

Agenda Item	9.
Report No	EDU/6/26

The Highland Council

Committee: Education

Date: 25 February 2026

Report Title: Early Years Strategy

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - People

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides an update following on from The Education & Learning Improvement Plan and details developments across the Early Years (EY) through the introduction of The Highland Council's EY Strategic Plan for 2025-28. (**Appendix 2**)
- 1.2 This report provides Members with information regarding the focus of improvement work over the next 3 years and details regarding the priorities for session 2025/26.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:

- i. Scrutinise and approve the Early Years Strategy (Appendix 2);
- ii. Note the three high level strategic priorities for the period of the strategy; and
- iii. Note the next steps.

3. Implications

- 3.1 Resource - There are no financial implications arising from the recommendations this report. The Early Years strategy will be delivered within existing approved central education and devolved school budgets.
- 3.2 Legal - There are no legal implications arising from the recommendations in this report.
- 3.3 Risk - There are no risk implications requiring an addition or amendment to The Highland Council's risk register arising from the recommendations in this report.
- 3.4 Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people) - There are no health and safety implications arising from the recommendations this report.

3.5 Gaelic - There are no specific implications for Gaelic Medium Education and Gaelic Learners Education courses. The Early Years Strategy applies equally to both Gaelic and English medium ELC.

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 Integrated Impact Assessment - Summary

4.3.1 An Integrated Impact Assessment screening has been undertaken, reviewed and signed off by the relevant Manager.

4.3.2 The Screening process has concluded that there are positive impacts in relation to poverty and socio-economic impact given an intention to secure more sustainable quality ELC provision meeting the needs of children and families across Highland, particularly in rural and island communities. Highland Council is committed to providing high quality, inclusive and sustainable Early Years and ELC services where all children thrive through meaningful play, strong relationships, responsive practice and high-quality learning experiences.

This vision applies across Local Authority and PVI provision. The Education & Learning Improvement Plan sets the context on which the Early Years strategy is based, and details developments and improvement priorities across the Early Years through implementation of the EY strategy. Members are asked to consider the summary in **Appendix 1** to support the decision-making process.

4.3.3 Impact Assessment Area	Conclusion of Screening/Full Assessment
Equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Children and Young People - Positive• Disability - Positive
Socio-economic	<i>Positive</i>
Human Rights	<i>No impact</i>
Children's Rights and Well-being	<i>Positive</i>
Island and Mainland Rural	<i>Positive</i>
Climate Change	<i>No impact</i>
Data Rights	<i>No impact</i>

5. Early Years Strategy (2025-2028)

5.1 Strategic Vision

Highland Council is committed to providing high-quality, inclusive and sustainable Early Years and ELC services where all children thrive through meaningful play, strong relationships, responsive practice, and high-quality learning experiences. This vision applies across Local Authority and PVI provision.

6. Priorities for Improvement 2025/26 – 2027/28

6.1 The strategy aims to strengthen practice across the Highland Council ELC Sector by focussing on the following three high level strategic priorities:

1. Strengthen Leadership and Governance

Focus on building strong, aligned leadership across the Early Years system through improved communication, increased leadership capacity, and robust governance and accountability structures.

2. Improve Quality Through Systemic Change and Inspection Readiness

Drive consistent, high-quality provision by strengthening leadership in settings requiring support, improving the use of data and self-evaluation, enhancing adult-child interactions and learning environments, ensuring effective personal planning, and securing full compliance with health and safety standards. Quality provision by strengthening leadership in settings requiring support, improving the use of data and self-evaluation, enhancing adult-child interactions and learning environments, ensuring effective personal planning, and securing full compliance with health and safety standards.-quality provision by strengthening leadership in settings requiring support, improving the use of data and self-evaluation, enhancing adult-child interactions and learning environments, ensuring effective personal planning, and securing full compliance with health and safety standards.

3. Enhance Workforce Skills, Confidence and Consistency

Invest in the workforce through a skills audit, targeted professional learning in key pedagogical areas, and strengthened induction processes to ensure a confident, competent, and consistent sector-wide workforce.

6.2 These priorities have guided the improvement activities undertaken in the current school session and led to the development of following six workstreams.

Task and Finish Workstreams (2025–2028) Six workstreams will deliver the Strategy:

1. Structure and Strategy Implementation
2. Accessibility of Support Materials
3. Messaging Alignment
4. Inclusive Practice and GIRFEC
5. Professional Learning and National Induction
6. Key Programme Sustainability and Expansion

7. Governance and Oversight

7.1 An Education & Learning, Early Learning and Children Strategy Steering Group has been established to ensure appropriate internal governance and to monitor implementation, review progress, and shape future priorities. Membership includes the Chief Officer, ELC Strategic Lead, Senior Manager Early Years, Educational Psychology representation, Area Quality Improvement Managers, Childcare Manager, ELC Commissioner, Head Teacher, and PVI representation.

Monitoring and evaluation will be undertaken through termly Steering Group reviews and using tracking tools and utilising data-informed decision-making including inspection outcomes and recommendations. In addition, the service will seek stakeholder feedback via surveys and consultations.

7.2 Annual Progress reports will be brought to the Education Committee.

8. Next Steps

8.1 An Early Years Delivery Plan is being developed setting out how the Strategic Priorities are being implemented and measured. In year 1 of this strategy, it is anticipated that the focus will be on ELC settings and play across early level including P1. However, agendas running in parallel to this strategy such as child poverty, employability and economy, childcare including the recently announced expansion of breakfast clubs and School Aged Childcare will also be important to consider.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - People

Date: 11 February 2026

Author: Hayley Brown, Senior Manager Early Years

Background Papers: Education and Learning Improvement Plan

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Integrated Impact Assessment

Appendix 2 – Early Years Strategy

Appendix 1: Integrated Impact Assessment Screening Early Years Strategy (2025–2028)

1. Introduction

This appendix summarises the outcomes of the Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) Screening for the Early Years Strategy (2025–2028). The strategy aims to strengthen Highland Council's delivery of high-quality, inclusive and sustainable Early Years and Early Learning & Childcare (ELC) services across Local Authority and PVI settings.

2. Scope and Purpose of the Proposal

The strategy supports the development of Early Years services that:

- promote meaningful play and high-quality learning experiences
- ensure responsive and relational practice
- strengthen inclusive approaches across the system
- improve access and outcomes for children and families

The proposal relates to a Council-wide strategy and is designed to benefit children and families across Highland.

3. Summary of Screening Outcomes

3.1 Equalities – positive

3.2 Poverty & Socio-economic Impact - positive

3.3 Human Rights - positive

3.4 Children's Rights and Wellbeing – positive

3.5 Data protection – neutral

3.6 Rural and Island Communities -positive

3.7 Climate Change - neutral

4. Overall Conclusion

The Integrated Impact Assessment Screening indicates consistently positive impacts across equalities, poverty reduction, children's rights, human rights and access for rural and island communities. There are no identified negative impacts, and no full assessments are required across any IIA domain. The Early Years Strategy (2025–2028) is expected to strengthen access, quality and outcomes for children and families across Highland.



Highland Early Years Strategy 2025-2028



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Vision

To ensure high-quality, inclusive, and sustainable early learning and childcare (ELC) provision across Highland, where every child thrives through play, relationships, and meaningful learning experiences. Provided in partnership between Local Authority and PVI partners.

It is appreciated that for any strategy to be effectively implemented it must be built upon use of evidence and data, involvement of stakeholders and clearly defined impact measures. The Early Years' Service is committed to ensuring these key elements play a significant part in the success of this strategy.

Data Analysis

The ELC sector is subject to inspections from the Care Inspectorate and Education Scotland and can experience joint inspections where both scrutiny bodies evaluate the quality of the provision. The sector experiences higher levels of scrutiny.

Following the publication of Funding Follows The Child and the National Standard for Early Learning and Childcare Providers: Principles and Practice, all ELC settings are expected to gain evaluations of good or better.

Currently the majority of settings meet the national standard with 76% of the 188 Local Authority and PVI settings gain good or better through external scrutiny conducted by the Care Inspectorate.

Each ELC setting tracks and monitors children's progress using a system of observations and assessments against a set of 7 developmental areas; movement, coordination, routines, social, play, language understanding, language expression.

Our data shows that there is a gender and poverty related gap in our child developmental overviews. There is sustained recovery from the pandemic, and this is likely due to the persisting positive effects of structural interventions put in place in preceding years. However, the recovery is not evenly spread and does not reach all populations.

Addressing these issues require;

- a joined up, detailed approach, where teachers and specialist services (such as allied health professionals) work together and share information to support children and families up, detailed approach-up, data-led approach
- a focus on high-quality interactions and positive relationships in settings, including continuing to use effective approaches positive relationship and behaviour for supporting children -quality interactions and positive relationships in settings

ELC Strategy

This strategy sits as part of the Highland Council's Raising Attainment and Achievement Strategy and aligns with improvement outcomes detailed within the Education and Learning Improvement Plan.

The four themes and three foundation principles for focused improvement work are detailed in the visual below.

Raising Attainment & Achievement

Learning & Teaching



Curriculum



Leadership



Data



Health & Wellbeing



Parental Involvement & Engagement



Inclusive Practice/ASfL



Over the next 3 years the Early Years Service will focus on the following improvement outcomes that sit as subsets of the 7 areas above. Each year the Education and Learning Improvement Plan and the EY Service Plan will detail the actions that will be undertaken to ensure progress towards these outcomes.

Research shows that high quality experiences in the Early Years are crucial for lifelong health, learning, and wellbeing, forming the foundation for future success and reducing inequalities, especially for children in poverty. Therefore, it is important that the Early Years Service undertakes focused work specific to the sector through a strategy to guide and highlight the importance of setting a solid foundational level of learning and development for our youngest children.

The Quality Improvement Team, Early Years Team, PVI Managers and Practitioners across all settings as well as Partners have key responsibilities in delivering the

ambitions set within this strategy. Collaboration and partnership work will be essential in the strategy's success.

Strategic Priorities

This strategy aims to strengthen practice across the Highland Council ELC Sector by focussing on the following three high level strategic priorities:



1. Strengthen Leadership and Management Capacity

A Skilled and Collaborative Highland: Strengthening Leadership, Systems and Workforce.

We will work together to build strong leadership and management across our services, improve the systems that enable effective communication and collaboration, and invest in high-quality professional learning so that our workforce is confident, capable, and equipped to deliver improved outcomes for children, families, and communities. We will also invest in high-quality professional learning so that our workforce is confident, capable, and equipped to deliver improved outcomes for children,

2. Systems that support effective Collaboration and Communication

Effective Systems for Collaboration and Communication.

We will strengthen the systems and processes that assist clear, consistent, and timely communication across Early Years services. By improving how we share information, plan together and work in partnership with families, communities, and specialist services, we will support more coordinated and effective delivery of Early Learning and Childcare across Highland.

3. Workforce Development and Professional Learning Opportunities

We will strengthen Workforce Development and Professional Learning across Early Years by investing in a confident, highly skilled, and well supported workforce. Our approach will focus on ensuring staff have access to high-quality professional learning, opportunities for continuous development, and the tools they need to deliver nurturing, inclusive and high-quality Early Years experiences. By working collaboratively across services, partners, and communities, we will build capacity, promote consistent practice, and support improved outcomes for children and families across Highland-supported workforce. Our approach will focus on ensuring staff have access to high-quality professional learning, opportunities for continuous development, and the tools they need to deliver nurturing, inclusive and high-quality Early Years experiences. By working collaboratively across services,

Workstreams arising from Outcomes and Actions

The following areas of work will be necessary to achieve our high-level strategic priorities:



Internal Governance

An Education & Learning, Early Learning and Children Strategy Steering Group has been created to ensure appropriate monitoring and evaluation of the strategy. This group meets termly to review progress, adjust workstreams, and scope future priorities.

Membership and Roles:

Role	Responsibilities
Chief Officer (Primary & Early Years)	Chair the group; ensure alignment with wider council priorities and strategic plans.
ELC Strategic Lead	Chair the group; Lead strategic planning and policy development for ELC.
Senior Manager Early Years	Operational leadership; oversee quality assurance and workforce development.
Early Years Educational Psychologist	Provide psychological expertise; support inclusion and wellbeing strategies.
Early Years Education Support Officer	Support curriculum delivery and pedagogy across settings.
Childcare Manager	Represent childcare providers; contribute to service delivery planning, operational focus
ELC Commissioner	Lead commissioning and contracting of PVI services; ensure value for money and service quality
Head Teacher	Represent school-based ELC settings; ensure integration with school improvement.
PVI Representative	Represent partner ELC settings

It is wholly accepted that partners play a key role in delivering the outcomes within this strategy. It will be crucial to work with partner agencies in support of children and families in the early years and so as the Strategic Steering group develops partners (such as CALA and Allied Health Professional) will be invited to participate as each outcome requires.

In year 1 of this strategy, it is anticipated that the focus will be on ELC settings and play across early level including P1. However, agendas running in parallel with this

strategy will such as child poverty, employability and economy, childcare including breakfast clubs and School Aged Childcare will also be important to consider as they develop nationally.

Budget and Resources

- Existing funding streams
- Community grants
- Scottish Government funding streams when available such as Child Poverty Action Fund (CPAF)

Monitoring and Evaluation

- Termly Steering Group reviews
- Quality Improvement Activity
- Data-informed decision-making using tracking tools and inspection feedback
- Stakeholder feedback loops via surveys and consultations
- The Highland Early Years Strategy will be reported to Education & Learning Committee annually.

Legislative and Policy Context

Early Years, and specifically Early Learning and Childcare (ELC), are governed by a comprehensive suite of legislation, national policies, and statutory guidance. These frameworks establish the legal duties and expectations that shape high-quality ELC provision across Scotland. Key legislation and policy documents include:

Primary Legislation

- **Education (Scotland) Act 1980**
[Education 1980](#)
- **Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 – Part 6 (ELC)**
[C&YP2014](#)
- **Eligible Children – Specified Children Orders (2014, 2020, 2021)**
2014 Order (PDF):
[Eligible children](#)
- Amendment Order 2020 (PDF):
[Amendment](#)
- **Deferred Entry – 2020 Amendment Order**
(Automatic ELC funding for deferred children)
[Deferral](#)
- **Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000 – Statutory Guidance**
[Standards in Schools](#)

- **Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 – Section 96 (GIRFEC Wellbeing)**
[GIRFEC](#)
- **Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010**
[Consultation](#)

National Policy and Guidance

- **Funding Follows the Child & The National Standard for ELC Providers (2025 Guidance)**
[National Standard](#)
- **Funding Follows the Child – Principles and Practice (2018)**
[Funding Follows the Child](#)
- **Early Learning and Childcare Statutory Guidance (2014)**
[Statutory Guidance](#)
- **Child Poverty Strategy**
[Child Poverty](#)

