

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Education Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Wednesday 26 August 2026 at 9.35 am.

Present:

Mrs S Atkin	Mr R Gale
Mrs I Campbell (remote)	Ms C Gillies (substitute)
Mr A Christie	Ms M Hutchison (remote)
Mrs M Cockburn	Ms E Knox (remote)
Ms T Collier (substitute)	Mr D Macpherson
Mrs H Crawford (remote)	Mr D Millar (Vice Chair)
Mr R Cross	Ms C Ramsay
Mr J Finlayson (Chair)	Mr R Stewart
Mr D Fraser	

Religious Representatives (non-voting):

Mr G Barnie
Ms S Lamont
Mr J Maxwell

Youth Convener (non-voting):

Ms E Primrose

Non-Members also present:

Ms L Dundas (remote)	Mr G MacKenzie (remote)
Mr A Graham	Mr P Oldham (remote)
Dr M Gregson	

In attendance:

Ms K Lackie, Assistant Chief Executive – People
Ms K MacPherson, Chief Officer – Secondary Education
Ms B Martin-Scott, Chief Officer – Primary Education and Early Years
Ms F Malcolm, Chief Officer – Integrated People Services
Ms A MacPherson, Strategic Lead – Resources
Mr D Martin, Strategic Lead – Operations
Mr R Campbell, Strategic Lead - Investment Strategy
Ms K Clark, Area Quality Improvement Manager
Ms I Sinclair, Area Quality Improvement Manager
Ms H Flavell, Head Teacher, Thurso High School (remote)
Ms H Brown, Senior Manager Early Years
Ms A Anthoney, Senior Youth Development Officer
Ms G Rodger, Chief Officer, Inspiring Young Voices (Third Sector)
Ms M Chemonges, Highland Parent Council Partnership
Ms M Murray, Principal Committee Officer
Ms R Ross, Committee Officer

Also in attendance:

Ms R Holt, Chief Executive, Eden Court

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

Mr J Finlayson in the Chair

Preliminaries

Prior to the commencement of formal business, the Chair welcomed Kirsty MacPherson, Chief Officer – Secondary Education, George Barnie, religious representative, and Eilidh Primrose, Highland Youth Convener, to their first meeting of the Committee.

He also paid tribute to Bernedette Cairns, Principal Educational Psychologist, who was leaving the Council after 34 years of dedicated service in different roles. He thanked Bernadette for her contribution and wished her well for the future.

Business

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

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr D Gregg, Ms L Kraft and Mr K Rosie.

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

There were no Declarations of Interest.

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

Item 9: Mr D Macpherson

Mr D Macpherson also made a general transparency statement on the basis that a close family member was employed by the Council as a Primary School Teacher. However, having applied the objective test, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

3. Recess Powers Cumhachdan Fosaidh

The Committee **NOTED** that the recess powers granted by the Council at its meeting on 25 June 2026 had not been exercised in relation to the business of the Education Committee.

4. Good News/Outstanding Achievements Naidheachdan Matha/Coileanaidhean Air Leth

A presentation on outstanding achievements by pupils and schools had been circulated.

Congratulations having been extended to all the schools involved, the Committee **NOTED** the outstanding achievements.

5. Statutory Consultation Exercise – Knockbreck Primary School (Skye): Request to Proceed to Consultation on Permanent Closure

There had been circulated Report No EDU/23/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

The Chair, speaking as a Local Member, commented that the community engagement undertaken to date had indicated a consensus in support of the proposals, and that the new school building in Dunvegan would provide a bright future for children living within the current Knockbreck and Dunvegan catchment areas.

The Committee **AGREED** to proceed to statutory consultation, in terms of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, on a proposal to discontinue education provision at Knockbreck Primary School (Skye) and re-assign the catchment area to Dunvegan Primary School, on the basis of the Proposal Paper attached as Appendix 2 of the report.

6. Education and Learning Improvement Plan 2025–2028 - Update Plana Leasachaidh Foghlaim agus Ionnsachaidh 2025–2028 – Cunntas às Ùr

There had been circulated Report No EDU/24/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

In introducing the report, the Chief Officer – Primary Education and Early Years drew attention to a number of typographical and formatting errors, highlighting that several references to 2025 should have referred to 2026 and that two sections had been numbered 8.2. She apologised for these oversights.

In addition to the report, Ms I Sinclair and Ms K Clark, Area Quality Insurance Managers, and Ms H Flavell, Head Teacher, Thurso High School, gave a presentation summarising the work being undertaken to support schools to improve outcomes for children and young people, including professional learning, self-evaluation and quality assurance visits. Information was also provided on the work undertaken to improve attainment at Thurso High School, including promoting inclusion and a sense of belonging, and a focus on literacy and numeracy.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- thanks were expressed for the report and the enlightening and encouraging presentation;
- congratulations were extended to Thurso High School on its significant improvements in attainment, which Members wished to see replicated across all Highland schools;
- with reference to the initial analysis of attainment at section 8 of the report, attainment overall appeared to be very good. Members commended the improvements that had been made, particularly in S6, and looked forward to comparing Highland's attainment data with both the virtual comparator and national results when the full report was presented to the November Committee;
- further information was sought, and provided, on the culture of self-improvement being created and the role of Pedagogy Teachers;
- the new Data Dashboard was welcomed. In response to a question, it was confirmed that the dashboard was not yet fully operational and accessible to all

schools. However, information had been shared with Head Teachers and it would be launched as soon as possible;

- reference was made to the approach being taken by Invergordon Academy in investing Pupil Equity Funding in Inclusion Support Workers, as outlined in the report, and it was queried whether, if the model proved successful, it would be shared more widely or whether it was specific to Invergordon Academy;
- Members emphasised the valuable contribution of Pupil Support Assistants (PSAs) to the education system and the importance of the review of Pupil Support roles. In response, the Assistant Chief Executive – People outlined the approach being taken to PSA development, which included the establishment of a Lead PSA role to provide both career progression opportunities and greater support and leadership to PSA teams across all Highland schools;
- in response to a question, it was confirmed that, going forward, all schools would be expected to undertake the survey referred to in section 7.1 of the report every two years or in advance of a quality improvement visit;
- with reference to section 8.1 of the report, it was suggested that an increase from 72.8% to 74.3% should not be described as “significant”, and the need for care in the terminology used was emphasised;
- whilst the improvements that had been achieved were welcomed, they would be less meaningful if national performance had improved by a greater margin, and the need for caution was emphasised;
- the report indicated that there had been a slight decrease in S5 Higher attainment. It was therefore queried whether this might suggest that S6 results in the following year would be lower than those achieved this year, and it was suggested that more could be done in terms of modelling to track and forecast attainment as cohorts progressed through school;
- there was some positive news in the report, and tribute was paid to pupils, as well as officers, school staff and teachers, for their hard work. However, attainment in Highland remained a concern, particularly the gap between the most and least disadvantaged children. Education was one of the most powerful tools for lifting people out of poverty, and failure to address educational disadvantage could have long-term consequences. The reference in the Improvement Plan to the Poverty and Equality Commission was welcomed. However, the Chairs of the Commission had made it clear that a plan alone was not sufficient;
- the impact of disruption and conflict in classrooms on learning and teaching was emphasised, and the commitment to review relationships and behaviour approaches by June 2027 was welcomed. However, a policy was only as good as the results it could deliver, and it was suggested that it was necessary to identify Key Performance Indicators to measure improvements in behaviour and demonstrate that less learning time was being lost to disruption in classrooms. In response, it was explained that HGIOS (How Good Is Our School?) 4, the national framework for school self-evaluation and improvement, contained a suite of quality indicators. The current school inspection format focused on two quality indicators, namely 2.3 Learning, Teaching and Assessment, and 3.1 Ensuring Wellbeing, Equality and Inclusion. It was confirmed that behaviour was a key component of 2.3 Learning, Teaching and Assessment, and that there was a focus on learning provision and how to best meet the needs of all children and young people. Children were considered as individuals, and targeted behavioural support was in place in some schools in addition to the universal support package. It was further explained that HGIOS 4 was currently under review by Education Scotland. Whilst the revised framework remained under development, a draft had been shared with officers and Head Teachers, and it was anticipated that the number of quality

indicators would be greatly reduced. A further update was expected within the next four to five weeks;

- the report indicated that the school attendance rate was approximately 90%. The Council had a responsibility to educate all children in Highland, and it was queried what action was being taken to support those who were not attending school and who were therefore more likely to experience poorer life outcomes. It was suggested that those who were not attending school were being let down, and one Member reiterated concerns raised at previous meetings of the Council and other committees regarding the lack of funding for youth hubs and clubs across Highland, which was placing many of these organisations at risk. The need to address the issue was emphasised, and it was questioned whether the Council was prepared to accept responsibility. The Chair acknowledged the point raised but explained that it was necessary to consider what fell within the remit of the Education Committee and Service. In relation to attendance, the Chief Officer – Primary Education and Early Years outlined the work being undertaken, including implementing the refreshed Attendance Policy; the provision of support by the Educational Psychology team for children experiencing emotionally based school avoidance; the wider rollout of Family Support Workers, funded through the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund, to support children, young people and families where attendance was problematic; and a “learning without boundaries” initiative;
- being in school was not necessarily right for every child and young person, and the importance of alternative approaches to learning was emphasised. Information was sought, and provided, on the opportunities available for outdoor education and the Council’s approach to risk, which it was explained focused on sensible risk management rather than risk avoidance;
- in response to a question regarding the actions being taken to accelerate progress among the most disadvantaged S4 pupils, it was explained that Pupil Equity Funding could be targeted towards specific interventions to support these learners. Members were also reminded that the current attainment picture was partial, and that published data on vocational qualifications was still awaited;
- there was a significant amount of transformation taking place in the early years sector, and the reference to 3-18 settings was welcomed, as were the references to health and wellbeing;
- it was queried what percentage of Head Teachers were participating in further professional learning and leadership training, and information was sought, and provided, on the support provided to Acting Head Teachers; and
- reference having been made to the success of foundation apprenticeship provision in Aberdeenshire and Glasgow, it was explained that there was a strong apprenticeship programme in Highland. A key aspect of the My Highland Future portfolio was vocational learning, including foundation, graduate and modern apprenticeships, focusing on specific sectors where there were gaps. It was confirmed that data on apprenticeship results would be provided in the report to the November Committee.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the content of the report and progress made;
- ii. **AGREED** the draft Education and Learning Report for 2025/26 and refreshed Plan for session 2026/27 (Appendix 1 of the report);
- iii. **NOTED** the summary of senior phase attainment, and that an in-depth analysis of the senior phase attainment for 2026 would be brought to Committee in November 2026; and

iv. **NOTED** the next steps set out in section 9 of the report.

7. Inverness Catchment Review Update Cunntas às Ùr air Ath-sgrùdadh Sgìre-sgoile Inbhir Nis

There had been circulated Report No EDU/25/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- with reference to section 6.2 of the report, which outlined a number of criteria to be considered as part of the review of Inverness Royal Academy and Millburn Academy Associated School Groups (ASGs), it was requested that an additional criterion be included, namely, “attending the closest school to where the child lived”, as that was not always the case at present. As an alternative, the Chair suggested “attending the closest school to where the child lived, taking into account parental choice”;
- with reference to recommendation iv. within the report, which did not specify a date for the proposed report to the Committee, concern was expressed that the matter could be delayed beyond the Local Government Elections. It was therefore suggested that a report be presented to the Committee on 17 February 2027, and this was accepted by the Chair;
- Inverness Royal Academy and Millburn Academy could both be at capacity within the next few years, and the report had not taken account of the proposed Masterplan Consent Area at Essich Road. Concern was therefore expressed that the proposed review could result in the need for further reviews of ASGs, particularly Culloden Academy;
- information was sought, and provided, in relation to school placing requests, during which it was confirmed that data on placing requests was held on SEEMiS and that officers had a good understanding of where any pressure points were. Members added that movement from one school to another could be indicative of an issue at a particular school, and it was therefore necessary to identify such instances and address any underlying concerns;
- it was suggested that, following completion of the review of catchment areas in Inverness, it would be worthwhile to undertake similar reviews across Highland, particularly in light of the construction of a number of new schools in remote and rural communities, to establish whether existing catchment arrangements remained suitable. The Chair and other Members concurred; and
- it was requested that the next report to the Committee provide greater clarity on the implications for Inverness High School which, unlike other secondary schools in Inverness, had significant available capacity. However, it was highlighted that, should this capacity be utilised, there would be significant staffing implications. The Chair highlighted that the matter could be discussed at the next Members’ Seminar.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the current school roll forecast position across Inverness Associated School Groups;
- ii. **NOTED** concerns that had been raised regarding catchment arrangements within parts of Inverness;

- iii. **AGREED** that officers undertake further detailed analysis of primary and secondary catchment arrangements within Inverness Royal Academy and Millburn Academy Associated School Groups, subject to the inclusion of an additional criterion, namely, “attending the closest school to where the child lived, taking into account parental choice.”;
- iv. **AGREED** that the findings of the review be reported back to a further Members’ Seminar before bringing a report to the Committee on 17 February 2027 setting out options, implications and recommendations arising from the review.

8. Revenue Budget Monitoring Report Final Outturn 2025/26 & Quarter 1 2026/27 Fìor Shuidheachadh Deireannach Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Teachd-a-steach 2025/26 & Ràith 1 2026/27

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

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the report stated that there would be a need to adjust spending on Additional Support for Learning staffing to bring it back into line with the approved budget, and it was queried how further staffing savings could be achieved without reducing frontline support for pupils. Concern was also expressed regarding the use of vacancy management to deliver savings, as it was important to ensure that posts were filled when needed. In response, it was explained that the vacancy management target was not intended to prevent the active recruitment of staff. Rather, it was designed to ensure that the underspends that naturally occurred in a service with a significant workforce could be used to deliver savings without directly impacting service delivery. It was further explained that vacancies arising from staff absence created significant pressures due to the need to employ supply staff. Work was therefore being undertaken to support staff to remain healthy at work and, where they were absent, to facilitate their return as soon as possible, when they were ready to do so, helping to manage staffing costs;
- disappointment was expressed regarding the reference in the report to the use of reserves, and the apparent inability of services to remain within the budget agreed by the Council, given that there was already an overspend only a few months after the budget had been set. It was suggested that the matter merited further discussion by the Full Council. In response, it was confirmed that changes would need to be made to remain within the agreed budget, and the importance of implementing any such changes in a sensitive and child-centred manner, with a clear understanding of their impacts, was emphasised. It was further clarified that the reserves referred to in the report had previously been set aside to enable the service to manage transformation over a period of time. An assurance was provided that the reserves were being utilised for their intended purpose, not to manage the budget overspend;
- it was highlighted that the overspend was minor relative to the size of the overall budget and was therefore not a cause for significant concern;
- with reference to section 8.2.1 of the report, information was requested on the reasons behind secondary schools operating above their Devolved School Management (DSM) entitlement in relation to management structures;
- in response to a query regarding whether school staffing numbers were realistic given the need to provide cover for staff absences and training, it was explained that DSM budgets could be utilised by Head Teachers to manage staff absences

and, in cases where these budgets were insufficient, there was a central contingency budget which could be used. In relation to Drummond School in particular, it was explained that significant additional resource had been provided to support the improvement plan that had been put in place following the school inspection and in recognition of the challenging environment. As had previously been reported, there had been a deliberate budget overspend in relation to Drummond School, which would be managed within the scope of the wider Additional Support Needs budget; and

- information was sought, and provided, on the challenges associated with the forthcoming reduction in class contact time for teachers, during which it was explained that recruitment challenges were anticipated, particularly in smaller rural schools where only part-time posts would be required, which could result in a need to recruit peripatetic teachers to cover several schools.

The Committee:-

- i. scrutinised and **APPROVED** the 2025/2026 final end of year outturn (Appendix 1 & 1a of the report);
- ii. scrutinised and **APPROVED** the forecast financial position for the year 2026/2027 as set out in the report and Appendix 2 & 2a of the report;
- iii. **NOTED** the explanations provided for any material variances and actions taken or proposed; and
- iv. **NOTED** the update provided regarding savings delivery.

9. Eden Court Update

Cunntas às Ùr air Cùirt an Easbaig

Transparency Statement: Mr D Macpherson declared a connection to this item as a Friend of Eden Court. However, having applied the objective test, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No EDU/27/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

In addition to the report, the Chief Executive of Eden Court gave a presentation highlighting Eden Court's 50th anniversary celebrations and outlining its Creative Engagement Strategy, which included work in schools and with teachers; Higher Dance and Drama Qualifications; the BFI (British Film Institute) Film Academy; classes for young people, including an expansion of Gaelic provision; the recently concluded Future Studio project; and an upcoming project working on employability skills with young refugees and asylum seekers.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- congratulations were extended to Eden Court for its work with young people, particularly those facing challenges;
- in response to a question, it was confirmed that the film "People's Emergency Briefing" had previously been shown at Eden Court and that the possibility of screening it again, together with opportunities to increase Elected Member engagement, could be explored;
- it was suggested that more communication surrounding Eden Court's activities and achievements was needed in areas outwith Inverness;

- the significant amount of grant funding secured by Eden Court was commended;
- interest was expressed in the possibility of intergenerational classes, particularly for the LGBTQ+ community as a need had been identified in this area;
- the achievements of Eden Court over the past 50 years were commended, as was its contribution to the Highland economy. Praise was also extended to the Chief Executive for her achievements since taking on the role;
- it was highlighted that the creative arts formed part of the Inverness-Highland UK City of Culture bid, and Eden Court's contribution in this area was commended;
- in response to a question, it was explained that, while there was a need to invest in Eden Court and capital projects were being considered, expansion of the Empire Theatre was not currently a priority given the costs and level of disruption involved;
- the forthcoming Basic Income for Artists Workshop was welcomed;
- the work being undertaken in schools and with teachers to build capacity for creative arts education, the reintroduction of National 5 qualifications in dance and drama, and the BFI Film Academy were commended, and the positive impact of drama on the mental health of young people was highlighted; and
- the CashBack for Communities Next Generation Creatives programme was welcomed, with particular reference to its delivery in Alness and Invergordon; and in response to a request, it was confirmed that a geographical breakdown of participation and further evidence of long-term educational and employment outcomes could be provided in future reports.

The Committee **NOTED** the contents of the report at Appendix 1 of the covering report.

10. Delivery Plan Monitoring and Progress Update - Person Centred Solutions Q1 2026/27

Cunntas às Ùr air a' Phlana Lìbhrigidh: Cùram-roinne Fhuasglaidhean Stèidhichte air an Neach – Cunntasan às Ùr air Tràth-ionnsachadh is Cùram-chloinne agus Seirbheisean Measaidh Niùro-leasachaidh

There had been circulated Report No EDU/28/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) project, which had been welcomed by families, businesses and communities across Highland, was commended;
- concern was expressed that section 5.5 of the report appeared to be attributing the difficulty of extra pressures and costs to parental expectations and, in response to a request, it was confirmed that the key risks could be updated to include national and community expectations, the need for equity and the diversity of need, as well as parental expectations;
- information was sought, and provided, regarding the proposed eight pilot unregulated activity-based childcare sites, during which it was clarified that, although these sites would not be registered with the Care Inspectorate as regulated services, there would be safeguards in place and all staff would have appropriate child-protection training;
- it was highlighted that many families struggled to access affordable childcare during school holidays and it was suggested that, in line with the calls to action of the Poverty and Equality Commission, the Council should seek to provide year-round childcare to support these families and help address poverty and

depopulation. In response, it was clarified that early learning was a statutory provision for which the Council received funding, whereas the delivery of childcare was not a statutory responsibility. It was explained that, whilst childcare provision could operate as a business model in other parts of Scotland, this was often not viable in remote and rural areas of Highland, which was why innovative approaches were being explored. Whilst not a statutory responsibility, childcare provision was regarded as a shared responsibility with communities and was vital to ensuring that Highland communities remained active and vibrant places in which to live, work and raise families; and

- in response to a question, it was confirmed that the Ardnamurchan pilot project would continue into the following year and the outcomes would be reported to the Committee on completion of the pilot.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the Delivery Project updates provided in the report;
- ii. **NOTED** the 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; and
- iii. **AGREED** that the key risks in section 5.5 of the report be updated to include national and community expectations, the need for equity and the diversity of need, as well as parental expectations.

11. Quarterly Performance Monitoring Report – Q1 2026/27 Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Coileanadh Ràitheil – R1 2026/27

There had been circulated Report No EDU/29/26 by the Assistant Chief Executive – People.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- concern was expressed regarding the 52% Freedom of Information (FOI) request compliance rate and the failure to comply with statutory requirements, and an explanation of the reasons for this was requested. In response it was explained that many of the FOI requests dealt with by the Education Service were complex in nature and that a new member of staff with responsibility for overseeing FOI requests had been appointed, which was helping to improve performance;
- in response to a question, it was confirmed that, where possible, people were directed to publicly available information, and that information from previous FOI responses was retained to assist in responding to similar requests as efficiently as possible. Members emphasised that making as much information as possible publicly available could also help to reduce the number of complaints received, as it appeared that, in some instances, submitting a complaint was the first course of action when information was not readily available. It was further suggested that education for members of the public on FOI requests and complaints procedures may be needed; and
- Members were encouraged to use the Members' Enquiry System for any questions they may have as they would receive a response within five days, whereas responses to FOI requests could take considerably longer due to how they were processed.

The Committee **NOTED** the performance information for the Education Service.

12. Minutes of the Local Negotiating Committee for Teachers
Geàrr-chunntas dhen Chomataidh Bharganachaidh Ionadail do Thidsearan

The Committee **NOTED** the draft Minutes of the Local Negotiating Committee for Teachers on 9 June 2026.

The meeting concluded at 12.05 pm.