

Agenda Item	8.
Report No	CPPB/24/25



Highland
Community
Planning
Partnership

Com-pàirteachas
Dealbhadh
Coimhearsnachd
na Gàidhealtachd

Highland Community Planning Partnership Board – 5 December 2025

Highland Outcome Improvement Plan (HOIP) Delivery Plan Progress Update – Highland Employer Charter

Report by Jack McIntyre, Project Manager

Summary

The Highland Employer Charter (HEC), launched on June 1, 2025, and aims to promote fair employment practices across the Highland region as an output of the Community Wealth Building Cross-Cutting Theme within the 2024 - 2027 HOIP Delivery Plan. The project development and timeframe was established through an innovation project phased approach:

Project Phases

Phase 1: Research, Development and trial cohort (completed September 2025).
 Phase 2: Recursive iteration and 2nd assessment cohort (focus on SME/Tier 1/Key Operators)
 Phase 3: Digital platform development and 3rd sector/land management/microbusiness cohort.
 Phase 4: Digital platform launch and open digital application cohorts.

Each phase spans approximately one quarter, with a one-month slack between phases in the event of an assessment overrun.

Key Features

The Charter was initially conceived with four pillars: Fair Pay, Employers of Choice, Procure Highland, Employ Highland.

1st Phase R&D established the criteria underpinning these pillars, with the assessment process designed to avoid ISO-style auditing, focusing instead on communication and a people-centric approach to improve equitability and set the HEC apart from contemporaries

The assessment process involves an initial virtual roundtable, regional in-person roundtable, site visit assessment, and award confirmation panels.

Achievements

- 8 organisations chartered (5 Gold, 3 Silver), including major employers like J Murphy & Sons, Green Freeport, and Highland Wildlife Park.
- Positive engagement at regional summits and favourable media coverage.
- Recognition in UK Parliament via an early day motion (Oct 27).
- Over 20 applications for Phase 2 cohort.
- Procurement completed for digital platform (Yellow Cherry Ltd) and local suppliers for awards and stationery.

Next Steps

- Complete Phase 2 assessments (20 prospective members).
- Onboard Skills Development Scotland and High Life Highland who have signed up to the Phase 2 assessment cohort.
- Onboard NHS Highland and Nuclear Constabulary who have expressed interest in joining the Phase 3 assessment cohort. Invite HTSI and NatureScot to join third sector and land management cohort as part of Phase 3.
- Launch digital platform to support open applications, business resources, and media generation.
- Develop further links between Business Gateway and the charter (Phase 3).
- Execute public media campaign and host digital platform / charter launch event.
- Develop business case to support continuation of initiative past March 2026.

Key Challenges

- Funding gap post-March 2026 (UKSPF ends); new business case being developed.
- Streamline site visit process via digital platform integration.

Recommendation

The Board is asked to:

- i) Note the Progress Report

Author: Jack Marley McIntyre

Date: 27/11/2025

Appendices:

1. **Employer Charter Progress Report**
2. **Developed information leaflet.**

Employer Charter Progress Report

Key Developments

The Highland Employer Charter project started full phased management on June 1st 2025, with the project developed to cover 4 key operational phases:

Phase 1: Research, Development and trial cohort (completed September 2025).

Phase 2: Recursive iteration and 2nd assessment cohort (focus on SME/Tier 1/Key Operators)

Phase 3: Digital platform development and 3rd sector/land management/microbusiness cohort.

Phase 4: Digital platform launch and open digital application cohorts.

Each phase was designed to represent work achievable in a 1 calendar quarter timeframe, with a month slack between each, in the event of any phase's assessment period overrunning.

The first phase of the project was completed at the end of September, with a successful assessment cohort awarded on the 7th of October. The assessment process was developed after comprehensive research into UK charter's, accreditations and the current UK auditing landscape, with the key outcomes being: the process must be accessible to micro and small businesses for equitability, and focus on a people-centric process through communication.

The Charter project now has 8 fully awarded member organisations from a selected sample of all business sizes, critical skill sectors and third sector, and geographical locales, supporting regional business confidence in the initiative.

The second phase of the project is now entering its cohort assessment period, after a period of reflection and iteration on the first phase. Key feedback from the business cohort was; "the charter has supported (the business) developing a foundation towards more rigorous accreditations such as IIP, by collaboratively in-graining good practice with a supportive portfolio of evidence developed to validate chartership". On the 24th of November, the next assessment cohort was finalised with over 20 organisations seeking recognition through chartership.

With the support of HIE in the Caithness and Sutherland areas, a number of northern organisations were identified who expressed interest in chartership, with HIE supporting introductions. Regionally, with the support of Hub North, Skills Development Scotland, and High life Highland, further interested organisations across the Highlands were identified. Hub North, Skills Development Scotland, and High life Highland are subsequently joining the charter as part of the 2nd phase cohort.

To support Highland based procurement for this project, the visual identity and stationery was developed and produced by *J Thomas & Sons Printers*, with the design developed to show a clear foundation within the visual identify of HCPP, with both the colour schema and font being aligned with HCPP's branding to show the charter's connection to the HOIP's place and prosperity Themes.

Similarly, physical award procurement was conducted with another local business *McBrides Signs*, who has produced 100 awards to support 4 chartership cohorts. Due to the estimated total development cost for the digital platform (>£10k), the procurement went through a formal tendering process, with the successful local bidder "Yellow Cherry Ltd" now in web development.

The assessment timeframe for the phase 2 cohort is estimated to end at the start of February 2026, with full membership confirmed via the awarding panel by the end of February 2026.

Additional Achievements

- Successfully onboarded 8 highland organisations: J Murphy and Sons, Inverness and Cromarty Green Freeport, Hydrasun, Jacobite Cruises, Landmark Forest Adventure Park, Norscot, Ecosystems Technologies, Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (Highland Wildlife Park). Of these charter members, 5 received gold status, and 3 received silver status.
- Project team conducted wide-reaching engagement at the Inverness Spotlight Summit, Focus North Conference, and was a key sponsor of the Workforce North Call to Action event, resulting in direct engagement with over 500 people within 1 calendar quarter.
- Highland Employer Charter was featured in local print media (Inverness Courier, Press and Journal, Ross-Shire Herald) and by the North Highland Chamber of Commerce.
- Initiative was subject of a congratulatory early day motion in the UK Houses of Parliament (27th October)..
- Speed of progress (6 months) from initial development to fully chartered organisations has been praised by fellow public sector organisations in the UK.

Next Steps and Key Challenges

- Completion of the second phase cohort assessments and award panel to bring total membership to 28 businesses.
- Support Skills Development Scotland, High Life Highland, and Hub North complete the second phase assessments to become chartered organisations.
- On-board NHS Highland, Nuclear Constabulary, UHI in the third phase cohort, with Highland Third Sector Interface and NatureScot being invited to join both the third sector and land management chartership cohorts.
- Completion of digital platform to support application process, information exchange, event management, charter list, and media hosting (videos, podcasts, seminars).
- Plan and utilise digital platform to support a reduction in the time requirement for assessment, and streamline the application process.
- Organise a public media plan to support public information on the Charter and support informing Highland public/employees of good employment practice and standards.
- Organise Charter event to coincide with the wider public launch of the Charter.
- Develop business case for charter to plan post-April developments in the initiative, and support continuous open public application cohorts, and charter reassessment timelines.

Recommendations

- Note the Progress Report.



Information Leaflet

Bileag Fiosrachaidh

employercharter@highland.gov.uk



The Highland Council
Comhairle na Gàidhealtachd

Highland
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“What is the Employment Charter?”

The Highland Employer Charter is a completely free employer initiative that champions good practise in employment throughout the Highland region.

We want to recognise and highlight the work and investment being conducted in the region to support Highland Economies, Communities and People, by our Highland Employers.

The Highland Employer Charter is comprised of **4 Key Pillars** which encapsulate and define the areas that exemplify an employer of choice.

Fair Pay

All staff and third party regular contracted staff are paid the Real Living Wage as defined by the UK Real Living Wage Foundation. Apprentice cost of living support.

Employ Highland

Supporting the development of a local workforce, engaging with education, employee collective voice and facilitating third sector volunteering opportunities.

Procure Highland

Supporting Highland based supply chains, circular economies, carbon reduction, community benefits and local investment in the region / operational localities.

Employers of Choice

Fair work practices and employee benefits across:

- Health & Wellbeing
- Family Friendly Working Policies
- Training & Progression
- Diversity & Inclusion





Scan to download the Virtual Roundtable Application Form



“What is the benefit of joining the Charter?”

By going through the chartership process, organisations demonstrate their commitment to being an “employer of choice”, while also having their investments in their employees and innovations within local economy, highlighted and shared across the region

Additionally, chartered organisations benefit from:

- Recognition of ethical practice through The Employer Charter Brand.
- Promoting excellent reputation to attract and retain employees.
- Building positive regard within business networks and the Highland community.
- Enable organisations to achieve better relations with staff to drive productivity.



Awards

Chartered organisations are awarded across 3 tiers.



2 Pillars
Achieved



3 Pillars
Achieved



4 Pillars
Achieved

Each chartered organisation receives a physical award plaque and digital livery.



Process to Charters

Virtual Roundtable



Information session on chartership process, requirements for businesses, evidence required to achieve pillars, formalise cohort, set timeframe for in-person roundtable and assessment site visits.

In-person Roundtable



Roundtable introduction to Highland Council, cross-organisational discussion on business and investment in region, investment in region, discuss charter outcomes, charter process and assessment time frames.

Site Assessment



Site visit to employer, assessor conducts a discussion across all aspects of the Highland Employer Charter, across each pillar. Discussion of evidence provided to support each pillar, assessor provides organisation tentative award.

Award Panel



Panel of key employer charter authorities discuss provided evidence with the assessor through a defence of business' tentative award. Final award is confirmed by panel which may be enhanced or decreased from tentative award.

Award Event



Award event where physical awards are shared with newly chartered businesses. Digital awards such as customised livery and email footers are shared via email alongside formal certification.

3 Year Reassessment

Award must be reassessed after 3 years from date of certification; this period may be reduced depending on type of evidence provided (1 year commitments).



Chartered Employers



Transforming the Highland Economy and Delivering National Energy Security

Contact: employercharter@highland.gov.uk

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Highland
Employer Charter
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