

The Highland Council
No. 14 2025/2026

Minutes of Meeting of the Highland Council held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Thursday 26 March 2026 at 9.35am.

Mr B Lobban in the Chair

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

Present:

Ms S Atkin	Mr A Jarvie
Mr M Baird	Mrs B Jarvie (Remote)
Mr C Ballance	Ms L Johnston
Dr C Birt (Remote)	Mr R Jones
Mr B Boyd	Mr S Kennedy
Mr R Bremner	Ms L Kraft
Mr I Brown	Mr B Lobban
Mr J Bruce	Mr P Logue
Mr M Cameron	Mr G MacKenzie
Mrs I Campbell	Mrs I MacKenzie
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair	Mr R MacKintosh
Mr A Christie	Mrs A MacLean
Mrs M Cockburn	Ms K MacLean
Mr S Coghill (Remote)	Mr T MacLennan (Remote pm)
Ms T Collier (Remote)	Mr D Macpherson
Ms H Crawford (Remote)	Mr D McDonald
Mr R Cross	Ms J McEwan
Ms L Dundas	Mr J McGillivray (am only)
Mr J Edmondson	Mr D Millar (Remote)
Mr J Finlayson	Mr H Morrison (Remote)
Mr D Fraser	Ms L Niven (Remote)
Mr L Fraser	Mr P Oldham
Mr R Gale	Mrs M Paterson
Ms C Gillies	Mr M Prosser (Remote)
Mr K Gowans	Ms C Ramsay
Mr J Grafton	Mrs M Reid
Mr A Graham	Mrs T Robertson
Mr M Green	Mr K Rosie (Remote)
Dr M Gregson	Ms M Ross
Mr R Gunn (Remote)	Mrs L Saggars
Mrs J Hendry	Mr R Stewart
Ms M Hutchison (Remote)	Ms K Willis

In Attendance:

Chief Executive
Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate
Assistant Chief Executive - People
Assistant Chief Executive - Place
Chief Officer - Finance
Chief Officer - Legal and Corporate Governance
Chief Officer – Facilities and Fleet Management
Joint Democratic Services Manager

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr S Cameron, Mr D Gregg, Ms E Knox, Ms M MacCallum, Mr W MacKay, Mr S Mackie, Mr A MacKintosh, Mr M Reiss and Mr A Sinclair.

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

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

Item 5 – Mr J Edmondson.

Item 7 – Ms M Hutchison and Mr J Edmondson.

Item 9 – Mr A Jarvie.

At this juncture, the Leader of the Council advised that at the special meeting of the Council on 5 March 2026, he had stated in his closing remarks on the budget that, regardless of the previous years prior to the budget for 2023/24, in January 2023 the base capital investment in roads infrastructure was only £7.2m. On reflection, he had inadvertently omitted to state that this was the information as reported to Area Committees in January and February 2023, detailing the consideration of the budget for 2023/24 at that time. He thanked Members for the opportunity to clarify the matter.

The Convener then welcomed Mr Matthew Prosser who had been elected as a Member of the Council for Ward 21 (Fort William and Ardnamurchan) on 11 December 2025. Mr Prosser formally introduced himself and was welcomed by fellow Members.

Thereafter, the Convener advised that Mr Jim McGillivray Ward 4 (East Sutherland and Edderton) would be leaving the Council and paid tribute to his long-standing and tireless work for his local community. Mr McGillivray thanked Council officers for the support and kindness he had received. He also paid tribute to the Convener and wished all Members well in their future endeavours.

3. Treasury Management Strategy Statement and Investment Statement 2026/27 Aithris Ro-innleachd agus Aithris Tasgaidh Ro-innleachd Stiùireadh Ionmhasail 2026/27

There had been circulated Report No. HC/02/26 by the Chief Officer – Corporate Finance.

During discussion, the following points were raised:-

- the Treasury Management function was extremely important for the Council and its medium and long-term future and the report demonstrated that plans for the Highland Investment Plan and HRA were affordable, prudent and sustainable; the Strategy was responsive to economic volatility and continued to prioritise risk management, flexibility and strong governance;
- specifically, the report detailed how the affordability of large-scale investment in infrastructure projects was being managed through new caps, appropriate controls, indicators and measures to support the Council's financial plans and sustainability;
- the report helped Members to consider the financial effect of global events and economic uncertainties in terms of the impact on interest rates and borrowing costs and it was hoped these events would not be long lasting;

- the 'cap' on the ratio of HRA repayment of borrowing costs relative to revenue funding would require the Housing and Property Committee to exercise discipline in its decision making in managing the debt ratio and predictions going forward;
- further clarity was sought, and provided, that a prudent and cautious approach was taken to Environmental and Social Governance (ESG) investments, noting that the language used in the Strategy was there to comply with the CIPFA Code of Practice; details of investments were reported to each meeting of the Corporate Resources Committee;
- the impact of the Council's investment policies associated with the strategic direction on Climate Change was set out in the report at Item 5 of the agenda and noting that it was for the Council to make decisions on priorities in developing its investment policies;
- the intention to deliver further Member training in relation to Treasury Management during 2026 was welcomed;
- the Strategy did not allow the Council to address social needs in Highland such as the numbers on the Council house waiting list, those living in poor or inferior accommodation, fuel poverty and the serious impacts of climate change on communities. Balanced consideration was required as to whether financial returns on investments outweighed the social returns, needs and outcomes required for people and communities in Highland;
- a wider, far reaching and innovative report was therefore required on the value judgements, options, financial sacrifices and flexibility that might be required in moving away from a capitalistic and financial approach. If this was not undertaken then concern was expressed at the legacy left for those in Highland; and
- concern that the HRA loan charge ratio was not forecasted to reduce over the period up to 2028/29, given that part of the reason for the Council house rent increase agreed for 2026/27 was for this purpose. It was suggested the burden of new Council house building should be taken away from Council tenants and placed in the Highland Investment Plan.

Decision

The Council **APPROVED** the:-

- Treasury Management Strategy Statement and Investment Statement for 2026/27 and the Prudential Indicators as detailed in Appendix 1 of the report; and
- new caps, controls and limits introduced within the report and relating to HRA ratio of repayment of borrowing costs, borrowing for loans to Housing Associations and limit for non-treasury investments.

4. Contract Standing Orders Gnàth-riaghailtean Cùmhnaint

There had been circulated Report No. HC/03/26 by the Chief Officer – Corporate Finance.

During discussion, Members raised the following points:-

- the Council's Contract Standing Orders were in place to ensure the Council could support the delivery of services, its priorities and best value and compliance with all relevant laws and regulations. They also supported the Council's wider plans in relation to community benefits;

- the annual review proposed changes and improvements that strengthened the Council's overall approach to procurement and to ensure it remained legally compliant, efficient and aligned with best practice. The review also incorporated feedback from services across the Council following a thorough and collaborative review process;
- the proposal to increase the threshold for direct awards of low value procurement from 10k to 20k was welcomed as being pragmatic and proportionate and in recognising that costs had increased over recent years. It would also reduce administrative burden and allow officer time to be focused on higher value and risk procurement and supported smarter governance;
- the session for Members on procurement had provided an invaluable overview of the procurement process and the potential to organise further training sessions;
- it would be helpful for Members to be provided with details of the postholders that comprised the various Boards and Groups involved in the procurement approval process;
- a list should be presented to the Corporate Resources Committee on a quarterly basis setting out where Contract Standing Orders had been suspended, either in whole or in part, by the relevant officers, in the interests of good governance and robust scrutiny; and
- there was a need for the Council to have a more directive and prescriptive approach by setting clear goals and outcomes for what the Council wished to achieve from community benefit in each area of Highland and to use procurement as the tool to drive those benefits out to communities. Members should be fully involved in this process, noting there was a need to better make the link between the Council's policies and vision and procurement especially in relation to community benefit to ensure the best outcomes for Highland.

Decision

The Council **APPROVED** the changes to the Highland Council Contract Standing Orders (CSO's) 2026-27 as set out at Appendix 2 to the report and **AGREED** that these become effective from 1 April 2026.

5. Climate Change, Energy and Community Resilience Atharrachadh Gnàth-shìde, Lùth agus Neart Coimhearsnachd

Transparency Statement: Mr J Edmondson declared a connection to this item as (a) a user of a private water supply; (b) as a Director of a Community Interest Company which enabled Broadband to Ardrross; and (c) as a member of a local transport forum. However, having applied the objective test, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

During discussion, the following points were raised:-

- the importance of the role of the Council's Climate Change Committee was emphasised, and it was considered crucial to build on the work of the Committee and commit to a structured, ongoing dialogue with the young people who would live with the consequences of the decisions Elected Members and others made;
- it was not difficult to align with earlier comments under item three regarding the social impacts of climate change on communities and the financial sacrifices that would have to be faced going forward. However, it was considered possible to be creative about the ways in which those challenges could be addressed, and to minimise any financial sacrifices;

- Highland was at the centre of the UK's energy security, creation and distribution, and there was investment in green energy throughout the region, yet it received little benefit in terms of physical and social investment, the poor rollout of digital fibre being cited as an example of the failure of national planning for delivery in Highland. The report set out the ambition of the Council to become more proactive in its approach to community resilience and energy security, and the decisions taken today would be the first steps in shaping the future of Highland;
- with reference to the infographic at section 1.3 of the report, it was emphasised that it was important to make the link between what needed to be done to mitigate the impact of climate change and the investment required to support the necessary adaptation of communities. Reference was also made to the potential negative impact of climate change on GDP in Highland by 2050 given that there were 29 vulnerable communities that would require major investment to sustain them in the face of growing climate impacts, with over 60,000 residential properties and 20,000 other properties, including those of businesses and public services, affected. The Social Value Charter, and how it might provide a mechanism for sourcing investment within these communities, was a key focus of the Council;
- the statistics on fuel poverty in the report were alarming, with almost one in two people in Highland in fuel poverty and one in three in extreme fuel poverty, Sutherland having the highest rates. With electricity four times more expensive than gas, it was not surprising that people were experiencing fuel poverty, and an example was provided of how easily, through no fault of their own, people could get into debt as a result. Families were having to choose between heating and eating, and the wider socio-economic impacts, such as on health and education, were highlighted. Whilst it was recognised that it was not possible to resolve the issue overnight, it was necessary to act quickly, prioritising those in the most extreme fuel poverty, to address the cold homes that existed throughout Highland through improved heating, insulation and economy measures. It was therefore proposed that a short-term Members Working Group be established, reporting to the Corporate Resources Committee, to explore ways the Council could mitigate the impacts caused by fuel poverty on Highland residents. This was accepted by the Leader of the Council;
- the important report was welcomed, and thanks were expressed to the Climate Change and Energy Team for the work that had gone into it. Climate change, ecosystem collapse, energy and resilience were shaping everything the Council did, impacting on costs, services and communities. Across Highland, there were rising energy costs, growing pressures on buildings and infrastructure, and increasing impacts from extreme weather. At the same time, Highland was at the centre of one of the biggest energy opportunities in the UK, but the energy system was not working for constituents. For too long, climate and energy had been treated as add-ons delivered through individual projects driven by short-term funding, and the report made it clear that that approach was no longer sufficient. If changes were not made, the pressures referred to would escalate the already increasing strain on the Council's medium-term financial plan and frontline services and limit the ability to shape outcomes for Highland. The report proposed a shift in thinking, with climate, energy and resilience at the centre of decisions about Council assets, investments and priorities. It was about tackling fuel poverty, making buildings more affordable to run, making the most of energy opportunities and supporting strong, resilient communities, as well as listening to young people, who wanted a sustainable future, good jobs and communities they could build their lives in. Delivering this would require coordination. The Climate Change and Energy Team provided the foundation for this work but was constrained by short-term funding and delivery models. It was necessary to enable what already existed to operate at the scale required, and provide adequate resource to coordinate activity across services,

communities and delivery partners as part of a long-term strategic approach. Designating the Climate Change Committee as a strategic committee would provide the necessary governance and would allow Members to oversee and guide the work taking place across the Council, bringing together the breadth of activity already underway in a coordinated, consolidated plan that delivered real benefits for Highland. The Council could continue to be reactive and manage the impacts of climate change, or it could choose to be proactive and shape the future, and it was intended to move an amendment proposing an additional recommendation that the Climate Change Committee become a strategic committee;

- it was emphasised that the energy price cap represented a maximum rate, and electricity companies were not required to charge the full amount. Members also highlighted the significant cost of electricity standing charges, and that both gas boilers and heat pumps were dependant on electricity;
- increasing reliance on electricity did not encourage resilience in society, and it was necessary to find ways to address this. For example, landlines were being removed without backup solutions being in place;
- grid infrastructure, whereby electricity was imported and exported to various regions in the UK, and the transmission network, which was more localised and affected the supply of electricity to homes and businesses, were often conflated, and the need for consistent language was emphasised;
- approximately 17% of households in Highland had a private water supply, although it was suggested that this was an understatement as there was no legal requirement for a property that was neither a business nor rented to register. Private water supplies were susceptible to drought and represented a significant risk in the context of climate change, and it was necessary to take measures in that regard and enter into discussions with Scottish Water;
- fuel poverty was affecting an increasing number of people and was not restricted to lower income families. Particular reference was made to those in rural areas who were reliant on heating oil, the price of which had more than doubled as a result of the current conflict in the Middle East. People in more remote and rural areas were also reliant on their cars to get about and to go to work;
- despite Highland producing excess renewable energy, residents were paying more for electricity than elsewhere in the UK, and it was necessary to try and address this with the electricity companies;
- energy efficiency retrofitting of housing had been a great success in areas such as Balintore, and it was suggested it was necessary to accelerate the process of retrofitting and roll it out to more rural areas as this would help people out of fuel poverty. Other Members referred to the Carbon Neutral Island Project on the Isle of Raasay, highlighting that the main priority identified by the community had been finding ways to retrofit and improve not only Council houses but all properties. As a result, a significant number of people had not been adversely affected by the recent increases in heating oil prices. It was added that it was essential that any new build homes were energy efficient;
- with reference to the recent presentation by the Highland Youth Parliament at the Climate Change Committee, the young people involved had been articulate and passionate about what they wanted to see happening in their communities and for the future of Highland, and it was necessary to encourage youth engagement and participation in everything the Council did. Other Members added that it was important to engage with all people, including business and tourism representatives, and to place more value on local knowledge;

- different areas needed different solutions, and the importance of a place-based approach to climate change, energy and resilience, as proposed in the report, and of working in partnership, was emphasised. As an example, reference was made to the recently completed flood alleviation scheme to protect Dingwall Business Park, which had been funded by the Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and NatureScot. A local farmer had developed the scheme, working with NatureScot, and not only had it addressed the flooding of the River Peffery but it had enabled approval of applications for the Business Park, which had encouraged more businesses to come in;
- there were a number of watercourses in the Dingwall and Seaforth Ward that needed to be inspected on a regular basis and it was queried whether it was being ensured that all watercourses received an annual inspection and that any remedial work was undertaken or noted. The Convener confirmed that this matter would come forward to the Dingwall and Seaforth Area Committee;
- it was necessary to look at small, simple solutions rather than focusing solely on the big picture;
- congratulations were extended to the Dornoch community, who had been active in carrying out preventative work in respect of the flooding of the Dornoch Burn. Having secured a grant through NatureScot, they had developed wetlands further upstream to divert the water problem, which was an innovative approach;
- flooding from the sea was a continual threat to the village of Golspie but, although an application had been lodged with the Scottish Government in 2019, there had been no indication of funding becoming available for the proposed flood prevention scheme, which had originally been costed at £1.5m. Concern was expressed regarding the slow pace of the Marine Directorate and the perception that barriers were being put in place to taking action, and it was suggested that the Marine Directorate should be proactively working with the Council and local communities to develop designs and progress schemes rather than waiting for applications to be submitted for them to work on;
- it was necessary to balance climate change needs with the impact on communities of renewables developments. In that regard, reference was made to instances of large projects expanding their activities without public consultation and without recognition of the impact this was having;
- all Members were encouraged to attend and engage in the Climate Change Committee;
- small jobs, such as maintaining and clearing drains, could prevent larger, more costly issues, such as flooding and damage to roads, from occurring. However, there was often insufficient capacity to carry out the smaller jobs, and it was suggested that a place-based approach to recruiting to the teams on the ground would help significantly with resilience;
- Local Members commended Avoch and Killen Community Council for their efforts in putting together a plan to address the flooding issues in Avoch;
- it was necessary to be much more ambitious in terms of what the Council attempted to deliver, and creating a platform for more effective collaboration with external stakeholders would enable this and allow the pace of delivery to be accelerated. It was further suggested that it was necessary to consider the adoption of a single region-wide approach, with clear targets for retrofitting, affordability, emissions reduction etc. With these points in mind, it was requested that the subject of the report be revisited by the Full Council in the near future;

- it had been beneficial for an officer from the Council's Flood Prevention Team to attend a recent meeting of Tarbat Community Council to discuss coastal erosion and why Tarbat did not feature on the list of high-risk locations in the Coastal Change Adaptation Plan, and it was recommended that other coastal communities extend an invitation to the Flood Prevention Team;
- concern was expressed that the Council was being asked to sign up to a set of ambitions that were not fully costed or funded, and that there were potential implications for taxpayers in terms of either cuts to services or increases in Council Tax. It was not a matter of whether or not Members supported climate action but how much was it going to cost constituents, and information was sought on the total cost of what was set out in the report, how much was funded externally and, if government funding was not forthcoming, where it was anticipated the necessary funding would come from. In response, it was explained that the costs were not clear at present but there was a programme of work to establish financial models, and continuing on the current path would lead to higher long-term costs and weaker outcomes. Much of the work taking place was externally funded, linked to the Net Zero transition, energy efficiency and climate adaptation, and without projects in these priority areas there were less opportunities to secure external funding;
- whilst energy security was important, many constituents did not want largescale renewable energy developments in their communities, and it was suggested that it was necessary to stop consenting to them as £343m in constraint payments had been paid in Highland at a time of rising bills;
- many of the issues under discussion were not the result of climate change but stemmed from decades of under-investment and decisions at national and central government level. In relation to the latter, concern was expressed regarding the current fuel tax rate, as well as the Scottish Government's attempts to restrict the use of log burners when many homes in Scotland were not connected to the gas grid. It was added that woodburning stoves were an inexpensive way of heating a home and that in some countries, such as Sweden, many houses had them due to the risks associated with a lack of heat;
- Scotland alone contributed to less than 1% of global emissions, and it was necessary to take a pragmatic approach to Net Zero and focus on what could be done to ensure communities were prepared and did not feel the worst impacts of climate change;
- it was pointed out that there was no national energy plan in place for Scotland and therefore there was a risk of a chaotic rollout of energy developments in Highland. It was suggested that it was necessary to pause what was being done in terms of rolling out the new transmission and energy system and analyse the full cumulative impact on communities of consenting to the vast majority of planning applications for energy developments. Approximately £8b in constraint payments was projected by 2030 which was not considered money well spent. As mentioned in the report, the Strategic Spatial Energy Plan (SSEP) was soon moving into a second phase and would be working with various stakeholders to try and better shape the energy transition. It was highlighted that the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy had been asked to consider making the Rural Scotland Convention of Community Councils a formal stakeholder in the SSEP to ensure that the transition was carried out in a way that worked for all communities in Highland. The report also mentioned liaising further with the Scottish Government and, given that Highland was expected to host a vast amount of energy infrastructure, it was asked if the Council could robustly raise the fact that there was not a national energy plan in place;

- the logical conclusion of the points raised during discussion was that the Climate Change Committee should become a strategic committee, and support was expressed for the proposed amendment in that regard. It was suggested that the obvious direction was to adhere to the commitment in the Administration Programme to create resilient and sustainable communities, and to ensure that matters such as the circular economy, renewable energy, peatland restoration, woodland protection and creation, low carbon construction, close alignment between national and regional policy, and meeting the challenges of Highland's rurality, remoteness and infrastructure were not just areas to work on but areas that needed to be brought together under one strategic committee. Excellent officers were already working in the same direction on issues such as sustainable transport, waste and recycling, flood risk management and woodland and forestry strategy, but more joined up thinking was needed to address the impacts of climate change that were already affecting communities. Other Members also spoke in support of the proposed amendment, commenting that the current Climate Change Committee's powers were limited, and a strategic committee would provide the necessary oversight, review and scrutiny of the coordinated strategic approach outlined in the report. It was added that, should the amendment not be successful, only the Full Council would have the power to scrutinise progress, and a request was made that a further report be brought forward in no more than six months;
- in response to a question, it was confirmed that the Climate Change and Energy Team regularly engaged with UHI around education and development relating to climate change. Members added that there were opportunities for schools to become more involved in climate-related learning and activities;
- the importance of working with communities rather than "doing to" them was emphasised;
- the impact that seed funding could have within small communities was highlighted, and Members looked forward to identifying ways to fund the work outlined in the report and seeing what could be achieved in communities across Highland;
- Highland had the longest coastline in the UK, and the need for funding for flood protection was emphasised. The recommendation that the Council write to the Scottish Government regarding the future funding model for flood protection schemes and engineered flood defence infrastructure was welcomed, and it was requested that the letter be robust;
- regardless of Members' individual views on climate change, investment in measures to address it would deliver benefits including cleaner water, improved health and wellbeing, more resilient communities, increased local food production and a flourishing natural environment;
- with reference to earlier comments regarding the cost to the taxpayer, attention was drawn to the Stern Review in 2006, which had found that there was an economic imperative for quick and decisive action on climate change, and that 1% of GDP spent on mitigation and adaptation at that time would save up to 20% of GDP in the future. While the proposals outlined were acknowledged to be expensive, the cost of inaction would be considerably greater;
- young people were the future of Highland and the recommendation to embed their voice within the Council's approach to climate change, energy and community resilience was welcomed;
- there was considered to be a greater role for the Council in terms of leading climate change action within the wider Highland economy;
- section 1.1 of the report referred to economic modelling on the impact of unmanaged climate risk on GDP, and it was requested that the source of such modelling be cited in future reports to enable Members to review it in advance of the meeting;

- many people were sceptical about climate change and wished to see the work outlined in the report taken forward but not under the banner of climate change;
- further to earlier contributions regarding constraint payments, it was questioned why companies were being paid not to generate energy that could not be sold in any case, and it was suggested that the money would be better spent on addressing climate change issues; and
- the need to address climate change was evident in communities, particularly coastal communities, and the actions proposed in the report were welcomed.

During summing up, the Leader of the Council emphasised the direct relationship between the Climate Change Committee and the Full Council, and that all reports to strategic committees were already required to consider climate change impacts. Climate change considerations were therefore embedded throughout the Council's committee structure and it was not considered that any additional benefit would be gained from designating the Climate Change Committee as a strategic committee.

Thereafter, Mr R Bremner, seconded by Mr B Lobban, **MOVED** the recommendations as detailed in the report, with the addition of the establishment of a short-term Members Working Group, reporting to the Corporate Resources Committee, to explore ways the Council could mitigate the impacts caused by fuel poverty on Highland residents.

As an **AMENDMENT**, Ms K Willis, seconded by Dr M Gregson, **MOVED** an additional recommendation as follows:

Council agrees to designate the Climate Change Committee as a Strategic Committee, providing policy direction, governance and oversight of climate, energy and resilience activity across all services; recognises these as core strategic and financial considerations embedded within Council decision-making, asset management and long-term investment planning; and adopts a coordinated, programme-led approach that consolidates existing activity into a single strategic framework, appropriately resourced and centred on the Climate Change and Energy Team as the Council's central coordinating function, to reduce long-term cost and risk, support financial sustainability, strengthen resilience and maximise local benefit for the Highlands.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 36 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 23 votes, with 4 abstentions. The **MOTION** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

Motion:

Ms S Atkin, Mr M Baird, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mrs B Campbell, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Mrs T Collier, Ms L Dundas, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Ms C Gillies, Mr K Gowans, Mr M Green, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Mr A Jarvie, Ms L Johnston, Mr R Jones, Mr S Kennedy, Ms L Kraft, Mr B Lobban, Mr W MacKay, Mr G MacKenzie, Ms K MacLean, Mr D Macpherson, Mr D McDonald, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs M Reid, Mrs M Ross.

Amendment:

Mr C Ballance, Mr A Baxter, Dr C Birt, Mr A Christie, Mr S Coghill, Mrs H Crawford, Mr R Cross, Mr J Edmondson, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Dr M Gregson, Mr R Gunn, Mrs B Jarvie, Mr P Logue, Mr R MacKintosh, Mrs A MacLean, Mrs J McEwan, Mr M Prosser, Ms C Ramsay, Mrs T Robertson, Mr K Rosie, Ms K Willis.

Abstentions:

Mr J Bruce, Mrs I MacKenzie, Mrs L Saggars, Mr R Stewart.

Decision

The Council **AGREED**:-

- i. the strategic context and direction set out in the report, recognising the increasing climate risks facing Highland communities and infrastructure and the Highlands' central role in Scotland's transition to a low-carbon energy system;
- ii. embedding the voice of young people within the Council's approach to climate change, energy and community resilience, recognising the long-term impact of these decisions on future generations, and to develop mechanisms to ensure that youth perspectives were reflected in policy development, investment planning and programme delivery;
- iii. strengthened coordination across Council services, supported by the Council's Climate Change and Energy Team, to enable a place-based approach to climate change, energy and resilience within infrastructure planning, housing programmes and long-term asset management;
- iv. the continued development of coordinated investment pipelines across climate adaptation, renewable energy, housing retrofit and infrastructure resilience, including the incorporation of climate resilience schemes within the developing Invest Highland infrastructure prospectus;
- v. continued strategic engagement with government, regulators, network operators, renewable energy developers and investment partners to ensure the interests of Highland communities were reflected in national energy system reform and infrastructure planning;
- vi. that further work be undertaken to develop proposals for a sustainable long-term delivery model to support the Council's climate change, energy and resilience programme outlined in the report, recognising that effective delivery would require sustained organisational capacity and programme coordination aligned with long-term programme delivery rather than short-term project funding cycles, with any proposals brought back to Council for future consideration;
- vii. that, in May 2026, the Council write to the Scottish Government seeking clarity on the future funding model for flood protection schemes and engineered flood defence infrastructure, recognising the increasing climate risks facing Highland communities, including the 29 communities currently identified as being at risk from coastal erosion; and
- viii. the establishment of a short-term Members Working Group, reporting to the Corporate Resources Committee, to explore ways the Council could mitigate the impacts caused by fuel poverty on Highland residents.

**6. Pride in Place Programme
Prògram Pròis ann an Àite**

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

Overall, Members felt that the Pride in Place Programme brought an opportunity to make transformational changes across North, West and East Sutherland, and the investment was welcomed.

During discussion, the following points were raised:-

- the investment could be augmented with community benefit funds already in place across Sutherland, maximising impact. This might also attract match funding;
- it was appreciated that the chosen area reflected significant identified need for improved social infrastructure, however there were several areas within Highland that would also benefit from such an investment. It was asked if widening the boundary to include Central Sutherland could be considered;
- the Neighbourhood Board would allow more meaningful community-led action and it was asked if the NorthWest2045 Community Vision, community transport links and tackling coastal erosion might be considered;
- it was asked whether the role of Chair could be undertaken by two co-chairs, that being one from each Ward. It was confirmed that this might be possible although a joint application would be preferable;
- assurances were sought, and provided, in relation to staffing. It was important to have sufficient capacity to meet Government reporting obligations and it was asked whether a new post would be created; and
- it was important to learn what worked or did not work over the 10 year period.

Decision

The Council:-

- NOTED** the update on the Pride in Place Programme (PIPP) and its proposed operation;
- NOTED** that the Highland Council would act as the Accountable Body for the funding in relation to the Pride in Place Programme for the “North, West and East Sutherland Neighbourhood”;
- NOTED** the initial funding provided to the Council, as Accountable Body, to progress the establishment of the Neighbourhood Board and development of a Project Plan to support delivery of the PIPP;
- NOTED** that, in the role of accountable body, the Council would lead, along with the local MP, on the recruitment of an independent Board Chair and following that, the recruitment of Board Members;
- AGREED** that authority be delegated to the Assistant Chief Executive - Place, in consultation with the Convener, Leader and Leader of the Opposition of the Council, to undertake the actions required to implement and progress delivery of the Pride in Place Programme. This would include (but were not limited to):-
 - a. recruitment and appointment of a Neighbourhood Board Chair;
 - b. recruitment and appointment of members to, and establishment of, a Neighbourhood Board (including setting the terms of reference for the Board);
 - c. approval of expenditure relating to the development and implementation of the PIPP programme from the initial grant provided to the Accountable Body (£0.15m) for 2026/27; and
- AGREED** that an update on the implementation of the Pride in Place Programme, be provided to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee on 20 August 2026, with interim updates provided to the Sutherland Area Business Meeting.

7. Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport (ICFGF) Retained Non-Domestic Rates Fund
Maoin Reataichean Neo-dhachaigheil Glèidhte Saor-phort Uaine Inbhir Nis agus Chaolas Chromba

Transparency Statements: the undernoted Members declared connections to this item but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that they had an interest to declare:-

Ms M Hutchison – as a Director on the Board of Assynt Leisure Centre, which was affiliated with High Life Highland.

Mr J Edmondson – as a member of a local transport forum.

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

During discussion, the following points were raised:-

- the report was welcomed as setting out a strategic approach for the use of retained non-domestic rates, with Members emphasising the importance of early investment to maximise long-term benefits. It was considered that opportunities for forward funding and the development of a recyclable fund would allow the region to secure a lasting legacy beyond the initial 25-year period;
- disappointment was expressed following the recent withdrawal of a major inward investment proposal at the port of Ardersier. Members commented on the scale of the potential economic loss and the impact on local communities, while acknowledging that substantial opportunities for investment remained across the Highlands;
- the identification of housing as an early priority was strongly supported. It was highlighted that insufficient housing supply posed a constraint on workforce development and that accelerated delivery would be needed to support anticipated demand;
- the wider role of regeneration, community infrastructure and active travel was emphasised. It was emphasised that communities closest to the Freeport should experience clear and tangible benefits and that skills and career development should remain central objectives throughout the duration of the Fund;
- concerns were expressed regarding the scale of workforce travel associated with the Freeport and the limitations of relying on private car use and it was recognised that accessible, reliable and sustainable transport options would be required within the travel to work area;
- questions were raised regarding the application and assessment process, including whether applications rejected at an early stage would still be visible to the Board and whether the Board would be able to request reconsideration. It was also observed that clear support would be required for small community groups that might find the process complex;
- Members sought reassurance that disadvantaged communities would benefit from the Fund, recognising that historically some major industrial developments elsewhere in Scotland had not resulted in equitable outcomes. It was important that the Investment Plan ensured resources were directed toward communities with the greatest needs. It was confirmed that regeneration was a core objective of the Fund and that many of the communities closest to the Freeport were among the most disadvantaged in Highland. Officers undertook to reflect this in feedback to the Freeport Company;

- clarification was sought, and provided, on the operation of the forward funding mechanism, including repayment expectations and the extent of certainty required around future non-domestic rates income;
- Members observed that the Freeport programme intersected with multiple Council strategies, including climate action, housing, workforce development and the wider investment programme. It was considered essential that a joined up delivery approach was adopted to avoid duplication and ensure that all funding streams worked cohesively;
- clarification was sought, and provided, on governance, including the frequency of reporting to full Council and future arrangements for elected Member representation on the Freeport Board;
- reference was made to the Black Isle and the potential value of reinstating or extending ferry services as a sustainable commuting option. It was recognised that pockets of deprivation existed across rural areas and that these should be considered alongside the needs of communities closest to the Freeport;
- the importance of maintaining low administrative costs to ensure that retained rates were used effectively for investment rather than overly bureaucratic processes was reiterated;
- concerns were raised regarding road infrastructure across the region, particularly given the long travel distances faced by many residents. Members stressed that appropriate infrastructure would be necessary to support workforce mobility; and
- reference was made to the condition of the Strathcarron Bridge and the potential implications for industrial activity at Kishorn. Members reported community concerns and sought advice ahead of forthcoming engagement meetings. It was confirmed that no restrictions were required at present, that a strategic improvement project had already been designed and that the Chief Executive would engage directly with local representatives in advance of planned community events.

Decision

The Council:-

- NOTED** the background to the development of the draft Investment Plan;
- NOTED** the feedback from Members as set out in section 6 and Appendix 3 to the report;
- AGREED** that the feedback from Members, as set out in section 6 of the report, be passed to the ICFGF Board for consideration within the final Investment Plan;
- in addition to the feedback from Members, **AGREED** to endorse the proposed Investment Plan;
- AGREED** that officers and the ICFGF Board explore opportunities to invest some of the available retained Non-Domestic Rates (rNDR) to create a recyclable funding pot which extended beyond the lifetime of the ICFGF;
- AGREED** that the Council, along with the ICFGF Board, consider opportunities to 'forward invest' rNDR delivery plan investments, to accelerate enabling infrastructure and investment, based on future income profiles and payback, subject to affordability and financial due diligence; and
- NOTED** that there would be engagement with Members on an annual basis to develop the Delivery Plan, which would include specific priorities for the forthcoming year, based on updated forecasts of available income.

8. Workforce North Co-Investment Fund Maoin co-thargaish luchd-obrach a' Chinn a Tuath

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

It was anticipated that the Highlands and Islands could benefit from up to £100b of future investment over the next 15 years from the Workforce North Co-Investment Fund, supporting the creation of an improved and greater skilled workforce Highland wide.

The Council had committed £1.6m to Workforce North comprising £1.2m in match funding and £402k to put dedicated posts in place to manage and deliver the program effectively. It was important to match skills correctly and deliver outcomes at pace.

During discussion, the following points were raised:-

- Workforce North would enable Highland employers involved in large-scale infrastructure programs to offer rapid entry to work training for unemployed or career-changing adults such as those leaving the oil industry. Although not everyone felt that the program should focus primarily on the renewable sector, it was said that the Council should take the opportunity as it was afforded. It was hoped that the program's funding strategy and tailored solutions could soon provide support to the hospitality, tourism and third sectors. It was questioned why whisky, marine and agricultural sectors appeared not to have been included;
- in terms of young people, the program could create employment and open up career pathways, which could help retain young people in Highland and reassure them that support was in place if things didn't work out. Engagement with schools and colleges alongside employers, partners and stakeholders would support the development of new skills and training. It was important to make options available across Highland and not just in one place, and to recognise the needs of different communities;
- information was sought, and provided, in terms of targets, next steps, benchmarking and monitoring of the program. Updates would be provided to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee and it was said that the program would bring the worlds of business demands and the supply of talent together, as well as find a greater alignment between the economic opportunities for young people in the area and the education system;
- the Highland Youth Parliament had previously indicated that young people wished to understand what their future job requirements were in terms of climate change and it was asked, through involvement with this program, what their next steps were;
- a bespoke vocational path for children with additional support needs was important, and welcomed, as was schools recognising the expanse of apprenticeships in addition to university level education;
- experiences of growth and decline in Invergordon highlighted the importance of learning from the past and avoiding reliance on a single sector. Developing a diverse economy was key to building resilience and stability;
- it was emphasised the need for housing, provision and infrastructure to enable those working across Highland to live there. Additionally, care must be taken to ensure that workers were not attracted away from positions such as caring and nursing, which were already difficult to recruit to; and
- in response to a question, it was confirmed that the program was developed following consultation with the private sector, that it considered the differing needs from industries and businesses, and that it was welcomed.

The Council:-

- i. **NOTED** the update on the Workforce North Co-Investment Fund and its proposed operation;
- ii. **NOTED** that the Highland Council would act as Lead Partner and Accountable Body for the funding;
- iii. **AGREED** that authority be delegated to the Assistant Chief Executive - Place, in consultation with the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure, to undertake the actions required to establish and implement the Workforce Co-Investment Fund as per the grant terms entered with Skills Development Scotland; and
- iv. **AGREED** that progress be reported to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee, through the update reports related to the My Highland Future Delivery Plan Portfolio.

9. Models of Integration Review – Options Appraisal Phase 1 Outcome Report and Phase 2 Initiation
Ath-sgrùdadh air Modailean Amalachadh

Transparency Statement: Mr A Jarvie declared a connection to this item as an employee of the Mental Welfare Commission and Director of Scottish Autism. However, having applied the objective test, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

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

The Assistant Chief Executive - People gave a presentation which included the context for the review of the model of integration, progress to date and how the two recommended options had been selected from the four options (0-3) detailed in the report. She summarised the definition of an Integration Joint Board (IBJ) in terms of planning, governance, resourcing, and membership. Attention was drawn to the Neurodevelopment Assessment (NDAS) Project Initiative as detailed in the report, for which £1.2m investment had been received.

The Chair of the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee outlined the significance of the decision to be made and how it would determine the shape of the delivery of Health and Social Care in Highland. The model of integration would set out how the Highland Council and NHS Highland worked together and that, after 14 years, it was time to review the model used, noting that Highland was the only local authority in Scotland using the Lead Agency model. The criteria used for testing the four options was summarised, including the framework of evidence, transparency and good governance and attention was drawn to the plans for engagement with staff, communities, Members and the third sector. The report also detailed proposals for the NDAS funding, progress with which would be reported through the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee. He thanked officers for progressing the matter at pace.

During discussion, the following issues were considered:-

- attention was drawn to the reversal of the Scottish Government's attempt to introduce a National Care Service and how, during that process, the Government's intention had been to prevent use of the Lead Agency integration model, which was currently in place in Highland. Given that the status quo was one of the two recommended options, it was queried whether this was competent

and whether the Scottish Government was likely to prevent continued use of the Lead Agency model. If so, there was little point in consulting on that option. It was further pointed out that the financial partnership that had been intended as part of the Lead Agency Model had not worked as seamlessly as planned. The Assistant Chief Executive - People provided assurance that current legislation did not prevent the continued use of the Lead Agency Model;

- in relation to the delivery of Adult Social Care, it was vital that the chosen model was the most suitable for the beneficiaries of the services and their families, that it provided positive and compassionate outcomes, choices around care and to facilitate independent lives for as long as possible;
- equitable access to services and the smoothing of geographic challenges were important;
- the importance of including lived experiences and the voices of services users was emphasised and information was sought, and provided, on plans to include those who were isolated or who required care and assistance in making their voices heard, for example people with learning difficulties or mild dementia;
- meaningful co-production with the third sector and communities was urged;
- efforts that were being undertaken to minimise disruption to staff and IT were acknowledged, as were the comprehensive plans for engagement;
- the options rating tool that had been used was considered sound and objective, and it was welcomed that it had acknowledged what had been achieved through the Lead Agency model;
- the disruptive nature of change was highlighted but could be mitigated by employing an appropriate consultation approach;
- the importance of the use of shared, understandable language (Plain English) was highlighted, with reference to the 'person-centred portfolio board' by way of example, which many people might not understand. Attention was drawn to the increasingly positive working relationship and shared language aims between the Council and NHS Highland;
- with reference to engagement with staff, it was queried how progress would be tracked and a benchmarking process was suggested to enable appropriate analysis of the success of the direction of travel;
- attention was drawn to the need to have back-up plans to cover the absence of key members of staff and to ensure continuity of access to information;
- the public deserved good governance and clear accountability;
- it was intended the process, and any new model, should provide opportunities to reduce organisational barriers and improve access to services;
- possible solutions to some of the challenges facing the Council and NHS Highland included clear career pathways for carers and adequate provision of housing for key workers;
- the tight timescales proposed were queried and acknowledged as a risk. Provision was being put in place to review the timescales as the programme progressed;
- attention was drawn to the cost implication of system change;
- the inclusion of the NDAS funding proposals in the report was welcomed, given the close connection between that work and the work of the integrated partnership. The intention to recruit a Project Manager was supported and would be instrumental in coordinating the work of the partners and to ensure a bottom-up approach was used. Attention was drawn to the relatively high number of neurodiverse children who had neurodiverse parents, and the impact of this on assessment procedures now and in the future; and
- with reference to the University of Glasgow being considered expert in the development of neurodevelopment assessment models, consideration was being given to whether an exemption to wider procurement could be granted.

The Chief Executive explained that officers would be tasked with bringing forward a proposal that met the challenges of the Green Book Assessment to be affordable, achievable and deliverable. He drew attention to the Adult Social Care (ASC) and the Children's Services budget recovery programmes, which would continue regardless of the outcome of the governance model review. He also referred to the ASC budget information that had been presented to the Council in February 2026 that had been grounded on the COSLA position that there would be an additional £750m of national investment in ASC, with Highland's share likely to be roughly similar to the current overspend on ASC. In the run up to the national care service bill, there had been positive discussion on the benefits of Highland using the same governance model as the rest of the country. Structuring funding solutions for the future was a vital component of any outcome, with much work required on this before it could be presented to the Council and the NHS Board.

Decision

The Council:-

- i. **NOTED** the outcome of the Phase 1 options appraisal summarised at section 5 of the report and set out in detail at Appendix 1 to the report;
- ii. **AGREED** the two options to be taken forward to Phase 2 of the Review: Option A – Lead Agency and Option B – Body Corporate (IJB);
- iii. with regard to next steps:
 - a. **AGREED** the draft Phase 2 Programme Plan at Appendix 2 to the report including timelines for a final decision and recommendation to Highland Council and the Board of NHS Highland by September 2026;
 - b. **AGREED** the Communications and Engagement Plan at Appendix 3 to the report;
 - c. **NOTED** progress with establishing a programme for Phase 2 including initiating appointment of a programme manager;
- iv. with regard to the NDAS proposal **AGREED** the:
 - a. high level proposal set out in Appendix 4 to the report; and
 - b. work to be further developed by and remitted to the Person Centred Solutions Portfolio Board.

10. **Members Learning & Development Annual Report 2025 Aithisg Bhladhnaid Ionnsachadh & Leasachadh Bhall 2025**

There had been circulated Report No. HC/09/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate.

During discussion, Members raised the following points:-

- Officers were thanked for the Members training briefing sessions over the last year which had been very valuable;
- Members were encouraged to take every opportunity to receive training. In particular, following the approval of the Council's Artificial Intelligence Policy, Members would receive a briefing session on artificial intelligence. There would also be another training event on treasury management;
- Members would also be engaged on a revised induction programme for returning and new Members after the Local Government Election in 2027;

- it was welcomed that the learning and development opportunities for Members were now far superior than in the past when such opportunities were limited. However, a view was expressed that the training opportunities that were offered felt like an attempt to make Councillors good members of a corporate body, rather than them fulfilling their representational roles that Councillors were elected to fulfil on the Council and represent the views of constituents. Therefore, in terms of the development of future Member training programmes, Officers must engage with Members so that there was a better understanding of the role of Councillors, which was firstly their representational role and that this was reflected in the training provided;
- in terms of equality and diversity, the effectiveness of the Council was reported as dependent on knowledge, confidence and capability. It was felt that this should also include awareness both of self and wider;
- when training and development courses were being developed they should recognise that people had different learning styles and engagement with Members should include Members lived experiences and how they learn. The policy on equality and diversity and related toolkit that the learning and development programme referred to was about children. There was a need for a policy that covered all the neurodiverse needs of all the various people involved in the Council i.e. children, adults, staff and councillors;
- Members had been advised not to get involved in operational matters and there was a need to inform Members where the boundaries were between policy and operational matters. Members were encouraged to contact the Standards Commission if they were unsure if they were encroaching on operational matters and undertake training provided by the Standards Commission;
- in respect of Members continuous learning and development, it would be great to see the Members' learning and development programme lead to a recognised course or qualification that would reflect Members training, learning and development and something for Members to take forward in their careers. This would also send a positive message to young people standing for election as it would show there was support and opportunities to grow and develop skills;
- the proposed training on the post election induction process and committee training was welcomed;
- when training was being planned there was a need to understand the challenges for Members attending whether that be work commitments, family and ward business pressures;
- while in person training was preferred, online training was invaluable as it was available at any time to suit Members;
- Councillors who joined the Council mid term should receive the same training and support as offered to Councillors appointed at the start of any new Council term;
- it was requested that a training session on net zero and climate change was arranged for Members in 2026 and for new Members in 2027. It was felt that knowledge and engagement would be fundamental to the success of the Council's net zero strategy and the climate change, energy and community resilience strategy;
- speed reading courses would be very useful to Members as would an almanac of officers for Members information;
- it was felt important that training was spread over a period of time so that training was not too onerous on Members when first appointed;
- Members had a wide area of expertise that could be used to facilitate Council business; and

- in terms of Councillors scrutiny role, a view was expressed that there was a conflict of interest, whereby Councillors duty was to scrutinise management, but management was providing Councillors training. Therefore, more external provision of training would be appropriate.

Decision

The Council-

- APPROVED** the refreshed Members' Learning and Development (L&D) Framework and outline L&D Programme for 2026;
- AGREED** the targeted improvement actions incorporated into the Programme for 2026;
- AGREED** that Committee Chairs, in consultation with Members, finalise and publish Committee specific learning pathways by June 2026;
- NOTED** further planned engagement with Members to shape the ongoing Programme for 2026 and the revised Induction and L&D Programme for 2027; and
- AGREED** that an annual update report be presented to Council in December 2026.

11. **Ukraine Memorandum of Understanding between the Highland Council and the Ivano-Frankivsk Regional State (Military) Administration, Ukraine** **Meòrachan Tuigse na h-Ugràin eadar Comhairle na Gàidhealtachd agus Rianachd Stàit Roinneil (Armairteach) Ivano-Frankivsk, An Ugràin**

There had been circulated Report No. HC/10/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive Corporate.

The Council had steadfastly supported Ukraine over the past four years as they continued to defend themselves regarding the unprovoked aggression by Russia. The Council had previously agreed to disinvest from Russian companies held in the Highland Council Pension Fund investment portfolio and granted the President of Ukraine, Freedom of the Highlands. Ukrainians were welcomed into Highland communities and The Memorandum of Understanding would continue to publicly reinforce the Council's support to Ukraine. Continuing, once the war was over, Highland communities would reap the benefits of its friendship with Ukraine and the mutual regard for each other.

Decision

The Council **APPROVED** the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding.

12. **Amendment to Standing Orders Relating to the Conduct of Meetings** **Atharrachadh do Ghnàth-riaghailtean a' Buntainn ri Stiùireadh Choinneamhan**

The Council **AGREED** that the following sentence be added to Standing Order 2.3:-

In the event that this occurs during a recess period, the meeting will be reconvened as soon as possible thereafter.

13. **Membership of the Council** **Ballrachd na Comhairle**

The Council **NOTED** that Mr T MacLennan had now joined the Highland Independent Group.

The political make-up of the Council was now as follows:-

SNP – 19 / Highland Independent – 19 / Scottish Liberal Democrats – 16 / Highland Alliance – 9 / Scottish Conservative and Unionist – 6 / Scottish Green Party – 3 / Labour – 2.

The formula in respect of the number of places on Strategic Committees remains unchanged - 5/5/4/2/2.

**14. Membership of Committees, etc
Ballrachd air Comataidhean, msaa**

The Council **AGREED** the appointments to Committees as tabled.

**15. Appointment to Companies - Highland Opportunity (Investments) Limited
Cur an Dreuchd gu Companaidhean - Cothrom dhan Ghàidhealtachd
(Tasgaidhean) Earranta**

Following the resignation of Mr P Oldham, the Council **AGREED** the appointment of Ms L Niven as a Director of Highland Opportunity (Investments) Limited.

**16. Armed Forces and Veterans Champion
Curaidh nam Feachdan Armaichte is nan Seann-ghaisgeach**

The purpose of the Armed Forces and Veterans Champion was to create links to proactively make contact with armed forces and veterans organisations and maintain contact with the Cross Party Group on Armed Forces Veterans within the Scottish Parliament, to advance interests at a local authority level through assessing the impact that Council initiatives have on the armed forces and veterans and to be a public advocate in the local authority area.

Decision

The Council **AGREED** that Mrs M Reid be appointed as Armed Forces and Veterans Champion.

**17. Timetable of Meetings
Clàr-ama Choinneamhan**

The Council:-

- i. **NOTED** that Joint meetings of the North and South Planning Applications Committee scheduled for 29 and 30 June 2026 were no longer required;
- ii. **AGREED** the South Planning Applications Committee due to be held on 21 August 2026 be moved to 6 August 2026;
- iii. **NOTED** that the Pensions Committee/Board meeting due to be held on 11 February 2026 had been held on 16 March 2026 and **AGREED** that further meetings be held on 18 June 2026, 1 October 2026 (rather than 3 September 2026) and 16 December 2026; and
- iv. **AGREED** the calendar of meetings from 1 January to 30 April 2027 as circulated.

**18. Deeds Executed
Sgrìobhainnean Lagha a Bhuilicheadh**

There had been circulated and **NOTED** a list of deeds and other documents executed on behalf of the Council since the meeting held on 11 December 2025.

**19. Confirmation of Minutes
Daingneachadh a' Gheàrr-chunntais**

There had been circulated Minutes of Meeting of the Council held on 11 December 2025 and the Special Council held on 5 March 2026 as contained in the Volume which were **APPROVED**.

**20. Minutes of Meetings of Committees
Geàrr-chunntasan Choinneamhan Chomataidhean**

There had been submitted for confirmation as correct records, for information as regards delegated business and for approval as appropriate, the Minutes of Meetings of Committees contained in Volume circulated separately as undernoted:-

Meeting	Date
Gaelic Committee	12 December 2025
Comataidh na Gaidhlig	12 An Dubhlachd 2026
City of Inverness Area Committee (Special)	7 January 2026
Badenoch and Strathspey Area Committee	19 January 2026
Caithness Committee	19 January 2026
Wester Ross, Strathpeffer & Lochalsh Committee	19 January 2026
Black Isle and Easter Ross Committee	26 January 2026
Lochaber Area Committee	26 January 2026
Housing and Property Committee	28 January 2026
*Climate Change Committee	28 January 2026

Starred Item as follows:-

Item 4 Highland Youth Parliament Presentation – AGREED that officers work with Members and representatives of the Highland Youth Parliament to progress the four asks of the Climate Change Committee as set out in the presentation.

Item 5i Net Zero Programme Update – AGREED the approval of the project brief templates in Appendix 2 of the report for inclusion in the Council's Net Zero Programme.

[Climate Change Committee](#)

Communities and Place Committee	29 January 2026
City of Inverness Area Committee	2 February 2026
Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee	4 February 2026
Audit Committee	4 February 2026
Nairnshire Committee	9 February 2026
Dingwall and Seaforth Committee	9 February 2026
Economy and Infrastructure Committee	12 February 2026

***Starred Item: Item 4iii. Short Term Let Control Area**

The Council **AGREED** 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.

Sutherland County Committee	16 February 2026
Isle of Skye and Raasay Committee	16 February 2026
*Education Committee	25 February 2026

Starred Item as follows:-

Item 16 – Appointment to Highland Football Academy Trust – AGREED the appointment of Mrs Kate MacLean to the Highland Football Academy.

Education Committee

Gaelic Committee	25 February 2026
Comataidh na Gaidhlig	25 An Gearran 2026
Pensions Committee	16 March 2026
*Corporate Resources Committee	19 March 2026

Starred Item as follows:-

Item 4 – Appointment to Sub-Committees, Working Groups, etc – AGREED the appointment of the following Members to the Appeals and Disputes Committee - Mr R Gale, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M MacCallum, Mrs I Mackenzie and Mr D McDonald.

Minutes of Meetings not included in the Volume as follows:-

- i. Highland and Western Isles Valuation Joint Board – **NOTED** – held on 7 October 2025 (approved by the Board on 16 December 2025);
- ii. Community Planning Board – **NOTED** – held on 5 December 2025 (approved by the Board on 10 March 2026);
- iii. Chief Officer Recruitment Panel - **APPROVED** – held on 15 December 2025;
- iv. Governance Review Steering Group - **APPROVED** – held on 12 February 2026 and 4 March 2026; and
- v. Redesign Board – **APPROVED** – held on 19 March 2026.

**21. Question Time
Àm Ceiste**

There had been circulated separately in Booklet A Member Questions received by the Chief Officer - Legal and Corporate Governance as follows:-

1. Mr A Christie

To the Leader of the Council

Please could the Leader list, detail and give an explanation of all non-family law legal cases the Council currently has ongoing and those concluded since 1st April

2023 together with the outcome as well as including complaints with the SPSO over the same period.”

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, was the Leader not embarrassed that former employees of the Council had taken action in regard to disability discrimination, unfair dismissal, whistleblowing victimisation, sex discrimination and pregnancy discrimination?

In response, the Leader advised as these were legal matters and it would be inappropriate to comment.

2. Mr A Christie

To the Leader of the Council

Please could the Leader detail by school establishment all vacant teaching posts and in which schools these are and whether this is causing a significant curriculum delivery challenge?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, there were currently 60 vacancies across schools in the region, how did the Administration plan to ensure this deficit did not cause educational disadvantage to school children.

In response, this would be discussed with the Chair of the Education Committee, and a response would be fed back to Members in due course.

3. Mr M Reiss

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

What were the numbers of farmers and contractors used in January 2026 to combat the heavy snowfalls within the Council area, area by area if feasible and detailing costs incurred by Highland Council?

The response had been circulated.

There was no supplementary question.

4. Mrs I MacKenzie

To the Chair of Housing and Property

Given national research from Age Scotland and the University of Stirling showing that older people across Scotland face fragmented and difficult processes when trying to access essential home adaptations, including poor public information, inconsistent pathways and delays due to limited capacity, and recognising that Highland's ageing population is growing and dispersed across remote and rural communities, can the Chair outline how the Council intends to work with NHS Highland, the Integration Joint Board, and third sector partners, including local TSI organisations, to explore a more coordinated "Highland Model" for delivering timely

home adaptations and to identify potential Scottish Government funding streams that could support such partnership work?

[Age Scotland | The Scottish Charity for Older People](#)

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, could the Chair advise on the current average waiting times for OT assessment through to completion of home adaptations and whether the recent Care and Repair Service changes had resulted in faster delivery for residents

In response, currently the time taken to complete capital medical adaptations average was 27 days in the current year and for 2024/25. For revenue medical adaptations took on average 9-10 days in 2024/25, from receiving the assessment from NHS Occupational Therapy.

5. Ms K Willis

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

What is the annual cost to Highland Council of contracted bus services in Highland, broken down for each area?

The response had been circulated.

There was no supplementary question.

6. Mr J Edmondson

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

The B9176 Road, known as "The Struie" linking the inner Dornoch Firth at Ardgay to the A9 south of Alness is defined as a Primary Route for winter maintenance as agreed by the Sutherland County Committee because it is a vital link to the North West Highlands.

The impact of closing this road is felt by multiple communities and businesses, many of which serve our food industry. The route is also the most direct to Inverness for hospital admissions and visiting. There are four residential properties on the road at Aultnamain.

The principle alternative route is the A9, which if closed for any reason between Tain and the Dornoch Firth Bridge, cuts off access entirely to and from the north eastern Highlands including Caithness via an eastern route.

It is accepted and acknowledged by Policy that circumstances will arise when the Struie is impassable, but the experience of the January storms left the route closed for 10 days. It was the last Primary route to be opened in the Highlands during the recent January storm, it remained closed for days longer than any other Primary route in the Highlands.

Will the Council commit to treating The Struie, a Primary Route as set out in Winter Service Policy (2018) and as agreed by Area Committee, and work with Police Scotland where necessary to ensure that this regionally important road critical to the resilience of the road network in the Highlands is opened as a matter of priority and as quickly as possible after any storm has abated at times of unplanned closure in future?"

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, in January 2026 the B9176 Road, known as The Struie, was left closed for 10 days, did you consider The Struie road was treated as a priority after the storm had abated in line with Sutherland Committee's designation of the road as a primary route?

In response, the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure advised the closure was regrettable however the re-opening had been prevented due to a stranded vehicle obstructing the road from being cleared. In future this would be dealt with in line with agreed policies.

7. Mr R MacKintosh

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

A recent article in The Ferret reported that an Estate in Sutherland benefitted from 100% rates relief from Highland Council, saving the Estate £11,200 in 2023. What was the loss in tax revenue to Highland Council over the last five years due to Estates claiming rates relief through the Small Business Bonus Scheme?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, how many Estates in Highland claimed the Small Business Bonus Scheme rates in the last 5 years?

In response, the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure advised that this information was not available however he would source this and circulate to all Members once available.

8. Mr S Coghill

To the Leader of the Council

Where development proposals would result in the loss of natural greenspace within a town or village — particularly where provision is already limited — what specific policy tests, mitigation requirements or compensatory mechanisms are applied to ensure that replacement provision is made, is meaningful, publicly accessible and secured within the same community?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, in relation to natural green spaces, where such spaces were limited within a town, what happened when these green spaces were lost and how did the Council ensure that the green spaces unique, ecological, recreational and social value were properly weighed and any compensatory provision replaced these critical benefits.

In response, due to the lengthy nature of the supplementary question, the Leader would review with officers and provide assurance about the subject matter, the response also being circulated to all Members.

9. Mr R Cross

To the Leader of the Council

The adopted Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan 2 makes clear that further housing allocations linked to Green Freeport status should await clear evidence of employment-led housing demand; on what basis is the Council approving applications that rely on Freeport status as justification where such evidence has not been demonstrated, without undermining the integrity of the plan-led system?

The response had been circulated.

There was no supplementary question.

10. Mr A Graham

To the Leader of the Council

What percentage of Highlands premises have broadband with

- (a) superfast speeds (30+ Mbps) and
- (b) Gigabit-capable full fibre

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, could the Leader advise if the Administration could accelerate the installation of superfast broadband into an acceptable number of properties in Highland.

In response, the Leader advised this issue had been highlighted in the past and he would be happy to work with Mr Graham to make further representations.

11. Mr C Ballance

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

Given that Orkney and Shetland Islands Councils have just this year published their Regional Maritime Plan, is Highland Council preparing its own Regional Maritime Plan?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, as there were initial building blocks that could be put in place to inform National Maritime Plan 2, such as assessing the condition of the region, summarising the significant pressures and consequences of human activity and the contribution of Marine Protection Areas, could work be started immediately.

In response, the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure advised he was aware of Orkney Council and Shetland Council having produced their national responses, however noted this had taken 10 years to do so. The advice to Highland was not to start now, but to await the creation of the National Marine Planning Framework 2 given resources would need to be identified for this.

12. Mr J Grafton

To the Leader of the Council

As Area Committees across Highland recently voted on :- “an increase of garage and garage site rentals” “[Lochaber - 8%] can you please confirm that the full value of the increase; or if greater, the percentage of the total garage rent that will be returned to the Area Committee’s to fund repairs and maintenance of the garage stock and enable lessors to see some benefits for their increased payments?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, could a breakdown be provided on what was spent on garage and garage sites to inform constituents of what they were getting as a result of two years of increased rentals?

In response, garage and garage sites were being investigated and the outcome would be reported back to the Housing and Property Committee. He was keen to see what could be done with garage estates in local areas. He was happy to have further conversations out with the meeting as to what could be done with redundant garage spaces.

13. Mr A Baxter

To the Leader of the Council

Will you set out the reasons as to why your administration was not prepared to support representations to the Cabinet Secretary for Transport requesting a cross-party, multi-agency roads summit for the Highlands to discuss future funding options to improve Highland roads?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, a query was raised on behalf of a constituent from Skye regarding the conditions of the road in Glendale.

In response, the Administration had made representation to government ministers regarding investment in roads and would continue to do so. The road infrastructure required increased investment now and over the coming years and the Redesign Board was looking to see how to achieve better benefit from that investment.

14. Mr D Macpherson

To the Leader of the Council

What scope is there for the income generated from council tax on second homes and empty homes, contributing to and invested in the Highland 'housing challenge' ?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, with 9000 people on a waiting list due to the housing crisis, why was not all of the £5.8M from second homes investment being used instead of the £1M recurring fund. How could the Council put more of this investment into empty homes to solve the housing challenge.

In response, when it came to the Highland Housing Challenge and the policies which had been set, the Leader advised that balanced consideration had to be taken of other challenges which the Council was facing and that had shaped how to invest in housing. A bigger holistic picture was required on making decisions noting this was what shaped the policy and income streams.

15. Mrs A MacLean

To the Chair of Housing and Property

Housing and Property Committee met on 5 Nov 2025 and agreed a new Domestic Abuse Housing Policy that clearly sets out its approach to assisting victim-survivors of domestic abuse.

The Policy strengthens the Council's role in preventing homelessness caused by domestic abuse, while ensuring a person-centred and safety focused response. "At the core of our approach is the belief that victims should have the right to choose. Whether they decide to remain in their home or relocate, their wishes will guide our response. We are committed to making housing part of the solution, not a barrier for those seeking safety."

Last year over 2,700 incidents of domestic abuse were recorded by Police Scotland in Highland.

On average, 167 households present as homeless each year in Highland due to a violent or abusive relationship breakdown, this is 12% of all households who approach the Council as homeless as they have nowhere safe and secure to live (1 in 9 households).

Women are disproportionately affected, and many do not disclose abuse due to fear, stigma, or lack of housing options.

The new policy will:

- Improve housing outcomes for victims and their children.
- Provide a trauma-informed, person-centred service to victims of domestic abuse.
- Promote preventative and proactive approaches, including support to remain safely in the home where appropriate.
- Recognise domestic abuse as a breach of tenancy.

- Prepare for the implementation of new powers under the Domestic Abuse (Protection) (Scotland) Act 2021, which will allow landlords to remove perpetrators from their tenancy (enabling the victims to remain if they choose).

The policy has been shaped by the voices of those with lived experience, as well as input from Council staff, tenant volunteers and partner organisations. It builds on The Highland Council's existing work with its partners in the Highland Violence Against Women Partnership, and its pledge to the Chartered Institute of Housing's Make a Stand campaign.

An implementation plan is already underway and includes:

- Ensuring, through training, that housing staff, and anyone delivering services on its behalf, have the skills to recognise and respond to domestic abuse.
- Awareness raising to make sure that people know how to get the help they need to keep them and their families safe.
- Service improvements to embed the policy in practice.

The Highland Council is committed to ensuring that anyone experiencing domestic abuse is listened to, supported, and empowered to make informed choices about their housing and safety.

How will this be implemented?

The response had been circulated.

In terms of a supplementary question, given Highland Council had stated on average 167 households presented as homeless due to violence and abuse, the expectation would be for 167 MARAC referral forms for each of the housing allocations as, for them to get a new property, a risk assessment was required. Could an assurance be provided that those were in place and records being kept correctly.

In response, the Chair of Housing and Property agreed to circulate this information to Members following the meeting.

22. Notices of Motion Brathan Glusaid

1. This Council recognises the local and regional importance of the B9176 Struie Road. It remains a strategic vital link between Sutherland, Easter Ross and beyond. Successive Area Committees have recognised it's importance by ensuring that it is a Primary Route in the Winter Service Policy. A Primary Route that in times of severe weather, after a storm has abated Policy dictates resources will be concentrated on getting it open and keeping it clear.

The recent January closure of the Struie Road for 10 days, 5 days longer than any other Primary Route in the Highlands and 7 days after the storm had abated meant that the A9 was the only route north and south on the east coast. This Council believes that resilience should be built into the road network for community safety and economic impact and therefore the Struie Road should continue to be recognised as a Strategic and Regionally important part of the road network.

- matters relating to the closure of the Struie road had been discussed at Ward level and lessons had been learned from this unprecedented situation and, the importance of working together at a local level to find solutions was emphasised;
- the dedication and professionalism of the Winter Maintenance Team, who had been working in difficult and dangerous conditions, was commended;
- it was important to recognise that the B9176 was a route of regional importance and that it came under the jurisdiction of both the Sutherland, and Black Isle and Easter Ross Committees;
- there had been offers of free road clearance from private companies and disappointment was expressed that these offers had not been accepted, however it was highlighted that the Council's procurement policy had to be followed for the protection of the Council and those doing the work and, if a contractor offered to work for free and something went wrong, it could end up having huge financial implications for the Council;
- during the storm in January, although the plan was in place to treat the B9176 as a priority route, there were not sufficient resources available to do so due to ploughs being unable to be fitted to vehicles, unreliable and broken down gritters, and the available resources being used to keep major A roads open;
- more resources were required to enable the Roads Team to keep all priority routes open during periods of adverse weather, and it was queried how best to ensure that there were suitable levels of staff and resources during these periods; and, as there was a resource implication, this was a matter to be discussed by the full Council rather than Area Committees;
- it was highlighted that a road closure on the B9176 would not just affect people in the Cromarty Firth and North, West and Central Sutherland Wards but also people needing to travel south from Caithness or Orkney, and emergency services as it was the quickest diversion if the A9 was closed between the Dornoch Bridge and the Nigg roundabout;
- it was emphasised that the Struie Road was not the only available route at the time of its closure and that the Highland Council had to work with the finite resources they had to keep as many roads open as possible, including in areas where there were no alternative routes;
- attention was drawn to the communities in the Struie area who were snowed in and stranded for several days in extreme weather conditions, and it was suggested that it was important to apologise to the people in these communities; and
- it was emphasised that clearing roads in extreme weather was often dangerous and took time, that damage to equipment was to be expected in these situations, and that the safety of frontline staff needed to be prioritised.

Thereafter, Mr R Cross, seconded by Mr M Baird, **MOVED** approval of the Notice of Motion as detailed.

As an **AMENDMENT**, Mr K Gowans, seconded by Mr J Finlayson, moved the Amendment as detailed.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 23 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 35 votes, with 1 abstention, and the **AMENDMENT** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion:

Mr M Baird, Mr A Baxter, Mr J Bruce, Mr A Christie, Mr S Coghill, Mr R Cross, Mr J Edmondson, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Dr M Gregson, Mr R Gunn, Mr A Jarvie, Mrs B Jarvie, Mrs I Mackenzie, Mrs A Maclean, Mr D Macpherson, Mr D McDonald, Mrs J McEwan, Mr M Prosser, Mrs M Paterson, Ms C Ramsay, Mrs L Saggars.

For the Amendment:

Ms S Atkin, Mr C Ballance, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Ms I Campbell, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Ms T Collier, Ms L Dundas, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Ms C Gillies, Mr K Gowans, Mr M Green, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Mr R Jones, Mr S Kennedy, Ms L Kraft, Mr B Lobban, Mr G MacKenzie, Mr R MacKintosh, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Ms M Reid, Mr K Rosie, Ms K Willis

Abstentions:

Mr H Morrison

Decision

The Council **AGREED** the Amendment as presented.

2. Accessible & Age-Appropriate Housing for Highland Motion

Highland Council recognises the urgent and growing housing needs of our ageing population and the importance of ensuring that people can live independently, safely and with dignity in their own homes for as long as possible.

Council notes the evidence from national experts, including the former Chair of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, who has stated that *“the housing needs of ageing tenants do not factor into planning policy”*, and wider research describing a *“policy blindness”* in spatial planning towards the needs of older and disabled people.

Council further notes that current Housing Need and Demand Assessments (HNDAs) do not require local authorities to collect evidence on the need for accessible, adaptable, or single-storey homes, limiting our ability to require developers to provide them. This will risk undermining Highland’s ability to plan effectively for our ageing demographic.

Council acknowledges the Scottish Government’s Housing to 2040 commitments, including:

- the forthcoming Scottish Accessible Homes Standard,
- the ambition to future-proof all new homes,
- improved systems for adaptations, and
- the requirement for joined-up planning across housing, health and social care.

Council therefore Agrees to:

1. That a report be brought to the Housing and Property Committee setting out options for developing a Highland Accessible and Adaptable Housing Action Plan, ensuring that the housing needs of older and disabled people are fully

reflected in future Housing Need and Demand Assessments (HNDAs), the Local Housing Strategy, and the next Local Development Plan.

2. To reaffirm our commitment to partnership working with NHS Highland and the Health and Social Care Partnership, ensuring that strategic planning for housing, care, support and independent living is properly aligned and integrated, in line with the principles of Housing to 2040.
3. To seek an update on preparations for the Scottish Accessible Homes Standard, ensuring that Highland is fully prepared to implement the new requirements as soon as national guidance is issued.
4. To request a progress report to Council within 12 months, including clear recommendations on future policy development, development planning, and partnership arrangements.

Signed: Mrs I MacKenzie
Mrs A MacLean

Mrs B Jarvie

Mr R Stewart

AMENDMENT

Highland Council recognises the growing housing needs of our ageing population but also individuals of all ages who require accessible and adaptable housing. It is important to ensure that people of all ages can live independently, safely and with dignity in their own homes, for as long as possible. Given this growing need, the Council is already taking action to ensure that people can live independently and well within their local communities. The Council welcomes the work already underway and planned to understand, evidence and respond to this need. This includes:-

- The new Housing Need Demand Assessment which, whilst still being finalised, has included a particular focus on the need for specialist housing including housing for older people and enabling independent living
- The HNDA evidence will be used to update the Strategic Housing Investment Plan and the Local Housing Strategy, which will specifically consider the need for specialist housing
- Through the Health and Social Care Partnership, the Adult Strategic Plan focuses on enabling people to remain in their own houses and communities, with the appropriate housing and care in place.
- The Lochaber Care Model which will consider developing different models of accommodation to enable people to live independently within their communities
- The current housing allocations policy which places a stronger weighting on the need for accessible housing – the new HNDA will inform the current review of the allocations policy
- The £1m HRA capital adaptations budget to enable existing HRA properties to be adapted.
- The Council's Build Programme already complies with the Housing for Varying Needs Standard (which would be part of the Scottish Accessible Housing Standard)
- The Council's Build Programme goes beyond the Housing for Varying Needs Standard and on most sites delivers 20% wheelchair accessible (standard 10%). For most ground floor properties, the Council goes beyond the Housing for Varying Needs Standard to improve accessibility.

Building on this body of work, working with our partners in NHS Highland and the Health and Social Care Partnership, the Council commits to bringing forward a Highland Accessible and Adaptable Housing Strategy to the Housing and Property committee, which will build on the work already in place and planned.

Signed: Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair Ms S Atkin

Mrs I Mackenzie summarised her Motion during which she referred to the demographic challenges faced in Highland and the need to move towards a stronger, more ambitious and forward looking age-friendly, intergenerational housing strategy that future proofed new housing, supported the ageing population to live independently and safely and also designed communities that worked for all ages from the outset. This would reduce pressure on health and social care, support independence and create more sustainable communities across Highland.

Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair summarised her amendment during which she outlined the considerable amount of work the Council was already undertaking to consider the needs of all ages of the population. As detailed and building on the existing body of work in respect of the need for adaptable and accessible housing, the Amendment proposed to develop an Accessible and Adaptable Housing Strategy that would set out the Council's approach to this critical area of work.

In discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the challenges for older people being able to live independently and safely in their own homes with supportive communities, near to close family, with good services, was one of the biggest issues faced by society;
- the Council did not underestimate the scale of the challenges but could not tackle these issues on its own. For example, it could not necessarily dictate to private developers as to where and what type of houses they should build;
- credit should be given for the considerable amount of work being done, as detailed in the Amendment, within the remit of the Housing and Property Committee, across all Services and through partnership working;
- it was important to focus on the ability to have access to accessible housing across every age group, demographic and level of ability given the fact people wanted to live their best lives in their own homes;
- there was a need to improve links between occupational therapy and housing as one of the main reasons for delayed discharges was that people's houses were no longer suitable for their needs;
- there was also a need for the Council to undertake more work at a faster pace in response to the challenges and potential to increase capacity in terms of the delivery of aids and adaptations;
- it was considered the Council was doing a good job in responding to people's needs and the importance of programming works required at the time in respect of existing tenants and houses;
- the Council had the ability to set out its requirements to private property developers and there was an opportunity to utilise developer contributions through a smarter approach to build more accessible housing in line with strategic goals. The key issue of using planning policy to help address the challenges was also highlighted;

- there were issues in relation to the allocations policy and the proportion of larger properties within the Council's portfolio occupied by one person. The opportunity to consider more one-bedroom developments would free up these houses;
- as part of the proposal there was also a need to consider the opportunities to build dementia friendly housing and the potential to learn from other countries in this regard;
- performance in delivering aids and adaptations to Council properties was high, the Council being in the top quartile for performance amongst social landlords in Scotland, showing there was capacity within the Housing Service. It was important to note that in relation to referrals, the occupational therapy function was the responsibility of NHS Highland; and
- reiterating that the Notice of Motion sought a commitment to better address the issues around age friendly and intergenerational communities, future proofing, right-sizing and planning policy and for these to be taken forward Highland wide through a holistic approach.

Thereafter, Mrs I Mackenzie, seconded by Mrs B Jarvie, **MOVED** approval of the Notice of Motion as detailed.

As an **AMENDMENT**, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, seconded by Ms S Atkin, moved the Amendment as detailed.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received 21 votes and the **AMENDMENT** received 33 votes, with 2 abstentions, and the **AMENDMENT** was therefore **CARRIED**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion:

Mr A Baxter, Mr A Christie, Mr S Coghill, Mr R Cross, Mr J Edmondson, Mr R Gale, Mr J Grafton, Mr A Graham, Dr M Gregson, Mr A Jarvie, Mr R Gunn, Mrs B Jarvie, Mr S Kennedy, Mrs I Mackenzie, Mrs A MacLean, Mr D Macpherson, Mr D McDonald, Mrs J McEwan, Mr M Prosser, Ms C Ramsay, Mrs L Saggars.

For the Amendment:

Ms S Atkin, Mr M Baird, Dr C Birt, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mr M Cameron, Ms I Campbell, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mrs M Cockburn, Ms T Collier, Ms L Dundas, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Mr L Fraser, Ms C Gillies, Mr K Gowans, Mr M Green, Mrs J Hendry, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Mr R Jones, Ms L Kraft, Mr B Lobban, Mr G MacKenzie, Ms K MacLean, Mr T MacLennan, Mr D Millar, Mr H Morrison, Ms L Niven, Mr P Oldham, Mrs M Paterson, Ms M Reid.

Abstentions:

Mr C Ballance, Mr R MacKintosh.

Decision

The Council **AGREED** the Amendment as presented.

3. The Council notes:-

- That Highland Council's Numeracy and Literacy Attainment figures still lag behind the national average in all areas and have declined in all but two categories.

- SQA results in S4, S5 and S6 have consistently been disappointing, and well behind national averages.
- The Council has attributed disappointing Secondary Educational Attainment data to Covid, Rurality, defective Primary Teacher judgements, and even unnecessarily negative comments by Councillors seeking to scrutinise the performance of the Service.
- In a context where Scotland's place in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tables has declined, many in Scottish Education have reassessed the Curriculum and its effectiveness.
- Education Scotland's Annual Action Plan, published in July 2025, firmly places the Curriculum as the primary focus for reform.
- Educationalists have, for some time, warned of "an overemphasis on skills and sidelining of knowledge" (Professor Sue Ellis).
- Curricular refocusing on the importance of Knowledge is already boosting attainment and achievement in many authorities, with key indicators such as the percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more level 6 qualifications in S5, and the percentage of S4 pupils achieving 5 or more level 5 qualifications showing huge improvements.

The Council therefore resolves:-

- That the Curriculum for Excellence is not serving Scotland's teachers, pupils or parents as well as it should or could.
- That we need an enhanced conception of the 4 Capacities (Successful Learners, Confident Individuals, Responsible Citizens, and Effective Contributors).
- That 'Powerful Knowledge' (Michael Young, Zongyi Deng and others) should be recognised as central to Education, and not subordinate, but complementary to Skills.
- That Highland Council's Education Service should take cognisance of such current research evidence, as well as the Education Scotland refocusing the Curriculum as the prime driver of the Educational process. In consequence, the Highland Council's *Education Improvement Plan* and *Raising Attainment and Achievement Strategy* should be reframed, and Officers and Staff should be empowered to advance the agenda accordingly.

Signed: Dr M Gregson Mrs H Crawford

The Council **NOTED** that this Motion had been withdrawn.

4. Highland Council welcomes and celebrates the £2 cap on bus fares across the Highlands introduced by the Scottish Government and effective from this Monday, the 23rd March, resolves to promote the reduced price regularly on its social media, and expresses the wish that any future Scottish Government will continue support for this beyond the one year pilot.

Signed: Mr C Ballance Mr R MacKintosh

In discussion the following points were raised:-

- the £2 fare cap was welcomed and thanks were extended to the staff who worked on getting Highland included in this scheme;

- the bus service in Highland needed to be extended, especially in local areas, to allow more people to make use of the £2 fare cap; and
- the My trip app where tickets for Highland buses could be booked did not currently support the £2 fare.

The Council **AGREED** the Motion as presented.

5. Council notes:-

- Buses can play a big part in improving social equity and inclusion. A significant proportion of the Highland population does not have access to a car, including young people, the elderly, and lower-income households.
- Reliable bus services are more than just a convenience; they are a critical piece of infrastructure, enabling people to access shops and services, which may be located on the outskirts of towns.
- Reliable buses provide a modal shift, giving residents a realistic alternative to driving.
- For many, the bus is a lifeline to medical appointments or social services.
- A well-run bus service enables societal inclusion. Without regularity and reliability, many people face transport poverty, where they are effectively cut off from the community. This disproportionately affects lower-income households.
- A well-run bus service can service and enhance our Highland Tourism and Hospitality economy. Tourists arriving by train or plane need reliable local transport to reach sites like Culloden Battlefield and Loch Ness. And efficient bus links help manage the seasonal surge of visitors, preventing rural roads and city parking spots from becoming overwhelmed during the summer months.
- One double-decker bus can potentially take 75 cars off the road, and can thereby significantly reduce emissions and congestion, and contribute to Climate Change targets.
- Cost savings achieved by taking services In-house: services previously externally awarded at £4,191,805, now replaced by a cost per annum of £2,400,000.

Council welcomes:-

- The work undertaken since January 2023 by the Council In-House Bus Service, in improving bus services, providing school contract services, public transport services and supporting education hires.
- This reflects excellent use of Section 22 Permits and the Bus Partnership Fund.
- Growth in In-house Bus Passenger numbers to 135,839 in 2025.
- Plans for a new operating model for bus services in the future, utilising ScotZeb 2 funding to meet the Council's Strategic objectives and align with the Local Transport Strategy.
- The formation of an In-house Officer Group to work towards a Highland Bus Operation, and potentially an Arm's Length External Organisation.

Signed: Dr M Gregson

Mrs T Robertson

AMENDMENT

This council congratulates the in-house bus team on the progress that has been made in the development and provision of a reliable in-house public transport operation and their dedication and commitment to deliver a key commitment for this council.

This Council notes:-

- Buses make significant contribution towards improving social equity, inclusion by creating opportunities for social interaction that help to develop social capital.
- Reliable bus services are a critical piece of infrastructure, enabling people to access shops and services, which may be located on the outskirts of our city, towns and settlements.
- Reliable buses provide a modal shift, giving residents a realistic alternative to driving and other forms of transport.
- For many, the bus is a lifeline that helps reduce health poverty, increases social mobility, improving the quality of life and life chances for everyone throughout our communities, noting this council puts people before profit.
- The provision of a reliable bus service is an investment in society itself and can be a significant contributor towards achieving net-zero carbon emissions targets for Highland.
- A local, trusted bus service can help boost the visitor economy and its future expansion by supporting rural connectivity as part of integrated transport solution.
- Cost savings achieved by taking services In-house: services previously externally awarded at £4,191,805, now replaced by a cost per annum of £2,400,000.
- This council will continue to support the development our in-house bus service and will enable additional financing to take advantage of expansion opportunities as these arise.

Council welcomes:-

- The work undertaken since January 2023 by the Council In-House Bus Service, in improving bus services, providing school contract services, public transport services and supporting education hires.
- The broad support for Highland Council in-house bus services from elected members and the public at large.
- This reflects excellent use of Section 22 Permits and the Bus Partnership Fund.
- Growth in In-house Bus Passenger numbers to 135,839 in 2025.
- The ability of this council to mitigate removal or reductions of services from other operators
- Plans for a new operating model for bus services in the future, utilising ScotZeb 2 funding to meet the Council's Strategic objectives and align with the Local Transport Strategy.
- The formation of an In-house Officer Group to work towards a Highland Bus Operation and supports in principle the creation an Arm's Length External Organisation to manage our expanding bus fleet, going forward.
- The work being undertaken to provide sustainable community transport solutions to support rural communities, ensuring alignment with the public's this council's strategic transport plan.

Signed: Mr K Gowans Mr C Ballance

In discussion, the proposers of the Motion accepted the Amendment and welcomed the £2 cap on bus fares across the Highlands introduced by the Scottish Government.

They also thanked all concerned who had pushed for improved public transport in the Highlands.

The proposer of the Amendment stated that it reflected the ambition of the Council and the excellent progress that had been made by the Council's inhouse bus team. The Council congratulated the team for the remarkable achievement in developing the community transport operation. The Council would continue to support the development of the inhouse bus service and stood ready to provide further support and investment as new expansion opportunities arose. Improvements to existing bus routes, delivery of school contracts, enhanced and reliable public transport provision was acknowledged as was the broad support by elected Members and the public for this work.

Decision

The Council **AGREED** the Amendment as presented.

6. To incorporate Care Experience into the Integrated Impact Assessment Process to ensure that the impact on care experienced young people is considered alongside equality, poverty, children's rights and rural/island.

Highland Council recognises:-

- Our collective responsibility as corporate parents and our commitment to the delivery of 'The Promise,' that Scotland's children and young people will grow up loved, safe, and respected.
- The Equalities Act 2010 confirms the significance in terms of protection, fairness and inclusion in all contexts of Protected Characteristics (Age, Disability, Sex, Race, Religion or Belief, Sexual Orientation, Marriage & Civil Partnership, Gender Reassignment, Pregnancy & Maternity).
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Highland Council resolves:-

- To add 'Care Experience' to our Equalities Impact Assessments where 'Care Experienced' is used to describe anyone who is currently, or has been, in the care system. For example, kinship care, looked after at home, foster care, residential care, secure homes, and adoption.
- To ensure that the impact on care experienced young people is considered alongside other impacts such as equality, poverty, children's rights and rural/island.
- To continually and proactively seek out and listen to the voices of care experienced young people when developing new policies.
- That the addition of care experience within Impact Assessments would formally recognise the impact any future decisions, services, policies might have on care experienced people.

Signed: Dr M Gregson

Mr C Ballance

Decision

The Council **AGREED** the Motion as presented.

The meeting was concluded at 5.30pm.