

Agenda Item	6.
Report No	EDU/3/26

The Highland Council

Committee: Education

Date: 25 February 2026

Report Title: Highland Sports Strategy Update

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - People

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides an update on progress in developing a Sports Strategy for Highland and outlines the next steps, including commissioning external specialist support agreed by Full Council in October 2025.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- i. Note progress to date;
- ii. Note emerging strategic themes;
- iii. Agree to progress the preparation of the Sports Strategy with the overall objectives as set out in Section 8 of this report, working closely with **sportscotland** and partners through a Community, Leisure, and Sports Board; and
- iv. Agree that regular updates on progress are reported to this Committee, including a draft strategy for wider consultation and engagement.

3. Implications

3.1 Resource - The delivery of the Highland Sports Strategy is an essential element of the Highland Investment Plan (HIP), as its priorities, facility planning and community-hub model rely on HIP's modernisation and colocation programme to enable sustainable and integrated sport and activity provision.

The development of the strategy, the commissioning of external specialist support, can be met within the budget (£100k) agreed by the Council in October 2025.

3.2 Legal - Commissioning the external specialist support and any subsequent delivery contracts must comply with procurement law and Contract Standing Orders, including transparent competition, evaluation, and contract management to avoid challenge.

- 3.3 Risk - Delivery of the Sports Strategy is dependent on the Highland Investment Plan programme and partner capacity, creating a risk of slippage to timelines and benefits realisation if HIP schedules, funding, procurement, or governance change.
- 3.4 Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people) - Expanded community access to school facilities raises supervision, safeguarding, risk assessment, and insurance considerations that must be embedded in governance and operating procedures.
- 3.5 Gaelic - There are no specific Gaelic implications arising from this update paper, although any future strategic developments or changes linked to the Sports Strategy and Highland Investment Plan will continue to support the Council's commitment to promoting Gaelic through bilingual signage, communication and inclusive access within community and school-based facilities.

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. Background and Context

- 5.1 Highland Council has already recognised the strong evidence base linking physical activity, sport and wellbeing, including improved physical health, mental health, social cohesion, and community resilience. This is mirrored across Scotland, where councils emphasise the positive impacts of participation and the importance of inclusive access.
- 5.2 Across the country, Councils are increasingly aligning sport and physical activity with wider priorities, such as climate action through active travel, strengthening communities, and supporting an ageing population.
- 5.3 The Sports Strategy is closely aligned with the Active Highland Strategy, which provides the multi-agency, evidence-based framework for increasing physical activity and reducing health inequalities across Highland. The Active Highland Strategy Group's systems-based approach aims to ensure that sport, physical activity, and public health priorities are fully integrated.

The developing Sports Strategy will reinforce these shared aims by focusing on increasing participation, tackling inequalities, and embedding activity within modernised school estates and community hubs, mirroring the Active Highland emphasis on accessible, co-located facilities that support lifelong participation.

5.4 **Sportscotland** will publish the findings from its national review of the sports facilities estate, along with a parallel review of the Active Schools programme, within the next three to four weeks. These outputs will provide useful insight, feedback and guidance to support future planning and delivery across Highland.

Further updates will be provided to Members as the information becomes available.

6. Key Themes Emerging from Comparative Strategies

6.1 A review of recent strategies from The Highland Council (Nov 2023), Perth & Kinross Council, Scottish Borders Council and Aberdeenshire Council has identified six common areas of focus which inform recommended next steps for Highland. These are:

1. Improving Health and Wellbeing

All strategies emphasise the health benefits of physical activity as core to public health, with particular focus on reducing inactivity among target groups.

2. Increasing Participation and Reducing Inequalities

Councils highlight the need to widen participation by reducing financial, geographic, social, and physical barriers to sport and activity. This includes targeted work with young people, rural communities, low-income households, and disabled people.

3. Strengthening Partnerships

A strong cross-sector partnership approach is a common theme, with collaboration across education, health, **sportscotland**, community clubs, national governing bodies, third-sector organisations, and leisure trusts. Highland's existing partnership with High Life Highland aligns with this national pattern.

4. Facilities Planning and Co-location

All Councils face significant financial pressures and growing maintenance demands. Modernising, rationalising, and co-locating facilities within schools and community hubs - an approach already underway in Highland - is widely recognised as a practical, sustainable solution.

5. Lifelong Activity and Demographic Change

Supporting older adults to live well locally, remain active and reduce demand on health and social care services is a shared strategic priority across the authorities reviewed.

6. Evidence-based, Cross-Council Frameworks

Councils align their sports and physical activity priorities with national frameworks such as Public Health Scotland's Active Scotland Outcomes Framework, ensuring decisions follow national evidence and whole-system approaches to increasing physical activity.

In Highland, this national direction is complemented by the Community Planning Partnership draft Activity Strategy. This is led by NHS Highland and developed through the multi-agency Active Highland Strategy Group, which uses a systems-based, evidence-driven approach to target inactivity and guide local priorities.

The aim will be for the Council's Sports Strategy to be fully integrated with regional health priorities and consistent with up-to-date evidence.

6.2 **Sportscotland's Sport for Life 2024** review highlights the national commitment to increasing participation, tackling inequalities, and strengthening community-based sporting systems, demonstrating clear alignment with Highland's emerging Sports Strategy and its focus on inclusive, evidence-led delivery.

7. Progress to Date in Highland

7.1 Highland has taken several positive steps including contributing to the ongoing preparation of the Active Highland Strategy 2025 through the Community Planning Partnership, establishing a vision for increased physical activity across the population.

7.2 Delivery of inclusive community sports programmes continues to be strengthened through partnerships with High Life Highland and national funders. The Get Active Highland Fund, supported by the London Marathon Foundation and **sportscotland**, provides grants of up to £5,000 to local clubs and community groups to remove participation barriers and expand inclusive physical activity opportunities. The fund enables organisations to develop coaching, improve access to facilities, purchase equipment, run events and offer hardship support, helping to grow community-led sport and improve health and wellbeing across the region.

7.3 Progression of integrated community hub planning through the emerging school estate strategy, supporting co-location of sport and community services. The Council's sports and activity priorities align closely with the Highland Investment Plan Phase 1, as the HIP's school-centred community hubs are specifically designed to integrate sport, leisure, and wider activity provision within modernised, co-located facilities, reinforcing the strategic shift toward multi-use spaces and improved community participation.

7.4 The HIP continues to provide a significant foundation for strengthening community, leisure, and sports provision across key locations. The October 2025 HIP update confirmed proposed capital investment within Invergordon, Inverness, and Tain, supporting the Council's long-term shift towards modernised, collocated and community-centred facilities.

7.5 In Invergordon, planned investment will contribute to enhanced community, leisure, and sports capacity as part of a wider programme of estate modernisation and asset rationalisation.

7.6 The development of the new Tain 3–18 campus provides a significant opportunity to enhance integrated sports provision for the community, with future planning now being shaped by strong local engagement and clear community priorities for maintaining accessible sport and physical activity facilities.

7.7 Lochaber Area Place Plan continues to demonstrate strong community ambition for enhanced sport, leisure, and wellbeing provision, which highlights clear priorities for improving health, expanding access to inclusive activities, and strengthening facilities across the region.

The Plan emphasises the importance of providing spaces that support vibrant, active communities and aligns with wider strategic frameworks, including the Highland Investment Plan. These community-driven priorities are reinforced by earlier sports-focused studies, such as the Lochaber Sports Association's feasibility work and the Lochaber Sports Hub assessment, both of which identified demand for improved indoor and all-weather training infrastructure. Together, this evidence base positions Lochaber as a key area for future development within the Sports Strategy, ensuring that local needs and opportunities are fully integrated into regional planning.

7.8 Highland continues to expand outdoor learning, strengthen school-based sports pathways through Active Schools and Community Sport Hubs, and widen access to physical activity for all ages.

8. Next Steps and Recommendations

8.1 As approved by Full Council in October 2025, it is proposed that the Education Service commissions external specialist support to guide the next phase of sport and physical activity strategic development, drawing on some of the £100,000 allocation earmarked for this purpose.

The strategy that will be created will help to:

- align infrastructure provision with current and forecast sporting and physical activity needs, thereby focussing available budgets on fit for purpose modern facilities, whilst supporting the net zero commitments;
- increase and broaden access to sport and physical activity and provide participation opportunities for all;
- bring social inclusion and engagement benefits, reducing levels of anti-social behaviour and addressing community disengagement by providing inclusive opportunities;
- nurture participation in sport and physical activity by helping to provide the case for modern facilities based on community requirements;
- advocate and promote complementary active travel strategies already created and develop outdoor areas that encourage and enable opportunities to enjoy access to the amazing topography of the Highlands for increased activity;
- partner with **sportscotland** and other organisations to support governing bodies, local clubs and volunteers to develop programmes that facilitate pathways that enable grassroots growth, and routes for talented athletes to reach their full potential; and
- contribute to the health benefits of exercise that address inequalities and decrease the risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes and remove obesity levels amongst children and adults.

8.2 The work outlined in this report will provide a high-level review of sport and physical activity provision across Highland within a three-to-four-month timeframe. This will include:

- Rapid mapping of current provision delivered by Highland Council, High Life Highland, community groups, and national governing bodies, establishing an initial baseline of programmes and facilities.
- A snapshot analysis of participation and inequalities, using existing data and national evidence to identify priority groups and geographic areas requiring further focus.
- A headline facilities overview, highlighting known pressures, accessibility considerations, and opportunities for alignment with the Learning Estate and the Highland Investment Plan.
- Targeted engagement with key stakeholders, capturing immediate issues, opportunities, and emerging themes to shape future phases of work.
- High-level benchmarking against national direction, ensuring alignment with recognised frameworks such as **sportscotland's Sport for Life** approach emphasising community-based systems and reducing inequalities.
- Priority recommendations, outlining early actions and identifying areas for deeper analysis in the next stage of developing a Highland-wide Sports Strategic Framework.

8.3 The development of a Highland-Wide Sport Framework, arising from the strategy will include:

- a clear participation pathway from early years to adulthood and older age.
- targeted interventions to address inequalities.
- integrated school, community, and club planning.
- measurable outcomes aligned with national frameworks.
- support for active travel, climate goals and place-making.

8.4 Building on the co-location principles referenced in Highland's Learning Estate Strategy and used widely across other Councils, further work should ensure:

- enhanced access to school facilities outside school hours.
- clear governance for shared use.
- local community hub development linking education, sport, leisure, and libraries.

8.5 As part of the work set out in this report, an improved data and intelligence approach is recommended, including:

- consistent data collection across High Life Highland, Education, and partners.
- benchmarking participation and facility use with comparator Councils.
- annual reporting to the Education Committee using national outcome measures.

8.6 In order to oversee programme direction, risk, dependencies, and alignment with major corporate programmes (including HIP and POD (Point of Delivery) development) it is proposed to create an officer level Cross Service Community, Leisure and Sports Board that will be responsible for maintaining progress and direction and reporting to Members on progress on a regular basis. Membership of this Board will include senior representatives from Education, High Life Highland, Property, Facilities Management, Health and Safety, Finance, Climate Change, POD Programme, and NHS Highland Chair of Active Highland.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - People

Date: 09 February 2026

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