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| Agenda Item | 4 |
| Report No | HC/38/25 |

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Meeting: The Highland Council

Date: 11 December 2025

Report Title: Highland Poverty and Equality Commission – Interim Report

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on the work of the Highland Poverty and Equality Commission and introduce the Commission's interim report which can be found at **Appendix 1**. This focuses on the poverty impacts around access to transport, digital and public services and then looks at the lack of homes, condition of homes and the affordability of homes and how this can impact on poverty.

2. Recommendations

2.1 The Council is asked to:

- **Note** the initial work of the Highland Poverty and Equality Commission; and
- **Note** the interim report from the Commission which can be found at **Appendix 1**.

3. Implications

3.1 Resource

There are no specific Resource implications arising from this report. A budget of £0.3m was agreed for the Commission as part of the budget setting process in March 2025. This budget is to support the work of the Commission, along with covering the expenses of the Commission e.g. room hire, catering, travel expenses. £1,194 has been spent to date, predominantly on expenses. As noted at paragraph 6.3, the Commission is in the process of commissioning a lived experience panel, to enable them to hear the voices of people who have direct experience of poverty, which will be funded from these resources.

3.2 Legal

There are no specific legal implications arising from this report.

3.3 Risk

There are no specific risk implications arising from this report.

3.4 Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)

There are no specific Health and Safety implications arising from this report.

3.5

Gaelic

There are no specific implications for the Gaelic Language Plan.

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 however, the recommendations/calls to actions will be subject to assessment for impact.

5.

Background

5.1

In March 2025, as part of the Highland Council's Budget setting approach, it was agreed to establish a Poverty and Equality Commission. The aim was to consider, improve and crucially accelerate the collective approach to tackling poverty in Highland.

5.2

The focus for the Commission is on 'what works' and this should include both direct mitigation measures alongside changes to how services are provided and delivered in Highland in order to develop preventative and early intervention approaches and integrated services.

The aims of the Commission are to:

- Identify sustainable solutions and actions to tackle and address rural poverty
- Identify direct actions to shape integrated service delivery in order to address poverty
- Improve early intervention approaches to prevent poverty
- Develop integrated approaches to supporting people and tackling poverty and inequality in Highland
- Address causes, consequences and responses to poverty across Highland's diverse communities.

5.3

At the Council meeting on 18 September, the Co-Chairs of the Commission provided Members with an update on their approach to gathering evidence, based on six thematic areas of focus:

- Access (transport, digital and service provision)
- Housing
- Ways of Working Across Services
- Fair Work
- Early Years and Education
- Financial Security.

5.4 Each of the evidence sessions are supported by Sounding Boards which are led by two Commissioners who report back to the Commission evidence sessions

6. Evidence Sessions

6.1 The Commission has undertaken two evidence sessions to date, the first session in Fort William on 10 October which considered how a lack of access to transport, digital and service contributed to poverty and potential solutions to overcome these challenges. The second evidence session was in Kyleakin on 7 November which focused on how a lack of a home, the condition of homes and the affordability of homes can exacerbate poverty. The next evidence session is taking place on 12 December and will focus on ways of working across services.

6.2 As well as the evidence sessions, the Commission have also engaged with a range of stakeholders and community groups and organisations which have helped to inform their thinking. Details are set out at Appendix 2 of the interim report.

6.3 The Commission are also in the process of commissioning a Lived Experience Panel to enable them to hear the voices of people who have direct experience of poverty. This will also provide them with a mechanism to test out their thinking, challenge assumptions and ensure that any proposals and calls for action are realistic, relevant, and effective.

7. Interim Report

7.1 The Commission's interim report can be found at **Appendix 1** and is based only on the findings from the first two evidence sessions. The report identifies the emerging themes to come from those sessions and highlights the Commission's thinking to date, including highlighting potential ways to alleviate the impact and effects of poverty.

7.2 Some emerging messages include:

- the importance of bringing services to people and increasing the capacity of community transport provision
- the concept of digital access hubs, making more use of public sector facilities and scaling up the work to provide free wi-fi/printers and Near Me consultations in libraries
- in designing digital services, there is a need to think about accessibility and affordability for the citizen
- when accessing public services, the importance of "no wrong door" was a key principle, with Public Service Hubs with agencies working across their traditional structures to deliver holistic people centred services
- on lack of homes, the Commission wants to better understand the housing investment plans of both the Council and Registered Social Landlords and explore whether there were options to accelerate the provision of homes in the Highlands such as converting existing buildings, developing more flats and the use of modular construction of homes
- In order to improve the condition and energy efficiency of homes, there was a focus on the concept of reshaping the way home improvements were undertaken but also exploring the potential benefits of the Council and RSLs undertaking joint procurement exercises to deliver home improvements and providing integrated advice on energy efficiency

- On sustaining tenancies, the Commission highlight the importance of building on the learning from existing projects, such as the Caithness housing social worker and Albyn Housing's 'Make a House a Home' focused on new tenancies. Preventative approaches are considered vital, such as mental health and financial advice and would seem to be cost-effective and impactful in enhancing the sustainment of tenancies. The Commission have highlighted that there are real benefits to be gained from integrated support models through combining housing, health, and social care to support vulnerable tenants as evidenced from the Caithness pilot project.

7.3 The Interim report concludes by highlighting some key elements that the Commission have identified, these relate to:

- Bringing services to people as far as possible, rather than people needing to go to services
- Applying person centred service design and delivery - putting the diverse needs of people first, rather than systems/organisations first
- Scaling up what works (the common elements of practice that probably can be spread) and what is making a positive difference, while being clear on what is specific to local communities
- Collectively working together (public, private and voluntary) to deliver the greatest impact.

8. Next Steps

8.1 The Commission will undertake the further evidence sessions which will focus on ways of working across services, fair work, early years and education and financial security. They will also engage with a wide range of community groups and organisations, both public, third sector and private. A workshop with elected Members is currently being arranged for early in the new year which will provide an opportunity to hear directly from Members across the range of themes being explored by the Commission.

8.2 The final report from the Commission will be presented to the Council at its meeting on 25 June 2026.

Designation: Chief Executive

Date: 24 November 2025

Author: Gordon Morrison, Policy Manager

Alison Clark, Chief Officer – Housing and Communities

Appendix 1: Interim Report from the Highland Poverty and Inequality Commission



Interim Report

December 2025

Introduction

As a Commission we recognised that poverty in the Highlands is shaped by a unique set of factors, including geographic isolation, limited access to services, and seasonal employment patterns. These challenges are compounded by rising living costs and housing pressures, which disproportionately impact low-income households.

Understanding these dynamics is essential to ensuring that interventions are targeted, effective, and responsive to local needs.

Early on we identified six themes we wanted to explore, recognising that they overlap and impact on people in different ways. These themes were centred around: -

- Access,
- Housing,
- Culture and ways of working across public service,
- Fair work,
- Early years and education,
- Financial security.

We also wanted to ensure that we engage with community groups across the Highlands, which is why our evidence sessions on each of these themes are taking place in different communities in the Highlands. To inform these sessions we have set up Sounding Boards, chaired by two Commissioners to informally speak to a range of stakeholders.

We had an inaugural meeting of the Commission in Balintore, which was foundational in establishing relationships, ways of working and our approach to gathering evidence.

To date we have had two evidence sessions, one in Fort William on 10 October which looked how a lack of access to transport, digital and service contributes to poverty and inequality. The other session was in Kyleakin on 7 November which focused on looking at the how a lack of homes, the condition of homes and the affordability of homes can exacerbate poverty.

This interim report provides an overview of the emerging themes from these two evidence sessions and starts to consider possible solutions, which could help alleviate some of the effects of poverty and outlines some good practice of preventative and early intervention approaches through integrated services.

The findings presented here draw on the evidence submitted to the evidence sessions, available data and stakeholder engagement. While this report does not provide a complete picture, it is intended to serve as a helpful step forward in sharing our thinking and direction of travel to date.

We look forward to our remaining evidence sessions and further engagement with communities and groups as we develop our proposals to improve and accelerate the collective approach to tackling poverty in the Highlands.

Jim McCormick (Co-Chair)

Maggie Cunningham (Co-Chair)

Executive Summary

We have held two evidence sessions, one in Fort William on 10 October which looked at how a lack of access to transport, digital and service contributes to poverty. The other session was in Kyleakin on 7 November which focused on looking at the how a lack of homes, the condition of homes and the affordability of homes can exacerbate poverty.

In relation to the Access session, we discussed a range of options to improve access to transport. Fundamentally we were interested in the concept of bringing services to people, increasing capacity of community transport provision. On digital we were interested in the concept of digital access hubs, making more use of public sector facilities and scaling up the work to provide free wi-fi/printers and Near Me consultations in libraries. In designing digital services, there is a need to think about accessibility and affordability for the citizen. This is area we want to reflect further on.

The third element of access we looked at was access to public services (whoever is providing them) and our thinking was around building on the concept of "no wrong door" and single gateway models. Potentially developing Public Service Hubs with agencies working across their traditional structures to deliver holistic people centred services. We were particularly interested in the Highland Whole Family Wellbeing Programme which takes a locality and holistic approach to service delivery for families experiencing disadvantage.

On Homes, we considered issues around a lack of homes, condition of homes and affordability of homes. On lack of homes, we noted the work of the Highland Housing Challenge and the Partnership Action Plan, but we do want to better understand how prevention and reduction of poverty and inequality are being factored into this action plan. We also want to better understand the housing investment plans of both the Council and Registered Social Landlords and explore options to accelerate the provision of truly affordable homes (converting existing buildings/flats/modular homes).

The condition of homes was the second element we reviewed, with the high cost of heating homes in Highland being a key concern. We acknowledge that most of the levers to change this are at a governmental level, including through regulatory and pricing models that serve the region better. However, we are interested in reshaping the way home improvements are undertaken through repairing homes first, improving the fabric spend and then thirdly addressing heating systems to deliver

more effective outcomes for residents. We also want to explore the potential benefits of the Council and Social Registered Landlords undertaking joint procurement exercises to deliver home improvements and providing integrated advice on energy efficiency.

The third element we looked at was the affordability of homes and we were interested in some of the pilot project work to help people sustain their tenancies, in particular the Caithness pilot project of the Council and NHS Highland establishing a joint social worker/housing post to support tenancy sustainment. We also were interested in the "Make a House a Home" pilot project by Albyn Housing to provide targeted support to people starting a new tenancy having been homeless.

Investment in upstream prevention (early support services) such as mental health and financial advice, would seem to be cost-effective and impactful in enhancing the sustainment of tenancies. We also think there is real benefits to be gained from integrated support models by combining housing, health, and social care to support low-income tenants and those at risk of homelessness as evidenced from the Caithness pilot project.

Access - Emerging Themes

Access to transport, digital connectivity, and essential services remains a critical challenge across the Highlands, where geographic remoteness and dispersed populations create barriers to inclusion and increase the effect of poverty on individuals and families.

Reliable transport links are vital for employment, education, and healthcare, yet many communities face limited public transport options and high travel costs. Similarly, digital connectivity is uneven, with gaps in broadband and mobile coverage restricting opportunities for remote work, online learning, and access to digital services. These issues compound difficulties in accessing health, social care, and other public services, particularly for groups with few choices. Addressing these disparities is central to reducing inequality and ensuring that all residents can participate fully in the economic and social life of the Highlands.

Transport

During our evidence session we found that: -

- Transport Provision in Highland was fragmented
- Some routes were not commercially viable
- Community transport was uneven and dependent on local capacity
- There were limited options and lack of availability (Rural and Urban)
- Lack of infrastructure to support active travel
- There were issues around digital literacy/ability to access timetables and make bookings
- There was eligibility confusion for, and access to, patient transport
- Forced car ownership
- Increased taxi usage due to lack of alternatives
- Community Transport - volunteer shortage/vehicle access issues/restrictions on use of concessionary cards)

A key theme emerging from the evidence we heard was on improving integration and co-operation over how people can access transport. There is potentially a real opportunity with the development of the Council's own bus service to develop sustainable, reliable and less expensive transport options for people across the Highlands. However, we do recognise that this is not the sole solution to the transport challenges in Highland.

Some of the ideas we have heard and considered related to:

- Bringing Services to People – rather than people coming to access critical services, the concept of services coming to people should be explored. One example that was shared was the concept of developing a mobile health unit (converted bus) to deliver primary care services (check-ups, chronic disease management, vaccinations etc) to communities with limited access to healthcare. It acts as a traveling clinic, reducing travel barriers and costs for patients as well as improving preventive care.

This not only reduces transport costs but saves on missed appointments due to transport unavailability and takes pressure of community transport providers to broaden their offering to communities. We want to engage further with NHS Highland to better understand the opportunities that could be realised from this approach but also consider how this approach could evolve for other service areas.

- Maximising Vehicle Usage – There was an opportunity to make better use of the public funded/owned vehicle fleet, such as school minibuses which are located throughout the Highlands that could be utilised to enhance community transport resources.
- Patient Transport – exploring ways of enhancing patient transport provision through a joined-up approach between the Scottish Ambulance Service, NHS Highland, the Council and voluntary sector in relation to patient transport
- Community Transport – Community transport schemes play a vital role in supporting rural communities in the Highlands by addressing gaps in conventional public transport and improving access to essential services. However, they do face challenges around capacity and costs.

We heard that for community transport providers to be able to offer more services, they needed more volunteers. One approach would be to enhance volunteer recruitment by potentially offering some form of incentives and develop volunteer management through flexibility over time commitments etc.

In terms of costs, there could be potential in Council workshops helping maintain community transport vehicles and enabling community transport providers to use concessionary cards.

- Knowing what's Available – We heard there is a need for better communication and awareness of services that can be provided to individuals.

Digital

On digital we heard concerns around connectivity gaps; there are still areas in Highland that lack adequate broadband and mobile coverage. Many public services (Universal Credit, housing, health appointments) are now digital-by-default. Without internet access, people struggle to apply for social security, book GP visits, or access advice services. There were also concerns raised about digital exclusion through lack of digital knowledge, disability issues and some online services are not mobile friendly creating barriers for those without laptops.

While national programmes to deliver reliable broadband and mobile connectivity continue, it would be helpful to understand timelines and areas that have not been reached.

Some emerging thoughts around improving digital access are around the concept of Digital Access Hubs. This involves: -

- Making more use of public sector facilities that have digital connectivity
- Build on work undertaken by Highlife Highland (free Wi-Fi/printers in libraries)
- Improve public awareness of digital resources (map all digital access points)

In terms of Digital Services, we can see real benefits in expanding the Highlife Highland/NHS Highland pilot on Near Me Consultations, for greater co-ordinated support for digital literacy and inclusion initiatives.

Near Me is a secure video consulting service that allows patients to attend pre-arranged appointments remotely using an internet-enabled device (phone, tablet, laptop, etc.). It reduces travel time, costs, and environmental impact while maintaining confidentiality and quality of care. It's not suitable for all appointments (e.g., those requiring physical examination) but works well for many outpatient and follow-up consultations.

Public services that design digital services, need to think about accessibility and affordability during the design phase. Digital services that are not mobile friendly creates barriers and additional costs for those without laptops.

Public Services

Given the geography of the Highlands, the physical location for delivering public services is primarily limited to main population locations. We found that people often must travel long distances to access services. We also heard that too often there was a siloed approach to delivering public services; services have historically been organised into separate structures with limited collaboration with each other.

This can result in a fragmented user experience with citizens often having to navigate multiple agencies for related needs. It can make it challenging in addressing complex needs issues like poverty, mental health, and aging populations requiring multi-agency responses, which silos hinder.

We also found that there was a lack of awareness of the range of services available, some people did not know what services existed or how to access these services. Access to commercial services such as banks and posts offices to undertake basic financial transactions is becoming increasingly challenging, particularly for those living in remote and rural areas.

Our initial thinking on how to improve the experience for the user is around building on the concept of "no wrong door" to access public services. This could potentially involve the development of Public Service Hubs with agencies working across their traditional structures. This approach has the benefit of: -

- Delivering services in a more holistic way
- Reducing the "pillar to post" effect
- Removing stigma (no one know what service you are seeking)
- Public services working closer with third sector providers
- Potential to explore commercial providers (banks/post offices etc)
- Creating fit for purpose facilities by divesting of older less efficient ones.

We were impressed with the Highland Whole Family Wellbeing Programme which takes a locality and holistic approach to service delivery. It aims to ensure that every family that needs support, gets the right family support, at the right time, to fulfil children's rights to be raised safely in their own families, for as long as it is needed.

The support is holistic by design and adopts a multi-agency approach which is joined up across services, so families experience a seamless delivery and do not experience multiple referrals or inconsistent support.

When developing and/or designing services, a key element should be around promoting flexibility and responsiveness so that people feel comfortable accessing those services. There also needs to be a greater awareness of the need to remove or reduce costs of accessing services when they are being designed.

Having a Home - Emerging Themes

Having access to a warm, secure home you can afford is fundamental to addressing poverty. A lack of a home is deeply intertwined with poverty, creating a cycle that limits opportunities for both individuals and families. High housing costs, coupled with low wages and seasonal employment patterns, place significant pressure on household budgets. For many, the lack of affordable and suitable homes forces reliance on temporary accommodation or overcrowded living conditions, which can exacerbate health and social inequalities. The rural geography of Highland adds further complexity, with limited housing supply and higher transport costs making it harder for those on low incomes to secure stable housing.

During our evidence session in Kyleakin, we looked at three elements, the lack of homes, the condition of homes and the affordability of homes. We see these issues as central to addressing poverty and inequality in Highland.

Lack of Homes

As of 31 March 2025, there were 8,767 people on the Highland Housing Register, 476 households living in temporary accommodation as of the end of June 2025 and in 2024/25, there were 1,270 homeless presentations. It is also worth noting that 20% of the housing stock in Highland is socially rented housing.

The impacts of not having a home are considerable. It can cause: -

- Homelessness and rooflessness with people living in temporary caravans, pods, or sofa-surfing.
- Rural Depopulation, with people are unable to remain in their communities due to lack of affordable housing.
- Children's education to be affected, especially when families are placed in temporary accommodation far from schools.

- Mental and physical health issues, which can deteriorate due to housing insecurity, with homelessness linked to poor health outcomes and increased use of health services.

The lack of housing also has an economic impact: -

- Workforce retention and attraction are hindered, especially in sectors like tourism, renewables, and public services, due to lack of housing for local workers.
- High housing costs force residents to allocate more income to rent or mortgages, reducing spending in the local economy and increasing financial stress.
- Second homes and holiday lets reduces the available housing stock for permanent residents, exacerbating affordability issues and community sustainability

The Scottish Human Rights Commission report on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands published in November 2024, highlighted concern over basic rights to housing, health, and food being delivered in the Highlands and Islands.

As a Commission, we have noted that the Council declared a Highland Housing Challenge in June 2024. This Housing Challenge identified the need to double the number of homes in the area over the next 10 years. This is across all tenures, including the social rented sector.

Through working with partners across all sectors a Partnership Action Plan has been developed which looks at three key areas: -

- Land
- Finance
- Developer capacity

While we do not intend to review the various elements of this comprehensive action plan in this interim report, we do want to engage with those involved in the delivery of this plan to better understand how poverty related issues are being factored into this action plan.

We also want to better understand the housing investment programmes of both the Council and Registered social landlords and their direction of travel. In addition, we have noted the Council's recently agreed Rent Strategy for 2026-2031. We want to better understand the rationale for this and also consider the findings of the tenant rent consultation which will be presented to the Council's Housing and Property Committee in January 2026. We also want to better understand the levels of rent and costs of housing across other housing tenures in Highland.

We welcome the Council's recently approved Empty Homes Strategy which was drafted in conjunction with the Empty Homes Partnership led by Shelter Scotland. The aim of this strategy is to bring empty and under-used properties back into use, so that they provide (primary) homes for people living in Highland communities.

We do want to explore further any other opportunities to accelerate the provision of homes such as the provision of flats/apartments/convert existing buildings and modular homes etc.

Conditions of Homes

We heard that several issues relating to the condition of homes both in the private and social sectors stemmed from structural defects, poor ventilation, and insufficient property maintenance. Damp and mould which poses health risks for children and vulnerable tenants were highlighted with some homes suffering from pest infestations which was linked to damp conditions of the property.

Some housing still fails energy efficiency standards, contributing to fuel poverty and exacerbating damp issues. However, it was noted that social housing overall was better than the private sector.

Another issue that was highlighted was the lack of accessible/adaptable housing across all tenures. Currently only 10% of new builds are built to an accessible standard, and only wheelchair-accessible at that. There is very little future proofing being undertaken to take account of an aging population who are living with varying levels of capability.

A key issue for people in their homes is fuel poverty. In Highland 33% of households in Highland are in fuel poverty, compared to the Scottish average of 24% with 22% being in extreme fuel poverty, nearly double the national average of 12%. Social

housing tenants are disproportionately affected, especially in off-gas grid areas where heating options are more expensive.

The drivers of fuel poverty in the Highlands include: -

High Energy Prices

- Rural and island households often rely on unregulated fuels like heating oil, LPG, or solid fuel, which are subject to volatile prices and require large upfront payments.
- Electricity costs are higher due to standing charges and limited supplier choice, especially for homes using storage heaters or on restricted meter types.

Low Household Income

- Average income levels in the Highlands are generally lower than the Scottish average, and some are in seasonal or insecure employment.
- Many households face a cost-of-living premium for essentials like food and transport, leaving less disposable income for heating.

Poor Energy Efficiency of Housing

- A large proportion of homes are older, stone-built, and are more difficult to insulate.
- Limited access to affordable retrofit services and supply chains in remote areas exacerbates the problem.
- Condensation, damp, and mould are common due to poor insulation and colder weather in the Highlands.

Colder Climate and High Heating Demand

- The Highlands tend to experience colder, wetter, and windier weather, requiring longer heating periods.
- There is little opportunity to "save" during summer months to offset winter costs.

Geographic Isolation and Energy Market

- Highland communities that are off the gas grid are reliant on expensive fuels.
- Limited local resources and poor access to services (including energy advice and affordable fuel suppliers) compound the issue
- Rural households often face higher tariffs and lack access to competitive energy deals.

We recognise addressing the condition of people's homes is a significant challenge, and many of the levers to addressing fuel poverty requires national government intervention. However, from the evidence we heard, there were some potential areas that are worth exploring further in relation to improving people's homes: -

- Consider broader home improvement grant schemes with targeted grants for those in low income to enable private sector housing to be improved.
- Reshape the way housing improvements are undertaken to deliver more effective and efficient outcomes through repair homes first, improve fabric of homes second and then thirdly address heating systems.
- Explore the potential benefits of the Council and Social Registered Landlords undertaking a joint procurement exercise to deliver home improvements to maximise contract scale and deliver more for the investment.
- Assess available funding streams to explore potential for combining these to deliver a more strategic outcome.
- Consider developing integrated advice on energy efficiency including advice on the range of funding sources available.
- There is also something about incentivising people to learn and change their behaviour, so they know how best to heat their homes.

Affordability of Homes

We also considered the issue of affordability of homes both in terms of the cost of private sector renting and social housing renting. We found that: -

- While affordability is subjective and variable, depending on income, location and household type, poverty can be measured both before and after housing costs are considered.
- Highland social rents remain below the national average and significantly lower than private rents.
- In work poverty has become a significant issue in recent years.
- People in and at risk of poverty have little disposable income after meeting essentials.
- Energy costs are continuing to increase.
- Cost of living pressures/personal debt (primarily for low-income households it is council tax, rent and energy) is increasing with worsening financial circumstances.
- Social housing tenants are among the lowest-income households and are more vulnerable to cost increases.

- Tenants not always aware of range of support available or wait until a crisis before seeking help.

In considering how to help people sustain their tenancies, we heard evidence about a range of initiatives. These include: -

- Early intervention: Local Housing Officers & Welfare Support Teams proactively contact tenants in arrears to offer help
- Council Housing Support Service: To assist tenants with a range of issues
- Council Rent Arrears Management Policy has been updated to reflect a supportive approach, recognising tenants in arrears as vulnerable.
- The Council's Housing Strategy 2023–2028 includes goals to improve tenancy sustainment.
- Caithness pilot project of the Council working with NHS Highland to establish a joint social work/housing post to support tenancy sustainment
- Albyn Housing adopted measures to sustain tenancies for vulnerable individuals and those at risk of homelessness
- Make a house a Home: pilot project by Albyn Housing to provide targeted support to homeless individuals starting a new tenancy with limited or no means to furnish their property.
- New Start Highland provides a service for adults who are homeless, or at risk of being homeless.

It has been estimated from research commissioned by Shelter Scotland and conducted by the Housing Associations' Charitable Trust that the benefits of sustaining tenancies are over £11,000 per household in improved health, employment, and reduced public costs. Some of the initiatives are only pilots, however if they work and demonstrate successful outcomes, there is a case to be made for rolling these out across the Highlands.

Investment in upstream prevention (early support services) such as mental health and financial advice, would seem to be cost-effective and impactful in enhancing the sustainment of tenancies.

We also think there are real benefits to be gained from integrated support models by combining housing, health, and social care to support vulnerable tenants as evidenced from the Caithness pilot.

Conclusion

We have appreciated listening to the insights from those who have shared their perspectives at the thematic sounding boards and at the evidence sessions on access and housing and we have also greatly benefited from visiting a range of community organisations who provide a range of assistance to alleviate the effects of poverty in their communities, and this is very much shaping our thinking.

From the evidence sessions we have held and our engagement with community groups, we have identified some key principles which centre around: -

- Bringing services to people as far as possible, rather than people needing to go to services
- Applying person centred service design and delivery - putting the diverse needs of people first, rather than systems/organisations first
- Scaling up what works (the common elements of practice that probably can be spread) and what is making a positive difference, while being clear on what is specific to local communities.
- Collectively working together (public, private and voluntary) to deliver the greatest impact.

Next Steps

Over the coming months our four remaining evidence sessions will focus on ways of working across services, fair work, early years and education and financial security. We intend to engage further with community groups and organisations across the Highlands.

We are also in the process of commissioning an experience panel to enable us to hear the voices of people with direct experience of poverty, to test out our thinking, challenge assumptions and generate ideas that we have not thought of and ensure that any calls for action are realistic, relevant, and effective.

We also want to host a stakeholder engagement session with councillors to hear their perspectives given the key role they have in representing their local communities.

Appendix 1: Members of Highland Poverty and Equality Commission

Appendix 2: Engagement with Community Groups

Appendix 3: Evidence during Thematic Sounding Boards

Appendix 4: Work Programme

Appendix 1: Members of Highland Poverty and Equality Commission

Jim McCormick (Co-Chair)

Maggie Cunningham (Co-Chair)

Cllr Richard Gale

Cllr Marianne Hutchison

Cllr Andrew MacKintosh

Cllr Maureen Ross

Cllr Kate Willis

James Dunbar, Chief Executive, New Start Highland

Calum Macpherson, Chief Executive, Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport

James Cook, Head teacher, Cawdor Primary School

Liz Richardson, The Poverty Alliance

Maureen Knight, Interim Chief Executive, Albyn Housing

Appendix 2: Engagement with Community Groups

Balintore – 15 August

- Seaboard Hall

Fort William – 10 October

- Lochaber Hope
- Care Lochaber
- Volunteer Action Lochaber
- Kinlochleven Community Trust

Kyleakin – 7 November

- Kyleakin Connections
- Broadford and Strath Community Company
- Lochalsh Youth Community Trust
- Living Hope
- Skye and Lochalsh Council for Voluntary Organisations
- Skye and Lochalsh Citizens Advice Bureau
- Kyle and Lochalsh Mental Health Association

Appendix 3: Evidence during Thematic Sounding Boards

Access Sounding Board – 22 September

- Chief Officer, Facilities, Fleet & Transport, Highland Council
- Senior Transport Officer, Highland Council
- Caithness Transport Forum,
- Highlands and Islands Enterprise
- Chief Officer, Business Solutions, Highland Council
- Project Manager ICT, Highland Council
- Customer Service Delivery Manager, Highland Council
- Programme Manager, Health and Social Care, Highland Council
- Director of Culture and Learning, Highlife Highland
- Director of Sport Leisure & Safeguarding Highlife Highland

Housing Sounding Board – 27 October

- Home Energy Scotland
- New Start Highland
- Lochalsh & Skye Housing Association
- Housing Service, Highland Council
- Welfare Team, Highland Council
- Changeworks

Appendix 4: Work Programme

| Meetings | Date | Location | Attendees |
|--|--------------|-----------|-------------------|
| Commission Evidence Session (Ways of Working across Services) | 12 December | Inverness | All Commissioners |
| Commission Evidence Session (Fair Work) | 30 January | Alness | All Commissioners |
| Commission Evidence Session (Early Years, Education) | 27 February | Lairg | All Commissioners |
| Commission Evidence Session (Financial Security) | 27 March | Wick | All Commissioners |
| Commission Review Session | 24 April | Inverness | All Commissioners |
| Final Review Session | 15 May | Inverness | All Commissioners |
| Present Report to Council | 25 June 2026 | Inverness | Co-Chairs |