The Highland Council

Agenda Item	**5**
Report No	**CC/25/26**

Committee: **Caithness Area**

Date: **2 November 2026**

Report Title: **Bereavement Services – Project Updates**

Report By: **Assistant Chief Executive - Place**

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides an update to members on the work being undertaken on burial ground capacity and new and/or extended burial grounds in the Caithness area.

2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:-

i. **Note** the current capacities and progress of burial ground extensions in the Caithness area; and
ii. **Note** the challenges with identifying and developing suitable land for burial ground development

3 Implications

3.1 **Resource** - The Council on 14 September 2023 approved a capital budget for bereavement services of £2.226m for 2023/24 and £4.168m for 2024/25 - 2028/29.

3.2 **Legal** - The Council has a statutory obligation to manage burial provision, memorial safety and cremations as set out in the Burial and Cremation (Scotland) Act 2016.

3.3 **Risk** - If burial ground extensions or new sites are not provided there is a risk that the Council will be unable to provide burials in some locations to meet the expectations and preferences of communities. The establishment of a project board for proactive oversight and support for projects serves to reduce service risks.

3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – The safety of staff and visitors in burial grounds is a statutory obligation for local authorities and memorial safety inspections are undertaken to reduce risks.

3.5 **Gaelic** - There are not considered to be any Gaelic implications.

4 Impacts

4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.

4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.

4.3 This is an update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5 Background

5.1 Section 3 of the Burial and Cremation (Scotland) Act 2016 requires each local authority to provide at least one burial ground within its area. The Highland Council has 247 burial grounds with 14 being within the Caithness area. Of these, 12 are operational and 2 are closed. **Appendix 1** provides a breakdown of lair availability and capacity data for burial grounds within the area.

6 Burial Ground Capacity Projects in the Caithness area

6.1 Through the capital programme the Council aims to provide appropriate burial ground provision in the Highlands. The team are reviewing burial ground extensions where current capacity is less than 10 years based on past trends. Information on burials and lair sales is monitored on a weekly basis following submission from all bereavement services administrative teams.

6.2 The Bereavement Services Project Board meets regularly, to support the work of the team delivering burial ground extensions and new sites. The board ensures good governance in delivering the programme and membership includes key internal partners in delivering the projects such as the Estates management team, the Project Design Unit and Finance.

6.3 The Board recognises the challenges in some areas with burial ground provision with it becoming increasingly difficult to identify available land for development of extensions or for new burial grounds. The reasons include:-

a) land availability and purchase cost;
b) developmental costs;
c) land suitability and geology – land conditions and requirements must comply with SEPA guidelines for burial grounds, be relatively flat land with little or no rock formations;
d) regulatory requirements – the selection of any new sites or extensions must not cause any pollution to the environment, including groundwater and this is regulated by SEPA; and
e) acceptability with local Planning considerations.

6.4 Four burial grounds within the Caithness area, currently included in the capital programme, have less than six years of remaining capacity:-

- Keiss Burial Ground – works to add additional rows of lairs at the burial ground is to be carried out by the in-house team.

- Reay Burial Ground – land investigations for potential extension are ongoing.

- Thurso Mount Vernon Burial Ground – land purchase for extension has been completed and planning has been approved. Works are expected to begin in 2027.

- Wick Burial Ground – There is less than three years of remaining burial capacity within the existing cemetery and investigations have confirmed that the site cannot be extended. A comprehensive assessment of 15 potential sites within the Wick area was undertaken to identify a suitable location for future provision. Following this process, a site near the Newton Hill area was acquired for the development of a new cemetery. The project will now progress to the design and planning stage to ensure sufficient burial capacity is available to meet future needs.

6.5 Work is still ongoing to review detailed projects for the current capital budget for 2024/25 - 2028/29 of £4.168m. The bereavement services team will continue to engage with local members on projects in their area and their ongoing support is appreciated.

Designation:	Assistant Chief Executive - Place
Date:	16 September 2026
Author:	John MacLean, Bereavement Services Manager Rachel Robertson, Project Coordinator
Background Papers:	None
Appendices:	Appendix 1 – Caithness Burial Ground Capacities & Lair Figures

Appendix 1

Caithness Burial Ground Capacities & Lair Figures

Figures as of 11/10/2026.

Name	Ward	Status	Number of prepared lairs available	Average Lairs sold per year	Current capacity in years
Bower	2	Open	164	1.8	92.3
Canisbay	3	Open	149	3.9	38.7
Corsback	2	Open	26	3.3	7.8
Dunnet	2	Closed	-	-	-
Halkirk	2	Open	75	9.0	8.3
Keiss	3	Open	13	3.3	4.0
Latheron	3	Open	519	6.6	78.7
Olrig	2	Open	138	8.0	17.3
Reay	2	Open	4	3.3	1.2
Thrumster	3	Open	76	2.1	36.6
Thurso Mount Vernon	2	Open	186	37.2	5.0
Watten	3	Open	33	4.2	7.8
Wick	3	Open	75	37.5	2.0
Wick St Fergus	3	Closed	-	-	-