

The Highland Council

Agenda Item	12.
Report No	EDU/26/25

Committee: Education

Date: 27 August 2025

Report Title: Eden Court Update

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - People

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 Highland Council has a contract with Eden Court in relation to the promotion, improvement and advancement of the arts and public education across Highland, to provide the best available entertainment for the widest public audience.
- 1.2 Eden Court's business plan is organised across three themes: Cultural; Social and Economic. A report is provided at Appendix 1 which focuses on the activities Eden Court delivers to achieve its 'Social' aims, due to these areas being most relevant to the Education Committee. The Chief Executive, Rebecca Holt, will also provide a verbal presentation to the committee.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
 - i. Note the contents of the report at **Appendix 1**.

3. Implications

- 3.1 Resource - there are no resource implications arising directly as a consequence of this report.

As the attached report sets out, the Council's grant of £300,000 to Eden Court unlocks c.£1million of funding from other sources annually. When considering all income, Eden Court generates £7 for every £1 invested by public funding sources.

The Eden Court building is owned by the Highland Council and Eden Court Theatre participates in the Highland Council Pension Fund, which is part of the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS). The Highland Council acts as the Administering Authority for this fund.

- 3.2 Legal - there are no direct legal implications arising as a consequence of this report.

- 3.3 Risk - there are no direct risks arising as a consequence of this report.
- 3.4 Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people) not applicable.
- 3.5 Gaelic - there are direct no implications on the provision of Gaelic services 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 This is an update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - People

Date: 12 August 2025

Author: Anne MacPherson, Interim Strategic Lead, Resources, Education & Learning

Background Papers:

Appendices: Appendix 1 – Eden Court Report to the Education Committee



Eden Court – Update to Highland Council Education Committee

Rebecca Holt, Chief Executive, August 2025

Eden Court's business plan sets out five high-level aims, as per the below:

Cultural

- 1) Play a pivotal role in Scotland's creative sector as the Highland's flagship cultural organisation – delivering an ambitious, high-quality and eclectic live performance and film programme for the people of our region.
- 2) Provide new opportunities for authentic Highland culture to be presented on stage and increase opportunities for professional artists to flourish across our rural region.

Social

- 3) Open up routes to engagement by being welcoming, inclusive and responsive to the needs of all of our communities.
- 4) Expand opportunities for people from across the Highlands to realise their creative potential and engage in the arts.

Economic

- 5) Grow our contribution to the Highland economy and attract higher levels of public and private investment to the region.

This report focuses on the activities we deliver to achieve our 'Social' aims, due to these areas being most relevant to the Education Committee.

As you read through, you'll notice that several strands of our activity are made possible through funding from Trusts and Foundations. The funds received via our SLA with Highland Council provide the crucial core infrastructure that enables us to secure this further support, bringing investment into Highland that would otherwise go elsewhere. The £300,000 annual investment that Highland Council makes into Eden Court enables us to unlock c.£1million of funding from other sources annually. When considering all income, we generate £7 for every £1 invested by public funding sources.

1) Youth Theatre, Dance & Film

We offer young people opportunities to be creative, develop their skills and make artistic work. We deliver three terms of activity each year (10 sessions per term), with the following groups:

- 5 x **Youth Theatre** groups – 5-7 Years, 8-10 Years, 11-13 Years, 14-16 Years & 16-19 Years
- 1 x **Musical Theatre** group – 10-16 Years
- 3 x **Youth Dance** groups – 5-8 Years, 9-12 Years & 13-18 Years
- 3 x **Youth Film** groups – 9-12 Years, 13-15 Years & 16-18 Years
- 1 x **Bùth-obrach Drama** (Gaelic Drama Workshop) – 9-15 Years

- 2 x **Ceòladairean Beaga / Wee Music Makers** for Under 5s
- Plus Summer and Festive week-long intensives

In 24/25, there were **6,445** tickets sold for these sessions. Once a year, work from across these classes is presented in our public-facing Youth Arts Festival. This year the festival included a devised performance made in collaboration with Compass Collective and Inspiring Young Voices called *Connections*. The *Connections* project worked with displaced communities within Inverness, with a focus on young people seeking asylum.

We provide opportunities for young people to take on decision-making roles, including through our Cinema Youth Board, comprised of a group of young film fans from across Highland who contribute to our programming decisions and curate monthly screenings.

2) **Studio Programme**

Eden Court's Studio Programme delivers activities for all ages, across a range of disciplines, aimed at nourishing individuals' creativity, health and wellbeing. There were **3,665** tickets sold for the the Studio Programme during the 24/25 financial year.

Classes include **Gracenotes** (dance for older adults), **Contemporary Dance**, **Jazz Dance**, **Heels Dance**, **Just Sing** and **Just Act**.

We also deliver disabled-focused work, including **I Heart Drama**, which works with disabled adults to explore physical theatre, improvisation and performing; **Horizons**, which is an inclusive dance group with disabled and non-disabled young people aged 13-21 years; and **Dance for Parkinson's**.

Sessions with the LGBTQ+ community are also a priority, including **Queer Youth Arts Collective**, which provides an online creative space for Highland-based LGBTI+ young people aged 13-18 and **Out Together**, a free monthly meet-up event for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Gender Diverse, Queer, Intersex and Asexual elders and allies. In February, we achieved Silver accreditation from LGBT Youth Scotland's **LGBT Charter** – Eden Court is the only theatre venue or cinema in Scotland, and the only public space in Inverness, to have been Charter accredited.

3) **Qualifications**

Eden Court offers SQA qualifications courses in **Dance (Higher)** and **Drama (National 5 & Higher)** for young people from across Highland who are unable to access them at school.

We are in the process of reviewing how we deliver our SQA qualifications to ensure that they work most effectively for students and schools, as the 25/26 year saw a drop in applications. We are keen to work closely with Highland Council on this, and Kate Lackie and her team have already responded positively in this regard.

In addition to the SQA courses, we also run **Break into Film**, a free course offering 16-19 year olds the opportunity to gain a BFI/Screen Skills NCFE Preparing to Work in the Film Industry level 5 equivalent

qualification. The course supports young people to develop their understanding of the fundamentals of filmmaking, from screenwriting, cinematography and sound, to directing, production and editing. They make short films, learn from top talent working in the industry through masterclasses, and gain commercial and cultural knowledge to begin their journey towards a career within the screen industries. Participants also become part of a BFI Alumni group which opens up additional training opportunities across the UK.

4) **Futures Studio**

Futures Studio works with young people experiencing complex challenges in their lives due to factors such as economic disadvantage, living in care or having caring responsibilities. The programme provides opportunities in **filmmaking, sound design, music production, photography and performing** – as well as a newly developed **Young Facilitators** strand – to ignite their passions and develop skills.

The programme aims to support young people onto positive destinations, back into education or onto employment, with young people offered the opportunity to complete a Youth Scotland Award. This project is supported by National Lottery Young Start, through £75,000 of funding over three years.

Our referral partner – Action for Children – who nominate young people into the project said the following:

"Action for Children's partnership with Future Studios at Eden Court is more than just a creative outlet—it's a launchpad for young people to build skills and self-worth. Through one-on-one sessions with professionals and group projects, participants have flourished. Seeing them showcase their finished work to family and friends at the exhibition is a powerful testament to their dedication and the incredible personal growth we've witnessed."

5) **Teacher Development Fund**

Eden Court is in receipt of £164,000 of funding from Paul Hamlyn Foundation for a two-year project working with Highland schools. The Teacher Development Fund supports Eden Court's artist practitioners to work collaboratively with teachers to introduce arts-based approaches into their teaching of the Curriculum for Excellence. The programme focusses on rural schools with composite classes, where meeting the varied needs of the students is more complex and the opportunities for peer learning for teachers are more limited.

The schools we are working with are: **Kyleakin** Primary, **Poolewe** Primary, **Bualnaluib** Primary, Northwest Sutherland Schools (**Scourie**, **Kinlochbervie** and **Durness** Primary Schools), **Tongue** Primary, **Halkirk** Primary and **Farr** Primary.

The project is being delivered across two years, with year 1 complete and year 2 about to begin.

Year 1

- **Phase 1 – Inspire:** Eden Court's practitioners delivered Artist Takeover Days comprised of curriculum driven lessons using drama and film techniques. The aim was to inspire the teachers by showing them what's possible, opening up their understanding and fuelling their ambitions for the project ahead.

- **Phase 2 – Goal Setting:** We established individual teachers' prior knowledge, experience and project goals, including desired pupil outcomes – this is informing the detail of the approach in the phases that follow.
- **Phase 3 – Observe:** The practitioners and teachers co-planned lessons, which Eden Court's practitioners led, with teachers observing.

Year 2

- **Phase 4 – Try Out:** Through group sessions in two clusters of schools, the teachers will learn and try out the techniques they've observed, such as Mantle of the Expert, Forum Theatre and Five Shot Film.
- **Phase 5 – Apply:** Teachers will co-lead the lessons with the practitioners, applying the skills they've learnt, whilst having the practitioners' direct support.
- **Phase 6 – Embed:** Teachers will take the lead on lesson delivery, with the practitioners assisting in planning the sessions, as well as observing and providing feedback.

The teachers are also working with the practitioners in 1:1 surgeries to reflect on their learning and troubleshoot challenges. Workshop days across the two years are providing supplementary learning, such as training related to anti-racism and change-management. There are also a number of facilitated networking sessions which bring together all the teachers, school leaders and practitioners, developing a Network of Practice.

In addition to this targeted programme, we continue to deliver bespoke workshops in schools, responding to their specific aims/issues.

6) **In On The Act**

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation supported Eden Court with £157,000 of funding to deliver *In On The Act*, an 18-month project working with four partners across the Highland region to bring stories of these communities to life on local stages. The locations, partners and shows developed were:

Skye (Ailie Robertson and Seall): The final piece, performed at An Crubh and called *101 Ways to Live on Skye*, gathered the voices of over 100 Skye residents, from ages four to 103, to create a soundscape of life on the island. Those interviewed included pupils from Sleat and Broadford Primary schools, and An Acarsaid Care Home. It blended individual stories with collective voices, field recordings and live music from both professional musicians and the Skye Wind Band.

Balmacara (Daniel Cullen and Balmacara Community Trust): This performance, titled *The Old Mill* took place as part of Balmacara's Gala Day. The show aimed to encapsulate what community means in Balmacara and featured a community cast of young people. It included songs, poems and performances that had come through workshops, interviews and stories collected from social archives.

Lairg (David McNeish and Lairg and District Learning Centre): *Welcome to Lairg* incorporated film, poetry, music and drama to tell the story of Lairg – with journeys into and out of Lairg as a key theme. It included performances by primary school pupils, pupils from Golspie High and local adult performers and musicians, including the Gaelic Choir.

Morvern Peninsula (Helen Woolston, Aukje Delnooz and Veronique Walraven): In this show, called *The Sway of Morvern*, puppetry, animation and movement were used to explore the themes of landscape, weather and human experience on this remote peninsula. Locally made sound and visuals were combined with animated work, and the performance was brought to life by Morvern residents.

7) **Community Cinema**

Through the Spotlight project, delivered in partnership with Film Hub Scotland and BFI, we have been working to build the capacity and confidence of cinemas and community organisations surrounding the Moray Firth, supporting them to screen a wide range of cinema for local audiences. Locations have included Forres, Evanton, Grantown, Invergordon, Ardross, Aviemore and Dingwall, as well as regular screenings in partnership with Moray Playhouse in Elgin.

We also continue to support Cromarty Cinema through film curation, procurement and promotion.

8) **Audience Development**

Providing accessible opportunities for people to experience Eden Court's live performance and film programme is also a key part of the way we consider our social impact. Our current audiences are:

➤ **Highly engaged and loyal**

- 215,000 ticketed attendees visit Eden Court annually in an area with a population of 238,000.
- 38% of our bookers are 'Super Active' which is more than twice the national benchmark of 17%. (Super Active is defined as having attended 10 or more times before, and at least once within the last 18 months. The benchmark is based on data from 71 'medium presenting' UK venues.)
- The Inverness & Nairn parliamentary constituency has a 61% cultural penetration rate, which is the third highest of Scotland's 73 constituencies and well above the Scottish average of 40%. The strong role Eden Court plays in this is evidenced by the fact that those in Inverness & Nairn also transact with fewer organisations than average at 1.3 venues, which is in the lowest 10% nationally.

➤ **From a wide geographic area and a range of socio-economic backgrounds**

- Over a third of Eden Court's bookers travel 60 minutes each way and 11% over 3 hours each way.
- Audiences engage from across all 30 of the Highland data zones that feature in Scotland's most deprived 20% on the SIMD profile.

➤ **Broad in age demographic and representative of the region with regards to mobility related disabilities**

- Those aged 25-74 engage at a rate in line with, or above, the make-up of the Highland population.
- 7% of bookers identify as having a mobility disability compared to 6.1% of the Highland population.

Eden Court's Audience Development plan identifies a number of opportunities to develop audiences, including the following:

1. **Location:** Continue to engage people from remote & rural communities in their location, reducing the barriers of travel, through projects like *In On The Act* and *Spotlight*.
2. **Disabled Access:** Better serve bookers with sight &/or hearing related disabilities. We are seeking to do this by investing in our infrastructure (e.g. improving our audio description and hearing loop systems), deepening engagement with local networks and increasing disabled-led programming.
3. **Cost:** Continue to offer accessible ticket pricing, including:
 - Low Income tickets of £5.50 on OneTouch Theatre shows and cinema.
 - Free cinema tickets for 16-25 year olds through the BFI Recommends programme.
 - Pay What You Can tickets for Under Canvas & Pay It Forward tickets on Engagement classes.
4. **Programming & Producing:** Within our programming, we will continue to provide opportunities for children and families to see high-quality work, with the aim of introducing the next generation of theatregoers to the transformational impact of live performance.

Between 2025-2027 this will include the presentation of three new Christmas shows, co-produced by Eden Court in partnership with Aberdeen Performing Arts and Capital Theatres Edinburgh. The first show will be called *Bananas for Christmas* by local Moray-based theatre company, Frozen Charlotte.

Members are asked to: Note the report, which will be accompanied by a presentation from Eden Court's CEO at the Education Committee on Wednesday 27th August.