

The Highland Council

Agenda Item	6
Report No	HCW/14/25

Committee: Health and Social Care and Wellbeing Committee

Date: 20 August 2025

Report Title: Annual Workforce Plan Report 2022- 2025

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive – People

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 On 9 February 2023, Members approved the Health and Social Care Workforce Planning report 2022-2025. The first progress report was submitted to this committee on 14 February 2024. This update report aims to provide information on the progress made so far, including updated workforce data.
- 1.2 Cluster workforce plans were completed in March 2025, and the People Workforce Plan includes information for Health & Social Care and Education & Learning. In addition, information from the service workforce plans was incorporated in a [Corporate Workforce Action plan](#) which was presented at Corporate Resource Committee on 20 March 2025.
- 1.3 The focus of this report is to update on Health and Social Care workforce planning only for the consideration of this Committee.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:-
 - i. **Note** the Health and Social Care workforce planning progress report and updated action plan;
 - ii. **Note** the positive outcomes from the report, including:-
 - a. Continued success of trainee programmes for Social Workers (both undergraduate and postgraduate), Health Visitors, and School Nurses, supporting workforce development and succession planning.
 - b. The turnover rate of staff has reduced from 14.7% in 2023 to 10.5% in 2024.
 - c. In mitigation of the high level of social work vacancies and subsequent risk, the role of Social Work Assistants (HC8) has been successfully introduced to alleviate some of the delivery pressures from Social Workers (currently on a fixed term basis). This alternative method of service delivery reduces the number of qualified Social Workers required whilst allowing the service time to evaluate the effectiveness of this role.
 - d. The implementation of the Person-Centred Solutions portfolio.

- iii **Note** the continuing risk highlighted in this report and reflected in the Corporate Risk Register. This relates to the high vacancy rate that continues with Children's Services and the impact this is having on service delivery and the wellbeing of the workforce.

3. Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** - A failure to manage workforce planning and change puts at risk the Council's capacity to make the most effective use of resources. The impact of failure of statutory service delivery will have a reputational impact, as well as financial implications from any relevant regulatory body.
- 3.2 **Legal** - Care is required so that workforce changes are managed in line with current employment legislation and Highland Council policy.
- 3.3 **Risk** - Having a sustainable workforce is included as a risk in the Corporate Risk Register. There are also staffing resource challenges associated with budget constraints. The delivery of core and statutory functions will be impacted if the Service is inadequately resourced, and staff do not have the necessary skills to deliver core functions. This report mitigates the risk of an insufficient current and future workforce.
- 3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** - Staff wellbeing is a priority in the People Strategy and the Service action plans, and this is reflected in the Corporate Workforce Plan.
- 3.5 **Gaelic** – There are no Gaelic implications as a result of this report.

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. Introduction

- 5.1 Workforce planning is the process that organisations use to ensure they have the right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time.
- 5.2 On 9 February 2023, the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee noted the Service workforce plans for Health & Social Care and the first update report was submitted for consideration to this committee on 14 February 2024.

5.3 There have been several changes in the Services since the last workforce planning update was presented, including the Council's organisational restructure aligning seven services to three Clusters. Health & Social Care forms part of the People Cluster along with Education and Learning. This report provides an update on the previously titled Health & Social Care Service. Future workforce plans will be developed based on the new structure in 2025/2026.

6. Workforce Planning Updates

6.1 Recruitment & Retention

6.1.1 Recruitment continues to be a significant problem in some rural areas for specialist skilled roles, including Social Workers and Health posts. Competition from other employers including NHS and private sector, increased outward migration and an aging Highland population all contribute to the difficulties experienced in recruiting suitable candidates. This is further exacerbated by the age profile of our workforce and predicted high numbers retiring in the near future.

6.1.2 Significant focus has been given to continuing trainee programmes and recruitment of newly qualified Social Workers within the service. In addition, hard to fill posts were identified with strategies put in place to fill essential vacancies. Examples of this included internal staff development and promotion and focused radio and social media advertisements. These approaches have had mixed success, with some posts still remaining vacant and this reflects a wider national challenge in Social Work recruitment. To support long-term sustainability, trainee Social Worker positions are often filled by individuals from local communities where recruitment is most challenging, which increases the likelihood of retention and continued workforce development. Since 2023, the rolling trainee programme has successfully delivered 10 newly qualified social workers, all of whom were existing employees who took up this development opportunity.

6.1.3 We continue our investment in training of qualified School Nurses and Health Visitors to support community health services as detailed below.

Trainee Job Title	Qualified 2023/24	Qualifying 2024/25
School Nurse Trainees	1	4
Trainee Health Visitors	5	5

6.1.4 The Trainee Mental Health Officer Scheme was launched to tackle recruitment challenges and support social workers into Mental Health Officer roles. It offers a structured route through academic study at Robert Gordon University and supervised practice within Highland Council. Currently, two trainees are completing their studies in August 2025, with two more starting in September. This nationally acclaimed scheme, which received an award from the Scottish Association of Social Work, has led to significant year-on-year improvements in recruitment and retention. Further, it has resulted in a significant lowering of the age profile with this team – from an average of 60 years of age, down to mid-40s.

- 6.1.5 In mitigation of the high level of social work vacancies, the role of Social Work Assistants (HC8) has been successfully introduced on a fixed-term basis to alleviate some of the delivery pressures from Social Workers. This alternative method of service delivery reduces the number of qualified Social Workers required whilst allowing the service time to evaluate the effectiveness of this role. Early indications suggest that Social Work Assistants are making a positive contribution by undertaking delegated tasks such as initial assessments, direct work with service users, and supporting care planning processes. This has enabled qualified Social Workers to focus on more complex casework and statutory responsibilities. The introduction of this role also provides a valuable development opportunity for individuals seeking to progress into qualified social work, thereby supporting workforce sustainability in the longer term. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation will inform future decisions about the potential for permanent implementation of this model.
- 6.1.6 The implementation of the Person Centred Solutions Portfolio, one of six portfolios in the Council's Delivery Plan, encompasses a wide range of programmes and projects with a key objective of enhancing the attraction, recruitment, and development of staff in Health and Social Care roles within the Council. This portfolio reports directly to the Health, Care and Wellbeing Committee and provides updates on relevant work streams to the Joint Monitoring Committee.
- 6.1.7 Highland Council staff have also been involved in a National Working Group developing a graduate apprenticeship framework for Social Workers. This is an ongoing piece of work.
- 6.1.8 It is evident that further and continuing emphasis must be placed on this to future-proof the service, given the current workforce demographics. Only 9.89% of service FTEs are aged 29 or younger, while 42% are over the age of 50, and 9.67% are over 60. The reduction in staff beyond the age of 60 indicates that some employees are exiting the service before reaching the standard retirement age.
- 6.1.9 To address this, the Person-Centred Solution Portfolio has a dedicated project focused on Developing the Workforce, to design and implement a range of interventions including piloting Health & Social Care representation at career fairs to attract younger talent.
- 6.1.10 The introduction of trainee programmes for Mental Health Officers, Social Workers, School Nurses, and Health Visitors will play a key role in reducing the workforce age profile across health and social care, supporting long-term sustainability, retention and succession planning. As stated previously, the MHO team have demonstrated the significant reductions in the age profile that can be achieved.
- 6.1.11 The [Talent Strategy](#) recognises the Highland Council's need to plan, manage and improve people approaches, and supports the achievement of the [People Strategy](#) and implementation of the Council's [Delivery Plan](#). To create a robust organisation, we must embrace diversity and foster an inclusive workplace that encourages ambition and supports change. The Talent Strategy will provide the foundation to build the 'ambitious, sustainable and connected' culture, placing people at the heart of the organisation.

6.2 Performance Management

6.2.1 Performance management is a critical component to workforce planning. It not only allows managers and staff to communicate expectations and outcomes, but it also provides information to management supporting informed decision-making regarding service delivery. Performance management can also help managers recognise areas for improvement and increase staff engagement and retention. It is essential that managers feel equipped to manage performance effectively and the service will aim towards 100% compliance with relevant managerial and HR training.

6.3 People Development

6.3.1 Health and Social Care Managers have an additional opportunity to engage with their staff through regular supervision sessions. These sessions are compulsory and align with SSSC registration requirements. Focus is on both practice issues as well as providing a supportive space for regular, structured interaction between the Manager and the employee, complementing the annual Employee Review and Development (ERD) process. From August 2025, protected learning will be formally introduced within social work and child health. This refers to dedicated time allocated for staff to engage in professional development and learning activities as required by our professional bodies.

6.3.2 Much improvement has been achieved corporately and within the service due to increased resource within the People Development Team including a recently appointed Career Coach, management development training at various levels and a variety of online training on Traineasy.

6.3.3 Furthermore, commitments were given to look at additional and specialist training for teams. For example, the Service has been promoting Trauma Informed practice, which increases understanding of what psychological trauma is, how it affects clients and how people are to recover. This practice has been rolled out now within all services across the Council. There is an e-learning module available to all staff which also highlights the importance of self-care, particularly in challenging areas of service delivery like social work.

6.3.4 As part of the Talent Strategy approved by Corporate Resources Committee on 20 March 2025, the organisation intends to work towards Investors in People (IIP) Accreditation. IIP is an internationally recognised accreditation for people management and employee wellbeing, and it aims to increase productivity across organisations by creating a stronger, healthier and happier society. The focus of IIP accreditation is to invest in people, wellbeing and apprentices which aligns with our workforce planning ambitions. Health and Social Care will go through this programme in the first months of 2026, with the expectation that the accreditation will be sought by August 2026.

6.4 Structures

6.4.1 As part of the Highland Council senior management restructure, two Chief Officers were appointed for Health and Social Care, both were internal appointments. A review of the current establishment and roles to ensure they are fit for purpose and aligned with strategic objectives is ongoing. The service values the positive partnering relationship it has with Trade Unions, and they continue to be consulted regarding proposed changes.

6.5 Absence Management and Staff Wellbeing

6.5.1 The absence levels for the Service increased in 2024/2025 compared to 2023/2024 with the average days increasing from 11.5 days in 2023/2024 to 14.96 absence per employee in 2024/2025. This is above the Highland Council average of 13.16 days in the same period.

6.5.2 As a consequence, there is focused attention being paid to identifying and addressing the reasons for this upward trend. A potential contributing factor to the increase in absence within Health and Social Care may be the current vacancy rate, which can place additional pressure on existing staff. As previously mentioned in this report, strategies have been put in place to fill essential vacancies. In addition, the Council is corporately considering a range of further interventions to reduce absence. However, it is acknowledged that high vacancy rates remain a risk to both service delivery and the wellbeing of the workforce and may be contributing to an increase in absence levels.

The most common reasons for absence across Health & Social Care are consistent with the corporate position:

1. Viral (covid, cold, flu and sore throat)
2. Headache/Migraine
3. Diarrhoea & Vomiting

6.5.3 Mandatory absence management training for managers was refreshed and has been completed by 79% of the managers in the Health and Social Care Service. The Service is working towards a 100% completion rate. The number of Attendance Support Officers is currently under review, in order to increase the available management support.

6.5.4 Additionally, employees can access our Employee Assistance Programme, which provides independent advice to address wellbeing, financial and mental health concerns.

6.5.5 The Occupational, Health, Safety and Wellbeing team provides a wide range of wellbeing support for staff and managers. The team is actively raising awareness of the available support by promoting their website, wellbeing and helpline and the existence of the mental health first aiders.

7. Succession Planning

7.1 A new succession planning toolkit was developed in 2024. The toolkit and guidance support managers with identifying key positions, timelines and development needs of internal employees (successors) with the potential to fill these posts, to ensure future service needs are met.

7.2 A Succession Planning Action Plan for Health and Social Care is being created in conjunction with People Development. This will be a mix of highlighting existing resources that aid succession and creating new initiatives and is led by the Person Centred Solutions project.

8. Hybrid Working

- 8.1 The majority of roles in Health and Social Care are office or client based, and hybrid working is well established.
- 8.2 It is recognised that hybrid working affords a better work/life balance for many staff, which supports their wellbeing and helps recruitment and retention of staff. Clear parameters are required around hybrid working in order to manage staff expectations, equity and balance the need of the individuals with service delivery requirement. The Flexible Working policy which was approved in Resource Committee on 5 June 2025 provides further guidance.

9. Action Plan

- 9.1 The updated workforce action plan is included as **Appendix 1**. The last column informs Members of progress to June 2025.

10. Priorities

- 10.1 The workforce planning priorities identified for the Health and Social Care Service over the next 12 months are:-
- Recruitment and retention – addressing current and future staffing needs.
 - Succession planning and staff development - to mitigate the impact of an ageing workforce and ensure continuity of service.
 - Staff wellbeing and absence management - promoting a healthy, supported workforce.
 - Continued implementation of a sustainable staffing structure which is informed by capacity and demand - ensuring long-term service resilience on a financially sustainable basis.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive – People

Date: 18 July 2025

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Background Papers: Health and Social Care workforce report 2024, Health and Social Care WFP progress report 14 February 2024, Corporate Workforce Strategy, People Strategy, Talent Strategy

Appendix 1: Health and Social Action Plan Update for 2024/2025

APPENDIX 1

WORKFORCE CHALLENGES PRIORITIES	ACTIONS REQUIRED	DESIRED OUTCOMES	WHO	Achieved by June 2025
<p>Age profile</p> <p>41% of H&SC workforce is older than 50 Update – June 2025 42.7% of H&SC workforce now over the age of 50 Although this represents a slight increase, it's important to note the significant reduction in staff turnover from 14.7% in 2023/24 to 10.4% in 2024/25, which indicates improved staff retention.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Succession planning - MA and trainee programme - Identify 'single points of failure' and mitigate - Implement measures for aging workforce to support continuing employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sufficient staff numbers in the future - Prevent 'knowledge drain' by increased retirements 	<p>(Senior) management, Service Business manager, HR BP</p>	<p>The trainee programme has successfully delivered 10 newly qualified social workers since 2023.</p> <p>To support staff health and wellbeing a new Mental Health and Wellbeing Helpline has been introduced and free physiotherapy sessions are available.</p> <p>The Person-Centered Solution project is designing and implementing a range of interventions including piloting Health & Social Care representation at career fairs to attract younger talent.</p>
<p>Employment types</p>				
WORKFORCE CHALLENGES PRIORITIES	ACTIONS REQUIRED	DESIRED OUTCOMES	WHO	Achieved by June 2025
<p>The service spends on average £1mln on agency staff per year Update – June 2025 – the agency worker spend for 2024/2025 was £1.5mln</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review use of agency staff and reduce as part of the Recruitment strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cost saving - Improved service delivery 	<p>Senior management, Talent management team, HR BP</p>	<p>There remains a high percentage of vacancies that are hard to fill, therefore agency spend has not been reduced. Also, whilst a number of newly qualified social workers are now in post, they cannot take on full caseloads, resulting in Agency staff being used.</p>

WORKFORCE CHALLENGES PRIORITIES	ACTIONS REQUIRED	DESIRED OUTCOMES	WHO	Achieved by June 2025
<p>Difficult to Recruit vacancies. This is a national problem enhanced in rural areas in HC, especially in the North and the West. Housing is a particular problem in the West.</p> <p>The Service has a turnover rate of 14.7% which is significant. A higher retention rate will decrease the number of (hard to fill) vacancies. It is not uncommon that recruited staff leave within their first year.</p> <p>Update June 2025 – turnover rate has reduced to 10.5%</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop Recruitment Strategy - Grow our own Rolling MA programme - Review current recruitment process - Refresh current job descriptions - Develop career paths - Explore options with UHI to develop a high quality SW course to avoid future workforce moving away from the Highlands - Review longstanding vacancies and determine if work can be divided differently - Work with Housing and Property to explore housing options for staff - Use existing Exit Interview process to analyse reasons for leaving and resolve where possible - Review induction programme to improve support to new staff to increase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensure right people at the right place at the right time, now and in the future <p>Reduce reasons for staff to leave employment with HC, reduce turnover</p> <p>Reduce turnover</p>	<p>(Senior) management, Talent management Team, HR BP, Service Business Manager</p> <p>Talent management team, HR BP (senior) management</p> <p>Improvement and Performance manager, HR BP</p>	<p>The ongoing Social Work Trainee Programme continues to yield positive results, with four trainees successfully qualifying this year and filling critical vacancies in social work positions. As part of our vacancy mitigations and to ease the workload on qualified Social Workers, the role of Social Work Assistants (HC8) has been introduced by converting vacant social work posts. These 8 posts have been filled on a fixed-term basis to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach before considering a permanent change to the establishment. This alternative model of service helps reduce the demand for fully qualified Social Workers. Additionally, a recent recruitment campaign featuring radio advertisements and outreach to retired staff to join a relief pool has been launched to further support workforce.</p> <p>The Talent strategy which was approved at Resource Committee in March 2025 provides further recruitment and retention strategies.</p>

	the chances of long term employment			
Staff development				
WORKFORCE CHALLENGES PRIORITIES	ACTIONS REQUIRED	DESIRED OUTCOMES	WHO	Achieved by June 2025
<p>Up to date knowledge is a priority to enable staff to respond to changing needs and changes in policies, guidance and practice. The Service has a training budget of ca £150,000</p> <p>Update June 2025 – Whilst the training budget originally addressed mandatory training, significant spend is now on running our trainee schemes and the additional support requirements for the newly qualified social worker year</p>	<p>Draft and implement a Service Learning and Development plan</p> <p>Costings for these additional tasks and functions are required.</p>	<p>Staff are well equipped and feel confident to undertake their duties</p> <p>Grow our own schemes to be key mitigation priorities within our workforce plan</p>	<p>(senior) management, HR BP, People development service</p>	<p>Health and Social Care are provided with quarterly reports to monitor staff compliance with mandatory training, ensuring continuous improvement and accountability. The person-centered portfolio is working in collaboration with People Development to support Health and Social Care staff development.</p>
Structure and roles				
WORKFORCE CHALLENGES PRIORITIES	ACTIONS REQUIRED	DESIRED OUTCOMES	WHO	Achieved by June 2025

<p>The Service restructure is continuing. Reasons for redesign is to improve service delivery and increase efficiency.</p> <p>An additional reason is the planned shift in focus to Early Intervention and Prevention. The Service required a change in management structure (now implemented). Gaps are identified in the following roles: Support workers Admin staff, roles to support early intervention, Mentors in Health, Basic Band5 Staff and Data analysis.</p> <p>Update June 2025- Health and Social Care is now part of the People Cluster, alongside Education and Learning. This will enhance synergies and promote collaborative working, ultimately leading to improved service delivery</p>	<p>Review current establishment and determine if the present roles are sufficient to meet change in needs and practice. Project with focus on support roles started January 2023.</p>	<p>Establish a sustainable, cost effective structure that is fit for purpose and ensures safe service delivery.</p>	<p>Senior management, project manager, HR BP</p>	<p>A restructuring proposal is currently being produced and engagement with both staff and unions will commence during summer 2025.</p>
<p>Staff Wellbeing and Performance</p>				
<p>WORKFORCE CHALLENGES PRIORITIES</p>	<p>ACTIONS REQUIRED</p>	<p>DESIRED OUTCOMES</p>	<p>WHO</p>	<p>Achieved by June 2025</p>

<p>The number of days lost to sickness absence equates to 30 FTE absence annually. Absence management enables staff to return to work at the earliest opportunity which is not just good practice. It is cost effective and also avoids further absence by team members who absorb additional workload.</p> <p>Depression and Stress is one of main reasons for long term absence.</p> <p>Improving wellbeing of staff is a priority.</p> <p>Update June 2025 - Viral illness is now the top cause of days lost - three times higher than the next reason, contributing to an increase in the annual average from 11.5 days in 2023/2024 to 14.96 in 2024/2025.</p>	<p>Refresh management knowledge of absence management and performance management policy, guidance and processes.</p> <p>Work closely with the Attendance Support Officer and Occupational Health to identify trends and act proactively to reduce absence</p> <p>Ensure that all staff have an up-to-date Employee Review and Development plan which includes Staff wellbeing.</p> <p>Make staff aware of the Employee Assistance Programme and Mental Health First Aiders. Ensure that all managers have completed the compulsory Mentally Healthy Workplace course.</p>	<p>Substantive and timely support for staff will reduce staff absence, performance issues and improve overall staff wellbeing, ultimately resulting in reduction of cost and turnover.</p>	<p>(Senior) Management, HR BP, People development. Attendance Support Officer</p>	<p>The Attendance Management E-learning module has been well received with 95 Managers undertaking the training.</p> <p>Digital training sessions with an Attendance Support Officer from HR has also been introduced to support Managers through the absence management process.</p> <p>The Service will continue to promote the extensive Mental Health and Wellbeing toolkit provided by the Occupational Health and Wellbeing team, The employee assistance is part of the employee helpline which is now widely advertised within the Council</p>
New ways of working				
WORKFORCE CHALLENGES PRIORITIES	ACTIONS REQUIRED	DESIRED OUTCOMES	WHO	Achieved by June 2025

<p>The pandemic caused an immediate shift from working in an office to working from home. There is no 'one size fits all' going forward. A staff survey showed that 79% of staff prefers a blended way of working with a combination of working in an office environment and from home. There are staff members who prefer to work in an office environment full time, whilst others wish to work mainly from home. Considering staff wellbeing, we need to ensure that we allow staff to work in a way they prefer <u>where possible</u>. Service delivery has to meet the needs of clients. However, enabling staff to work in a way they prefer will improve their wellbeing and can support recruitment and retention.</p>	<p>Identify Service Requirements and how this can accommodate a blended way of working.</p> <p>Identify office space (where and what) required</p> <p>Work with teams to complete the team agreement documents about ways of working</p>	<p>Effective match between service requirements and staff preference to enhance service delivery and staff wellbeing.</p>	<p>(Senior) management, HR BP</p>	<p>Hybrid Working Guidance has now been approved at Resources Committee on 5th June 2025. This will work with the Flexible Working and Flexi-Time to create the 3 Flexible Working Strands which are incorporated under Flexible Working Arrangements. The Future Operating Model Portfolio aims to improve services by working more locally, to support staff and communities.</p>
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