

Highland Council: Questions: 29 October 2026**Public Question****1. Mr C McCormack****To the Leader of the Council**

Given that Highland Council's last published External Quality Assessment of Internal Audit was undertaken in 2017, with the five-year EQA requirement under the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS) becoming overdue in approximately 2022, and with the current Global Internal Audit Standards (GIAS) continuing to require an External Quality Assessment at least once every five years, how can the Council demonstrate to Members and the public that Internal Audit's organisational independence and objectivity remain adequately safeguarded and that the service continues to provide reliable assurance over governance, risk management and internal control?

RESPONSE

Firstly, it is important to state that the reasons for the original delay in the External Quality Assessment (EQA) being undertaken, and subsequent events have been fully and transparently reported to the Audit Committee and the Council's External Auditors.

Whilst the most recent EQA was not undertaken, annual self-assessments as required by both the PSIAS and GIAS (the standards) have been undertaken and reported to the Audit Committee within the Internal Audit Annual Audit Report. The annual audit report sets the arrangements for audit independence and objectivity; and provides confirmation of the organisational independence of the internal audit activity. In addition, as required by the standards, assurance on the independence of internal audit activities is also provided within the annual Internal Audit Plan which is approved by the Audit Committee.

The information from the Internal Audit Annual Audit Report is used to inform the Council's Annual Governance Statement, which is independently examined by Audit Scotland, our External Auditors, as part of their annual audit work. Whilst Audit Scotland have acknowledged the overdue EQA in their annual reports, no concerns have been raised regarding either the organisational independence and objectivity of Internal Audit or the assurances provided by the Chief Audit Executive's annual audit opinion.

Finally, it has been confirmed that arrangements are in place for the Council's EQA to be undertaken by Glasgow City Council. This work is scheduled to start in November, and the final report is expected to be presented to the Audit Committee in March 2027.

Member Questions

1. Mr A Christie

To the Leader of the Council

Please can you detail the process that will be followed and the membership of the panel that will be involved in the carrying out the 2026 Chief Executive's Performance Appraisal?

RESPONSE

The process comprised of an extensive and rigorous interview and assessment of the Chief Executive's performance in the last 12 months. It was carried out by me as the Leader of the Council in collaboration with the Convener in a similar way to that of the previous year.

2. Mr A Christie

To the Leader of the Council

As every elected member has a responsibility towards the governance of the Inverness Common Good Fund, please could you provide a profit and loss account for *The Inverness International Blues Festival* held on Saturday 28 March 2026 together with all relevant minutes from the Area Committee or any of its sub committees (redacted if necessary) referring to the event and evaluating its financial outcome.

RESPONSE

The Council does not normally prepare profit and loss accounts for the events and festivals funded by the Inverness Common Good Fund as there is no requirement for such events to make a profit. However, you will be aware that it was agreed that an audit, Inverness Common Good Fund – Review of Events and Festivals, would be undertaken. This audit will include an examination of the Inverness International Blues Festival, and the final income and expenditure out-turns which will enable the net profit/ loss to be calculated.

This audit will be reported to the Audit Committee, and a report will follow in the usual way to the City of Inverness Area Committee and elsewhere as appropriate.

3. Mr A Graham

To the Leader of the Council

For each year since the opening of Torvean Bridge on 31 May 2021, please provide the number of days it has been closed to road vehicle traffic.

RESPONSE

The information requested is set out below:

Year	Number of Days Closed
2021	36
2022	18
2023	12
2024	16
2025	0
2026	68

4. Mr C Ballance

To the Leader of the Council

At its meeting on 25th June, Council agreed unanimously “to ask officers to lobby the Civil Aviation Authority to designate the Highlands as a Transponder Mandatory Zone.” Could the Leader detail the action that has been taken and the response from the CAA?

RESPONSE

A letter was sent by to the Civil Aviation Authority on 14 July 2026, a copy of which is available on the members intranet. I understand that no reply has yet been received.

5. Mr A Baxter

To the Chair of the Communities and Place Committee

Following publication of the Scottish Government’s *Strategic Action Plan on Wildfires* in March 2026, on what dates has the Chair met or held discussions with Scottish Fire and Rescue Service officers regarding wildfire preparedness and resilience in the Highlands?

For each meeting or discussion, please provide the date, a summary of the matters discussed and any actions arising, covering:

(a) the period from publication of the *Strategic Action Plan on Wildfires* to the start of the Cairngorms wildfire in summer 2026; and

(b) the period from the start of the Cairngorms wildfire to date.

RESPONSE

While I have not had any specific meetings with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) regarding wildfire preparedness and resilience in the Highlands, the Convener has engaged directly with the First Minister regarding the wildfires in Cairngorm. In addition, the Leader wrote to the First Minister following the Motion that was agreed at the last Council meeting which requested that the Scottish Government undertake an independent

review of the Cairngorm wildfire and assess whether the existing command structure is appropriate for major landscape-scale wildfires. A response to this letter has been received from Neil Gray, Cabinet Secretary for Justice, and this has been circulated to all members and is available on the members intranet.

Senior officers, including the Assistant Chief Executive - People, attended the first of a number of formal debrief meeting which took place on 15 October 2026, with another planned for 27 October and further dates to be confirmed. As well as the involvement of all statutory Resilience partners, including SFRS, this process is also engaging with wider stakeholders and community representatives in response to representations made by the Council and Cairngorm National Park Authority for a thorough and detailed lessons learned exercise to be undertaken.

The Council is represented on the Scottish Wildfire Forum Executive Committee and at its meeting in April there was discussion of the draft SFRS Concept of Operations Multi-agency Approach to Wildfire document. The Council's Emergency Planning team has also been pro-actively undertaking a significant piece of work over the last 2 years, engaging with communities to encourage the development of Community Resilience Plans. Over this time 53 communities have been contacted and provided with guidance and materials, with 33 of these at various stages of active engagement.

6. Ms K Willis

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

In 2025, internal bike racks were installed on buses serving two key routes in the Northeast of Scotland, helping to connect transport modes by improving the integration of cycling and bus journeys. As Highland Council now operates a bus company, when does Council plan to start the installation of bike racks on its own bus fleet to encourage sustainable travel and act as a 'leading example' to other bus operators in Highland?

RESPONSE

The installation of bike racks on buses is recognised as a valuable measure that can help support integrated and sustainable travel by enabling passengers to combine cycling and public transport journeys. We will look to implement these where it is possible, viable and affordable.

The Council is committed to initiatives that strengthen the connection between active travel and public transport, taking into account operational requirements, vehicle suitability, passenger demand, safety factors and the availability of appropriate funding. The Council is also maximising relevant external funding opportunities where available.

The Council remains committed to promoting sustainable travel choices and supporting greater use of both active travel and public transport across the Highlands.

7. Mrs I MacKenzie

To the Chair of Health, Social Care and Wellbeing

Given Scotland's ageing population, what work is Highland Council undertaking with older people's organisations to ensure older people's voices influence policy and service design as Highland's population continues to age?

RESPONSE

This goes beyond the delivery of adult social care but does include that element as part of many functions delivered by the Council which impact on the ageing population. In terms of the delivery of adult social care Cllr Mackenzie can be assured that there is significant engagement with the third sector with a view to assuring that the voice of older people has an impact on service delivery. At an operational level there is regular work with HTSI by NHS Highland as lead agency in terms of the Third Sector Project Board. In terms of the governance of partnership business the following groups are members of the Joint Monitoring Committee – Scottish Care Highland Branch Chair (Care Homes), Connecting Carers, Highland Senior Citizen's Network, Highland Third Sector Interface, and Scottish Care (Care at Home) .

Beyond the delivery of adult social care, it is also necessary to take account of the work of the Community Planning Partnership and the associated local delivery groups. Those groups which are also attended by the Third Sector are also key in terms of services to older people and contribute to other key policy areas including transport, housing and public health.

8. Mr R Stewart

To the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure

Given that Highland Council ranks 28th out of Scotland's 32 local authorities for road condition, with 38.9% of its road network requiring maintenance treatment, and that the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984 places a statutory duty on the Council to manage and maintain public roads, what assurance can the Council provide that it has the necessary professional expertise, suitably qualified staff and sufficient engineering capacity to fulfil its responsibilities as a competent roads authority, including the effective delivery of its statutory maintenance duties and a comprehensive, risk-based road safety inspection regime within the Council's prescribed timescales?

RESPONSE

The Council recognises the importance of maintaining sufficient professional and engineering capacity to discharge its responsibilities as a competent Roads Authority, particularly given the scale, geography and condition of the Highland road network.

The Council currently retains the professional expertise and engineering capability necessary to manage its responsibilities and continues to develop the skills of its workforce, and is using the ongoing redesign to strengthen resilience, flexibility and the effective use of technical resources across Highland.