

The Highland Council

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| Agenda Item | 4 |
| Report No | BSAC/13/25 |

Committee: Badenoch and Strathspey Area Committee

Date: 04 August 2025

Report Title: High Life Highland Service Delivery

Report By: Chief Executive, High Life Highland

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides the committee with information on High Life Highland (HLH) service delivery in the Badenoch and Strathspey area.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to comment on and note the report.

3. Implications

- 3.1 Resource - there are no new resource implications for The Highland Council (THC) arising from this report.
- 3.2 Legal - there are no new legal implications for THC arising from the recommendations in this report.
- 3.3 Risk - there are no new risks arising from this report.
- 3.4 Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people) There are no new health and safety implications for THC arising from this report.
- 3.5 Gaelic – The Highland Folk Museum and music tuition service both contribute to the active promotion, and in the case of the museum interpretation, of Gaelic language and culture. The sports development team is involved in the development of shinty in the area through supporting after school clubs in Aviemore Primary and Kingussie High School as well as supporting the local Clubs through the Community Sport Hub Programme.

4. Impacts

- 4.1 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. Due regard must be given to the findings of any assessment when taking any decision. This is an information report on High Life Highland services so an impact assessment by the Council is not required.

5. Background

- 5.1 HLH's purpose is Making Life Better. It was established as a charity by THC in October 2011 to deliver the Council's Public Services Obligations (PSOs) in: archives; community venues and engagement; countryside rangers; leisure; libraries; museums and galleries; music tuition and sports development. THC has a Contract in place to ensure that HLH delivers the specified Council PSOs.
- 5.2 HLH was established to deliver services on behalf of THC and at the same time deliver savings and protect, improve, and develop services. Each year, Arm's Length External Organisation (ALEO) status saves THC c. £2.5m p.a. through non-domestic rates relief.
- 5.3 HLH has consistently returned revenue savings for THC with recent (5 year) savings averaging £1.55m p.a. (9% of 2025/26 Services Fee). Savings have been achieved through income and efficiencies, whilst minimising service reductions. The partnership has been hallmarked by HLH assuming responsibility for additional services at the request of THC, with 43 new services and facilities having been added to HLH since it was established in 2011.

6. Customer Numbers

- 6.1 The services which THC has contracted HLH to deliver on its behalf in Badenoch and Strathspey are listed in the table below along with customer numbers for the two most recent full financial years. Customer numbers increased year on year by 2%.

| In Person Visits | 2023/24 | 2024/25 | Change | % Change |
|---|---------|---------|--------|----------|
| Aviemore | | | | |
| Aviemore Community Centre | 24,561 | 23,817 | -744 | -3.03% |
| Aviemore Library | 88,087 | 79,607 | -8,480 | -9.63% |
| Grantown | | | | |
| Craig Maclean Centre | 45,087 | 48,846 | 3,759 | 8.34% |
| Grantown Library and Service Point | 11,561 | 12,870 | 1,309 | 11.32% |
| Music Tuition Grantown ASG ¹ | 5,016 | 4,830 | -186 | -3.71% |

¹ Figures for music tuition and sports development are by associated school group area.

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|-----------------------------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|--------------|
| Sports Development Granttown ASG | 7,045 | 9,731 | 2,686 | 38.13% |
| Kingussie | | | | |
| Badenoch Centre | 17,130 | 23,770 | 6,640 | 38.76% |
| Talla nan Ros | 1,770 | 1,920 | 150 | 8.47% |
| Badenoch Library | 7,579 | 7,330 | -249 | -3.29% |
| Music Tuition Kingussie ASG | 3,205 | 2,710 | -495 | -15.44% |
| Sports Development Kingussie ASG | 9,208 | 9,313 | 105 | 1.14% |
| Newtonmore | | | | |
| Highland Folk Museum ² | 67,989 | 69,491 | 1,502 | 2.2% |
| Total | 288,238 | 294,235 | 5,997 | 2.08% |

- 6.2 The services which saw reductions between the two years have been listed below along with explanations and corrective action.
- 6.3 **Aviemore Community Centre** – The reduction between the two financial years is low and is indicative of a consistent performance. To increase customer numbers, the site staff have offered a wide range of activities catering for all age groups and has recently launched HYROX (see below) which has been extremely well received.
- 6.4 The team is also in the process of developing a training academy for all internal HLH employees. This will include delivery of qualifications such as:
- Level 2 Gym Instructor
 - Level 3 Personal Trainer
 - Indoor Cycling
 - British Weight Lifting courses
- 6.5 **Aviemore Library** - experienced a temporary reduction in programming as a result of staffing changes and delays in the recruitment process. This situation has since been resolved, and the library is now operating with a full staffing complement. The local team is in the process of re-establishing and expanding the programme of activities and events, with the objective of increasing public engagement.
- 6.6 **Music Tuition** - the number of engagements reflects pupils receiving music tuition. This number fluctuates throughout the year in relation to scheduling of tuition and event and programming but support for and engagement with music remains strong, with local pupils also playing in a range of Highland wide bands and orchestras. The team are continuously looking to further develop the depth and breadth of provision in

² Museums also receive visits “not in person” which are reported as part of THC’s statutory reporting. If these are included, annual visits for 2023/24 and 2024/25 were 99,437 and 121,723, a 22% year on year increase.

the area as evidenced by the piano pilot in Grantown Primary (see section 10.3 for details).

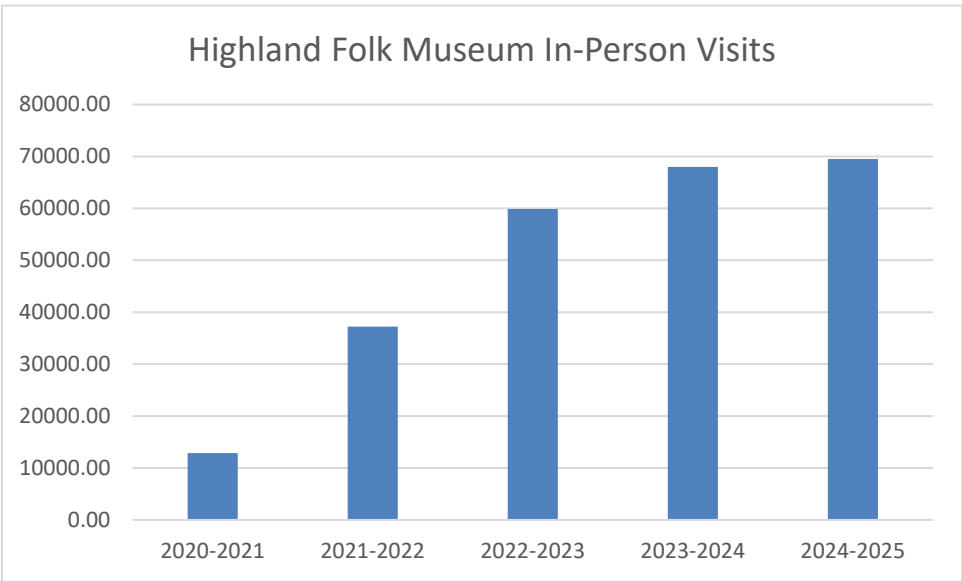
- 6.7 **Badenoch Library** - has seen a reduction in Bookbug participants over the last year. In response, the local team is actively working to enhance community engagement and service uptake through promoting the Bookbug programme more widely and the introduction of new initiatives, including a children's coding club and photography classes. These programmes are designed to broaden the library's appeal and increase visitor numbers.

7. **Talla nan Ros**

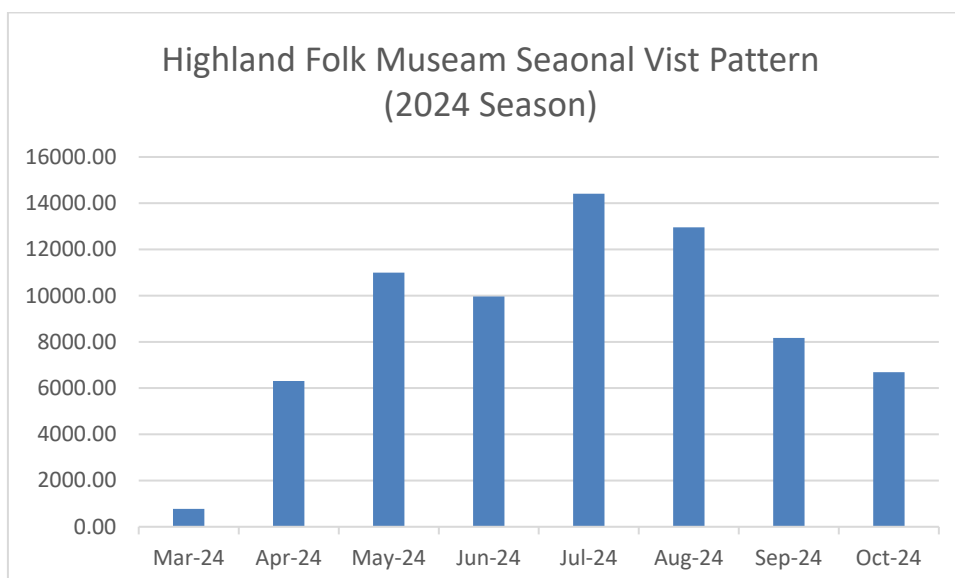
- 7.1 Elected members requested information on activity taking place in Talla nan Ros. The facility hosts programmes which include yoga, Dynamic Wellbeing, and chair-based exercise classes. The space is also regularly block-booked by local community groups, including the Guides, church groups and the Film Club which hosts four film screenings annually, which are well attended and contribute to the community use of the facility. In addition, it serves as a venue for one-off events throughout the year such a music concerts featuring local bands.

8. **Highland Folk Museum**

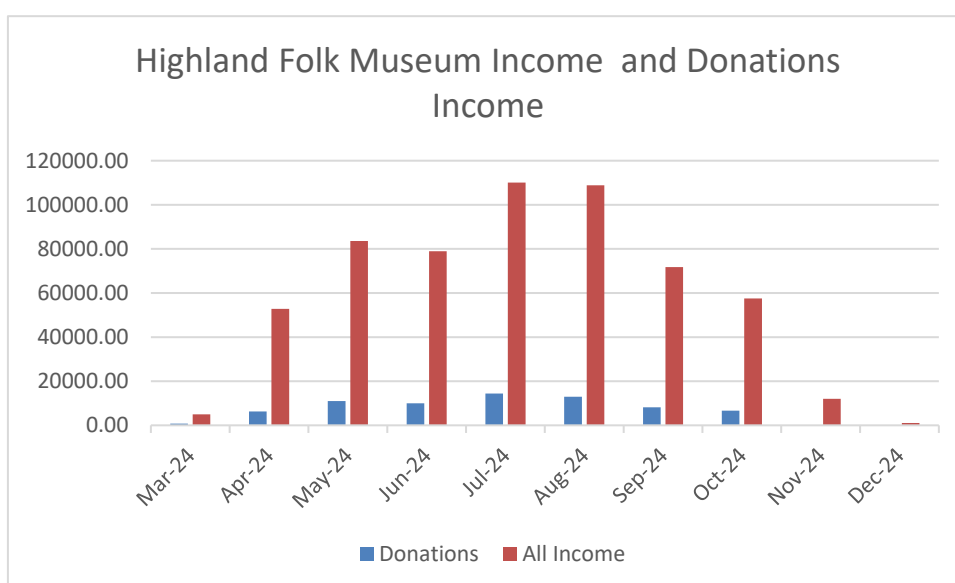
- 8.1 Elected Members requested information on the feasibility of extending the opening season at the Highland Folk Museum. The Highland Folk Museum has grown in-person customer visits as can be seen in the graph below.



- 8.2 The Museum is funded by The Highland Council to operate from Easter through to the end of the school holidays in October with customer numbers at their highest over the summer months. A seasonal workforce is recruited at the start of each season.
- 8.3 Customer numbers at the beginning and end of the season being relatively low (as can be seen on the graph below) indicate that extending the current operating season could have an impact on the sustainability of the site and extending it would require an additional/external funding source.



- 8.4 Donations income is at its highest level ever at over £200k p.a. and this has been consistent over the past two years and is key to the sustainability of the site. Total income (including donations) at the site was £576k in 2024 was also at its highest level ever. The graph below shows the income profile over the opening season in 2024.



- 8.5 The HLH Board engaged external consultants to produce a report on the impact of introducing admission charges at the Folk Museum and this was considered at its meeting held in December 2022. Based on the advice in the report, the HLH Board concluded that it was highly likely that footfall and income would reduce if a charging model were to be introduced. The Board also agreed to introduce a car park charge to complement the existing donations model. As a result of these decisions visitor numbers and total income are at their highest ever levels, thereby contributing to the popularity and the financial sustainability of the site.
- 8.6 As well as the challenges faced when considering extending the season in terms of low demand/visitor numbers over the winter period, The Highland Folk Museum faces additional challenges, associated with being an outdoor site. The buildings are not

heated/winterproofed and the collections are placed in storage at the end of the seasons to help protect and preserve them. The site itself is subject to the extremes of the weather (as evidenced by the loss of the pinewoods in the winter storms) and the extensive network of paths become difficult to negotiate safely. Although HFM currently offers a programme of winter tours of the store house collections in partnership with local accommodation providers, the long-term aspiration is to secure investment to develop a new interpretation centre for the site which would support year-round opening.

9. Service Developments and Highlights

- 9.1 Elected members requested recent service delivery highlights and a selection of these have been included in **Appendix A**.

10. Future Developments

- 10.1 Elected members requested information on any future service developments which were being considered, and this section provides a summary of those.
- 10.2 Sport and Leisure are continuing to develop the Schools Out Programme in the area through a strong collaboration with other services and linking with local clubs. The sports team is partnering with schools to support transition of new pupils and pupils moving to secondary school in the new academic year and work is underway to upskill more gymnastics coaches to allow a greater offering of the sport in the area.
- 10.3 The Music Tuition Service is piloting a new group piano programme at Grantown Primary School as part of our Youth Music Initiative (YMI) provision. The “Piano Project” will involve utilising the skills of a YMI funded tutor and investing in 4 digital pianos to be located at Grantown Primary. This will enable groups of 8 pupils at a time to begin access to piano skills.
- 10.4 The Countryside Ranger Service is planning to create online visitor interpretation of some of the Highland Council sites which it manages for biodiversity. The information which will be able to be accessed locally via a QR code, will help people find out about and understand the natural environment of the sites and will also include messages on responsible access. This initiative will include several sites in the Badenoch and Strathspey area.
- 10.5 The organisers of the Newtonmore Highland Games have requested that the **Archives** Service receive a large body of archive material relating to the Games. This is being deposited in the Highland Archive Centre and after being catalogued by the team it will be made easily and fully accessible to the public.
- 10.6 HLH and Council Officers are continuing to explore the possibility of securing external investment to support the year-round opening of HFM. Also, following the recent restoration of the curling pond and the launch of the MacLean village shop, site developments and improvements continue as the team are now working on the extensive restoration of the sawmill pond beside the pinewoods.

Date: Draft 1 July 2025

Author: Steve Walsh

Appendices: Appendix A – Recent service highlights

Appendix A Recent Service Highlights

To provide some detail of service developments over the past year, this appendix provides summaries of media releases with links to them on the High Life Highland web site.

[HYROX hits highlife!](#)

HYROX is billed as the ultimate fitness race. Three will be introducing this global fitness phenomenon this summer and Aviemore Community Centre is one of three sites rolling out this new offering to customers.

[McLean's shop stores a shed load of memories](#)

A tiny shop that served a Strathspey farming community for almost 80 years before closing its doors in the early 1970s has been given a new lease of life at the Highland Folk Museum. McLean's Shop is the Museum's newest exhibit, having been donated by the original shopkeeper's Great Granddaughter.

[High Life Highland joins forces with museums on UK-wide collaborative exhibition programme](#)

High Life Highland is one of twenty organisations across the UK taking part in Going Places – a landmark £5.36m exhibition programme from Art Fund that will see museums and galleries from all four nations share their collections in the largest collaborative touring project of its kind. The project will be exploring how local heritage and traditions of making have evolved. For High Life Highland collections at the Highland Folk Museum includes coiled straw basket making, thatching, spinning wheel making, sporran and kilt making and bee skep making.

[Travel award scheme boost for talented Highland athletes](#)

Talented athletes from across the Highlands are being supported through the latest round of the Highland Athlete Travel Award Scheme (ATAS), delivered through a partnership between sportscotland and High Life Highland. This includes two recent recipients from Strathspey, Carrbridge-based snowboarder [Emily Rothney](#) and Hannah McCook from Nethybridge (golf). *Click on Emily's name for further PR re her call up to Team GB*

[Supporting employee wellbeing is the focus of relaunched leisure membership scheme](#)

With businesses becoming increasingly focused on the health and wellbeing of their employees, High Life Highland is supporting those efforts with its refreshed corporate membership offering. '[Employee Wellbeing Membership from highlife](#)' aims to make it as easy as possible for businesses to foster healthier, happier workforces. Aviemore Medial Practice opted to join *highlife* as corporate members last year. Manager Diane Wright commented: "It is great to see that staff members can have access to these

facilities at a reduced cost to them and lovely to see their enthusiasm for improving their health and fitness.”

High Life Highland Libraries celebrate Book Week Scotland - High Life Highland

Libraries, as part of Book Week Scotland delivered a bumper issue of activities for literary lovers of all ages! At Grantown Library there were visits from Jane MacCauley, author of ‘Cairngorm – The Story of a Mountain’.

20 Years of Active Schools

Active Schools is celebrating its 20th Anniversary with thousands of young people in the Highlands having benefited from this national programme during that time – with some now even employed as their local Active Schools Coordinator, motivating the next generation. Tina Gibson was one of the first Active Schools Coordinators employed by The Highland Council (before High Life Highland came into being). She has worked in Kingussie among other places.

Artworks make a splash in ‘Ponds to Puddles’ Competition

The artistic talents of young people in the Highlands are second to none according to the High Life Highland Countryside Rangers and staff at the Highland Folk Museum, who had the difficult task of judging a recent art competition. As part of the curling pond restoration at the [Folk Museum](#) and freshwater ecology education project – ‘Ponds to Puddles’ – the art competition set out to find some amazing works to feature on a new interpretive panel.

Sign up for the Active Schools volunteer team!

High Life Highland is on the look out for new recruits to join its Active Schools team. The charity – working with schools across the Highlands – provides an array of extracurricular activities for children across primary and secondary schools from shinty, football and basketball to kids clubs, racket sports and dance and so much more! Lisa McInnes from Carrbridge volunteers with Active Schools at Carrbridge Primary School. She is also a past recipient of the High Life Highland Volunteer of the Year Award.

Pull up a chair – here’s how High Life Highland can help with health and wellbeing

Anyone recovering from injury, illness or major surgery knows that the pathway to recovery is not always easy but with the right help and support, there is a smooth journey to better health. This is the case for Highland Councillor, Muriel Cockburn, who in 2019 contracted sepsis, leading to endocarditis, requiring surgery to repair a damaged heart valve. She recently attended her first Chair Yoga session at Talla nan Ross in Kingussie, finding the mental wellbeing benefits of the class every bit as important as the physical benefits.

Aviemore celebration for dynamic youth!

The Hub in Aviemore was the venue for an awards ceremony to celebrate the outstanding achievements of the area's youth. The Dynamic Youth Awards – hosted by High Life Highland and IRL Education – recognised the efforts made across a wide range of activities.

Carrbridge treasure reopens at the Highland Folk Museum

A woodsman's caravan – cut in half during Storm Arwen by falling mature pine trees – has been restored to its former glory at the Highland Folk Museum in Newtonmore. The tiny home had only been open to visitors at the site for a matter of months, having been relocated from Carrbridge, when tragedy struck. However, thanks to a generous benefactor, this special exhibit can be enjoyed by the public again.

Gym goers get greater experience with High Life Highland investment in leisure facilities

An ongoing programme of upgrades to gym equipment in are providing customers with more choice and an improved experience, helping to make life better across the region. Gyms in several areas including Badenoch, have all recently been revamped with a variety of new equipment introduced and upgrades to fitness suites.

New class in Grantown for those needing a more sedate pace - High Life Highland

High Life Highland has introduced a new class to its offering in Grantown-on-Spey which is aimed at older adults who might benefit from some gentle exercise to help them manage long term health conditions or mobility problems.

Step back in time at Highland Folk Museum's Outlander Day

For fans of 'Outlander' there was an opportunity to get an insight into the lives of characters Jamie Fraser and Claire Randall as the Highland Folk Museum celebrated Outlander Day.