

Agenda Item	7.
Report No	CPPB/3/26



Highland
Community
Planning
Partnership

Com-pàirteachas
Dealbhadh
Coimhearsnachd

na Gàidhealtachd

Highland Community Planning Partnership Board – 10 March 2026

Title of report - Highland Children and Young People's Needs Assessment (CYPNA) 2026

Report by – Chair – Integrated Children's Services Planning Board

Report Classification (tick as appropriate):

Strategic Priority: People Place Prosperity

Cross-Cutting Theme (tick all that apply):

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Connecting People and Places | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Employment / Employability |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Whole Family and Community-Based Approaches | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Housing |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Shared Approaches to Commissioning | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Community Wealth Building |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Aligning Partnership Practices | |

Report Purpose (tick as appropriate):

For Noting For Approval For Decision

Recommendation(s)

The Board is asked to:

- i) Note the findings of the DRAFT Highland Children and Young People's Needs Assessment (CYPNA) 2026 and the evidence and themes from the DRAFT ICSP Voice Report ;
- ii) Endorse the CYPNA and the themes from the ICSP Voice Report as the evidence base for the Integrated Children's Services Plan (ICSP) 2026–2029;
- iii) Support the next steps including data-improvement work and publication of a summary version.

Executive Summary

The Highland Children and Young People's Needs Assessment (CYPNA) provides a comprehensive analysis of the needs, pressures and inequalities affecting children, young people and families across Highland. It highlights population decline, significant rural access barriers, persistent child poverty (22%), and increasing complexity in family, wellbeing and service demand.

A dedicated Children and Young People’s Voice report, produced through the Integrated Children’s Services Board, has been used to complement the quantitative assessment. It reflects the views of over 8,000 children and young people across Highland and reinforces key messages around affordability, transport barriers, safety, mental health, inclusion, and access to opportunities. This qualitative insight strengthens the overall evidence base for the ICSP 2026–29 by ensuring the priorities reflect what matters most to children and young people.

The Board is asked to note the findings, endorse their use in the ICSP 2026–2029, and support actions to strengthen early intervention, reduce inequalities, and improve data integration across the partnership.

1.	Background
1.1	The CYPNA and Highland Children and Young People’s Voice Report (2026) were commissioned by the Integrated Children’s Services Planning Board to manage statutory duties for identifying priorities for the 2026–2029 Integrated Children’s Services Plan.
1.2	They with major national frameworks including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Getting It Right For Every Child) GIRFEC, The Promise and Scotland’s Population Health Framework.
1.3	Evidence sources for the CYPNA include National Records of Scotland (NRS), Public Health Scotland, Scottish Public Health Observatory (ScotPHO), Census 2022, Highland Lifestyle Survey, Planet Youth and service datasets.
2.	Key Issues from the CYPNA
2.1	<p>Demographic and Geographical Pressures</p> <p>Highland continues to experience a declining child population, down 7.7% over the past decade, with further reductions projected. Low birth rates and outward migration of young adults contribute to shrinking cohorts, particularly in rural and very remote communities. Almost one in four under-18s lives in remote rural areas, and half of children live in the 20% most access-deprived areas, creating sustained challenges for service reach, transport, and maintaining viable provision across dispersed geographies.</p>
2.2	<p>Inequalities and Child Poverty</p> <p>Child poverty remains at 22%, influenced by low-wage employment, high rural living costs, limited childcare options and transport barriers. Priority family groups – lone parents, families with disability, young mothers, larger families and minority ethnic households – experience the highest risk. The CYPNA highlights a clear and persistent social gradient affecting early development, maternal health, oral health and educational outcomes. Rural deprivation is less visible in SIMD, meaning levels of need may be underestimated without additional local intelligence.</p>

2.3	<p>Early Years Health and Development</p> <p>Developmental concerns are most commonly identified at the 27–30-month review, with speech, language and communication needs dominant. Health visitor review coverage reduces at older stages, which may limit early identification opportunities. Maternal vulnerabilities are significant, with 62% of pregnancies recording at least one vulnerability, and mental health the most frequently noted. Lower breastfeeding and immunisation uptake, combined with risks such as preterm birth (8%), low birth weight (5.6%), and maternal smoking, illustrate the need for strengthened universal and targeted early years pathways</p>
2.4	<p>Health Behaviours and Wellbeing</p> <p>Adolescent health behaviours and wellbeing present notable concerns. Physical activity drops sharply with age, particularly among girls, while sedentary behaviour and screen time continue to increase. Substance use remains prevalent: 60% of S3/S4 pupils have consumed alcohol, and 27% have vaped. Mental wellbeing issues, including sleep deprivation (only 39% meeting recommended levels), anxiety and digital harms, are growing pressures. These trends reinforce the need for coordinated prevention models such as Planet Youth and stronger youth mental health supports</p>
2.5	<p>Structural Barriers: Housing, Transport and Digital Access</p> <p>Housing affordability and supply challenges affect stability for families, despite reductions in the number of children in temporary accommodation. Transport remains a major barrier to accessing services, activities and childcare, particularly in remote areas. Digital exclusion affects 16% of households, limiting access to education, health services and benefits. These structural challenges reinforce the importance of broader place-based interventions across the CPP.</p>
3.	Children and Young People’s Voice – Key Findings
3.1	<p>A dedicated Highland Children and Young People’s Voice Report (2026) brings together insights from over 8,000 children and young people through the Lifestyle Survey, Participation Strategy engagement, school-based feedback, care-experienced groups and the “Library of Voices” initiative. The themes are aligned to ICS Board delivery groups and provide important context for the CYPNA</p>
3.2	<p>Poverty, Cost of Living and Access to Opportunities</p> <p>Children and young people consistently describe the impact of daily costs on participation, health, and wellbeing. Affordability of food, school meals, activities, and travel were dominant themes. Many reported that opportunities are limited or inaccessible because “everything is so expensive” and they want more free or low-cost local activities. Transport reliability and cost were raised as significant barriers to education, employment and social participation, particularly in rural areas.</p>

3.3	<p>Safety, Community Perceptions and Child Protection</p> <p>Young people identified concerns about violence, crime, online harms and feeling unsafe in their communities. Some described stigma, stereotyping and feeling judged by adults or services. Safe spaces in schools and communities, better relationships with trusted adults, and non-judgemental support were emphasised.</p>
3.4	<p>The Promise and Care-Experienced Voices</p> <p>Care-experienced young people highlighted the need for trusted, consistent adults; support for throughcare and aftercare; timely permanence; and fair treatment within education and community settings. Sibling contact, availability of support workers and feelings of being treated differently were recurrent issues.</p>
3.5	<p>Health, Wellbeing and Inclusion</p> <p>Young people expressed a strong desire for inclusive, welcoming spaces to build relationships, belong, and develop confidence. Barriers in accessing health services—particularly in rural areas—were noted, including difficulties obtaining GP or dental appointments. Children and young people reported limited local opportunities for physical activity, socialising and community participation.</p>
3.6	<p>Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing</p> <p>Mental health was described as one of the most urgent issues. Children and young people reported anxiety, stress, sleep difficulties, and pressures linked to social media. Many highlighted challenges in speaking openly about their mental health and expressed the need for accessible, confidential support.</p>
3.7	<p>Drugs, Alcohol and Risk-Taking Behaviours</p> <p>Young people shared concerns about substance use among their peers, availability of drugs, and the consequences of alcohol consumption. These concerns reinforce the importance of preventative models and early intervention across schools and communities.</p>
3.8	<p>Rights and Participation</p> <p>Most young people felt their rights were partly or fully met, but many emphasised the need to be listened to, involved in decisions, and taken seriously by adults. They asked for clearer communication, less adult-centric language, and meaningful opportunities to influence local services. Equality, inclusion, and tackling discrimination were highlighted as essential to improving their experiences.</p>
3.9	<p>The Children and Young People’s Voice work will continue through the ICS Board’s Rights & Participation Group, with ongoing development of the Library of Voices, quarterly reporting, and strengthened feedback loops (“We Asked, You Said, We Did”). Insights from voice work will continue to directly inform ICSP 2026–2029 priorities and locality planning.</p>

4.	Implications for the CPP
4.1	Planning: need for proportionate universalism and stronger locality-based early intervention models.
4.2	Workforce: pressures across social work, early years, health visiting and specialist services.
5.	Risks and Mitigations
5.1	Demographic decline threatens sustainability of rural schools, early years settings and health visiting capacity.
5.2	Inequalities risk widening without coordinated action on poverty, housing, digital access and early help.
5.3	Workforce fragility remains a system-level risk across education, NHS and care sectors.

Impact Assessment

The CYPNA and Highland Children and Young People’s Voice Report (2026) highlight significant impacts on children and families, particularly in rural and deprived areas. It identifies risks arising from poverty, transport barriers, digital exclusion, workforce pressures and demographic change. Positive impacts include enabling evidence-based planning and improved alignment of partnership resources. Use of the CYPNA will support improved equity, early intervention and better service coordination. Residual risks relate to capacity constraints, data quality and the potential for inequalities to widen without targeted mitigation.

Author: Chair, Integrated Children’s Services Planning Board

Date: March 2026

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Draft CYPNA Report.

Appendix 2 - Draft Children and Young People’s Voice – Key Findings report