

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Corporate Resources Committee** held in the Chamber, Council Headquarters, Inverness on Thursday, 27 August 2026 at 9.30am.

Present:

Mr M Baird	Mr S Mackie (remote)
Mr R Bremner	Mr T MacLennan
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair	Mr J Murray (sub for Mr Lobban)
Mr J Edmonston (sub for Mr Christie)	Mr P Oldham
Mr R Gale (sub for Mr Logue)	Mr M Prosser (remote)
Mr K Gowans	Ms M Reid
Mr A Jarvie	Mr M Reiss
Mr S Kennedy (remote)	Mr R Stewart
Mr G Mackenzie	

Non-Members present:

Mrs T Collier (remote)	Mr D Macpherson
Ms C Gillies	Mr D Millar (remote)
Mr J Finlayson (remote)	Mrs T Robertson
Mr D Fraser (remote)	

Officials in Attendance:

Mr A Gunn, Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate
Mr S Fraser, Chief Officer - Legal and Corporate Governance
Ms R Fry, Chief Officer – HR and Communications
Mr B Porter, Chief Officer - Corporate Finance
Mr D Scott, Chief Officer - Business Solutions
Mr G Munro, Revenues Manager
Mrs L Dunn, Joint Democratic Services Manager
Ms F MacBain, Senior Committee Officer

Also in Attendance:

Mr S Walsh, Chief Executive, Highlife Highland

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

Mr P Oldham in the Chair

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

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr A Christie, Mr B Lobban Mr P Logue, and Mr Bruce.

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

Item 11 – Mr R Stewart (transparency statement).

3. Recess Powers Cumhachdan Fosaìdh

The Committee **NOTED** that the recess powers granted by the Council at its meeting on 25 June 2026 did not require to be exercised in relation to the business of the Corporate Resources Committee.

4. Good News Naidheachdan Matha

The Committee **NOTED** the following good news:

- Communications Officer Sylvia Tarrant and Senior Licensing Officer Michael Elsey had been successful in gaining their Level 3 City & Guilds Award in Leadership and Management;
- Health and Safety Advisor Fiona Borwick in the SHEP team had passed her National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health (NEBOSH) diploma. Fiona had been supported to take the qualification while gaining experience in the team, making this a great example of 'growing our own' talent; and
- Emergency Planning Officer Hannah Cameron-Ross had passed the Certificate of the Business Continuity Institute (CBCI) with merit, improving resilience in the team.

5. Appointments to Sub-Committees, Working Groups, etc Cur an Dreuchd gu Fo-Chomataidhean, Buidhnean-obrach is eile

The Committee **AGREED**:-

- i. Mr B Lobban replace Mr S Kennedy on the Non Domestic Rates Appeal Committee;
- ii. Mr B Lobban replace Mr S Kennedy on the Employment Release Sub-Committee; and
- iii. that the following Members be appointed to the Community Asset Transfer Review Panel which would be chaired by the Chair of Corporate Resources Committee:

Mr M Baird, Mr A Christie, Mr K Gowans, Mr G Mackenzie, Mr T MacLennan, Mr P Oldham, Mr M Prosser, Mrs M Reid and Mr M Reiss.

6. Corporate Revenue and Capital Monitoring Report Aithisg Teachd-a-steach Corporra agus Sgrùdadh

- a. **Corporate Revenue Monitoring Out-turn for 2025/26 and Quarter 1 for 2026/27**
Sgrùdadh Teachd-a-steach Corporra – Fìor shuidheachadh airson 2025/26 agus Ràith 1 airson 2026/27

There had been circulated Report No RES/30/26 by the Chief Officer - Corporate Finance.

The Chair explained that the Inverness Castle Experience aspect of the report would be considered separately, after the remainder of the report, as detailed below.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- the challenging budget situation and significant overspends were impacting all Council services, with Adult Social Care being a particular challenge;
- concern was expressed at the poor state of much of the school estate across Highland. The Highland Investment Plan (HIP) was welcomed but a similar level of investment was required to repair and maintain school buildings to ensure all children had positive experiences throughout their school journey. In response, reference was made to the ongoing long-term school estate essential maintenance and repairs programme, and to the HIP;
- assurance was sought and provided that vacancies were not being deliberately held and used to fill budget gaps, and attention was drawn to natural turnover and recruitment challenges for certain roles. The impact of significant numbers of vacancies on service delivery and on working conditions for existing staff covering for vacancies was highlighted;
- an explanation was sought and provided on a communication that had been issued to service managers reminding them of the importance of the proper management of budgets. Assurance was provided that it had not contained any instruction to use holding of vacancies as a means of controlling the budget;
- a brief summary was sought and provided of the Council's position in relation to loan charges from capital investments;
- with reference to two buildings in Caithness which were Council-owned but leased to community groups, it was queried whether the Council's policy was to give responsibility for the maintenance of such older buildings to the leaseholder, rather than retaining responsibility for the building. This query would be passed to officers in Housing and Property and the answer provided outwith the meeting. It was also suggested that the maintenance of specific buildings could be considered at Area level;
- there was an expectation that there would be an appropriate level of operational scrutiny to ensure budget lines were being responsibly controlled and any overspend risks flagged as early as possible to facilitate the consideration of mitigating action; and
- concern was expressed at the plans to address budget issues over the remainder of the financial year, when it was important to understand the reasons for any developing budget issues. Income and savings targets needed to be realistic to help safeguard the Council's reserves.

Following this, the Chief Executive of High Life Highland gave a presentation on The Inverness Castle Experience (TICE), which included the history of the project, the first six months of operation, the strategic plan, actions to date, the five-year growth and cost projections, and the ongoing strategy, governance and operational risks.

During discussion on TICE, the following issues were raised:-

- a further report on TICE was due to be presented to the next meeting of the Committee on 19 November 2026;
- with regard to the visitor numbers being lower than predicted, it was queried and explained how they had been estimated, this having mainly been the outcome of the TICE Delivery Group which included a wide range of stakeholders and industry experts. Attention was drawn to the skilled staff who were employed at TICE, who were thanked for their work;
- the use of appropriate marketing expertise was suggested for future, and current work being undertaken with industry experts and with the Council's in-house team was queried and explained;
- it was suggested that, especially for local people, it might be worth lowering the price to attract higher numbers of visitors, and some modelling around this should be undertaken. It could be that a lower entry fee would bring more visitors who might spend more on retail and catering, which had proven to be the case at the Storr visitor centre on Skye. Benchmarking against other attractions was suggested, although it was also important to consider their differences, especially not to compare visitor numbers for a free attraction, or an attraction such as the Storr, which already had a significant number of visitors, with visitor numbers for Inverness Castle, which had no history as an attraction to draw on. One drawback of lowering prices could be to devalue the experience;
- lessons could be learnt from feedback on Tripadvisor and Google reviews;
- it was likely to be 2029/30 before a break-even position was anticipated, and it was concerning that the Council was having to provide unexpected financial assistance from its reserves at a time when Council budgets and reserves were already stretched. An early resolution was urged;
- the mitigating decisions and fast action that had been taken in light of the lower than expected performance was welcomed; and
- TICE remained an exciting project and asset for the Highlands, which would succeed with the appropriate marketing, online and physical, and a robust recovery plan that was closely monitored.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the:-

- i. out-turn position for 2025/26 based on draft unaudited accounts, as set out in the report;
 - ii. forecast financial position for 2026/27 as set out in the report and appendices;
 - iii. explanations provided for any material variances and actions taken or proposed in response to the overspends forecast, including the more rigorous approach to cost reduction and non-essential spending; and
 - iv. consolidated assessment of savings delivery forecasts.
- b. Corporate Capital Monitoring - Out-turn for 2025/26 and Quarter 1 for 2026/27**
Sgrùdadh Calpa Corporra – Fìor Shuidheachadh airson 2025/26 agus Ràith 1 airson 2026/27

There had been circulated Report No RES/31/26 by the Chief Officer - Corporate Finance.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- with reference to the reported underspend for 2025-26, and projected underspend for 2026-27, it was queried whether the Council had adequate resources to deliver on its capital programme and, if not, what could be done to address the situation. Attention was drawn to the need to balance ongoing project review while minimising delays and slippage, and to balance the use of in-house and external resources;
- information was sought and provided on how efficiently the Council could source cost predictions or changes to manage their impact on projects; and
- the scope and flexibility of heating and ventilation systems in new buildings, including schools, were queried and this information would be provided to Mr Reiss outwith the meeting.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the:-

- i. near final outturn for the 2025/26 financial year and the funding profile;
- ii. net spend for Q1 2026/27, the forecast year end outturn and the funding profile; and
- iii. review underway in relation to capital project monitoring, governance and delivery arrangements.

7. Corporate Cluster Budget Monitoring Reports - Out-turn for 2025/26 and Quarter 1 for 2026/27
Aithisgean Sgrùdadh Buidseit Buidhne Corporra – fìor shuidheachadh airson 2025/26 agus Ràith 1 airson 2026/27

There had been circulated Report No RES/32/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- an explanation was sought and provided for the licensing staff costs being almost double the budget, while the related income was only 20% higher. Attention was drawn to the challenges around reporting the licensing profile over time, and that further information on this could be provided outwith the meeting to Mr Jarvie;
- clarification was sought on the loss of income in relation to tourism and corporate procurement savings, and attention was drawn to paragraph 6.3 of the report which provided more detail on how Council-wide procurement savings of £0.812m, and tourism-related income of £0.697m had been partly offset by staff underspends. Information was provided on the setting of challenging targets in relation to procurement to help secure best value, noting the dynamic nature of this area, with variable costs, and to the various streams of tourism-related income, with some being significant and others, such as the camper van scheme, being less financially lucrative but provided other benefits such as the promotion of sustainable tourism and the management of waste. Further Unique Visitor Experiences were being considered by the Redesign Board that afternoon; and

- with reference to the success of the Storr project on Skye, attention was drawn to the benefits of the development of a single cost centre model for income generation projects, including giving individual sites autonomy to recruit staff and raise income.

The Committee:-

- APPROVED** the final budget position for 2025/26 as set out in the report and Appendix 1 to the report;
- APPROVED** the forecast financial position for 2026/27 as set out in the report and Appendix 2 to the report;
- NOTED** the explanations provided for any material variances and actions taken or proposed; and
- NOTED** the Corporate Cluster Financial Strategy 26/27 (Appendix 3).

8. Treasury Management Rianachd Ionmhais

a. Annual Treasury Management Report 2025/26 Aithisg Stiùiridh Bhliadhnail an Ionmhais – 2025/26

There had been circulated Report No RES/33/26 by the Chief Officer - Corporate Finance.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- with reference to the total overall outstanding debt, and average interest rates, information was sought and provided on progress with repaying legacy PWLB debt, especially those on particularly high interest rates. It was queried what the Council's strategy was for managing the refinancing of the risk as some of these loans reached maturity, and whether a strategy of short-term financing was beneficial or detrimental;
- the reduction of 1% in the ratio of financing costs to net revenue stream for the Housing Revenue Account against the budget was encouraging;
- it was queried what the impact might be on the Council's finances if the current 3.75% Bank Rate increased, with reference to the situation in the Middle East;
- it was suggested that if the UK Government wished to encourage new affordable housing being built, the loan penalties for local authorities should be reconsidered; and
- attention was drawn to the £1m loan taken out by the Council in 1990 at an 11% interest rate, with comment also being made noting the high prevailing interest rate at that time.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the Annual Treasury Management report for 2025/26.

b. Summary of Transactions for the Quarter to 30 June 2026 Geàrr-chunntas de Ghnothachasan airson na Ràithe gu 30 Ògmhios 2026

There had been circulated Report No RES/34/26 by the Chief Officer - Corporate Finance.

The Committee **NOTED** the Treasury Management - Summary of Transactions report for the period from 1 April 2026 to 30 June 2026.

9. Annual Report on Citizens Advice Contract **Aithisg Choileanaidh Bhliadhnail Biùro Comhairleachadh a' Phobail**

There had been circulated Report No RES/35/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- Members welcomed that the financial gains for clients who had accessed support from the Council's Welfare Support Team and Citizens Advice exceeding £30.3 million, which represented a £18.84 return for every £1 invested by the Council in these welfare services. Staff were thanked for their work;
- clarification was sought and provided on the differences between the services provided by the in-house Welfare Support Team and Citizens Advice, and similar external providers. An area breakdown of services provided would be helpful and would be provided, if available, to Members after the meeting; and
- it was disappointing that people were experiencing debt problems that made these services necessary.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. nearly 25,000 residents were supported by the Council's Welfare Support Team and Citizens Advice during 2025/26 with welfare, debt and housing advice services, resulting in more than 133,000 contacts (on average, 5 contacts per client). Assessing the volume of contacts offers valuable insights into workload and service throughout, providing essential context for evaluating the overall effectiveness and quality of the welfare services delivered;
- ii. financial gains for clients who accessed support from the Council's Welfare Support Team and Citizens Advice exceeded £30.3 million. This represented a £18.84 return for every £1 invested by the Council in these welfare services;
- iii. value for money delivered by these services was highlighted in the Highland Poverty & Equality Commission's final report which was considered at the Highland Council meeting on 25 June 2026:

"Highland Council's Welfare Support team and Citizens Advice partnership served over 23,000 people in 2024-25. This led to £27.7M of financial gains mostly through benefit payments that had not been claimed or received, and £12.1M in debt management. Few other areas of funding generate a return on investment of 17 times. It is therefore a high priority for further funding". [Highland Poverty and Equalities Commission Final Report](#) – page 18 refers.

- iv. a total of £10.714m of debt (including £0.583m relating to mortgage/other secured loans) was presented by households who were supported by skilled advisers in these welfare services to prioritise their bills, reduce and manage their debts, and wherever possible to lower the interest charges they were due to pay. Advisers also engaged with multiple creditors to establish amounts due. Where appropriate, skilled advisers put in place debt recovery moratoriums on behalf of their clients. These moratoriums provide a temporary legal six-month protection for debtors and prevent creditors from taking enforcement action, such as arresting bank accounts or wages, while formal debt solutions could be considered for clients, including bankruptcy or a Debt Arrangement Scheme for example;
- v. support was provided for 2,076 clients (including social rented, private rented and homeowners) seeking housing-related advice, thus highlighting the demand for consistent accessible support on these critical issues. The advice provided supported the Council's homelessness commitments and helped to support those in need of housing. Housing-related advice supported tenants to maintain their tenancies and for all clients accessing housing advice and support to remain in their homes whether that be social rented, private rented or home ownership;
- vi. as included in Highland Council's Revenue Budget 2025/26, dated 6 March 2025, there was an estimated £70 million of unclaimed benefits in the Highland area, including £6.9 million unclaimed pension credits affecting 3,000 people. Following approval by Members when setting the 2025/26 budget (INV/6), the Revenues & Commercialisation section had delivered digital transformation through the implementation of the Low-Income Family Tracker (LIFT), developed by Policy in Practice. LIFT utilised intelligent data analytics software to help maximise residents' income and reduce their costs. Data analytics analysed, identified, engaged and tracked financially vulnerable households to help maximise income and avoid costs by preventing vulnerability and to quickly identify and obtain insights about households who might need support. This service was being delivered in partnership with Citizens Advice and aimed to improve residents' financial resilience and reduce poverty gaps by using independent data-led evidence; and
- vii. as previously reported, and integral to the Council's commitment to reduce poverty and alleviate financial hardships, the Council had also launched a Better Off Calculator on its website at <https://www.highland.gov.uk/benefits-money-help/find-benefits-mayentitled>. This calculator enabled residents to self-serve to check entitlements that might be available to them, and to understand the impacts of life events, changing working hours, and other circumstances which might impact their income. Since its introduction, the Better Off Calculator had been used by 191 households across Highland. Of these, 160 households (84%) were identified as potentially entitled to additional financial assistance, with a total of £187,566 in potential benefit entitlement. Analysis of the results indicated that 138 households might be missing out on benefits, with an estimated £87,774 in unclaimed entitlement identified to date. This digital solution also provided residents with an option to be supported by skilled advisers within the Welfare Support Team.

10. Standby Policy **Poileasaidh Fuireachais**

There had been circulated Report No RES/36/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive -Corporate.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the findings of The Standby Working Group;
- ii. **APPROVED** the revised corporate Standby Policy in line with Option 3 as set out in the report; and
- iii. **NOTED** the Standby Guidance document developed to support consistent implementation of the revised policy.

11. Mileage Rate Revision **Ath-sgrùdadh air Reata Astar Mhìltean**

Transparency Statement – Mr R Stewart declared a connection to this item as a close family member was employed by the Council however, having applied the objective test, did not feel he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No RES/37/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive -Corporate.

The Committee:-

- i. **AGREED** that the Council adopt the revised HMRC mileage rate of 55p per mile for the first 10,000 business miles;
- ii. **AGREED** that the change be backdated to cover travel relating to 6 April 2026 onwards;
- iii. **NOTED** that backdated claims would be calculated and paid by the end of the calendar year;
- iv. **AGREED** that any approved change apply equally to both employees and Elected Members in order to maintain consistency across the organisation; and
- v. **AGREED** to reinforce the requirements of the Council's Travel and Subsistence Policy and Travel Hierarchy to minimise avoidable travel and reduce reliance on private vehicle use.

12. Pensions Guarantee to SPPA for High Life Highland Instrumental Music Instructors **Barantas Pheinnseanan gu SPPA airson Oidean Innealan-Ciùil High Life na Gàidhealtachd**

There had been circulated Report No RES/38/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive -Corporate.

The Chair drew attention to paragraph 6.3 of the report which stated that any guarantee would only be utilised in the event of default, the risk and likelihood of which was assessed as very low.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the contents of the report and the background changes relating to pension arrangements for High Life Highland music instructors; and
- ii. **AGREED** that a Letter of Comfort guarantee to the Scottish Teachers Pension Scheme be provided for the reasons and on the basis as set out within the report.

13. Corporate Service – Performance Monitoring Quarter 1 2026/27
Seirbheis Chorporra - Sgrùdadh Coileanaidh Ràithe 1 2026/27

There had been circulated Report No RES/39/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive -Corporate.

During discussion, Members queried whether a significant amount of the sickness absence due to stress was the result of unfilled vacancies and additional workload, but it was explained that around two thirds of stress-related absence was non work related. The various approaches to reducing stress and supporting staff mental health were outlined. It was suggested that a small number of long-term IT issues could be impacting the overall statistics

The Committee **NOTED** the:-

- i. performance information for the Corporate Cluster; and
- ii. change to Invoice reporting to align with the Corporate Cluster structure.

14. Corporate Systems Update – HR & Payroll Programme
Cunntas air Siostaman Corporra – Prògram Ghoireasan Daonna & Rola Pàighidh

There had been circulated Report No RES/40/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive -Corporate.

The Committee **NOTED** the:-

- i. progress, financial position, and risk management of the HR & Payroll Programme; and
- ii. the summary in section 4.5 of the report to support the decision-making process.

15. Delivery Plan – Corporate Solutions and Income Generation Portfolio Update
Plana Lìbhrigidh – Ùrachadh air Pasgan Fuasglaidhean Corporra agus Gineadh Teachd-a-steach

- a. **Delivery Plan Budget Monitoring & Progress Update – Corporate Solutions**
Sgrùdadh Buidseit & Cunntas air Adhartas a’ Phlana Lìbhrigidh – Freagairtean Corporra

There had been circulated Report No RES/41/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive -Corporate.

The Committee **NOTED** the:-

- i. project/programme updates provided in the report; and
- ii. revised format of the report, which included the use of Portfolio Board project dashboards from the Performance and Risk Management system (PRMS), with accompanying project narrative sections aligned to the content of these.

b. Delivery Plan Budget Monitoring & Progress Update – Income Generation
Sgrùdadh Buidseit & Cunntas air Adhartas a’ Phlana Lìbhrigidh - Togail Teachd-a-steach

There had been circulated Report No RES/42/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive -Corporate.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- attention was drawn to the campervan scheme, which was not achieving its revised income target and, while it had been a worthwhile project to attempt, a more successful scheme to produce income from campervans should be devised. Other Members pointed out the some of the benefits of the scheme were not financial;
- the completion of Phase 2 of the Storr Project on Skye was welcomed and all staff involved were thanked for their efforts in making the project a success. The project demonstrated the value of partnership working and provided a valuable model for future visitor experiences; and
- with reference to some of the challenges in managing campervan behaviour in certain locations, including their knowledge of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, which did not provide land access rights to vehicles, it was suggested that more education and enforcement would be beneficial.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the project/programme updates provided in the report.

16. Minutes of Meetings
Geàrr-chunntasan Choinneamhan

The following Minutes of Meetings were:

- i. **APPROVED** – Central Safety Committee held on 15 June 2026;
- ii. **APPROVED** – Fuel Poverty Working Group held on 19 June 2026;
- iii. **NOTED** – Appeals and Disputes Sub Committee on 29 June 2026; and
- iv. **NOTED** – Non-Domestic Rates Appeals Committee held on 10 August 2026.

The meeting ended at 12.25pm