 September 2025, which confirmed that the Scottish Government was open to legislative change. Members argued that the Council should pause until such changes were confirmed, to ensure that any future scheme could take full advantage of potential new flexibilities. Disappointment was expressed that the Council appeared to be prioritising revenue generation over sector engagement;
- over 1,200 Highland businesses had expressed opposition to the current percentage-based model, while remaining open to the principle of a levy. Members emphasised the importance of securing broad industry support and ensuring that any future scheme reflected the specific circumstances of the Highland area. Concerns were raised about the absence of a clear reinvestment framework and the need for transparency in how any revenue generated would be used to support tourism infrastructure and local communities;
- an amendment was proposed by seeking to delay any decision on the Visitor Levy until the Scottish Government's position on legislative changes had been clarified. Members expressed concern that the current legislation was not suited to the Highland context. Specific reference was made to the administrative burden placed on small accommodation providers, with some reporting that the proposed scheme could threaten the viability of businesses. The need for a simpler flat rate model was highlighted, along with calls for greater engagement with the tourism sector to ensure any future scheme was workable and widely supported. Members questioned why the proposed legislative amendment could not be made via statutory instrument within the current parliamentary term, given its simplicity. It was suggested that the Council should actively engage with the Scottish Government to explore this option;

- concerns were raised regarding the impact on residents travelling within the Highlands, particularly for hospital appointments or essential shopping and the need to exempt local residents from any levy. Members stressed that residents should not be treated as tourists when moving within their own region; and
- concerns were expressed about the suitability of the legislation for rural areas. The current framework appeared overly complex and not well aligned with the needs of Highland communities. A flat rate model was considered more practical and manageable for local businesses. Reference was made to examples from Liverpool and Manchester, where visitor levies had been successfully introduced through industry led approaches. Members called for a similar model in Highland, co-designed with the tourism sector to ensure broad support and effective implementation.

At this point, Mr A Christie, seconded by Mr A Baxter, **MOVED** that Standing Order 34 (the six-month rule) be suspended to allow debate on the amendment proposing that no decision be taken on the Visitor Levy until legislative clarity had been confirmed.

As an **AMENDMENT**, the Leader of the Council, seconded by the Convener, **MOVED** that Standing Orders should not be suspended, on the basis that the Council had already agreed on 18 September 2025 to receive a further report in December 2025 before making any decision.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 34 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 33 votes, with 2 abstentions. In accordance with Standing Order 36, a two-thirds majority of Members present and voting was required to suspend Standing Order 34. As this threshold had not been met, the **MOTION** was **NOT CARRIED**, and Standing Orders remained in effect.

The votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion:

Mr M Baird, Mr A Baxter, Mr J Bruce, Mr S Cameron, Mrs I Campbell, Mr A Christie, Mr S Coghill, Mrs H Crawford, Mr R Cross, Ms L Dundas, Mr J Edmondson, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Mr D Gregg, Dr M Gregson, Mr R Gunn, Mr A Jarvie, Mrs B Jarvie, Mr P Logue, Ms M MacCallum, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mrs A MacLean, Mr D Macpherson, Mr D McDonald, Ms J McEwan, Mr J McGillivray, Mr M Reiss, Mrs T Robertson, Mrs M Ross, Mrs L Saggars, Mr A Sinclair, Mr R Stewart.

For the Amendment:

Ms S Atkin, Mr C Ballance, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Mrs M Cockburn, Mrs T Collier, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Ms C Gillies, Mr K Gowans, Mr M Green, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Ms E Knox, Ms L Kraft, Mr B Lobban, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mr K Rosie, Ms K Willis.

Abstentions:

Mr R Jones, Mr S Kennedy.

Following the outcome of the vote, the Convener confirmed that the matter would be considered further at the next Council meeting in December 2025 and proceeded to the next item of business.

Decision

The Council **NOTED** the report as agreed by Council on 18 September 2025 and **AGREED** that a further report be submitted to the Council in December 2025, setting out the findings from the economic impact assessment and consultation analysis, including recommendations on the way forward for a Visitor Levy in the Highland area.

8. Review of the Scheme of Delegation Cunntas às Ùr mun Sgeama Thiomnaidh

There had been circulated Report No. HC/35/25 by the Chief Officer – Legal and Corporate Governance.

Decision

The Council **AGREED** the changes to the Scheme of Delegation as detailed in Appendix 1 of the report.

9. Annual Review of Standing Orders Relating to the Conduct of Meetings Ath-sgrùdadh air Òrdughan Seasmhach a' Buntainn ri Stiùireadh Choinneamhan

There had been circulated Report No. HC/36/25 by the Chief Officer – Legal and Corporate Governance.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- clarification was sought on the provision for substitutes at Planning Applications Committee (PAC) meetings. It was highlighted that the current wording could imply that a substitute would attend the entire next meeting, whereas the intention was that substitution should only apply to the relevant item that had been carried forward from the previous meeting and the Standing Order should be amended accordingly to reflect this. It was also clarified by the Chief Officer – Legal and Corporate Governance that the existing quorum for PACs would continue to be applied to planning applications that were currently in the process of being considered;
- it was confirmed that the review of Standing Orders was undertaken annually and the report reflected the discussions that had been held at the Governance Review Steering Group. In addition, a glossary had been prepared and circulated as an appendix to assist Members which was welcomed;
- Standing Order 21.2 referred to roll call votes, which were no longer used, and it was suggested that this should be amended to replicate current voting practice by specifying that a point of order could not be taken once the Convener had announced that a vote was to take place;
- concern was expressed that there was no clear provision for emergency motions. Members considered that the 21-day notice period for Notice of Motions was too restrictive and that a mechanism for urgent motions should be included, subject to the Convener's discretion. However, it was indicated that urgent motions could be considered under Standing Order 8 as items of urgent business at the Convener's discretion;

- Members stressed that where urgent business was refused, this should be recorded in the minutes along with the reasons for refusal to ensure fairness and transparency, and that this should be incorporated into Standing Order 8;
- only 20 responses had been received to the recent Member survey on the trial Notices of Motions process. It was indicated that the survey would be recirculated to encourage wider feedback. It was confirmed that meeting invites for the Governance Review Steering Group would be circulated to all Members;
- questions were raised about Standing Order 11 and the extension of the notice period for questions to 21 days. Members expressed concern that this could prevent timely scrutiny and emphasised the need for urgent questions to be allowed at the Convener's discretion. In addition, Members highlighted frustration that answers provided were often not substantive and sought assurance that responses would address the questions fully;
- Members highlighted issues with Standing Order 15.3 on Notices of Amendment in Planning Applications Committees, particularly the requirement to secure 40% support before the end of the meeting. It was considered that this was impractical and should be reviewed. It was suggested that suspending the meeting could allow time for Members to secure the necessary support for a Notice of Amendment. In addition, concern was raised that the restriction on using communication devices during planning meetings (except for reviewing planning materials) made it even more difficult to obtain the required support within the limited timeframe;
- concerns were raised about the impact of current arrangements on democratic accountability and the ability to respond to emerging issues in view of the timescales for questions and Notices of Motions. It was clarified that the current process for Notices of Motions and amendments was a trial and would remain in place until further feedback was received and considered by the Governance Review Steering Group to inform future recommendations; and
- reference was made to the lack of flexibility in the current process for Notices of Motions and amendments to these, as the current arrangements did not allow compromise between competing proposals at the meeting. It was suggested that this should be addressed in future revisions.

Following discussion, the Convener, seconded by Mr R Bremner, **MOVED** the recommendations as set out in the report.

As an **AMENDMENT**, Mr C Ballance, seconded by Mr R MacKintosh, **MOVED** that the recommendations should not be agreed.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 48 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 11 votes, with 8 abstentions, and the **MOTION** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion:

Ms S Atkin, Mr M Baird, Mr A Baxter, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Mrs B Campbell, Mr A Christie, Mrs M Cockburn, Mrs T Collier, Ms L Dundas, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Mr R Gale, Ms C Gillies, Mr K Gowans, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Mr M Green, Mr D Gregg, Mr R Gunn, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Mr R Jones, Mr S Kennedy, Ms E Knox, Ms L Kraft, Mr P Logue, Ms M MacCallum, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr S Mackie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mrs A MacLean, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Ms J McEwan, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mrs T Robertson, Mrs M Ross.

For the Amendment:

Mr C Ballance, Mr J Bruce, Mr S Coghill, Mrs H Crawford, Mr A Jarvie, Mrs B Jarvie, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr R MacKintosh, Mrs L Saggars, Mr R Stewart, Ms K Willis.

Abstentions:

Mr S Cameron, Mr R Cross, Mr J Edmondson, Dr M Gregson, Mr B Lobban, Mr D Macpherson, Mr D McDonald, Mr M Reiss.

Decision

The Council:-

- i. **APPROVED** the revised wording of Standing Orders Relating to the Conduct of Meetings as set out in Appendix 1 of the report subject to:
 - a. the wording in respect of substitutions for Planning Applications Committees at Standing Order 4.3 be amended;
 - b. Standing 6.4 be amended to clarify that the existing quorum (one quarter of the membership) would continue to be applied at PACs for applications that were currently in the process of being considered and determined;
 - c. if a request for an item to be considered as urgent business is declined, the reasons for refusal must be recorded in the minutes;
 - d. reference to roll call voting be removed from Standing Order 21.2;
- ii. **NOTED** that the survey on the Notices of Motions trial process would be recirculated to encourage wider Member feedback. Thereafter, the feedback and trial process would be reviewed by the Governance Review Steering Group and any revisions would be submitted to a future meeting of the Council for approval; and
- iii. **NOTED** that non-members were welcome to attend the Governance Review Steering Group meetings and invites would be issued to all Members.

**10. Membership of the Council
Ballrachd na Comhairle**

The Council **NOTED** that Ms Sarah Fanet had tendered her resignation as a Highland Council Member with effect from 20 October 2025 and a By-election for Ward 21 (Fort William and Ardnamurchan) would be held on 11 December 2025.

The Council also **NOTED** that following By-Elections for Wards 7 (Tain and Easter Ross) and 11 (Caol and Mallaig) held on 25 September 2025, the undernoted were elected as Members of the Council:

Ward 7: Ms Connie Ramsay
Ward 11: Mr Sammy Cameron

The political make-up of the Council was now as follows:-

SNP – 19 / Highland Independent – 16 / Scottish Liberal Democrats – 16 / Highland Alliance – 9 / Scottish Conservative and Unionist – 6 / Scottish Green Party – 3 / Labour – 2 / Alba – 1 / Non-Aligned – 1 / Vacant – 1.

The formula in respect of the number of places on Strategic Committees was now 5/4/4/3/2.

11. Membership of Committees, etc
Ballrachd air Comataidhean, msaa

The Council **AGREED**:-

- i. the appointments to Committees as tabled; and
- ii. Mrs Maureen Ross be appointed as Vice Chair of Climate Change Committee.

12. Deeds Executed
Sgrìobhainnean Lagha a Bhuilicheadh

There had been circulated a list of deeds and other documents executed on behalf of the Council since the meeting held on 18 September 2025 which was **NOTED**.

13. Confirmation of Minutes
Daingneachadh a' Gheàrr-chunntais

There had been circulated Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council held on 18 September 2025 and the Meeting held on 18 September 2025 as contained in the Volume which were **APPROVED**.

14. Minutes of Meetings of Committees
Geàrr-chunntasan Choinneamhan Chomataidhean

Minutes of Meetings not included in the Volume were as follows:-

- i. Highland and Western Isles Valuation Joint Board 10 June 2025 (approved by the Board on 7 October 2025) – **NOTED**;
- ii. Community Planning Board 6 June 2025 (approved by the Board on 19 September 2025) – **NOTED**;
- iii. Investment Sub Committee 26 September 2025 – **APPROVED**; and
- iv. Area Committees Review Working Group 17 September 2025 and 9 October 2025 – **APPROVED**.

15. Question Time Booklet A
Àm Ceiste

There had been circulated separately in Booklet A Public and Members Questions received by the Chief Officer - Legal and Corporate Governance.

Public Question

1. Mr D MacKenzie

To the Leader of the Council

What are the costs to Highland Council for the Academy Street proposals; broken down by staff time, consultant fees and legal costs to defend the judicial review?

The response had been circulated.

Member Questions

1. Mr A Christie

To the Leader of the Council

Please can you provide a list of all current contracts that are in place that had an original duration of over twelve months and a value over £500K, showing the value of the awarded contract, nature of the work commissioned and expiry date of the contract. This should be for the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account.

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, which contracts created local jobs and how were these measured.

In response, the Leader advised he would investigate this and circulate a response to the Council.

2. Mr A Christie

To the Leader of the Council

In relation to the remedial works at Rose Street Car Park what is the full schedule of works recommended to be carried out and the cost and duration for each phase?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was queried why the necessary repairs at the Rose Street car park in Inverness were taking so long.

In response, the Leader agreed to review the matter and a response would be provided prior to the deadline for the submission of Questions to the next meeting of the Council on 11 December 2025.

3. Mr M Reiss

To the Leader of the Council

On March 6 2025, the Leader of Orkney Islands Council, Heather Woodbridge, wrote to you in response to concerns raised to her by Orkney Members about the risks of landslips on the A9 north of Inverness. She indicated “that you may be looking to pursue the improvement of safety on the A9 at the next meeting of the Convention of the Highlands and Islands (CoHI)”

She went on to offer her full support to you and highlighted the grave economic consequences of a closure of the A9.

As a Caithness Member you will be aware of the recent landslides on the A9 at Scrabster, as well as a previous one in Sutherland near Portgower.

What actions have you undertaken as a result of the Leader of Orkney Islands Council’s letter, and the concerns she raised therein?”

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, when approximately, did you reply to the Leader of Orkney Council's letter dated 6 March 2025.

In response, the Leader advised he did not know the exact date of the reply but he would be able to discuss the matter directly with the Leader of Orkney Council at the forthcoming meeting of the Convention of the Highlands and Islands. Feedback would be provided on the outcome of the discussion.

4. Dr M Gregson

To the Leader of the Council

Will the Council be commemorating the sixty anniversary, on November 1, of the establishment of the Highlands & Islands Development Board, the forerunner of Highlands & Islands Enterprise? This initiative, by a Labour Government in 1965, marked a significant commitment to address the economic and social problems facing our region.

The response had been circulated.

There was no supplementary question.

5. Mrs J McEwan

To the Leader of the Council

When and how are we going to start paying the 2 billion Highland Investment load back?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was queried how long it would take to pay the £2billion Highland Investment back.

In response, the Leader advised that it was a fluid and evolving payment programme but he was willing to arrange a meeting to enable further discussion and understanding on the payback system.

6. Mrs I MacKenzie

To the Chair of Health, Social Care and Wellbeing

Following the BBC Panorama investigation into the Castle Hill Care Home Inverness, will the Chair provide Members with an update on the current situation and what actions are being taken by the Council and its partners in response to the programme's alarming findings?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, given the serious issues highlighted at Castle Hill Care Home, it was queried whether the Council, in partnership with others, would carry out a wider review of adult care provision.

In response, the Chair of Health, Social Care and Wellbeing, agreed to review the question and come back to the Members with a fuller answer.

7. Mr A Graham

To the Leader of the Council

Please provide total number of staff employed by Highland Council for each year since 2007.

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, following the savings of £200m made over the last 10 years, it was queried how the staff count had increased by approximately 800.

In response, the Leader stated that this Administration had made every effort to protect as many jobs as possible within Highland Council. A proportion of the figures reflected this; however, he could not comment on decisions of past Administrations.

8. Mr J Edmondson

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

Two bridges in Ward 6 need replacing or extensive repairs. The Lealty Bridge [U19900010] is a lifeline bridge, there are no other alternative routes, it requires replacement or extensive repairs. The Achnagarron bridge [U19210010] where a temporary bridge has been installed, but a permanent bridge is required. Both replacements were promised for the summer of 2025. When will these bridges be replaced with a permanent solution?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was queried whether there had been any indication as to when the vital bridges required in Ward 6 would be repaired/completed.

In response, the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure indicated that Autumn 2026 was the earliest a permanent bridge would be in place at Lealty which was currently at the preliminary design stage. Achnagarron Bridge was scheduled for replacement in April 2026.

9. Mrs B Jarvie

To the Leader of the Council

Could the Leader of the Highland Council please update Members on the proposed "Moray FLOW- Park" wet storage site for numerous floating offshore assets sited within the Moray Firth. This is currently being developed by the Offshore Solutions Group. Could the update include a detailed timeline of any discussions/plans both past, present and future including Highland Council kindly requesting from OSG, an informative public consultation/presentation, including to all relevant Ward Area Committees that surround the Moray Firth.

<https://offshoresolutionsgroup.com/moray-flow-park/>

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was queried whether the Leader of the Council would ensure that the Highland Council was meeting its obligations under Section 10 of the Community Empowerment Scotland Act 2015.

In response, the Leader requested that he be provided with a copy of the question in full in order a comprehensive answer could be circulated.

10. Mr D Gregg

To the Leader of the Council

Please list the 3rd parties the council currently shares personal data with under GDPR regulations.

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, could a review be undertaken to determine whether an automatic data sharing agreement could be put in place with relevant partners such as the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, Scottish Water and SSEN, to allow older adults to access services more easily.

In response, the Leader acknowledged the issue and agreed that a review would be requested.

11. Ms K Willis

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

In the March 2025/26 Budget, Members agreed to introduce a blanket mandatory charge for motorhomes and campervans in all Council carparks, and to increase the costs of all parking permits by 5%, in order to maximise income from visitors and increase income generated for the maintenance of carparks. One of the benefits identified in the 2025/26 budget was the splitting of income with Area Committees. With the introduction of the mandatory charge for motorhomes and campervans in Council carpark and the 5% increase in parking permits, how much income has been generated across Highland and specifically for each Area Committee this year?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, clarification was sought as to whether the 5% increase applied to parking permits on the 1 April 2026 would follow the 50/50 strategic/local split as agreed in the Council Parking Strategy.

In response, the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure commented that dialogue in respect of this was still ongoing and it would be inappropriate to pre-empt the outcome of these discussions.

12. Mr R Stewart

To the Leader of the Council

Given the ongoing issues and confusion surrounding the Council's poorly implemented voluntary motorhome scheme, what active enforcement and monitoring are actually taking place in council car parks between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.? In particular, what steps are being taken to ensure that issues such as:

- "No overnight parking" restrictions are properly enforced and not ignored; and there
- Motorhomes are confined to the designated Overnight Stay Bays (OSBs) rather than using general car park spaces.

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was queried whether the Highland Campervan and Motorhome Scheme would be ceased.

In response, the Leader advised that the scheme would continue.

13. Mr A Baxter

To the Chair of Communities and Place

Given that climate change projections indicate more frequent and severe storm systems affecting the Highlands, what preventative maintenance programme, including dedicated staffing resources, does Highland Council have in place for proactive management of the council's tree estate rather than reactive emergency response?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, assurances were sought regarding the proactive management of tree estates where properties were at risk.

In response, the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure commented that a Tree Policy had gone to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee, and a copy of this could be circulated.

14. Mr C Ballance

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

Earlier this summer Stagecoach gave Dumfries and Galloway Council the minimum 28 days notice that it was closing its local depot and ceasing all services based in the region.

Does Highland Council have any contingency plans in case Stagecoach accept they can't run a reliable service and pull out of Highland at short notice?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, it was queried whether the Stagecoach service review would include improvements to public transport serving Aird and Loch Ness.

In response, the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure stated that discussions were ongoing and Stagecoach was proposing a new plan for January 2026. No details were available at this time, but it was hoped that this would include provision for Aird and Loch Ness.

16. Notices of Motion Brathan Gluasaid

The following Notices of Motion had been circulated separately in Booklet A, received by the Chief Officer - Legal and Corporate Governance.

1. Council notes that for many years there has been a growing debate about the effectiveness, accountability, and local responsiveness of the Highland Council in its current structure. Time and again, votes within this chamber on this issue have been close reflecting both the strength of feeling and the absence of clear consensus among elected members.

It is therefore right that this decision should not rest solely with councillors. The time has come for the public themselves to have their say on the future of how the Highlands are governed and taxpayers' money is spent.

Accordingly, this Council agrees:

1. To hold an advisory referendum on the future structure of local government in the Highlands.
2. That this referendum will ask the people of the Highlands the following question: "Should The Highland Council be reorganised into smaller local authorities?"
Voters will be asked Yes or No.
3. That the referendum will take place on the same day as the next scheduled local government elections, to ensure maximum participation and to minimise additional costs.
4. Results will be published on a ward-by-ward basis as well as for the Highlands as a whole.
5. That officers be instructed to prepare the necessary arrangements and report back on the practical steps required to give effect to this advisory referendum.

Signed: Mr R Stewart

Mrs B Jarvie

AMENDMENT

To replace the motion with the following amendment:

This Council reaffirms its commitment to resilience, economic sustainability, and equitable support for all communities across the Highland region. We recognise the vital role The Highland Council plays in delivering essential services and infrastructure, supported by revenues derived from concentrated tax bases. These revenues are crucial in reflecting the social values and aspirations of our region, enabling the provision of services such as education, health and social care, infrastructure maintenance, and significant capital investment.

The Council acknowledges that key strategic projects—including the Corran Ferry replacement, Naver Bridge, Uig Linkspan, the School Capital Programme, and future investment in Green Freeports—are among many initiatives that could be jeopardised by proposals that risk destabilising our current governance and funding model.

We further recognise the advantages of the current structure, with The Highland Council being one of Scotland's largest local authorities. This scale provides political influence and economic leverage at both Scottish and UK levels. Any move toward smaller, fragmented authorities would likely erode these benefits, reduce economies of scale, and further strain already limited financial resources.

It is reasonable to conclude that the public would not support a scenario where more of their council tax is diverted to fund the significant additional bureaucracy that would result from further division of governance and accountability.

Accordingly, this Council agrees that holding an advisory referendum on this matter—at an estimated cost of between £200,000 and £650,000—would represent an unjustifiable expense to the Highland taxpayer at this time.

Consequently, this amendment proposes the direct negative to the Motion 1.

Signed: Mr K Gowans Ms K Willis

Speaking in support of the Motion, Mr Stewart believed that the people of Highland should be offered the right to decide the future structure of their local government. He highlighted that some Highland communities felt distanced from decision making, and that a local connection had been lost.

Speaking in support of the Amendment, Mr Gowans felt it was the strength of the current Council structure that had secured the endorsement of the Highland Investment Plan, attracted the Inverness and Cromarty Green Freeports and helped to amass major funding such as the Corran Ferry, Inverness Castle, City Region Deal, Uig Linkspan, and Caol Flood Protection. It also helped to attract and develop close partnerships with Moray and Aberdeenshire Councils.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the current Council structure made larger investments possible, and it was difficult to imagine smaller Councils generating the same revenue. Further, smaller communities currently benefited from many of these investments;
- reference was made to a discussion of this matter in 2021 and it was highlighted that the opinions of some Members had changed. This was questioned;
- concern was expressed in terms of the cost to the Council as outlined in the assessment of financial implications;
- political pressure should come from the people;
- local views were important and it was asked why locals should not be offered the opportunity to decide. However, it was also felt that this should come from Scottish Government level;
- a decision for change did not necessarily mean reverting back to County Councils; and

- Ward Business Meetings worked well and decisions could be made at Area Committees. The Area Committees Review Working Group had reconvened on 17 September 2025 and it was hoped that positive changes would result from future meetings.

In his summary, Mr Gowans was not aware of a groundswell of opinions demanding the breakup of Highland Council. He felt that breaking into smaller Councils would result in substantial additional bureaucracy and an ongoing cost burden to residents. Highland had a relatively small population but a large geographical area and the current structure better placed Highland to navigate financial challenges, as well as sharing skills and resources. The Highland Council had attracted significant funding and investment, and it was felt that this would not have been possible with a plethora of smaller Councils.

In his summary, Mr Stewart expressed his intention to give the people of Highland the opportunity to choose whether they wanted to restore smaller, more locally focused government areas, or retain the current structure of the Council. Having spoken with residents throughout Highland, he felt that there was less support for the Highland Council to remain as it was and it was suggested that residents in Caithness and Lochaber did not wish to be governed from Inverness. A response was then provided to concerns regarding financial implications.

Thereafter, Mr R Stewart, seconded by Mrs B Jarvie, **MOVED** approval of the Notice of Motion as detailed.

As an **AMENDMENT**, Mr K Gowans, seconded by Ms K Willis, moved the Amendment as detailed.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 22 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 36 votes, with 7 abstentions, and the **AMENDMENT** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion:

Mr M Baird, Mr A Baxter, Mr S Cameron, Mr A Christie, Mr S Coghill, Mr J Edmondson, Mr R Gale, Mr A Graham, Mr D Gregg, Dr M Gregson, Mr R Gunn, Mr A Jarvie, Mrs B Jarvie, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr S Mackie, Mrs A MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Macpherson, Mrs J McEwan, Mr M Reiss, Mrs T Robertson, Mr R Stewart.

For the Amendment:

Mrs S Atkin, Mr C Ballance, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Mrs I Campbell, Mrs M Cockburn, Mrs T Collier, Mr R Cross, Ms L Dundas, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Ms C Gillies, Mr K Gowans, Mr M Green, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Mr R Jones, Mr S Kennedy, Ms E Knox, Ms L Kraft, Mr B Lobban, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms K MacLean, Mr D Millar, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Reid, Mr K Rosie, Mrs M Ross, Ms K Willis.

Abstentions:

Mr J Bruce, Mr L Fraser, Mr J Grafton, Ms M MacCallum, Mr D McDonald, Mr H Morrison, Mrs L Sagers.

Decision

The Council **AGREED** the Amendment as set out.

2. A9 Dualling, Tore to Dornoch Bridge

Highland Council calls on the Scottish Government to commit to dualling the A9 trunk route from Tore roundabout north to Tain and the Dornoch Bridge.

Upgrading the existing infrastructure to a dual carriageway is key to unlocking the benefits of the Cromarty Firth Green Freeport. It will not only improve traffic flow but also enhance overall safety for all road users. The increased capacity will alleviate congestion arising from increased employment related traffic and abnormal load movements from the Cromarty Firth ports of Nigg and Invergordon in addition to peak travel periods due to tourism, the NC500 and the impact of centralised potato crop processing and grain harvesting.

Dual carriageway roads are safer than single carriageway roads. Additionally, such a development will reduce journey times to/ from the Far North, increasing the attractiveness of some of our most remote areas and improving access to Inverness based health and other services.

Such a commitment would also inform the anticipated housing developments along this route, most notably north east of Alness from Milnafua to Mossfield, and at Tain, in addition to eliminating accident blackspots at Tomich and Tain. This residential expansion is likely to create substantial communities divided by the A9 as evidenced already in identified development sites, underlining the need for informed infrastructure planning.

The section of the route between the Cromarty Bridge and the Evanton junction is a dangerous “pinch point”, which, if blocked effectively isolates the North and Northwest mainland.

There is significant concern and frequent debate regarding the difficulties of recruiting skilled personnel, notably but not exclusively health professionals. The benefits of this proposal will not only unlock the potential economic boost from the Green Freeport, but it will enhance the attractiveness of the area to incoming skilled workers, and also support the traditional tourist economy.

In summary this section of the A9 is key to achieving the benefits of the Cromarty Firth Green Freeport initiative which will result in....

Increased heavy traffic resulting from industrial activity.

Increasing occurrence of abnormal loads servicing onshore renewables development and maintenance.

Substantial increases in domestic traffic from residential areas to industrial sites at Nigg, Invergordon, Alness and Evanton.

The route includes the “pinch point” between Cromarty Bridge (Ardullie roundabout) and Evanton which, if blocked by accident effectively isolates the north and northwest.

Enlarged residential areas at Alness, Invergordon, Evanton and Tain must be designed accordingly, taking a holistic view.

Accident blackspots at Tomich (by Invergordon) and the north and south junctions at Tain can be eliminated through fully informed design.

Signed: Mr R Cross

Mr M Reiss

AMENDMENT

Invest in the Far North Line

From

“Highland Council calls on the Scottish Government to commit to”

DELETE ALL and replace with;

“... prioritise investment in the Far North Rail Line.

“The significant increases in travel requirements caused by the growth of the Free Port areas cannot be solved just by building more roads, but have to be managed through improved public transport.

“Highland Council welcomes the recent £11m spend on replacing worn out track on the Far North Line, but believes significantly more must be spent to improve journey time and reliability, to encourage use of rail rather than road, as per the Government’s Travel Hierarchy.

“In particular this Council notes that a rail journey from Wick to Glasgow currently takes as long as a journey from London to Glasgow and back; notes that the lack of dualling and insufficient passing loops causes regular delays; notes that it is 112 years since any significant investment was made in the line.

“Council therefore calls on the Scottish Government to work with Scot Rail to prioritise investment in the Far North Line and Inverness Station.

“Additionally, Council calls on the Scottish Government to investigate what can be done by design in the immediate future to eliminate particular accident blackspots on the A9.”

Signed: Mr C Ballance

Ms K Willis

Mr R MacKintosh

Speaking in support of the Motion, Mr Cross wished to call on the Scottish Government to commit to dualling the A9 between Tore and Dornoch Bridge roundabouts. He anticipated economic growth in terms of the Highland Investment Plan and Green Freeport, and emphasised the importance of future planning. He also expressed concern about existing accident blackspots and stressed the significance of the route.

Speaking in support of the Amendment, Mr Ballance also emphasised the importance of safe, efficient and reliable travel. However, where full dualling of the A9 in the Far North might take decades, he felt that practical and strategic measures to address accident blackspots could be implemented within the next 2 to 3 years. He also underlined the need for a balanced spend between road and rail, particularly

when there had been no significant investment or improvement to the Far North Rail Line for some time.

During discussion, the Leader of the Council highlighted that both the Motion and the Amendment were important and this was felt by others.

It was felt that dual carriageway roads were safer in general, and concern was expressed in terms of various dangerous junctions throughout this stretch of road. It was reported that the financial cost of a death on the A9 was circa £1M, however, the human and emotional cost far outweighed this.

Thereafter, Mr R Cross, seconded by Mr M Reiss, **MOVED** approval of the Notice of Motion as detailed.

As an **AMENDMENT**, Mr C Ballance, seconded by Ms K Willis, moved the Amendment as detailed.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 54 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 9 votes, with 2 abstentions, and the **MOTION** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion:

Mr M Baird, Mr A Baxter, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr J Bruce, Mr M Cameron, Mr S Cameron, Mrs I Campbell, Mr A Christie, Mrs M Cockburn, Mr S Coghill, Mr R Cross, Ms L Dundas, Mr J Edmondson, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr R Gale, Mr K Gowans, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Mr M Green, Mr D Gregg, Dr M Gregson, Mr R Gunn, Mrs J Hendry, Mr A Jarvie, Mrs B Jarvie, Ms L Johnston, Mr R Jones, Mr S Kennedy, Ms E Knox, Ms L Kraft, Mr B Lobban, Ms M MacCallum, Mr G MacKenzie, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mr S Mackie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mrs A MacLean, Mr D Macpherson, Mr D McDonald, Mrs J McEwan, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Reid, Mr M Reiss, Mrs T Robertson, Mr K Rosie, Mrs M Ross, Mrs L Saggars, Mr R Stewart.

For the Amendment:

Mrs S Atkin, Mr C Ballance, Dr C Birt, Mrs T Collier, Ms C Gillies, Ms M Hutchison, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms K MacLean, Ms K Willis.

Abstentions:

Mr L Fraser, Mr T MacLennan.

Decision

The Council **AGREED** the Motion as set out.

3. The Council commits to:

- Designating a named lead Highland Council contact for each care home in the area to act as a clear point of contact for residents and relatives to contact with concerns, issues or question.
- Creating a document which explains the rights of residents and relatives within a care home. This document should include clear information on how concerns can be raised to the council and external regulatory bodies (Care Inspectorate, professional regulators, Disclosure Scotland, police).

- All relatives/residents within the relevant care home, and all councillors, to be notified of the publication of Care Inspectorate reports within 7 working days of that report being received by the council.
- All relatives/residents within the relevant care home to be notified that a Large Scale Investigation has commenced within 7 working days, and all councillors to be notified at the next full council meeting.
- All Care Inspectorate reports to be formally presented to the Health & Social Care Committee, in public or private session at discretion of the committee chair, with councillors being given chance to ask questions on the report.
- When a care home ceases to be under an improvement notice from the Care Inspectorate, a 'Lessons Learned' report will be presented first to the Health & Social Care Committee and then before the full council to detail what improvements were made while under the Care Inspectorate improvement notice, and any recommendations which should be made to improve practice across Highland care homes.

Signed: Mr D Gregg

Mr A Christie

AMENDMENT

To replace the motion with the following amendment:

Under the Lead Agency Model it is NHS Highland that deliver Care Home services for adults by commissioning the private sector and providing inhouse care homes. They also commission the care at homes services. The regulator is the Care Inspectorate. Although adult social care is delegated to NHS as part of the Lead Agency Model, the Chief Social Work Officer maintains statutory responsibility and accountability for the delivery of social work and social care services. With regard adult protection, governance and assurance is through the Adult Protection Committee. This then reports into the Highland Public Protection Chief Officers Group for the overarching governance across Highland.

Councillors receive twice annually assurance reports through the Health and Social Care Committee. The Chief Social Work Officer Annual report comes to Full Council and includes the care Inspectorate grades for all Care Home and Care at Home Services. Under the lead agency model the Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC) is key in terms of overseeing all partnership business and much of this material is provided there at the quarterly meetings.

In partnership with the NSH Highland as lead agents the Council undertakes to carry out a full review of the reporting structures related to the regulated services i.e. care homes and care at home. The review will articulate what and where governance currently lies and how this can be improved. One of the issues that will be looked at is how various committees and boards are given assurance when governance lies elsewhere and how the attendees then report back to other boards and committees. The review will also look at opportunities to share learning across Highland with a view to improving the overall standard of care. The report will include a section on access information about the Regulated Services and how the escalate concerns about a service.

The draft report will be discussed at the February 2026 meeting of the Health & Social Care Committee and a final draft report will then be taken to Full Council. The Final Report will be agreed at JMC.

Signed: Mr D Fraser Mrs M Cockburn

The Council **NOTED** that Mr D Gregg had withdrawn his Notice of Motion.

4. This motion asks that the Leader of the Council writes to the Scottish Government and the Lloyd's Banking Group in the strongest possible terms regarding the closures of Branches of the Bank of Scotland in Dingwall, Gairloch, Nairn and Tain. Tain branch, for instance, is "the last Bank standing ". Once upon a time there were eight Banks in Tain. From January 2026, Tain will have no Bank. According to the consumer group Which? more than 6,400 banks across the UK have closed since 2015. That equates to more than 60% of the UK's banking network, at a rate of around 53 closures every month. Closing these branches fails to recognise the unique needs in our rural communities. Access to cash and in-person banking remains vital for many, particularly older residents, small businesses, and those who are less confident with digital banking. The Bank of Scotland must think again. Reducing bank branches has a disproportionate impact on rural communities where public transport is increasingly limited and town centres are struggling with declining retail and limited private sector investment. The Federation of Small Businesses is right to warn of the impact of bank closures on small businesses, not least the loss of face-to-face interaction and a reduced ability to manage cash flow. The establishment of Banking Hubs – owned by the not-for-profit company Cash Access UK and funded by nine high street banks to provide easy access to face-to-face cash and banking - are welcome innovations but agrees with Age UK that it is unacceptable for there to be long delays between the last branch closing and a banking hub opening.

In conclusion:-

1. This Council calls for the rapid establishment of Banking Hubs to ensure the banking services they provide are accessible before any community suffers a bank closure.
2. Asks that if they do not voluntarily fund the banking hub network that a levy is imposed on bank profits to finance the hubs
3. Calls for the commissioning of an independent review on the effectiveness of the regulatory functions of the Financial Conduct Authority with regards to protections of cash deposit and withdrawal services

Signed: Mr M Baird

Mr R Gale

Mr A Graham

Decision

The Council agreed the Motion as set out.

5. To strengthen protections for school staff against violent and abusive behaviour in schools; and to ensure that they are properly supported and enabled to get on with their jobs.

Council notes:

- There is a serious problem of violent and abusive behaviour in schools. This has grown in recent years. The Scottish Government's *Behaviour in Scottish Schools* Reports confirm this unfortunate trend.

- There were 3170 incidents of classroom violence in Highland schools in 2024.
- School staff made an average of 16.7 reports a day – an increase of more than 500% in four years.
- Such incidents included physical and verbal abuse, particularly physical aggression, general verbal abuse and physical violence.
- In response to the same FOI, the Council was unable to say how many assaults on school staff or pupils took place, and how many times weapons or illegal drugs were confiscated in its schools.

Council further notes:

- The 1974 Health and Safety at Work Act places a responsibility on all employers to ensure the health and safety of employees.
- The Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations require certain incidents to be reported to the Health and Safety Executive.

In this context, the Council therefore resolves:

- To commit to a 'Zero Tolerance' policy for violence against staff at school.
- To commit to support staff by producing Risk Assessments for persistently disruptive pupils. In some circumstances, it may be acceptable for a member of staff to refuse to teach a pupil, if she or he felt that their personal safety was at risk.
- To commit to clear and well-understood procedures for recording and reporting incidents.
- To ensure adequate staff training in dealing with challenging behaviour and violent incidents.
- To ensure adequate support for staff who are victims of violent incidents.

Signed: Dr M Gregson

Mr R Gale

AMENDMENT

To replace the motion with the following amendment:

Given the national trend which shows an increase in the reporting of disruptive behaviour in schools across all authorities as well as a significant rise in the number of pupils with ASN and given the importance the Highland Council attaches to supporting and caring for all its school staff and pupils the Council will:

- continue to work with all school staff, parents, pupils, professional associations, and elected members to help understand the underlying factors that are contributing to the increase in dysregulated behaviours in our schools.
- continue to offer an inclusive education to all pupils and provide support, guidance, and training to all staff members to ensure their health, safety and wellbeing continues to be a key priority.
- continue to ensure that local and national policies and guidance are followed and staff members receive support and appropriate debriefing after any relevant incidents and are encouraged to record these incidents as per council policy to support all those involved.
- continue to ensure regular self-evaluation takes place at school level regarding the implementation of council and school policies which takes account of the unique circumstances pertaining to individual school settings and the pupils on their roll.

Signed: Mr J Finlayson Mr D Millar

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- it was important that schools were places where learning and teaching could take place safely and securely and to recognise that the increase in incidents of classroom violence was an issue;
- due to a better understanding of why incidents of dysregulated behaviour occurred, action was already being taken to tackle it, and the Council was actively involved in supporting schools, staff members, pupils and parents who had to deal with challenging behaviours;
- an Improving Relationships and Behaviour in Schools Action Plan had been brought to the Education Committee earlier in the year;
- there was already a zero-tolerance policy for violence against staff in schools, supported by an understanding of additional support needs and the many other challenges faced by young people at home and in school;
- staff did not have the ability to pick and choose which pupils they worked with and therefore could not refuse to teach certain pupils because of their behaviour. Attention was drawn to the Integrated Impact Assessment where it was stated that marginalising pupils as a consequence of their behaviour would contravene the Human Rights Act and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and that teachers refusing to teach certain pupils could disproportionately affect vulnerable groups;
- updated Assure and Pupil Staff Incident systems had been agreed with unions and put in place to improve recording and communication of incidents;
- adequate staff training in dealing with challenging behaviour was a key element in bringing about change and, the Council's Educational Psychology Team and Positive Relationships Team offered this training;
- the expectation was that support for staff who experienced incidents of violence was in place through line management and the Health and Wellbeing Team and officers and school leaders would be asked to ensure that there was consistency across all schools and that this support was available to anyone who needed it;
- recent statistics had shown a reduction in the number of pupil staff incidents reported to the Highland Council since 2023-2024;
- management of challenging behaviour needed to be consistent and holistic and needed to engage with all individuals around the child;
- there were risk assessment training, protocols and guidelines in place as well as training on de-escalation awareness and techniques;
- violent and abusive behaviour in schools had become a serious problem both for staff and pupils whose learning was being disrupted;
- the Council had a duty to prevent its staff from harm, and the Education Scotland Act placed a duty on parents to ensure that their children attended school and followed the rules. This created a partnership between home and school based on mutual respect and accountability which had sadly been diluted by recent national guidelines which focused almost entirely on inclusion without addressing the potential consequences;
- attention was drawn to the fact that minor disruptions to learning could have a serious impact on pupils' learning and attainment and in situations where there was a persistently disruptive pupil in a classroom, the attainment of the whole class would decline;

- pupils were not being provided with the support needed to help them manage their behaviour and teachers were not equipped to deal with behaviour that became violent;
- it was suggested that not all instances of verbal and physical aggression from pupils towards staff were being recorded;
- the challenges faced by schools due to staff absences were emphasised;
- it was highlighted that not all additional support needs that children might have were due to medical conditions or disability, there could be other reasons such as going to school hungry due to poverty or not getting a good sleep due to being a young carer;
- the difficulty of balancing children's rights to an education and employees right to a safe workplace was highlighted;
- the work done with young people at The Place in Alness was commended, and it was suggested that the Council should give financial support to this, and similar, organisations;
- it was recognised that school staff worked hard, sometimes in difficult circumstances;
- assurances were given that incidents of violence and aggression were taken seriously;
- it was highlighted that the number of incidents of pupil violence or aggression involving pupils with additional support needs or pupils and Primary One and Two and the numbers drop off steeply as children mature and develop; and
- increasing the number of senior officers did not necessarily make things easier for teachers in the classroom.

Thereafter, Dr M Gregson, seconded by Mr R Gale, **MOVED** approval of the Notice of Motion as detailed.

As an **AMENDMENT**, Mr J Finlayson, seconded by Mr D Millar, moved the Amendment as detailed.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 25 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 31 votes, with 3 abstentions, and the **MOTION** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion:

Mr M Baird, Mr A Baxter, Mr J Bruce, Mr S Cameron, Mr A Christie, Mr S Coghill, Mr R Cross, Mr J Edmondson, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Dr M Gregson, Mr R Gunn, Mrs B Jarvie, Ms M MacCallum, Mrs I Mackenzie, Mr D Macpherson, Mr D McDonald, Mrs J McEwan, Ms C Ramsay, Mr M Reiss, Ms T Robertson, Mrs L Saggars, Mr A Sinclair, Mr R Stewart,

For the Amendment:

Ms S Atkin, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Ms I Campbell, Mrs M Cockburn, Ms T Collier, Ms L Dundas, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Ms C Gillies, Mr K Gowans, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Mr R Jones, Mr Kennedy, Ms E Knox, Ms L Kraft, Mr B Lobban, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms A MacLean, Ms K MacLean, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Ms M Reid,

Abstentions:

Mr C Ballance, Mr A Jarvie, Mr S Mackie

Decision

The Council **AGREED** the Motion as set out.

The meeting ended at 6.05pm on the 30 October 2025 and 4.50pm, following the Special Council meeting, on 6 November 2025, earlier that afternoon.