

## **The Highland Council**

Minutes of Meeting of the **Communities and Place Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Thursday 21 May 2026 at 9.30 am.

### **Present:**

|                        |                            |
|------------------------|----------------------------|
| Mr C Ballance          | Mr W MacKay (remote)       |
| Mr S Coghill (remote)  | Mr G MacKenzie (Chair)     |
| Mr R Cross             | Mr S Mackie (remote)       |
| Mr R Gale (Substitute) | Ms K MacLean               |
| Mr M Green             | Mr D Millar                |
| Mr R Gunn (remote)     | Mr H Morrison (Vice Chair) |
| Mrs J Hendry           | Ms C Ramsay                |
| Mrs B Jarvie (remote)  | Mrs M Ross                 |
| Mr S Kennedy           |                            |

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

|                         |                          |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Ms C Gillies (remote)   | Mrs T Robertson (remote) |
| Dr M Gregson (remote)   | Mr R Stewart             |
| Mr T MacLennan (remote) | Ms K Willis (remote)     |
| Mr D McDonald (remote)  |                          |

### **In attendance:**

Ms A Clark, Chief Officer – Housing and Communities  
Ms D Sutton, Chief Officer – Operations and Maintenance  
Mr I Braker, Strategic Lead - Waste Strategy and Operations  
Mr A Yates, Strategic Lead - Environmental Health and Bereavement Services  
Mr J MacLean, Bereavement Services Manager  
Ms H Jones, HR Business Partner  
Ms M Murray, Principal Committee Officer  
Ms G Prince, Partnership Development Manager  
Ms R Ross, Committee Officer

### **Also in attendance:**

Ms L Gow, Area Commander and Local Senior Officer, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

**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 G MacKenzie 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 J Bruce and Mr A Graham.

## **2. Declarations of Interest/Transparency Statements Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt/ Aithrisean Fhollaiseachd**

The Committee **NOTED** the following Declaration of Interest:-

Item 4: Ms C Ramsay

The Committee also **NOTED** the following Transparency Statement:-

Mr D Millar made a general Transparency Statement on the basis that a family member was employed by the Council. However, having applied the objective test, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

## **3. Good News Naidheachdan Matha**

The Committee **NOTED** the good news as circulated.

## **4. Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) Performance Report Aithisg Choileanaidh Seirbheis Smàlaidh is Teasairginn na h-Alba**

**Declaration of Interest: Ms C Ramsay declared an interest in this item as a paid on-call firefighter and, in accordance with paragraph 5.6 of the revised Code of Conduct, left the meeting for the duration of the item.**

There had been circulated the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Highland Performance Report for Q3 and Q4 2025/26.

The Area Commander and Local Senior Officer gave an introduction highlighting the key points of the report including the development of the new local fire plan, domestic fire safety, unintentional harm, non-fire emergencies including road traffic collisions, deliberate fire-setting, non-domestic fire safety, and operational resilience and readiness including preparedness for the wildfire season.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the SFRS's involvement in community initiatives was welcomed and encouraged;
- information was sought, and provided, on a number of matters including how the availability challenges in North West Sutherland were being addressed; the new contract banding tier system; and the extent of the issue of deliberate fire-setting of waste bins;
- attention was drawn to the recent influx of workers into Tongue and, since there was currently not a District Officer in the area, it was queried whether an SFRS officer could visit to support recruitment efforts among these new residents;
- the increase in appliance availability was commended;
- on the point being raised, the Area Commander undertook to explore the possible use of abandoned vehicles in road safety demonstrations in schools, as part of a joint approach with the Council and Police Scotland;
- the Area Commander's visit to Skye and the increase in availability in the area were welcomed;
- the success of Fire Skills courses was highlighted, and it was hoped that they could be held more regularly; and

- an update was sought, and provided, on the proposed new Fire Stations in Portree and Uig, and it was confirmed that a further update would be provided at the November Committee.

The Committee scrutinised and **NOTED** the report.

## **5. Integrated Weed Control Strategy and Action Plan**

### **Ro-innleachd agus Plana Gnìomha Amalaichte airson Smachd air Luibheanaich**

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

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- several Members extended their thanks to the many community groups that volunteered to keep streets and open spaces free of weeds as their work made a visible difference within communities and freed up time for the Council's amenities teams to undertake other duties. In response to Members' questions, it was confirmed that guidance covering the key aspects of weed removal work, including the safe use of herbicides, cutting and managing vegetation, preventative weed-spraying early in the season, risk assessment and understanding public liability considerations, could be distributed to these groups in order to better support them; equipment, including Hi-Viz jackets and refuse bags, was available to volunteers; and the possibility of providing volunteers with NTCP (National Tests Proficiency Council) Certificate-level training in the use of approved chemicals could be considered;
- information was sought, and provided, on mechanical means of weed control;
- in response to questions, the Chief Officer – Operations and Maintenance undertook to provide Councillor Ballance with information on the prevalence of invasive species and the associated biological control trials, the extent of the reduction in Glyphosate use and the number of wildflower meadows created in the last year. The Chair requested that the response be circulated to all Members of the Committee;
- it was encouraging to see a reduction in the use of glyphosate. However, it was highlighted that glyphosate was effective and that any alternatives might be found ineffective;
- in response to questions, it was confirmed that the majority of seasonal posts had been filled, all training in the use of mechanical weed brushes had been completed, and some external contractors were still being used;
- it was good to see a reasoned rationale for when chemical herbicides should, or should not, be used;
- it was noticeable within communities that, since the clearing of roadside weeds had become the responsibility of the roads team, weeds were being cleared less often, and roadsides had become overgrown and untidy. It was suggested that more integration between the amenities and roads teams was needed, and it was confirmed that the Integrated Weed Control Strategy was designed to help with this;
- concern was expressed regarding the lack of amenities staff in Skye, including having no trained driver for the road sweeper. It was confirmed that the recruitment challenges in Skye had been recognised and that members of the current workforce could be trained on the use of road sweepers to prevent this equipment from sitting unused;

- in response to questions, it was confirmed that there was a plan for rewilding old cemeteries to reduce the need for strimming and grass-cutting, and that this would be discussed at local level; and that the use of salt for weed control was mentioned within the Strategy;
- attention was drawn to No Mow May and the fact that the UK was one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. The importance of biodiversity was emphasised, particularly as several of the weeds mentioned in the report were native species which were important for biodiversity. It was also queried how wildflower areas and naturalised zones would be identified, whether such areas were already in place, and whether there were plans to increase the number of naturalised areas; and
- while biodiversity was important, ticks were often present in long grass and wildflower areas. It was important to recognise the dangers of Lyme disease, which was prevalent in Highland, and it was suggested that more education was needed in that regard. It was confirmed that the risks associated with ticks had been considered within the Strategy, and that desire lines were often created in unmowed areas and wildflower meadows to allow people to cross safely.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the contents of the report;
- AGREED** and adopted the Integrated Weed Control Strategy and Action Plan 2026;
- NOTED** that an annual update on progress would be reported to the Communities and Place Committee; and
- AGREED** that the response to Members' queries regarding the prevalence of invasive species and the associated biological control trials; the extent of the reduction in Glyphosate use; and the number of wildflower meadows created in the last year be circulated to all Committee Members.

## 6. Participation & Engagement Strategy Ro-innleachd Com-pàirteachaidh

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

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- concern was expressed regarding the low number of responses to the public engagement on the Strategy, particularly from Community Councils which was considered indicative that they did not feel valued or supported. It was highlighted that, in Sutherland, there was a reluctance amongst Community Council members to take decisions or undertake office-bearer roles due to the perceived risks faced both individually and collectively. As a result, there was concern that a number of Community Councils could go into abeyance, leading to the loss of a valuable link between the Council and local communities. It was suggested that the low response rate reflected a lack of confidence in the Council, and that increased support for Community Councils was required. In response, the importance of the work of Community Councillors was recognised. The recent review of the Scheme of Establishment had highlighted a request for greater support and guidance for Community Councillors and an extensive support pack had been developed based on this feedback and was due out in the coming weeks. It had been recognised

that the draft Strategy did not give sufficient weight to the importance of the role of Community Councils, and this had been strengthened, along with a key action to develop guidance to support Community Councils to engage with their community;

- there was a lot of cynicism amongst the public regarding various aspects of the Council's performance, including responsiveness to enquiries or complaints;
- the statement in the report that there were not considered to be any Gaelic implications was questioned;
- in response to concerns that service provision at Service Points appeared to be reducing in favour of online services, it was confirmed that there had been no change to the services offered at Service Points, although officers would be keen to understand the concerns of constituents in that regard, and that a report on Service Points would be brought to the next meeting of the Committee; and
- attention was drawn to the attendance of the local Roads Officer at Community Council meetings in Ward Six, where they had been able to provide direct feedback and relay queries as required. This had helped Community Councils to have more confidence in the Council which had strengthened relationships.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the extent of the engagement and responses received;
- ii. **NOTED** how consideration of these responses had been incorporated into the strategy;
- iii. **AGREED** to support the content of the Action Plan contained within the strategy; and
- iv. **AGREED** the strategy, noting that reports on progress would be submitted to the Committee as part of the wider Participation and Engagement annual update.

## **7. Waste Strategy Development Plan Plana Leasachaidh Ro-innleachd Sgudail**

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

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the Chair highlighted that the aims and objectives of the Recycling Improvement Fund had been met, with significantly less waste being sent to landfill, resulting in financial savings, and better quality recyclate being collected, generating increased income;
- members of the public were engaging well with the new waste and recycling arrangements, the success of which was welcomed;
- concern was expressed regarding restrictions, involving booking systems, being placed on smaller rural recycling centres, and it was requested that this be revisited as it could lead to an increase in fly-tipping and was contrary to what the Council was trying to achieve in terms of increasing recycling. It was clarified that booking systems for large trailers and vans were generally only used at the busiest sites for safety reasons, and the Strategic Lead – Waste Strategy and Operations undertook to provide Councillor Gale with further information in light of a recent Council communication suggesting that small rural sites would also be affected;
- it was suggested that larger general waste bins be made available for families as many had too much general waste for the small bin provided. In response, it was

clarified that households with more than five people or individuals with medical conditions could request a second bin;

- an update was sought, and provided, on the industrial waste shredders that had been commissioned. It was confirmed that there would be a Members' visit to the Longman Waste Transfer Station on 17 June 2026 to see a shredder in operation, and the Chair requested that an invitation be extended to all Members and that transport from Council Headquarters be provided;
- it was highlighted that the current recycling level of 45% was the same as in 2014, despite the Scottish Government funding, and that the target of an increase of 1% over the next four years meant that it would take 20 years to reach a level of 50% recycling while some European countries were already achieving recycling levels of 70%. The need to be more ambitious was emphasised and it was requested that the Waste Strategy include analysis of what this would look like. It was also queried whether focusing on the total levels of residual waste going to landfill and Energy from Waste would be more useful than tracking recycling figures. In response, it was clarified that there had been changes in the way that recycled waste was categorised meaning that although the overall level of recycling had remained the same, the level of household recycling had increased. It was explained that the current predicted increase in recycling levels was based on things remaining as they were and that the changes needed in order to achieve higher levels of recycling were being discussed as part of the Strategy;
- it was suggested that there needed to be a greater focus on enabling people to better understand recycling and how to reduce their general waste, including promoting the use of reusable nappies;
- the importance of the Reuse and Repair fund was emphasised and, in response to a question, it was confirmed that members of the Climate Change and Waste Management teams would be involved in assessing applications to the fund;
- it was important to understand that people in rural areas did not have access to the same number of recycling bins as those in more urban areas, and that this could lead to households in rural areas producing larger amounts of residual waste and possibly needing larger general waste bins;
- in response to a query, the Strategic Lead – Waste Strategy and Operations, undertook to provide Councillor Morrison with an update on staffing levels and vacancies in Sutherland;
- it was queried whether the number of people paying for a garden waste bin had declined due to the increasing cost of living, as the annual charge for a garden waste bin was almost £50, and if this had led to garden waste being disposed of in residual waste bins. The possibility of combining food and garden waste in one bin, as was the case in some other areas, and of providing households with their first garden waste bin for free, was suggested. In response, it was emphasised that efforts had been made to keep the cost of garden waste bins below £50 per year and that this was relatively cost-effective compared to taking garden waste to a recycling centre. It was also highlighted that green waste collections was one aspect of the potential regulatory changes outlined in the report, consultation on which was ongoing;
- information was sought, and provided, regarding the UK Government's Deposit Return Scheme, which it was confirmed was expected to come into effect in 2027;
- further public education was needed around issues such as the use of recycling centres, fly-tipping and rodent control, and social media and information leaflets could be helpful in that regard;
- it having been queried why there was no longer a skip at the Thurso recycling centre for items that could potentially be reused, it was explained that schemes

had been introduced, in partnership with ILM Highland, at some recycling centres, including in Caithness, to try to capture items that could be reused before they went into general recycling;

- in relation to the Reuse and Repair Fund, the impact of the funding awarded to ILM was already being seen; there was enthusiasm within communities for initiatives such as repair cafes; and it was requested that applications from small community groups be considered in the next round of funding;
- it was highlighted that the bin in the Council carpark adjacent to the Seaboard Centre was not large enough to deal with the increased amounts of waste during the summer months;
- recent waste audits in schools had shown that significant amounts of recyclable materials were still going into general waste bins. In light of the request from the Highland Youth Parliament to equip schools with recycling infrastructure, it was queried what the timeline was for providing such infrastructure and whether there was a shovel ready project so that external funding opportunities could be taken up when they arose. It was also queried whether there was a strategy for reducing the amount of food waste in schools;
- in response to questions, it was confirmed that encouraging home composting could be considered; and that some waste wood in Highland was recycled via the biomass facility in Invergordon; and
- on the point being raised, it was confirmed that the issue of timber waste being exhumed from Seater landfill facility and subsequently dumped in a car park had been identified and had now ceased.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the forthcoming potential changes to the waste regulations and the operational and financial implications;
- ii. **APPROVED** the approach to developing the Council's Waste Strategy;
- iii. **AGREED** that the award of funding under the Reuse and Repair Fund be delegated to the Assistant Chief Executive for Place in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Communities and Place Committee; and
- iv. **AGREED** that an invitation to the visit to the Longman Waste Transfer Station on 17 June 2026 be extended to all Members.

## **8. Environmental Health Performance and Strategic Plan 2026-2029 Coileanadh agus Plana Ro-innleachdail Slàinte Àrainneachdail 2026–2029**

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

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- information was sought, and provided, on the process for dealing with reports of dangerous and out of control dogs; the enforcement of dog fouling legislation; the Council's preparedness for an outbreak of a dangerous disease on a cruise ship in a Highland port; the possibility of creating a more streamlined pathway for dealing with abandoned and nuisance vehicles; and how often fines were issued for fly-tipping;
- in response to a question, the Council's role in investigating work-related deaths was explained and the Strategic Lead – Environmental Health and Bereavement

Services undertook to provide Councillor Ballance with further information regarding the number of such investigations;

- the Environmental Health team was commended for their efforts across a range of areas;
- it was welcomed that the issue of abandoned and nuisance vehicles would be considered by the Redesign Board;
- on the point being raised, it was confirmed that it was the Council's responsibility to deal with abandoned vehicles wherever they were in Highland, including vehicles abandoned on trunk roads;
- it having been queried whether the Environmental Health team had sufficient staff to deal with the pressures caused by Short-Term Let licensing applications, it was confirmed that, although the workload was significant, income received from the application fees ensured that the team had sufficient resources to deal with it;
- the staff structure table in Appendix 2 of the report was commended, and it was suggested that it would be useful for other teams to include something similar in their reports; and
- it was queried whether an easier mechanism for reporting abandoned vehicles could be introduced, and it was confirmed that the website and online form had recently been improved to allow further information to be provided.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the Environmental Health Strategic Plan 2026-2029 as detailed in Appendix 3 of the report;
- ii. **NOTED** the Environmental Health performance in 2025/26 as detailed in Appendix 4 of the report including delivering statutory duties to over 6000 properties on private water supplies, over 5000 food businesses, and receiving over 13,500 service requests on a wide range of public health, nuisance, licensing, safety, dog control, animal health and incivility issues; and
- iii. **APPROVED** the Food Safety Plan to 31 March 2027 as detailed in Appendix 5 of the report.

## 9. Bereavement Services Update Cunntas air Seirbheisean Call Neach-gaoil

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

During discussion, the following points were raised:-

- it having been queried whether woodland burial sites were ever considered when looking for new burial grounds, especially in areas where sites had been difficult to identify, it was confirmed that such sites were been considered but were still subject to the same challenges as traditional burial grounds; and
- in response to a question regarding the capacity of the burial ground in Alness, it was confirmed that trial digs had taken place and that a further update should be available at the next meeting of the Committee.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the progress of current projects within the burial ground extension programme;



- ii. **NOTED** the progress of the cremator replacement project at Inverness Crematorium; and
- iii. **APPROVED** the updates to the Burial Ground Management Rules in accordance with recent regulation changes.

#### **10. Place Cluster Workforce Plan Annual Progress Report Aithisg Adhartais Bhliadhnail Feachd-obrach na Buidhne Àite**

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

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- following the decision by the Full Council in March 2026 to strengthen coordination across Council services, supported by the Council's Climate Change and Energy Team (CCET), to enable a place-based approach to climate change, energy and resilience within infrastructure planning, housing programmes and long-term asset management, surprise was expressed at the lack of reference to climate change within the report, and information was sought, and provided, on the service's preparedness to deliver this agenda, including whether the CCET was included in the workforce analysis and action plan set out in the report; how emerging requirements around climate change adaptations, energy system resilience and place-based delivery were being reflected in workforce planning and service design across the organisation; and whether any workforce gaps or future resourcing requirements had been identified;
- in response to a question, it was confirmed that information on the gender pay gap was collected and had been reported to the Committee as part of the Equalities Mainstreaming and Outcomes Report, which it was confirmed could be re-circulated to all Committee Members following the meeting; and
- reference was made to the increasing use of robots in areas such as forestry and, it having been queried whether young people could be encouraged to pursue training in the control of robots, it was confirmed that this could be discussed further.

The Committee **NOTED** the Place Cluster workforce planning progress report.

#### **11. Highland Outcome Improvement Plan Update Cunntas air Plana Leasachadh Thoraidhean na Gàidhealtachd**

There had been circulated Report No CP/13/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive Place.

An update was requested on the position once funding for the Whole Family Wellbeing Programme came to an end in March 2027, as support from the Programme had replaced Service Level Agreements (SLAs) for some third sector organisations. It was also queried why some SLAs had been withdrawn, given that the fund had not been intended to replace business-as-usual provision. The Partnership Development Manager undertook to liaise with the Whole Family Wellbeing Team and provide an update to Councillor Gale.

The Committee **NOTED** the progress update on delivery of the 2024–2027 Highland Outcome Improvement Plan.

**12. Performance Reporting for Q4 January 2026 – March 2026**  
**Aithris Coileanaidh airson R4 Faoilleach 2026 – Màrt 2026**

There had been circulated Report No CP/14/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive Place.

The Committee:-

- i. scrutinised and **NOTED** the service performance information;
- ii. **NOTED** the change to absence reporting to align with Chief Officer structure; and
- iii. **NOTED** the change to Freedom of Information reporting to align with Chief Officer structure.

**13. Membership of the Waste Strategy Working Group**  
**Ballrachd de Bhuidheann Obrach na Ro-innleachd Sgudail**

The Committee **AGREED** the revised membership of the Waste Strategy Working Group as tabled.

The meeting concluded at 12.30 pm.