

## **The Highland Council**

Minutes of Meeting of the **Education Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Wednesday 19 November 2025 at 9.35 am.

### **Present:**

Ms S Atkin	Mr J Finlayson (Chair)
Mr A Baxter (Substitute)	Mr R Gale
Mrs I Campbell	Ms M Hutchison (remote)
Mr A Christie	Ms E Knox (remote)
Mrs M Cockburn	Ms L Kraft
Mr R Cross	Mr D Millar (Vice Chair)
Ms H Crawford	Ms C Ramsay
Ms L Dundas	Mr R Stewart

### **Religious Representatives (non-voting):**

Rev Dr C Caley  
Ms S Lamont  
Mr J Maxwell

### **Youth Convener (non-voting):**

Ms L McBain

### **Non-Members also present:**

Ms T Collier (remote)	Mr G MacKenzie (remote)
Mr D Fraser (remote)	Mrs I MacKenzie (remote)
Ms C Gillies	Mrs T Robertson (remote)
Mr K Gowans (remote)	Ms M Ross (remote)
Dr M Gregson	Mrs L Saggars (remote)
Mr R Jones	

### **In attendance:**

Ms K Lackie, Assistant Chief Executive – People  
Ms F Grant, Chief Officer – Secondary Education  
Ms B Martin-Scott, Chief Officer – Primary Education and Early Years  
Ms F Malcolm, Chief Officer – Integrated People Services  
Ms A MacPherson, Strategic Lead – Resources  
Mr D Martin, Strategic Lead – Operations  
Ms F Shearer, Strategic Lead - People  
Mr R Campbell, Service Lead – Capital Planning and Estate Strategy  
Mr I Kyle, Head of Performance and Improvement  
Mr M Richardson, Principal Adult Learning and Youth Work Manager  
Ms A Anthony, Senior Youth Development Officer  
Ms F Dalgetty, Chief Executive, Fèis Rois (Third Sector) (remote)  
Ms M Chemonges, Highland Parent Council Partnership (remote)  
Ms M Murray, Principal Committee Officer  
Ms R Ross, Committee Officer

### **Also in attendance:**

Mr S Walsh, Chief Executive, High Life Highland  
Ms A Mason, Highland Archivist

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

**Mr J Finlayson in the Chair**

## **Business**

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

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr D Gregg, Mr D Macpherson and Mr J McGillivray.

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

There were no Declarations of Interest.

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

Item 13: Mr A Christie

Ms H Crawford made a general Transparency Statement on the basis that a family member was employed within the Highland education sector. However, having applied the objective test, she did not consider that she had an interest to declare.

### **3. Good News/Outstanding Achievements Naidheachdan Matha/Coileanaidhean Air Leth**

A presentation on outstanding achievements by pupils and schools had been circulated.

Congratulations having been extended to all the schools involved for the wide variety of work and achievements that had been showcased, the Committee **NOTED** the outstanding achievements.

### **4. Statutory Consultation: Relocation of Beauly Primary School Co-chomhairleachadh Reachdail: Gluasad Bun-Sgoil na Manachainn**

There had been circulated Report No EDU/28/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- Members unanimously welcomed the report, which would also be welcomed by teachers and parents, particularly the Parent Council, who wanted a safe, warm and secure school. Thanks were expressed to the Head Teacher of Beauly Primary School for her involvement, the school community and the wider community for their support and patience, and officers for the community consultation event that had taken place earlier in the year and for taking Ward Members' comments on board. It was highlighted that the aim was for the new

school to open between January and April 2028, and Members would continue to monitor the situation as work progressed. It was added that Local Members and their predecessors had been working towards achieving a new primary school for Beauly for many years, and it was welcomed that it would now be delivered as part of the Council's Highland Investment Plan. Since the disappointment of not securing LEIP funding, the opportunity had arisen to look at a new greenfield site and there would now be a better school without the disruption that would have resulted from rebuilding on the existing site;

- reference was made to the former Strontian Primary School building which had closed in 2017 and was still vacant, and reassurance was sought, and provided, that sight would not be lost of what was going to be done with the existing Beauly Primary School building when it became vacant, and that officers would work with Ward Members and the local community in that regard so a plan was in place when the new school became available;
- a new, modern school in Beauly would provide an improved learning environment and local growth. Staff would be able to teach in purpose-built accommodation, and Members looked forward to a tour in the future;
- the new Tain campus project was already over a year behind schedule and considerably over budget, and information was sought, and provided, as to what safeguards, oversight measures and project management processes would be put in place to prevent a similar situation from occurring in Beauly and to avoid placing unnecessary stress on staff, pupils, the community, Ward Members and Council finances;
- it was important that comparisons between capital projects were relevant and proportionate, and Beauly Primary School and the new Tain campus were fundamentally different in both scale and complexity. Planning for the Tain campus had taken place immediately pre and post Covid, and officers had continued to work on the project through a difficult period, committed to delivering it while costs rose exponentially. The campus had now been built and would be handed over to the Council imminently. It had been a challenging project, but robust financial monitoring and project management procedures were in place to ensure the Council's interests were protected. For Beauly Primary School, the Council was adopting a similar design and layout to that being used for both Broadford and Dunvegan Primary Schools. In addition, these three new schools were single storey so much less complex than the Tain campus. Whilst it was important to be aware of budgets, comparing the Beauly and Tain projects was not comparing like with like in terms of community, type of school and economic environment. The Beauly project was part of the Highland Investment Plan which was reported to Full Council, and regular reports were also presented to the Housing and Property Committee and further scrutinised at the Corporate Resources Committee. The Council had rightly insisted on all Passivhaus specifications being fully met prior to formal acceptance of the campus, and Members were asked to consider the potential long-term costs and risks had that not been the case. The Tain campus was the Council's first Passivhaus build, and it brought four schools into one campus, bringing community learning under one roof. In the construction process, there had been a significant effort to achieve a high standard of air tightness, and it would be a state-of-the-art facility providing a high-quality learning environment for the local community. The campus was also part of the Scottish Government's Learning Estate Investment Programme and would receive government funding for a 25-year period to ensure it remained in fit-for-purpose condition. In terms of future project delivery controls, the Council had engaged a delivery partner, Hub North Scotland, who would have responsibility for

ensuring new school projects and Community Points of Delivery were brought in on time, on budget and to the quality specified. Contractors would sign up to a suite of Key Performance Indicators to demonstrate project compliance against performance targets specified by the Council via Hub North Scotland. Each project would have a team of dedicated design consultants overseen by the Hub North Scotland Project Director, and the delivery process would be monitored by the Council's Property team. Other Members added that Tain was only one example, there being many examples of primary school builds that had run late and over budget; and

- the Chair highlighted that the final consultation paper in respect of St Clement's School would be published today, and the associated report would be presented to the Full Council in December.

The Committee **AGREED** to proceed to statutory consultation, based on the proposal attached to the report at Appendix 2.

## **5. Revenue Budget Monitoring Report Quarter 2 2025/26** **Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Buidseat Teachd-a-steach R2 2025/26**

There had been circulated Report No EDU/29/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- attention was drawn to the reported underspend of £0.833m, which it was suggested was not good news or indicative of strong budget management. There were currently 47 external vacancies in education advertised on MyJobScotland, and concern was expressed that no service could operate effectively with staffing gaps of that scale, and that posts were being left unfilled to balance the budget, leaving the remaining staff overworked and exhausted. Children were being impacted by reduced support in classrooms, early learning settings were stretched, and Additional Support Needs teams were being asked to do the impossible with increasingly fewer staff. There were overspends of £0.739m on Special Schools and £0.653 on Out of Authority Placements, driven by demand and insufficient capacity, and these were long-standing structural issues that had failed to be addressed. It was suggested that, instead of freezing posts and underfunding services, investment in frontline staffing and capacity-building was required to deliver improvement and better outcomes for children in Highland and prevent further decline in attainment. In responding to the points raised, the Chair emphasised that the underspend was less than 1% of the total budget. All Members shared the concerns regarding recruitment but it was extremely difficult to recruit to particular subjects and particular areas and, increasingly, the Council was competing with other industries. Assurance was provided that the importance of recruitment in schools, from ELC to the senior phase, was recognised, and the Council was committed to it;
- information was sought, and provided, on whether the underspends in respect of Adult Learning, Youth Work, and Crossing Patrollers and School Escorts were a result of vacancy management and, if so, the likely impact on service delivery. In relation to Crossing Patrollers in particular, it was queried whether there was any risk of impact on school safety;

- Education was a challenging service to manage, with issues such as falling school rolls and numerous vacancies that were outwith the Council's control, and officers were commended for their efforts; and
- further information was sought, and provided, regarding the underspend on early learning and childcare staffing, which the report indicated reflected work to deliver approved savings next year.

The Committee:-

- i. scrutinised and **APPROVED** the forecast financial position for Quarter 2 2025/26 as set out in the report and appendices;
- ii. **NOTED** the explanations provided for any material variances and actions taken or proposed; and
- iii. **NOTED** the update provided regarding savings delivery.

## 6. Parental Involvement and Engagement Strategy Ro-innleachd Com-pàirteachadh Phàrantach

There had been circulated Report No EDU/30/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

The Chair explained that the purpose of the Parental Involvement and Engagement Strategy (the Strategy) was to ensure that all parents, guardians and carers were encouraged and supported to engage as key partners in their children's education and, importantly, the life of the school.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the strengths of the Strategy were recognised, particularly the commitment to better communication, a stronger parental voice and family learning. However, it was suggested the Strategy ought to be measured by the improvements it delivered, and that it was lacking in outcomes and information as to how the Council communicated the progress and performance of learners to parents. The Parental Involvement Act gave parents the right to be informed about their child's learning so they could support it at home, but Members had heard from parents that there was a disconnect between school and what was happening at home. The Education Improvement Plan required schools to monitor the progress, behaviour, attendance and wellbeing of pupils every month, and it was suggested that, if such information was readily available, there should be more regular reporting to parents through report cards, emails or other means, thereby allowing early intervention when issues arose. A formalised reporting structure would strengthen the partnership between parents and schools, and a request was made that how to better communicate with parents be explored at a future meeting or workshop. The Chair confirmed that a workshop could be arranged. However, it was explained that many of the points raised in terms of communication with and reporting to parents already happened at individual school level;
- engaging with parents at all levels was vital, and the report was welcomed. However, concern was expressed that while there were some extremely well-organised Parent Councils they were often run by a small number of hard-working volunteers, and it was questioned how the Council was going to engage with the parents who were not currently involved and encourage them to volunteer and interact with the school. In addition, an example was cited of a Parent Council that

had been unable to go into abeyance as it was a registered charity, and it was suggested it was necessary to look at how the Council engaged with Parent Councils and provide guidance on governance. The Chair explained there were clear guidelines on the establishment and roles and responsibilities of Parent Councils, and it was suggested this should also form part of the proposed workshop;

- there appeared to be no mention of home-educated children in the Strategy, and concern was expressed that they were not getting the support they needed. The Chair suggested that home education also be included in the proposed workshop;
- it was necessary to empower parents to be part of the educational process, and reference was made to successful initiatives in local schools such as literacy and numeracy fairs with hands-on activities that were both fun and educational;
- the intention to identify parents and carers who might have barriers to access was welcomed, and further information was sought on how it was intended to do so;
- the explicit nature of the Strategy was commended;
- parents had a responsibility to get their children to school, and involving them in improving attendance was key;
- information was sought, and provided, as to how, and at what level, it was envisaged parents would contribute to decision-making;
- in relation to the possible formation of Area Parent Council Forums, parents tended to be concerned about their own children and their own local school. Concern was expressed regarding accountability and creating another layer of bureaucracy, and further information was sought, and provided, on the proposals;
- Members spoke to their own positive experiences of parental involvement, and commended teachers' willingness to answer direct questions and show parents the resources available to them to support their children. However, it was necessary to consider how to support harder to reach parents to ask such questions and guide them through the answers;
- the language used by education professionals could be difficult to understand, and a request was made that plain English be used wherever possible when engaging with parents. The Chief Officer – Primary Education and Early Years confirmed that, going forward, officers would engage more closely with the Parent Council Partnership around the use of language prior to releasing any documentation;
- Head Teachers and their colleagues could be somewhat exposed at Parent Council meetings when there was a particular issue at a school, and were placed in the position of balancing their duties to the Council and to parents. It having been queried what support was provided in that regard, it was confirmed engagement with Parent Councils would form part of the induction programme for new Head Teachers;
- the willingness of the Chair and officers to be open and transparent where there were difficulties within a particular school was commended. Meeting with Parent Council representatives and teaching staff in person did a great deal to ease the concerns of the school community, and it was requested this be replicated throughout Highland;
- tribute was paid to the Chief Officers responsible for primary and secondary education for the changes made in a short period of time in terms of engagement with Head Teachers, schools and parents;
- it was important to listen to parents and tailor communication based on their needs, and an example was provided of a school communicating with parents on a weekly basis by way of a closed digital group;

- the Council's whole family approach and close partnership working with the Children's Services team enabled parents to be identified who were not engaging with schools or who, for example, had support needs or young carers;
- change took time and one template did not fit all but a lot of progress had been made, and it was important to recognise the leadership of Head Teachers as well as the role of pastoral teachers in schools;
- where Head Teachers had communicated to Parent Councils how they intended to implement the Strategy, it had been well received;
- with reference to recent Head Teacher interviews, the successful candidates' ideas in terms of how to get parents, particularly those who were hard to reach, and the community involved had been impressive and inspirational, and Members were encouraged to visit their local Head Teachers to speak to them about their plans for engaging with parents;
- early diagnosis of neurodivergent conditions such as Autism or Tourette's Syndrome gave parents the capacity and knowledge to support their children and teach them coping strategies, increasing the likelihood of them thriving in mainstream education, and it was queried whether there was any scope for an increased focus on early diagnosis. In response, it was explained that only the Neuro Developmental Assessment Service, which was an NHS Highland responsibility, could provide a clinical diagnosis. However, the Council was working closely with NHS Highland in terms of how resources could be aligned to address the challenges being faced. It was added that it was important not to underestimate the professional knowledge of teaching staff who could sometimes recognise specific traits, and a significant amount of support was available ahead of diagnosis from specialist education services such as Educational Psychology and Speech and Language Therapy;
- the title of the Strategy implied it was just for parents and not the wider family, and it was suggested "Family Involvement and Engagement Strategy" would be more appropriate. Particularly in working families, it was often the grandparents who dropped off/picked up children at school and attended school events. In addition, reference was made to an instance of a grandparent being told they could not join a Parent Council, and it was suggested there was an opportunity for grandparental involvement on struggling Parent Councils. It was confirmed that grandparents could be co-opted onto Parent Councils even if they were not acting as the parent, and the Chair suggested the matter be discussed further at the proposed workshop;
- the demographics in Highland were such that parental involvement and engagement was easier to achieve in some school than others, and information was sought, and provided, as to how the Education Service was feeding into the Poverty Commission to try to increase the inclusion of parents and grandparents in the school community;
- with reference to the three-year Action Plan contained within the Strategy, it would be helpful for the Committee to receive an update report after six months so Members could track progress and see whether there was anything they could do at local level. It was confirmed an interim report could be provided, and there would be a further update within next year's Education and Learning Improvement Plan;
- communication, reporting and effectively collaborating with parents and families was important and valued across the teaching profession. However, this sometimes involved parents raising other issues, such as vacant teaching posts, with teachers, and the impact of long-term absence and vacancies on the remaining staff was emphasised; and

- Child's Plans were important instruments of collaboration between schools and families, and it would be helpful to receive a report in that regard including whether there were models of good practice in terms of the compilation of Child's Plans and whether targets were being met. The Chair emphasised the need for caution in terms of confidentiality issues. However, he confirmed consideration would be given to bringing a report to a future meeting on the inter-agency work that went into Child's Plans and their central role in the Getting It Right For Every Child agenda.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the content of the report;
- APPROVED** the reviewed Parental Involvement and Engagement Strategy 2025-2028 (the Strategy) (Appendix 2 of the report);
- NOTED** that action to implement the Strategy would form part of the annual Education Improvement/National Improvement Framework Plan;
- AGREED** that a Members' workshop be arranged to explore how to better communicate with parents; the establishment, roles and responsibilities of Parent Councils; and home education;
- AGREED** that an interim report on the implementation of the Strategy and Action Plan be brought to the Committee after a period of six months; and
- AGREED** that consideration be given to a future report on Child's Plans, specifically the associated inter-agency work and their central role in the Getting It Right For Every Child agenda.

## 7. **Education Improvement Plan and Raising Attainment and Achievement Update** **Cunntas às Ùr mu Phlana Leasachaidh an Fhoghlaim agus mu Bhith ag** **Àrdachadh Buileachadh is Coileanadh**

There had been circulated Report No EDU/31/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

The Chair referred to the recent seminar which had helped shape the Education and Learning Improvement Plan for 2025/26, and thanked all Members who had attended for their input on the day and after the event.

In introducing the report, attention was drawn to a data error at section 6.1.2 of the covering report. It was explained that the Combined Literacy figure for 2021 was 49%, not 53%, and for 2025 the figure was 69%, not 72%. This was still an improvement of 20%, and the correct data was set out in the graphs in the Education and Learning Improvement Plan itself.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the nature of education meant that, unlike some other Council services, change and improvement took a long time. However, it was difficult to see improvement in the report, particularly when looking at the key attainment trends in S4-S6 as set out in section 6.2.3, and it would be helpful to receive an explanation as to where improvements had been made;
- with reference to the senior phase attainment statistics in Appendix 3 of the report, attainment at SCQF Level 6 Numeracy in S5 had increased by 2% in Highland in 2025. However, the National figure had increased by 3% which indicated that



other local authorities had improved at a better rate. Attainment at SCQF Level 6 Literacy in S5 had decreased in Highland in 2025 so Highland was now below the Virtual Comparator. Other Members cited several other areas where Highland was below the Virtual and National Comparator;

- offers from universities were often unconditional or based on S5 Higher grades meaning that Advanced Highers rarely influenced admissions, and it was questioned what other local authorities were doing better than Highland, in terms of discipline and attendance, to improve performance in S6. In that regard, it was explained that an attendance policy had been implemented in secondary schools which included expectations around attendance in S6 and steps that would be taken if young people were not engaging. Work was also underway on a presentation policy, which it was hoped to bring to the next meeting of the Committee, which would set out firm guidance on the number of certificated courses pupils would be expected to be studying. With reference to the previous item, it was added that it was necessary to ensure parents understood the importance of children engaging fully with courses in S6 and supported them to do so;
- in response to a question, it was explained that, in accordance with the Council's Integrated Impact Assessment procedure, a full impact assessment had not been carried out as the screening had identified that the Education and Learning Improvement Plan would have only positive impacts on children and young people. A full impact assessment was only required where the screening identified negative impacts;
- with reference to the Combined Primary 1, 4 and 7 A Curriculum for Excellence (ACEL) data in section 6.1.2 of the report, the improvements in literacy and numeracy were significant and impressive, and information was sought, and provided, as to what the increases could be attributed to;
- page 52 of the papers referred to collective school attendance improving by 0.2%. However, it was contended this barely constituted an improvement, it being only 2 of every 1000 pupils;
- information was sought, and provided, as to how the poverty related attainment gap was identified and measured;
- it was suggested the report was glossing over the truth, which was that attainment, standards and the life chances of young people in Highland were declining. A society that could not teach its children to read and write with confidence was letting them down, and attainment in literacy had decreased in S4, S5 and S6. Attainment in S6, a vital gateway year, was decreasing, and particular reference was made to the significant reduction in the number of pupils achieving an Advanced Higher. Complementary Tariff Scores had also gone down and, whilst the report indicated that the attainment gap between the least and most disadvantaged learners in S6 had not changed significantly over the last two years, it was contended that was not the case as performance at both ends of the gap had deteriorated. The National Comparator figures were key, as they showed what students in Highland were up against when applying for university places, and they indicated that Highland was falling behind the rest of Scotland. Pupils and teachers in Highland were no less capable than elsewhere, and it was suggested the responsibility for the issues lay with the Education Committee. It was necessary to recognise there was a problem, raise standards and expectations, and reverse the negative trend;
- it was intended to move an amendment proposing that attainment statistics be reported quarterly to Full Council to allow further scrutiny and continual improvement. However, the Chair explained that attainment was reported annually

so quarterly statistics were not available, and the Council agenda was not a matter for the Committee to agree. Other Members added that the Education Committee was the appropriate forum to debate education matters, and all Members could attend the Committee if they so wished;

- in relation to improving performance amongst the lowest attaining 20% of pupils, it was necessary to focus on the early years into P1, identify disengagement with education at an early stage, and work with pupils at school level. In addition, it was questioned whether the leap from S3 to S4 was too much for some pupils, and whether the perspective of learners was evaluated at that stage;
- the S4 Level 5 Literacy and Numeracy figures on page 71 of the papers did not appear to correlate with the percentage of Highland pupils achieving 5+ awards at SCQF Level 5 in S4, and clarification was sought, and provided, as to whether Level 5 Numeracy included applications of maths, and whether Level 5 Literacy was a National 5 in English. It was added that if a pupil could achieve a National 5 in English they should be aiming to achieve several other National 5s in S4, and it was questioned whether learners were being sufficiently challenged to achieve;
- the recent Members' Seminar on raising attainment and achievement was commended, and it had been encouraging to see what was happening from strategic level down to classroom level;
- the importance of taking a bottom-up approach, working with parents and getting it right in the early years from birth was emphasised. As indicated earlier in the discussion, primary attainment in Highland had improved significantly, but these improvements would take time to move up through the system;
- appreciation was expressed for the direction provided by the Assistant Chief Executive – People over the past year, and to senior education officers for their efforts;
- the evidence in the report showed a sustained, persistent and systemic decline in senior phase attainment. Radical intervention was needed, and support was expressed for discussing the matter at Full Council;
- concern was expressed regarding the lack of meaningful debate at Committee, and that responses were only provided to specific, direct questions;
- the wider context was one of excellent teachers leaving the profession, unfilled vacancies, staff on long-term absence, and pupils who were struggling. Teachers were under pressure, and it was necessary to start talking about that in practical terms;
- as had previously been stated, young people in Highland were at a disadvantage when applying to college or university in comparison with those from other Council areas, and this should be cause for concern at Full Council level. In response, it was explained that destination data, including information on university applications for Highland, had been reported to the June meeting of the Committee, and the Chief Officer – Secondary Education undertook to re-share the report;
- the Covid pandemic and rurality were often cited as contributing factors to the decline in attainment in Highland. However, Covid had not only affected Highland, and rurality had not prevented Highland from being an exemplar of academic performance in the past;
- it had previously been asked if the Council could be partnered with a top performing local authority, as happened in other parts of the UK. In that regard, it was explained that the Council already had strong connections to the Northern Alliance but, over the past year and half, further connections had been made through collaborative improvement work at national level, and the Council worked closely with Stirling, Borders and Midlothian Councils;

- putting the human rights and needs of every child and young person at the centre of education, and ensuring equity and inclusion in all improvement activity, was important, as was the health and wellbeing of children and young people;
- the importance of closing the attainment gap was recognised. However, every school and cohort had different learning needs and attainment, and it was necessary to take that into consideration;
- not all young people wanted to go to university, and it was important to ensure other opportunities, such as apprenticeships, were available, that young people were supported in whatever path they chose, and that they were encouraged to become fully rounded citizens;
- learning and training support for all educational staff was key;
- anecdotally, Members had heard that attendance was poor on Fridays, and information was sought, and provided, as to whether issues relating to rural transport and the shorter school day on a Friday were skewing the attendance figures;
- positivity was expressed regarding the way in which education had moved on in recent decades;
- Members spoke to their experience of participating in Children's Hearings, highlighting that a high proportion of those who came through the system were neurodivergent. Children were victims of their circumstances, and the importance of addressing the matter under discussion correctly was emphasised, as were the potential consequences of failing to do so;
- the need to work together, regardless of political persuasion, and to put children and young people first was emphasised;
- in responding to the points raised, the Assistant Chief Executive – People refuted any suggestion the report was anything other than factual, adding that it clearly set out where improvements had been made as well as where they had not. Whilst there had been a lot of discussion regarding the areas that had not improved, there had been less mention of the areas that had improved, and a summary was provided in that regard. In particular, it was highlighted that S5 Level 6 had increased by 2%; S4 Level 5 had increased by 5%, and 9% over the past five years; 5+ awards in S5 had increased by 2%; and 3+ awards in S5 had increased by 1%. It was also important to recognise areas that were not about SQA qualifications, such as the increase in Skills for Work and National Progression Awards which impacted hundreds of school leavers and included subjects that were important for Highland such as early learning and childcare, rural skills, hospitality, automotive skills, social services, construction, business and marketing, scientific technologies, aquaculture and computer games development. It was emphasised that 96.5% of school leavers had positive destinations, which was the highest figure in five years and above the national position. These were all things to be proud of. However, the need for sustained improvement against every measure was recognised, and the attainment data had been appended to the Improvement Plan as the two things went hand in hand. Thanks were expressed to the Members who had attended the seminar which had helped inform the Improvement Plan, and it was hoped some of the feedback that had been provided was evident in the Plan. An assurance was provided that improving the educational outcomes and positive destinations of young people in Highland would continue to be a strong ambition, both centrally and at school level, but it was important to acknowledge where improvements had been made and the hard work of those involved.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the Education and Learning Annual Report for 2024/25;
- ii. **APPROVED** the Education and Learning Improvement Plan for 2025/26 (Appendix 2 of the report); and
- iii. scrutinised and **NOTED** Highland's Senior Phase Attainment for session 2024/25 (Appendix 3 of the report).

#### 8. **Quarterly Performance Monitoring Report Q2 2025/26** **Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Coileanadh Ràitheil R2 2025/26**

There had been circulated Report No EDU/32/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- there was value in the Committee being able to analyse trends in data, and it was proposed that, in future, all school inspection reports be presented to the Committee to improve scrutiny of service performance. This was accepted by the Chair, and it was confirmed discussions would take place as to the most appropriate means of presenting school inspection reports to the Committee. However, it was explained that school inspection reports were available online and were provided at Area Committee level. Other Members added that they had not received inspection reports at Area level, and an assurance was provided that this would be addressed;
- in response to a question, it was confirmed that Quarter 2 covered July, August and September, so the staff absence figures for that period had been impacted by the school holidays;
- in response to a question, it was confirmed that the Council-wide statistics included all services;
- the importance of understanding the reasons for staff absences in order to better support staff having been emphasised, the Strategic Lead – Resources confirmed that information in that regard could be provided in future reports;
- staff were having to teach in difficult conditions, and long-term staff absences were putting additional pressure on the remaining staff; and
- information was sought, and provided, on the resource and time implications of processing Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. Concern was expressed regarding vexatious requests, and it was questioned whether a discussion in that regard was needed at Full Council level. However, it was explained that all FOI requests must be dealt with unless an exception could be applied in terms of the Freedom of Information Act.

The Committee:-

- i. scrutinised and **NOTED** the Service's performance information;
- ii. **NOTED** the last quarterly report combined both Performance and Delivery Plan reporting. These would now be reported separately; and
- iii. **AGREED** that discussions would take place as to the most appropriate means of presenting school inspection reports to the Committee.

## 9. Delivery Plan Monitoring and Progress Update – My Future Highland Q2 2025/26 Sgrùdadh agus Cunntas air Adhartas a’ Phlana Lìbhrigidh – Mo Ghàidhealtachd Ri Teachd R2 2025/26

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

The Chair stated that this was an important report, as education was about preparing young people for the world of work while supporting them to develop the skills required in an ever-changing society. It was currently a pivotal time in terms of investment in many different projects across Highland as well as the huge number of visitors coming to the area and, as such, it was necessary to support both skills development and engagement with employers to make sure young people took full advantage of the opportunities that were and would be available.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- thanks were expressed for the exciting and positive report;
- the Digital School was an innovative project that could provide pupils with wider opportunities and could also potentially be used by home-educated children. Disappointment was expressed at the ongoing delays in its expansion, and an update was sought, and provided, in that regard;
- Members welcomed the increase in uptake of accelerated degree pathways as a way of inspiring young people to engage in S6; the increase in the delivery of Modern Apprenticeships; and the “Talking Tubs” initiative;
- it was queried whether S6 pupils could take different subjects at different schools to allow a wider range of subjects to be offered;
- the Creative Industries workshop provided by the production company behind “The Traitors” television programme was commended, and the importance of production companies who came to the area engaging with schools and young people was emphasised;
- information was sought, and provided, on funding for hybrid school/college learning, and whether sufficient information was given to parents on what happened in terms of funding if a child chose to leave school and attend college part-time;
- many young people would be self-employed at some point in their future, and the attention being given to business skills was welcomed;
- the importance of preparing young people for life as well as for work was highlighted;
- concern was expressed regarding the apparent decline in rational thought in today’s society, and it was questioned how that could be addressed in education;
- information was sought, and provided, regarding Foundation Apprenticeships, including whether they were offered in all schools and the criteria for acceptance; and
- attention was drawn to a possible future partnership between the Gro For You project, which specialised in creating grassroots solutions to addressing skills challenges, and Tain Royal Academy, and this was welcomed.

The Committee scrutinised and **NOTED** the Delivery Project updates provided in the report.

## **10. Youth Convener Update** **Cunntas às Ùr mu Neach-gairm na h-Òigridh**

Highland Youth Convener, Leah McBain, delivered a presentation on her priorities for the year ahead with a particular focus on Online Safety and Technology.

It having been queried whether the Committee would receive feedback and recommendations on the work around digital safety, the Chair confirmed that the Youth Convener would have the opportunity to feed back to the Committee towards the end of her term.

Having expressed thanks for the inspiring presentation and wished the Youth Convener good luck for her term in office, the Committee **NOTED** the presentation.

## **11. Community Learning and Development Plan 2024-2027: Annual Report, including Year 2 and 3 Review** **Plana Ionnsachadh is Leasachadh Coimhearsnachd 2024–2027: Aithisg Bhliadhnail, a’ gabhail a-steach Ath-sgrùdadh Bliadhna 2 is 3**

There had been circulated Report No EDU/34/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- it having been queried whether there was a connection between the underspend on Community Learning and Development (CLD) and the HM Inspector's view that insufficient progress had been made against the two main action points identified in the original CLD inspection, it was clarified that the underspend related to the transfer of the budget from High Life Highland to the Council; and
- information was sought, and provided, on the provision of evening classes in schools and whether there was scope to reinstate these.

The Committee **NOTED** the progress, including key delivery achievements, made in year one of the Highland Community Learning and Development Plan 2024-2027.

## **12. Keeping The Promise in Highland** **A’ Cumail a’ Ghealltanais sa Ghàidhealtachd**

There had been circulated Report No EDU/35/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

The Chair explained that an update report on how The Promise was being kept in Highland had been presented to the recent meeting of the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee. However, he felt it was important that an update was also brought to the Education Committee.

Members welcomed the report, which was an important reminder of the Council's Corporate Parenting responsibilities. Attention was drawn to the "Language Bin" which had been created following consultation with young people, and Members were encouraged to reflect on the language they used when discussing children and young people as young people often considered it to be stigmatising and judgemental.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the contents of the report;
- ii. scrutinised and **NOTED** areas of challenge and areas of progress across service delivery; and
- iii. **NOTED** that all services would be supported to Keep The Promise.

### **13. High Life Highland Progress Report Aithisg Adhartais High Life na Gàidhealtachd**

**Transparency Statement: Mr A Christie declared a connection to this item in his capacity as a Non-Executive Director of NHS Highland. However, having applied the objective test, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.**

There had been circulated Report No EDU/36/25 by the Chief Executive, High Life Highland.

In addition to the report, the Highland Archivist gave a presentation on the work of the Archive Service, including public and school engagement.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- although there had been some initial concerns about the creation of High Life Highland, it had flourished since then and its existence had helped to protect important cultural and heritage services;
- information was sought, and provided, on the perceived greatest risks to High life Highland over the next five years; any geographical or socio-economic gaps in the provision of music tuition and how these were being managed; and income generation streams within the Archive Service;
- before the creation of the Archive Service significant and interesting documents had been stored in unsatisfactory conditions and had not been available to the public. The Archive Service had rectified this situation and its success was commended;
- the music tuition service, which at one point had been close to being cut completely as had been the case in other local authority areas, was commended and attention was drawn to the Gold Award for commitment to music recently awarded to Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Port Rìgh;
- Members commended the Archive Centre in Portree, which was well used and respected by the community;
- the music tuition service concert at Eden Court had been a great success and thanks were extended to the many music tutors who had worked within both the Council and High Life Highland, some of whom were retiring soon after many years of service;
- the success in securing “Get Active Scotland” funding was welcomed, and it was queried how local communities could access this funding; and
- an update was requested on the roll out of the library van in the west Highland.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. the performance of High Life Highland as detailed in its annual report in Appendix A of the report;

- ii. the information provided in Appendix B of the report on customer satisfaction levels;
- iii. the general updates provided in Appendix C of the report; and
- iv. the information on the archives service in Appendix D of the report.

**14. Minutes of Educational Trust Fund Sub-Committee**  
**Geàrr-chunntas Fo-Chomataidh Maoin Urras an Fhoghlaim**

The Committee **NOTED** the draft Minutes of the Educational Trust Fund Sub-Committee on 8 September 2025.

**15. Membership of Sub-Committees**  
**Ballrachd air Fo-Chomataidhean**

The Committee **AGREED** the revised membership of the Educational Trust Fund Sub-Committee and the Local Negotiating Committee for Teachers as tabled.

The meeting concluded at 1.10 pm.