

**The Highland Council Staff Partnership Forum –  
Elected Members/Staff Side Group**

Minutes of Meeting of The Highland Council Staff Partnership Forum held in Council Headquarters, Inverness/Remotely on **Wednesday 6 May 2026 at 10.30 a.m.**

**Present:**

**Employer’s Representatives:**

Mr R Bremner	Mr B Lobban
Mr J Finlayson	Mr G Mackenzie
Mr D Fraser	

**Staff Side Representatives:**

Ms C Farmer-McEwan, UNISON	Ms S Purdie, RCN
Mrs C A Stewart, GMB	Mr M Smith, UNITE/UCATT

**In attendance:**

Mr A Gunn, Assistant Chief Executive, Corporate  
 Mrs K Lackie, Assistant Chief Executive, People  
 Mr M MacLeod, Assistant Chief Executive Place  
 Ms R Fry (**RF**), Chief Officer, HR & Communications  
 Mr B Porter, Chief Officer, Corporate Finance  
 Ms E Barrie, Head of People, Corporate  
 Ms G Warburton, Joint Secretary, Teachers’ Side  
 Mr A MacInnes, Senior Committee Officer, Democratic Services  
 Mrs G MacPherson, Senior Committee Officer, Democratic Services

**Mr R Bremner in the Chair**

<u>SUBJECT/DECISION</u>	<u>ACTION</u>
<p><b>1. Apologies for Absence</b></p> <p>Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr P Oldham of the Employer’s Side and Mr J Gibson of the Staff Side.</p>	
<p><b>2. Declarations of Interest/Transparency Statement</b></p> <p>There were none.</p>	
<p><b>3. Staff Side Items</b></p> <p>i. VAT on Administration Fee for Trade Union Subscriptions</p> <p>The Staff Side advised that as far as they were aware The Highland Council was the only employer that charged VAT on the administration fee for Trade Union subscriptions. Representations had been made to the Council on this as VAT should not be charged. In response, it was advised that the Council had charged VAT given tax advice received on this matter. Given this matter had been raised by the Staff Side, Officers had consulted with COSLA and looked at the approach other Councils were taking on this. It did seem that this Council were</p>	

the only local authority charging VAT. Therefore, a second opinion from an Independent tax adviser was being sought. A written response would be provided to trade union correspondence on this matter, in addition to feedback provided to the Staff Side. **RF**

#### **4. Flexible Working, Travel and Assets review**

There had been circulated Report which presented the high-level findings from the recent staff survey on Flexible Working, Travel and Assets review. The staff survey responses cut across several Delivery Plan workstreams, including Future Operating Model, Reconfiguring Our Asset Base, Net Zero, Flexible and Hybrid Working, and Travel.

The survey was open from 11 February to 6 March 2026 and had been promoted to all Council and High Life Highland staff through multiple channels to maximise reach and there had been 1,340 responses received. The findings of the survey were summarised in the report and overall staff valued the opportunity to have hybrid working. There were areas where staff would like to see improvements such as the provision of touchdown spaces, the improvement of office quality in some areas and to address inconsistency in the application of hybrid working arrangements.

Some of the actions to address these findings in the survey were highlighted such as there was a new Flexible Working Policy in place and more work would be undertaken to publicise this and training undertaking where appropriate. As part of the Future Operating Model there would be more Touchdown spaces for staff. There was a review of the HQ office and the active travel team were looking at what more they could do to promote active travel and car sharing.

The Forum **NOTED** the terms of the report.

#### **5. Investors in People update**

The Forum were updated on progress relating to Investors in People (IIP) rollout across the Council.

The Corporate Cluster was now fully complete and the IIP rollout was underway in the other Clusters, except Place 2 tranche which would start at the end of May, 2026. In terms of IIP survey responses, Place 1 tranche had a 61% response rate and had achieved the standard accreditation for IIP. People 1 tranche had completed the survey stage with a 56% response rate. The People 2 survey was currently still open.

The Staff Side requested that IIP survey reports be issued earlier to them as the latest information they received on the survey was only received recently and was too late for them to provide any meaningful feedback on them.

Further, in terms of office rationalisation and spaces for staff, there was no where for staff to go to have breaks at Council Headquarters.

In response, it was advised that this was a point that came out of the flexible working survey and in the IIP process. Officers were aware of this issue and it was being looked at through the wider Future Operating Model and various options were being looked at for the provision of welfare space. There had been an employee survey of what catering employees would like and feedback from this would be taken forward as part of the Future Operating Model.

The Forum **NOTED** the update on Investors in People.

## 6. HR Statistics

HR statistics in relation to disciplinary/grievance/redeployment/ill health & capability cases and performance management for the period 1<sup>st</sup> March, 2025 to 28 February, 2026 were circulated and **NOTED**, subject to one grievance being supported by the RCN union to be included in the statistics. **RF**

Arising from the HR statistics, the Staff Side highlighted the length of time to resolve disciplinary and grievance matters which was detrimental to the wellbeing of staff involved. In response, it was advised that HR officers could pick up any delays at the regular fortnightly meetings with trade unions. If there were particular challenges with some of the cases HR officers did review these to try and address any barriers to progressing the disciplinary/grievance process.

The Forum **NOTED** the HR Statistics.

## 7. Minutes of Last Meeting

There had been circulated the minutes of the last meeting of the Forum held on 26 February 2026, the terms of which were **APPROVED**.

## 8. Matters Arising from Minutes

i in relation to violent and aggression incidents, procedures on feedback to staff would be checked, and it would be checked how to build into management training contact and support for staff. *Completed (The Health and Safety team follow up all reports of violence and aggression and this includes ensuring that affected staff are suitably supported).*

ii an undertaking to check with Managers delays in processing grievance/disciplinary cases with a view to progressing these. *Completed. (A Senior HR Officer has liaised with managers to progress cases where there may be delays. There are now regular meetings taking place with senior officers, specifically in People and Place clusters to review cases.)*

iii information would be provided on how it was checked that sub contractors for NHS Highland and the Council were paying their staff Scotland's real living wage. *Completed. Information circulated in the meeting papers.*

## **9. Service Trade Union Liaison Meetings**

There were circulated the following Service Trade Union Liaison Minutes of Meetings, the terms of which were **NOTED**:-

- i. Corporate – 1 April, 2026
- ii. Education – 21 January, 2026
- iii. Health & Social Care – 9 April, 2026

The meeting concluded at 10.46 a.m.