

**The Highland Council
Pensions Committee and Pension Board**

Minutes of Meeting of the **Pensions Committee and Pension Board** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness/remotely on Monday 16 March 2026 at 10.30am.

Present:

Pensions Committee

Mr S Coghill (remote)
Mr A Christie (remote)
Mrs J Hendry
Mr B Lobban (remote)
Mr P Logue
Mr R MacKintosh (remote)
Mr T MacLennan (remote)
Mr P Oldham
Mrs M Paterson (remote)
Mrs T Robertson

Pension Board

Dr C Birt, Highland Council (remote)
Mr B Boyd, Highland Council (substitute) (remote)
Ms E Johnston, GMB (remote)
Mr D MacDonald, Unison (remote)
Mr W Munro, Unison
Mr R Boyle, Unite

Non-Member in attendance:-

Mr L Fraser

Officers in attendance:

Mr B Porter, Chief Officer Corporate Finance, Corporate Service
Ms C Strachan, Pension Fund Manager, Corporate Service
Ms L Harrison, Pensions Accountant, Corporate Service
Mr J Thurlbeck, Corporate Audit Manager, Corporate Service
Mrs L Dunn, Joint Democratic Services Manager, Corporate Service
Mr A MacInnes, Senior Committee Officer, Corporate Service

Also in attendance:

Mr B Battison, Senior Audit Manager, Audit Scotland (remote)

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 P Oldham in the Chair

Business

**1. Apologies for Absence
Leisgeulan**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr S Kennedy and Mr R Fea from the Pension Board.

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

There were no declarations of interest/transparency statements.

3. **Service Plan 2026/27** **Plana Seirbheis 2026/27**

There was circulated Report No. PC/01/26 by the Chief Officer Corporate Finance which detailed Highland Pension Fund priorities over the next year alongside the budget and key objectives for the year ahead.

Following a summary of the report by the Pension Fund Manager, in relation to the budget for computer and ICT (external providers) it was queried if there were plans to bring this function in house in future or was it best practice to use external providers. It was advised that the budget costs for ICT (external providers) had decreased. Pensions administration software was very technical and the external provider was a leader in the pension industry. There had been a number of changes to Pension fund policy and legislation over the last few years and there was a long lead in time to develop software to take account of these changes. Given the specialist nature of undertaking this work, this could not be done in house. However, it was being considered if data cleansing to prepare for the Pensions Dashboard could be undertaken in house.

It was confirmed that fees for Investment Adviser and actuarial services had increased. The budget for central support charges was also increasing to take account of employee progression through pay scales, pay awards and additional staff costs to develop policies for good governance purposes.

It was advised that the triennial actuarial valuation would be on 31 March 2026. Following this date, data would be collated and provided to the Actuary. Initial results would be submitted to the Committee meeting in October 2026. Members of the Committee/Board would receive training on the approach to the actuarial valuation before it was submitted to Committee. In early 2027 the Pension funding strategy statement would be submitted to the Committee.

The Committee **APPROVED** the following:-

- i. Highland Pension Fund Service Plan 2026/27; and
- ii. Highland Pension Fund budget for 2026/27 (Section 11 and Appendix 3 of the report) to support the delivery of service plan.

4. **Pension Fund Administration** **Rianachd Maoin Peinnsein**

There was circulated Report No. PC/02/26 by the Chief Officer Corporate Finance which provided an update on matters relating to the administration of the Highland Pension Fund.

In discussion, reference was made to the 6,231 outstanding cases to be processed at the end of January 2026. This illustrated the need for the additional resource recruited to the team in June/July 2025 which was having a positive impact on processing benefits and managing workloads. Also, the Pensions team had received the standard accreditation for Investors in People and the team would hopefully be seeing the benefits of this now.

In relation to filling vacancies in the Pensions team, the response to a recent recruitment exercise had been good. Staff were receiving ongoing training with a view to growing our own talent.

The Committee **NOTED** the following:-

- i. current Highland Pension Fund administration performance and performance updates (section 6);
- ii. update on Pension Dashboard connection (section 7);
- iii. Investors In People accreditation standard award and training (section 8); and
- iv. consultation responses (section 10).

**5. External Audit Annual Plan 2025/26
Plana Bliadhnail Sgrùdadh on Taobh A-muigh 2025/26**

There was circulated Report No. PC/03/26 by the External Auditor, Audit Scotland which presented the External Audit Annual Plan 2025/26.

The Senior Audit Manager, Audit Scotland highlighted key points in the Annual Plan. It was intended that the audit would be completed by 31 October 2026 with the results being submitted to the Committee at its meeting in December 2026. It was intended that the 2026/27 audit would be completed by end September 2027.

A view was expressed that it was disappointing that the target for completion of audits had not been met throughout the current contract and it would not be until next year, the last year of the contract, that it was scheduled to be on time.

The Committee **NOTED** the Audit Annual Plan 2025/26.

**6. Highland Council Pension Fund Internal Audit Annual Plan 2026/27
Plana Bliadhnail In-Sgrùdadh Maoin Peinnsein Chomhairle na Gàidhealtachd 2026/27**

There was circulated Report No. PC/04/26 by the Strategic Lead (Audit & Risk) which provided details of the audits contained within the Pension Fund's 2026/27 Internal Audit Plan.

The Committee **APPROVED** the 2026/27 Internal Audit Plan as set out in section 5.3 of the report.

**7. Internal Audit Report – Pension Fund Payments
Aithisg In-Sgrùdaidh – Pàighidhean Maoin Peinnsein**

There was circulated Report No. PC/05/26 by the Strategic Lead (Audit & Risk) which provided details of an audit of Pension Fund's Payments.

Following a summary of the report by the Corporate Audit Manager, a point was made that more uptake from scheme members using the Pensions portal would help prevent fraud. It was queried what was being done to encourage scheme members to use the Pensions portal. In response it was explained that the Pensions team did regular mailing exercises particularly to deferred scheme members to encourage them to sign up to the portal. There was also promotion of

the portal in pensions newsletters and when the annual benefit statement was issued. Currently, 63% of active scheme members were registered to use the portal which was very good and work would continue to encourage use of the Portal.

The Committee **NOTED** the content of the report and the audit opinion provided.

8. Risk Management Update 2025/26
Cunntas às Ùr air Rianachd Cunnairt 2025/26

There was circulated Report No. PC/06/26 by the Chief Officer Corporate Finance, which detailed the key risks from the risk register and information on how these risks were being managed.

The Committee **NOTED** the updated risk register extract (Appendix 1 of the report).

9. Investment Sub Committee Membership
Ballrachd Fo-Chomataidh Tasgaidh

The Committee **AGREED** that Mr P Logue replace Mr R Gale on the Investment Sub Committee.

10. Investment Sub Committee: Minutes of Meeting
Fo-chomataidh Tasgaidh: Geàrr-chunntas na Coinneimh

The Minutes of the meeting of the Investment Sub-Committee held on 17 December 2025 were circulated, and **APPROVED**.

The meeting ended at 11.09am.