

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Economy and Infrastructure Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Thursday, 12 February 2026 at 9.30am.

Present:

Mr A Baxter	Mr B Lobban (Substitute)
Mr I Brown	Mr P Logue
Mr J Bruce (Remote)	Mr D Macpherson
Mr M Cameron	Ms L Niven (Remote)
Mr S Coghill (Remote)	Mrs T Robertson
Mr J Edmondson	Mrs M Ross (Substitute)
Ms C Gillies (Substitute)	Mr R Stewart
Mr M Green	Ms K Willis

Non-Members also present:

Mr R Bremner (Remote)	Ms L Kraft (Remote)
Ms L Dundas (Remote)	Mr R MacKintosh (Remote)
Mr J Finlayson (Remote)	Ms K MacLean (Remote)
Mr D Fraser (Remote)	Mr T MacLennan (Remote)
Dr M Gregson	Mr D Millar (Remote)
Mr M Hutchison (Remote)	Mr P Oldham (Remote)
Ms E Knox (Remote)	Mr M Reiss

Officials in Attendance:

Mr M MacLeod, Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy
Ms D Sutton, Chief Officer - Operations & Maintenance
Mr P Reid, Chief Officer - Facilities & Fleet Management
Ms N Wallace, Service Lead - Environment Dev Active Travel
Mr D Mudie, Strategic Lead - Planning and Building Standards
Mr T Stott, Development Plans Manager
Ms J Bromham, Flow Country Partnership Manager
Mr P Tomalin, Senior Community Development Manager
Mr R Porteous, Operations Manager – Corran Ferry
Mr P Waite, Outdoor Access & Long Distance Route Manager
Mr D Cowie, Principal Planner
Ms M Maguire, Principal Planner
Ms S Lashley, World Heritage Project Co-ordinator
Ms J Cromarty, Team Leader (Sustainable Transport)
Miss J MacLennan, Joint Democratic Services Manager
Mrs O Bayon, Committee Officer

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

Mr M Green in the Chair

Business

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

Apologies were intimated on behalf of Mr K Gowans, Mr R Jones, Mr W MacKay Mr H Morrison and Mr A Sinclair.

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

The Committee **NOTED** the following declaration of interest:-

Item 13 – Mr J Edmondson

And also **NOTED** the following Transparency Statement:-

Item 4 – Mr M Cameron and Mr M Green

Item 10 – Mr J Edmondson

3. Good News Naidheachdan Matha

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

Indicative Capital Budget Allocations for Roads Maintenance 2026/27

There had been an increase in the Area allocations for the Roads Capital Budget for 2026/27 and a proposed contingency allocation of up to £1 million was also brought forward to address in-year issues.

Roads Team Response to Snow Event in Highland 1-12 January 2026

The Roads Team responded to challenging winter weather conditions between 1-12 January 2026. The severe conditions required a coordinated approach across the Service, with teams providing support to Roads colleagues throughout this period. Alongside many notes of thanks and praise received from members of the public, sincere appreciation was expressed to all operatives, supervisors and managers for their commitment and hard work.

Catch the Bus Month 2025 Campaign

The Highland Council received the 2025 Catch the Bus Month Local Authority Engagement Award from Bus Users UK. The Council had been one of 376 official partners taking part in this year's Catch the Bus Month, promoting the benefits of bus travel and encouraging increased public use.

During the campaign, the Council invited school pupils to visit the in-house bus depot. A month-long social media campaign was also delivered and supported by a discounted 10-journey ticket for the in-house bus service, which proved popular

with the public. In addition, a public awareness event was held in Inverness with representatives from Bus Users UK, D&E Coaches, Stagecoach and CityLink. The focus of the day was to highlight the benefits of using buses, including boosting the economy, reducing congestion and pollution, and improving health and wellbeing.

Highland Council Bus Service – Growth

The Highland Council Bus Service continued to grow. The Council expanded its in-house bus service to cover several routes in Inverness and the Black Isle, ensuring service continuity after significant low-passenger-driven cuts by Stagecoach. New Council-operated services, including routes in Dalneigh, Milton of Leys and Culduthel, filled gaps to maintain city connectivity. This provided communities with transport links across the city and beyond.

Improvement Service Innovation Award 2025

Ben Forrester, Systems Administrator within the Systems and Change Team, was the recipient of the 2025 Gazetteer Innovation Award. He had utilised the Python coding language to create scripts designed to update records in the Corporate Address Gazetteer, information supplied daily to the One Scotland Gazetteer and relied upon by public sector systems including those within Scottish Government, National Records of Scotland, NHS and the emergency services.

Naver Bridge

The deck of the new bridge was completed and was scheduled to receive its waterproofing layer in the week ending 30 January. This would allow the abutments to be backfilled and utilities to be finalised before surfacing the bridge. This represented a significant step forward in progressing the transfer of traffic to the new bridge to enable demolition of the old structure.

30 Years of Screen Highland 1996-2026

Screen Highland marked its 30th anniversary. It was one of Scotland's oldest film offices, having been established in 1996 to support the development of the screen industry, drive economic development and promote the region to visitors. Over the past three decades it had been highly successful in attracting some of the world's most iconic productions to the Highlands, supporting local talent and helping to grow a vibrant screen sector year on year. Working closely with partners, plans were being developed to celebrate the achievements and growth of the industry. The milestone year also looked ahead to attracting new productions, investment and opportunities across the Highlands.

4. Short Term Let Control Area Sgìre Smachd Màil Gheàrr-ùine

**Transparency Statements: Mr M Cameron and Mr M Green made
Transparency Statements in respect of this item as a short term let licence**

holder and an owner of a holiday property in Nairn respectively. However, having applied the objective test, they did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/01/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- appreciation was expressed for the quality of the evidence, with emphasis that decisions had been taken locally at Area Committees and that any final approach should continue to respect local decision making;
- concern was expressed about the proposal to consult on two aggregated areas, Inverness City and a single Highland Rural area, rather than on an Area Committee basis. Members queried governance, the risk that local recommendations could be overruled at Committee, and sought assurance that post consultation reports would return to relevant Area Committees before any final decision;
- Members reiterated concern that consolidating areas into a single Highland Rural control area reduced the influence of Area Committees and emphasised the need to maintain meaningful local decision making throughout the process;
- observations were made that designating a single large rural control area could create risk of legal challenge if statements of reasons were not sufficiently specific to each locality;
- Members sought information on resource implications and it was indicated that significant officer capacity would be required to manage an anticipated rise in applications seeking to regularise existing use;
- it was confirmed that the control area mechanism did not operate retrospectively. However, some existing short term let properties already required planning permission and would need to regularise their position, including by application for certificates of lawfulness where appropriate. A significant volume of such applications was anticipated and would be addressed in the next report;
- clarification was provided that consultation would be local in focus within the proposed areas, with statutory public notice, direct notification to Community Councils and a preferred six-week consultation period. Following consultation, proposed boundaries could be reduced to exclude areas that opposed inclusion, but could not be expanded to include new areas that had not been consulted;
- reference was made to impacts on housing availability, workforce recruitment and community sustainability, including the position in Gaelic speaking areas where displacement from home communities affected language use and service resilience;
- observations were made that short term let control areas formed only one part of a wider response to the housing challenge, and requests were made for updates on action to address long-term empty homes; and

- it was confirmed that work on rural housing within any future growth deal was being taken forward as part of the Council's Housing Challenge programme with both Governments, with further detail to follow in due course.

Following a short adjournment, the Committee **AGREED** to suspend Standing Order 35.1 as the decision on the process had previously been taken by the Highland Council on 18 September 2025, falling within the six-month period during which decisions could not normally be revisited,

The Committee then accepted the amendment by Mr A Baxter, which required post-consultation reports to return to the relevant Area Committees before a final decision by the Economy and Infrastructure Committee, with corresponding amendments to the Scheme of Delegation.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** that the Area Committees of Lochaber, Sutherland, City of Inverness Area, Skye and Raasay and Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh had agreed to continue the process of considering designating Short Term Let Control Area covering all or part of their area;
- ii. **NOTED** that the process of designating further Short Term Let Control Areas requires consultation on the Planning Authority's statement of reasons, and that in Inverness City, Short Term Lets display different characteristics and present different issues relative to those in rural areas, which warrants consultation on a different statement of reasons;
- * iii. **AGREED TO RECOMMEND** to Council that the final decision to designate a Short Term Let Control Area was for Economy and Infrastructure Committee, following a post-consultation report to the relevant Area Committees, amending the Scheme of Delegation, accordingly, allowing them to comment, and if necessary, amend the Short Term Let Control Area within their area committee boundary; and
- iv. **AGREED** that following consultation officers bring back a further report to Committee, summarising the feedback so that Members could decide whether to continue with submission to Scottish Government Ministers.

5. Revenue Budget Monitoring Report for the period Q3 2025/26 Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Buidseat Teachd-a-steach airson na h-ùine R3 2025/26

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/02/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- a brief introduction confirmed that the Q3 revenue position continued to show challenges across several service areas, with active management measures underway, including work on roads maintenance budgets, climate change and energy budgets and the Corran Ferry overspend;
- clarification was sought on whether mandatory charges for motorhomes and campervans had been implemented across all Council car parks, observing

that this had been highlighted as a £50k income line but had not been in place when queried at the October 2025 Council meeting;

- reference was made to section 7.1 of the report, and Members requested further detail on the Corran Ferry budget recovery plan, including proposals relating to refit costs and staffing. It was highlighted that Lochaber Members received regular operational updates but had not yet discussed the budget recovery plan. Assurance was sought that any consideration of fare increases beyond the annual uplift would involve engagement with Lochaber Members and community stakeholders as previously committed;
- additional income reported from increased cruise ship numbers brought significant revenue in areas such as Fort William and Portree, yet this income was centralised within the wider harbours budget. Members expressed interest in future work to explore options for linking harbour income to local reinvestment, similar to the approach used for car parking;
- concern was expressed regarding delays in implementing previous budget decisions, with comment that failure to implement agreed measures undermined the role of Members in setting the annual budget. Reference was made to a projected £2m overspend in the climate change and energy budget and the view was expressed that such variances risked necessitating service reductions, use of reserves or increases in charges in future years; and
- Members emphasised the importance of realistic budgeting, noting that businesses in financial difficulty often overestimated income and underestimated expenditure. Further clarification was sought regarding seasonal reductions in marine gas oil sales and progress with battery-storage or solar PV-related income streams, including whether these had begun to generate revenue or whether significant income was not expected until the following financial year.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. the forecast financial position for the year as set out in the report and Appendices 1 and 2 of the report;
- ii. the explanations provided for any material variances and actions taken or proposed; and
- iii. the update provided regarding savings delivery as detailed within Appendix 3 of the report.

6. Capital Monitoring Report Q3 2025/26 Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Calpa R3 2025/26

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/03/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- concern was expressed regarding the condition of rural bridges, with specific reference to closures in the Carrbridge and Dulnain Bridge area. It was highlighted that the impact on local businesses, including farms operating on both sides of the river, had been severe and questions were raised about

whether current approaches risked leaving rural communities without viable transport connections;

- clarification was requested on an apparent underspend identified in the report. Members asked why temporary bridges continued to incur ongoing costs when capital budget remained unspent and sought further information on progress with permanent repair works. Questions were also raised regarding the status of the Tomich Junction planning application and the cause of significant cost increases at Naver Bridge;
- observations were made that underspends were not reflective of reduced need, but instead highlighted delays in delivering critical infrastructure works. Members stressed that rural bridges were essential links for residents and businesses and that asset failure had wide ranging social and economic impacts;
- comment was made that chronic under funding of roads and bridges by national government had left Highland with structural disadvantages, as current funding formulas prioritised traffic volumes over geographic scale. Members emphasised that Highland's extensive network required a more equitable national approach and expressed support for renewed representation to both Governments;
- additional questions were raised regarding active travel, with Members querying whether the full allocation would be spent in year and whether increased funding would be pursued in the next financial year. Further clarification was sought on progress toward upgrades at Glencoe car park;
- Members referred to the scale of the Highland bridge estate, highlighting the large number of structures nearing or exceeding their lifespan. Examples were given of bridges requiring full replacement, including those long overdue for renewal and those carrying heavy local usage, with Members requesting clarity on how priorities were determined and what leverage the Council had to influence national investment decisions;
- comment was made that the condition of key assets, including the Waterloo Bridge, demonstrated a significant backlog. Members emphasised that delays in inspection and replacement were affecting communities daily and urged renewed escalation to national level;
- Members expressed broader concern that the condition of Highland's roads network had deteriorated to a level affecting mobility across the region, with the view expressed that the challenge was now comparable in scale to the housing crisis;
- officers advised that temporary bridge allocations were being utilised as quickly as procurement timescales allowed, with an expectation that budgets would be fully spent by year end. It was confirmed that outline planning had been submitted for Tomich Junction, that detailed design was ongoing, and that Glencoe car park updates would be provided following the meeting; and
- it was recognised that the concerns raised across Members reflected the significant importance of rural and urban bridges to communities throughout the Highlands.

The Committee **APPROVED** the financial position to 31 December 2025 and note the estimated year end forecast.

7. Roads Capital Allocations

Riarachaidhean Calpa Rathaidean

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/04/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- Members were advised of a minor correction in Table 4 of the report, with the 2025/26 allocation for Sutherland stated incorrectly and now confirmed as £2.316 million;
- concern was expressed that the level of capital allocation continued to fall significantly short of the investment required to address the condition of the Highland roads network. Reference was made to long standing backlogs and the widening gap between budget availability and actual need;
- area level allocations did not reflect the scale of deterioration across the network and examples were given highlighting substantial local backlogs, including in Lochaber and Dingwall and Seaforth. It was observed that many Councillors lacked clear visibility of the true backlog in their areas and that previously agreed reporting standards had not yet delivered full transparency;
- questions were raised regarding the structures allocation for Lochaber, including whether the annual uplift of approximately £50k was additional to the structures allocation approved at the 13 November 2025 Economy and Infrastructure Committee meeting, and how priority projects for that area would be funded;
- wider concerns were raised that funding formulas based on usage rather than network length disadvantaged Highland disproportionately, given the size and rurality of the network. This contributed to sustained under investment and placed communities, businesses and services at increasing risk;
- the view was expressed that the condition of Highland roads was deteriorating faster than investment could offset, with several Members describing the situation as unsustainable. Highland required a significantly improved national funding settlement to safeguard connectivity, public safety and economic activity;
- questions were raised on the Scottish Road Maintenance Condition Survey results, including whether the most recent findings differed materially from the previous year and how these would impact area allocations once confirmed;
- Members also queried disparities in annual percentage increases for areas such as Skye and Caithness, asking whether their relative positions in previous condition assessments explained the lower uplift for 2026/27;
- concerns were raised that delays in addressing critical bridges across Highland, including lifeline structures and those already categorised as poor, risked escalating further. Examples included Waterloo Bridge and other bridges where inspection backlogs and funding gaps continued to affect communities and businesses;
- reference was made to the cumulative impact of inflation on road materials and construction costs, with Members observing that the reported 2.15% average increase for 2026/27 represented a real term reduction against inflation rates for road materials; and

- it was recognised that while the Council had continued to allocate the maximum resources available within its own budget, the scale of the problem required additional funding from national government, with calls for stronger collective representation to secure a fairer settlement.

Thereafter, Mr M Green seconded by Mr I Brown, **MOVED** the recommendations as set out in the report.

As an **AMENDMENT**, Mr A Baxter seconded by Mr D Macpherson **MOVED** that the Council notes the estimated £233 million backlog of capital road repairs across the Highland Council area and that without Scottish Government commitment and additional financial assistance the council's road network would continue to deteriorate with a direct impact on communities and the Highland economy. Consequently, the Chairman of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee write to the Cabinet Secretary for Transport requesting a cross-party and cross-agency roads summit for the Highlands to discuss future funding options to improve Highland roads.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 8 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 8 votes, with no abstentions.

In accordance with Standing Order 30, the Chair used his casting vote in favour of the motion, and the **MOTION** was **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:

For the Motion:

Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Ms C Gillies, Mr M Green, Mr B Lobban, Ms L Niven, Mrs M Ross, Ms K Willis.

For the Amendment:

Mr A Baxter, Mr J Bruce, Mr S Coghill, Mr J Edmondson, Mr P Logue, Mr D Macpherson, Mrs T Robertson, Mr R Stewart.

The Committee:-

- i. **AGREED** the funding allocations in Table 2 of the report;
- ii. **AGREED** the specific projects from the road's contingency allocation, as detailed in Table 3 of the report;
- iii. **AGREED** that agreement on additional schemes proposed for funding from the contingency allocation would be delegated to the Assistant Chief Executive - Place, in consultation with the Committee Chair and Vice-Chair; and
- iv. **NOTED** the indicative allocations in Table 4 of the report and agree they would be updated with any adjusted for any carry forwards and using the same methodology as last year, once the Scottish Road Maintenance Condition Survey results were available.

8. Highland Local Development Plan - Progress Update (Part 2) Plana Leasachadh Ionadail na Gàidhealtachd – Cunntas Adhartais (Pàirt 2)

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/05/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the initial estimates from work undertaken for the Housing Need and Demand Assessment indicated a potential net increase of 17,000 to 18,000 jobs in Highland over the next 20 years and that related household projections suggested around 17,000 additional homes might be required, reflecting updated Scottish Government demographic projections;
- Highland remained one of the few local authorities in Scotland projected to experience household growth and therefore required to plan for the associated impact on services, infrastructure and land supply;
- clarification was sought on how the jobs forecasts might be influenced by recent developments affecting the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport area. Members queried whether temporary reductions in staffing levels at the Ardesier port site could affect long term projections; and
- it was confirmed that current estimates for job creation were based on best available information, including figures submitted with pending planning applications, but that adjustments could be made in due course as evidence evolved.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** progress on gathering, analysing, and reporting sufficient evidence to produce the new Highland Local Development Plan (HLDP), including ongoing engagement with the public, Scottish Government and other stakeholders;
- ii. **NOTED** the next steps, including requirements for completion of the Evidence Report documentation for approval by Full Council and subsequent submission to Scottish Ministers for independent Gate Check; and
- iii. **AGREED** the content of the remaining chapters of the Evidence Report as summarised in Section 7 of this report.

9. The Flow Country World Heritage Site – Progress Report Làrach Dualchas na Cruinne anns na Flobhachan – Aithisg Adhartais

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/06/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

A presentation from the Flow Country Partnership Manager was provided who outlined the governance, management and planning work underway following inscription of the Flow Country as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2024. The partnership, established as a charity in 2024, employed two Highland-Council-funded staff and managed the World Heritage budget on behalf of Highland Council and NatureScot.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- Members were advised of a minor correction within paragraph 1.2 of the report, where the reference should read “planning position statement” rather than “planning permission statement”;
- appreciation was expressed for the significance of the Flow Country landscape, with Members emphasising its unique ecological value and encouraging Members who had not visited the site to do so;
- clarification was sought on the meaning of “inappropriate development” referenced in paragraph 3.3 of the report. It was explained that such development would be any that adversely affected the Outstanding Universal Value of the site, particularly activities impacting peat-forming processes and blanket bog integrity;
- Members asked for further explanation of the term “climate reliance” in paragraph 5.9. of the report and officers advised that the wording should have read “climate resilience”; and
- concern was raised regarding the increasing spread of non-native coniferous species, including Sitka Spruce and Lodgepole Pine, which were regenerating across areas cleared for forestry or wind farm development. Members highlighted the difficulty landowners faced in determining responsibility for removal of these invasive species, observing that re-seeding was occurring beyond original planting boundaries.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** progress made and future proposals in relation to The Flow Country World Heritage Site; and
- ii. **AGREED** the proposed timeline for future reports in relation to planning and development within and close to the Site.

10. Local Transport Strategy Delivery Plan

Plana Lìbhrigidh Ro-innleachd Còmhdhalach Ionadail

Transparency Statement: Mr J Edmondson made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item in his capacity as a Director of Ardross Online CIC. However, having applied the objective test, reviewed his position in relation to the item and any personal connection, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/07/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- clarification was sought, and provided, on how the programme would be funded and whether progress depended on external bids;
- questions were raised on how future amendments to the Delivery Plan would be communicated to Committee, given its status as a live document;
- Members suggested that local transport forums, already operating in several areas, could form a useful part of ongoing engagement;

- reference was made to abnormal loads and the need for clearer coordination given their potential disruption. Members highlighted previous difficulties during planning processes and sought greater focus on managing such movements;
- Members welcomed efforts to support new station proposals and were advised that rail station requests were resource intensive and competitive at national level, with 77 applications currently across Scotland;
- queries were raised regarding the inclusion of smart-meter infrastructure within the Plan, with Members recognising its relevance to supporting cost effective EV charging. Officers accepted to relay this point to colleagues in the Climate Change and Energy team;
- Members asked whether car sharing was included in the priority actions. Officers advised that active workstreams existed but would confirm whether it appeared explicitly within the Delivery Plan;
- concern was expressed about the vulnerability of mobile phone masts during power outages, with Members highlighting the severe impact on communities during recent storms. Officers undertook to seek further advice and report back;
- Members sought clarification on timescales for the Fort William integrated transport work and were advised that results from the Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance (STAG) appraisal were expected in early 2027; and
- comment was made regarding modal shift, with the view expressed that public transport in many rural areas could not realistically match the convenience, affordability or reliability of private car use. It was argued that future work should acknowledge rural dependency on private transport and avoid approaches that were perceived to penalise car users, while continuing to support active travel and public transport where viable.

The Committee **APPROVED**:-

- i. the Local Transport Strategy 2025 – 2035 Delivery Plan; and
- ii. the Local Transport Strategy 2025 – 2035 Progress Update Template, which includes the Monitoring and Evaluation programme from the LTS.

11. Highland Council – In-house Bus Service

Comhairle na Gàidhealtachd – Seirbheis Bhusaichean an Ùghdarrais

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/08/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the in-house bus service had transformed a financially unsustainable position into a strong operational and financial success, with substantial savings achieved and significant growth in passenger numbers. A report on the future operating model would be brought to the 14 May 2026 Council meeting;
- Members queried whether establishing an Arm's Length External Organisation (ALEO) with D&E Coaches would restrict flexibility to deploy buses in areas beyond Inverness, highlighting recent reductions in

commercial services in Lochaber and the need for improved connections to new housing areas;

- questions were raised on the upcoming £2 bus fare cap pilot, specifically when it would be implemented in Highland and what impact it might have on passenger numbers;
- Members emphasised that in many parts of Highland, services had been withdrawn by commercial operators and community expectations for improved provision were growing. Members sought assurances that the in-house model would be used as a platform for further expansion across the region;
- concern was expressed that, while the in-house service was welcomed, many communities viewed it as Inverness-centric, with limited visibility elsewhere in Highland. Members asked for clarity on timescales for expansion and how gaps left by commercial operators would be addressed;
- questions were raised regarding Section 22 permit limitations and whether establishing an ALEO or obtaining an operator's licence would improve the ability to run a wider range of services and generate income;
- it was asked whether the Council was recovering the full value of reimbursement from the Scottish Government for under-22 free travel;
- questions were raised regarding progress toward a zero-emission fleet and concern expressed that earlier lack of access to funding had resulted in older, high-emission vehicles being used in Inverness;
- the importance of reliable provision in areas such as Milton of Leys, Hilton, Culloden and Inverness South was highlighted, with suggestions for improved links to visitor destinations including Culloden Battlefield;
- the need for a robust vehicle replacement programme was stressed, and assurances were welcomed that D&E Coaches operated on a strict renewal cycle and that older vehicles would continue to be phased out as electric fleet capacity increased; and
- appreciation was expressed across the Chamber for the work of the in-house bus team, with Members highlighting the reliability of services, the responsiveness shown in filling gaps left by commercial operators and the positive contribution made to local communities.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the progress of the in-house bus service; and
- ii. **AGREED** the work to develop a new operating model for Highland Council Bus and Coach services with a report to be brought to the Council meeting May 2026.

12. Seasonal Access Rangers Annual Report 2025 Aithisg Bhliadhnail Maoir-dhùthcha Inntigidh Ràitheil 2025

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/09/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- Members welcomed confirmation of recurring funding of £655,000 per annum from 2025/26 onwards to support the re-establishment and continuation of the Seasonal Access Ranger service, recognising its importance for visitor management and community reassurance;
- strong appreciation was expressed for the work carried out by the Ranger Team, with Members highlighting the scale of activity undertaken across Highland during the previous season. Examples included over 3,000 public engagements, more than 370 patrols in Lochaber alone, significant volumes of litter removal, and the identification of large numbers of abandoned tents and informal campsites;
- concern was expressed about the volume of waste, inappropriate camping, parking pressure and anti-social behaviour in hotspot areas. Members stressed that Rangers played a vital role in supporting local communities who were frequently overwhelmed during peak visitor periods;
- Members commented that the role was challenging and often undertaken in difficult conditions, involving direct engagement with visitors whose behaviour was not always responsible. It was suggested that the scale of visitor pressures, particularly in Lochaber, Skye and along the NC500, now exceeded the capacity of the current team;
- the view was expressed that educational engagement remained valuable but, in some cases, insufficient. Members suggested exploring whether Rangers could be supported by stronger enforcement mechanisms, including fixed-penalty powers for inappropriate parking, littering or irresponsible camping, as a means of addressing persistent issues;
- Members welcomed the positive impact reported in Skye, where coordination between Rangers, Police Scotland and Community Councils had been effective, but emphasised that coverage remained limited by geography and time. The importance of resourcing that would allow for increased staffing and consideration of more permanent roles was raised;
- in Easter Ross, it was highlighted that only one recognised seasonal hotspot, Portmahomack, appeared in the report and clarification was sought on whether additional sites such as Shandwick, Nigg and Balintore could receive more consistent ranger presence, given that previous locally funded provision was no longer available;
- reassurance was sought that recruitment for the 2026 season was progressing and that sufficient capacity would be in place by spring. The value of Rangers' data collection was emphasised, as it provided important evidence on visitor behaviour trends, pressures and infrastructure gaps across the region;
- growing concerns were expressed regarding blackwater waste dumping, outdoor toileting and fire risks, all of which had increased significantly in 2025. Broader infrastructure planning, including additional waste points and public toilets, should be considered in future discussions;
- reference was made to the need for improved long-term investment in visitor infrastructure, with questions raised about how observations on parking capacity, waste disposal, toilet provision and roadside camping could be translated into capital planning and budget decisions; and
- officers advised that while enforcement powers were limited and challenging to implement in practice, emerging legislative changes, including the new

Natural Environment Bill might enable local authorities to issue fixed-penalty notices for wildfire related offences. It was confirmed that this would be explored further and, if appropriate, brought back to Committee for consideration.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the information provided by the report; and
- ii. **AGREED** the Access Ranger Annual Report 2025 for distribution to stakeholders and interested parties.

13. Beinn Tharsuinn Windfarm Community Limited Annual Accounts 2024/25 Cunntasan Bliadhna Coimhearsnachd Tuathanas-gaoithe na Beinne Tarsainn Earranta 2024/25

Declaration of Interest – Mr J Edmondson made a Declaration of Interest as he was a Director of Beinn Tharsuinn Windfarm Limited for part of the period the Accounts covered and, in accordance with paragraph 5.6 of the revised Code of Conduct, he left the meeting for this item.

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/10/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- following the last Committee meeting, a letter had been sent to Scottish Power seeking an uplift in the community benefit contribution in line with the Council's Social Value Charter. Members were informed that the response received was disappointing, confirming no increase to the current £2,000 per megawatt base payment, significantly below the £12,500 per megawatt level sought under the Charter;
- a further letter from the Chair would be sent to Scottish Power requesting a face-to-face meeting to continue pressing for adherence to the Charter for future years, observing that the Council was not seeking retrospective application but a fairer forward looking settlement;
- questions were raised regarding interest earned on funds held by the company. Members sought a breakdown of backdated interest referred to in the report, including the years covered and the annualised rate of interest achieved, observing that balances in earlier years had yielded minimal return;
- comment was made that, compared with previous discussions, interest payments for 2024/25 appeared to show improvement, but Members asked for clarity to ensure that communities were not disadvantaged in earlier financial years; and
- officers confirmed that the requested information could be provided to Members.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the activities of Beinn Tharsuinn Windfarm Community Limited;
- ii. **AGREED**, on behalf of Highland Council, the Financial Statement of Beinn Tharsuinn Windfarm Community Limited for year ending 31 March 2025;
- iii. **AGREED** to write once again to Scottish Power seeking an uplift in community benefit contribution from this scheme, and for the Chair to request a face-to-face meeting to press for a fairer forward-looking agreement in line with the Social Value Charter; and
- iv. **AGREED** that officers would provide Members with a breakdown of the backdated interest referenced in the report, including the years covered and the annualised rate of interest for the previous three financial years

14. Delivery Plan Budget Monitoring and Progress Update Q3 2025/26 Sgrùdadh Buidseit is Cunntas Adhartais a' Phlana Lìbhrigidh R3 2025/26

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/11/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- questions were asked in relation to the closure report for the Solar PV Commercial Estate project, as set out in the appendix of the report. Reference was made to the earlier work comparing potential delivery models to the Edinburgh Solar Co-operative and Members queried whether similar partnership based models could now be reconsidered;
- the UK Government's newly released Local Power Plan might provide future funding opportunities for Local Authorities to work with communities to develop renewable energy schemes. This could open the door to partnerships that delivered community benefit, reduce energy costs and lower emissions, in line with the Council's Community Wealth Building and Social Value Charter commitments;
- Members sought assurance that, although the project had been formally closed, officers would continue to explore alternative approaches for deploying Solar PV within the commercial estate, including community-led or co-operative models where viable;
- officers confirmed that although the specific Delivery Plan project had been closed, work remained ongoing to identify opportunities across both leased and Council-occupied properties. They advised that further dialogue with Highland People's Power could be considered and accepted to take this forward for discussion;
- further questions were raised on the monitoring and reliability of the Council's existing solar PV installations, with Members asking how downtime was identified and reported. Officers undertook to investigate monitoring arrangements and provide clarification; and
- Members also asked whether the Council itself contributed to communities under the Social Value Charter when delivering its own renewable projects.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the progress provided in the Utility Scale Solar PV Programme and Project for updates in the report;
- ii. **APPROVED** the closure of the Solar PV Commercial Estate project as recommended by the Net Zero Portfolio Board; a
- iii. **NOTED** the progress on delivering an Investment Pipeline in compliance with the Council Delivery Plan 2024-2027;
- iv. **AGREED** that officers would explore options for renewed engagement with Highland People's Power regarding potential partnership models and report back on any viable opportunities; and
- v. **AGREED** that officers would review the monitoring arrangements for the Council's existing solar PV installations and provide clarification to Members on how system performance and downtime were recorded and addressed.

15. Performance Monitoring Report Q3 2025-26 Aithisg Sgrùdadh Coileanaidh R3 2025–26

There had been circulated Report No. ECI/12/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

During discussion, a query was raised regarding the continued absence data, which had not been reported in the previous cycle and remained unavailable in the Q3 report. Officers confirmed that they would investigate the reason for the missing information and circulate the figures to Members by email once available.

The Committee:-

- i. **AGREED** the Service's performance information;
- ii. **NOTED** the changes to presentation of the Economy and Infrastructure Service data in section 6 of the report in order to more clearly show alignment with Performance Plan commitments;
- iii. **NOTED** the inclusion of SPI's out with the Performance Plan to further support transparency and scrutiny of performance reporting; and
- iv. **AGREED** that the Assistant Chief Executive – Place would investigate the absence of absence data and circulate the information to Members by email once confirmed.

16. Minutes Geàrr-chunntas

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

- i. North PAC – 12 September 2025;
- ii. South PAC – 8 October 2025;
- iii. North PAC– 26 November 2025;
- iv. North PAC– 17 December2025;

and, **APPROVED** :-

- v. City Region Deal Monitoring Group held on 4 November 2025;
- vi. Harbours Management Board held on 28 November 2025;
- vii. Community Regeneration Fund Strategic Sub Group held on 20 January 2026; and
- viii. Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport Monitoring Group held on the 23 January 2026.

The meeting ended at 1 pm.