

Agenda Item	10
Report No	RES/22/26

The Highland Council

Committee: Corporate Resources

Date: 4 June 2026

Report Title: People Strategy Update

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Corporate Resources Committee considered a review of the People Strategy in [May 2025](#). The purpose of the review is to align with the Corporate Workforce Planning Strategy which reflected the new structure and financial strategy. Action plans are developed which directly relate to other pillars of the People Strategy: workforce planning; talent management; people data and processes as part of the HR and Payroll programme. This report provides an action plan **Appendix 1** covering the remaining pillars of the People Strategy which do not already have a separate action plan.
- 1.2 The report also provides an assessment of progress against the actions and workforce activity contain in the People Strategy. The current breakdown of the workforce reflects percentages for males to females consistent with those reported in 2025 – 25.8% male and 74.2% female. There has been a slight shift in the age demographics over the last 12 months with 0.6% increase of staff employed under 30 years old and a reduction of staff employed over 50 by 0.7%. There is also a reduction in turnover of 2% from 13% to 11% suggesting workforce initiatives are contributing to these positive trends.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
- i. **Note** the progress of commitment provided in the People Strategy; and
 - ii. **Agree** the People Strategy action plan as outlined in **Appendix 1** and updated Talent Strategy Action Plan in **Appendix 2**.

3. Implications

- 3.1 Resource – resource implications have been presented to committee with actions plans where appropriate. Resources relating to work of the delivery plan has also been identified through the budget process and ongoing monitoring by means of the officer Budget Review Group, chaired by the Chief Executive.

- 3.2 Legal – employment legislation, including equalities legislation and Health and Safety legislation are relevant to the application of the People Strategy. Legal requirements are assessed when developing strategy and implementing policy with our trade union colleagues.
- 3.3 Risk – risks arising from the Strategy are logged in the appropriate risk register such as Service or Corporate Risk Register. Retaining a sustainable workforce is a risk on the Corporate Risk Register. There are also staffing resource challenges associated with budget constraints. The workforce planning report actions helps to mitigate the risk of an insufficient current and future workforce. Risk relating to the application of Employment Rights Act 2025 will be added to the Corporate Risk Register.
- 3.4 Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people) – there are no implications arising.
- 3.5 Gaelic – the Council will highlight the desirability of Gaelic in Job and Person specifications as part of its commitment to the promotion of the Gaelic language, as set out in the Council’s 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 a monitoring and update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5. Background

- 5.1 The Council is operating in a period of sustained workforce challenge driven by demographic change, national labour market conditions, rising service demand, financial constraint, and significant reform to employment law. These pressures affect recruitment, retention, workforce capacity, and organisational resilience which are all referenced in the eight key pillars of our [People Strategy 2022-2027](#):

- staff engagement
- health, safety and wellbeing
- reward and conditions
- talent management
- people development
- people data and processes
- workforce planning
- equality, diversity and inclusion

5.2 The Strategy reflects the new structure and Financial Strategy. The [revised People Strategy](#) refers to The Future Operating Model (FOM) which is a critical component of the Council’s Delivery Plan, illustrating how we will transform our service delivery. The Future Operating Model is defining a new way of working, alongside partners and communities, and identifying new roles.

5.3 To ensure our people have the skills and aptitudes we will need in the future, we need to design career pathways and jobs differently, recruit people with the right values, and encourage individuals to work across a variety of teams or services. Our workforce planning toolkit enables this. We also need to make best use of the staff that we have, deploying people into new areas where needed and removing vacant posts that are no longer required. Our aim is to empower and motivate staff by creating roles which encourage them to drive positive change. An update on the Future Operating Model was reported to Council in [October 2025](#) and an update report was presented to this committee in [March 2026](#). It confirms the transition from the definition phase to the delivery phase. This sets the strategic direction that recognises the workforce as the Council’s most critical asset. FOM is underpinned by all eight pillars of the People Strategy.

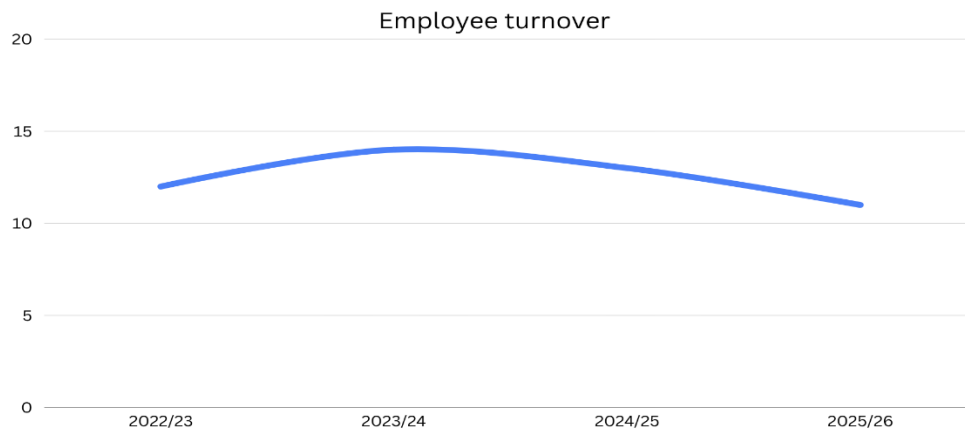
5.4 The revised People Strategy 2025 indicated our workforce is made up of predominantly females who represent 74.1% of the staff. This has remained consistent over the last 12 months increasing by 0.1% to 74.2% females with 25.8% males. There is a change to our age demographics with a percentage increase of 0.6% staff employed under 30 (10.9% in total) compared to 10.3% recorded in 2025. There is also a reduction in the percentage of staff employed over 50 with 43.7% of our staff currently over 50 compared to 44.4% in 2025 (see table1 below). The age demographic changes are welcomed as we wish to encourage younger employees to join the Council.

5.5 Table 1

	2026		2025	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
% Workforce split male/female	25.8%	74.2%	25.9%	74.1%
% Workforce aged under 30	10.9% ↑		10.3%	
% Workforce aged over 50	43.7% ↓		44.3%	

5.6 Our staff turnover has reduced, falling from 13% in 2024/25 to 11% in 2025/26, demonstrating the impact of sustained focus on staff engagement, wellbeing and retention. This improvement reflects a more supportive workplace culture and strengthened communication with staff across services.

5.7 Figure 2 below demonstrates this sustained improvement, with turnover steadily declining since 2022/23.



6. Staff Engagement

- 6.1 The Our Future Highland roadshows continue to be delivered across the Highlands. These sessions provide staff with the opportunity to engage directly with the leadership team and hear first-hand about the future direction of the Council and our communities. 48 staff roadshows have been delivered during 2025/26 across Highland, engaging 2,601 employees. The target completion date for this current programme is November 2026.
- 6.2 The Council has adopted Investors in People (IiP) accreditation framework as the most appropriate model to support improvement in how we lead, support and develop our people and organisational culture. The roll out of IiP is referenced in the revised People Strategy reported to committee in [June 2025](#). Further detail on the benefits and roll out of the IiP programme is contained in IiP Programme update report [March 2026](#) and the IiP Corporate Cluster final report (Item 7 on the agenda of this committee). To date there has been a high level of survey responses exceeding our 50% target rate, achieving between 56% and 83%. Council-wide themes will be collated from Service Cluster action plans where issues need to be addressed corporately. The Council's vision and desired behaviours will be further developed through a structured programme of workshops delivered across each Chief Officer service as part of the Investors in People (IiP) framework.
- 6.3 One of the themes emerging from the IiP staff surveys relates to recognition and reward. Examples of reward and recognition which extends beyond pay and pensions are: staff discounts; salary sacrifice schemes; health benefits/Employee Assistance Scheme; promotion; thanks; information celebrations; peer recognition and formal celebrations. Further work will take place to design and implement an inclusive process of recognition for staff and the positive contribution staff can make in the workplace – individually or as part of a team.

7. Health, Safety and Wellbeing

- 7.1 The **Occupational Health Safety and Wellbeing (OHSW) Policy** was updated and approved by Corporate Resources Committee in [March 2026](#), to reflect the new senior leadership structure. It outlines the roles and responsibilities of our senior

leaders for the health and safety in the organisation, including the role of our trade union partners. It also reflects the changes in the creation of the Safety, Health and Emergency Planning (SHEP) Service with the competent person now being the Service Lead – SHEP. The Council has a duty to produce a policy, and to effectively implement and comply with it. A clear and consistent policy mitigates the risk of non-compliance and ensures all employees are aware of their responsibilities.

- 7.2 The Local Government Benchmarking Framework data for 2023/24 highlights challenges related to managing staff absences due to sickness, with a reported increase in sickness absence in Scottish local authorities since the Covid-19 pandemic. There has been 13.2 sickness days lost per employee in Highland Council during 2024/2025 compared to 11.4 for 2023/2024. The continued rise in absence is partly attributed to improved reporting accuracy following the implementation of additional training for managers and teachers digitally reporting absence in 2023/24. As a result, we are now seeing a more realistic and consistent reflection of days lost due to absence. Mental health remains one of the top three reasons for **long-term absence**. It is important to recognise that recovery from mental health conditions often requires multiple treatments and sustained support and waiting lists for NHS mental health services can be lengthy, which can extend period of absence.
- 7.3 The Council is investing in additional Attendance Support Officers (ASO) approved in the 2026/2027 budget, to support services to provide a consistent and proactively management of attendance, promoting staff health and wellbeing and reduce sickness absence rates. Two of the additional three have taken up post and the remaining one has been appointed. This intervention will also have a positive impact on reduced overtime rates and use of agency staff to ensure critical service delivery can continue during periods of sickness absence.
- 7.4 Mental health is a topic regularly highlighted and communicated by the Mental Health and Wellbeing Viva Engage channel accessed by over 1,300 staff. The Council's mental health and wellbeing telephone helpline, used as an exemplar by the Scottish Government, continues to direct staff to specialist options via one dedicated number supported by our pool of internal mental health reps.
- 7.5 There has also been a rise in **short-term absences** linked to viral illnesses. This appears to correlate with changing seasonal patterns, potentially contributing to the spread of infections throughout the year. A flu vaccination campaign will take place later in the year to encourage staff to take up the offer of immunisation offered by the Council or through the NHS for vulnerable staff who are eligible.
- 7.6 The Council continues to promote **trauma-informed practice** in the organisation and supports training for all staff, delivered on Traineasy. This training is aimed at supporting staff to feel better equipped for their role and allowing staff a safe space to reflect on their own life or practice. The Mental Health and Wellbeing Viva Engage channel is also used to host trauma informed sessions and events. Scottish Trauma Informed Leaders Training (STILT) delivered through NHS Scotland, is also promoted to support leaders of organisations to develop trauma informed systems, processes, environments and teams.

8. Rewards and Conditions

8.1 **Employment Rights Act 2025** is the largest expansion of employment protections in a generation, which is aligned to the UK Government's "Make Work Pay" agenda. Changes are phased during 2026/27, increasing employee protections earlier in employment, particularly around dismissal, redundancy, sickness absence and working patterns. The Extended Management Team was briefed on these changes in January and all managers received more detailed and practical information promoted through Viva HR, covering the key changes, reminders of manager responsibilities and signposting to the relevant policies and guidance in preparation for the changes which came into effect the first quarter of 2026.

8.2 The **changes which have come into effect since February - April 2026** are:

- Statutory Sick Pay now payable from day one, with no earnings threshold
- Paternity leave and unpaid parental leave are now day one rights, previously linked to employee's service
- Time needed to give notice of industrial action reduced to 10 days, from 14 days
- Industrial action mandates last for 12 months, instead of 6 months
- Maximum protective award for collective redundancy has doubled from 90 to 180 days per employee if consultation is flawed
- Dismissal for participating in lawful industrial action now automatically unfair regardless of length of action

8.3 The HR policies impacted have been revised along with guidance and available on the [HR Microsite](#). **The key changes include:**

- Introduction of **Bereaved Partner's Paternity Leave (BPPL)** as a new statutory entitlement
- Updated eligibility definitions within **Bereavement, Special Leave, and Paternity** guidance
- Confirmation that **Statutory Paternity Leave is a day one right**
- Clarification and added definitions within **Shared Parental Leave** provisions
- Improved cross-referencing between policies
- Confirmation that **Statutory Sick Pay applies from day one of absence, with waiting days removed**
- Minor eligibility clarifications within **Ordinary Parental Leave** and **Time Off for Dependents**

8.4 The **changes due to come into effect from October 2026** are:

- Employers must take "all reasonable steps" to prevent sexual harassment which introduces a higher threshold for employers
- Employers will become liable for third-party harassment eg for service users, contractors, customers, unless prevention steps are demonstrable
- Sexual harassment disclosures qualify for whistleblowing protection
- Trade unions gain a statutory right to access to workplaces for recruitment and representation, with arbitration if agreement cannot be reached

8.5 The **changes from January 2027** are:

- Dismissal for refusing changes to core contractual terms ('fire and rehire') will generally be automatically unfair
- Qualifying period for unfair dismissal reduces from 2 years to 6 months
- Compensatory award cap for unfair dismissal will be removed
- New rights to guaranteed hours, predictable patterns and compensation for cancelled shifts. This removes the use of zero hour contracts and applies to agency workers as well as directly employed staff

8.6 A new Fair Work Agency has also been established, consolidating enforcement of statutory employment rights and increasing the likelihood of external scrutiny. The Council is fully committed to Fair Work First and our trade union colleagues have been involved in an annual review of the council's [fair work statement 2026-2027](#) which is used to evidence our commitment and a necessary requirement when applying for grant funding allocated by other Scottish public sector bodies such as HiTrans, NatureScot, HIE. Many issues in the Fair Work First Framework are being strengthened by the employment rights legislation changes such as an effective voice for unions, security of employment removing the use of zero hours.

8.7 Flexible/hybrid working is a key staff condition of service. Flexible ways of working are also contributing positively to retention through the phased rollout of Smarter Working and the new Flexible Working Arrangements Policy approved by Corporate Resources Committee on [5 June 2025](#). This promotes flexibility, autonomy and modern working practices, supporting staff wellbeing while enabling effective service delivery.

8.8 A staff survey was undertaken in February 2026 with 1,340 staff providing views on how and where we work, travel, use our buildings and supported by the flexible/hybrid working arrangements. The survey was designed in collaboration with colleagues in FOM/HR, Net Zero and Asset Rationalisation teams and input was also sought from our trade union representatives. This joint approach reduced the need for multiple staff surveys and enable rich data to be collated. A dynamic power BI dashboard holds the baseline data and allows a drill down by cluster, analysis by geographic location and interrogation of travel and working patterns.

9. Talent Strategy

9.1 The [Talent Strategy and action plan](#) was approved in March 2025, and supports "Our Future Highland" Corporate Plan 2022 – 2027, Strategic Outcome Statement 5.1 "Grow and retain our own talent within the Council". This strategy complements service workforce planning and the activities outlined in the plan at **Appendix 2** illustrate a coordinated and sustained approach to strengthening the Council's reputation as an **employer of choice**, building future workforce capacity, supporting employee development and wellbeing, and reducing turnover. The Talent Action Plan places a clear emphasis on inclusivity, engagement and long-term workforce sustainability to ensure the Council is well positioned to meet current and future Service needs. The five key areas of commitment in the strategy are:

- Employer of Choice (Employer Branding)
- Talent Attraction
- Talent Retention

- Talent Development
- Exit Strategy

- 9.2 Whilst we face workforce challenges, we are actively promoting the Council as an **employer of choice through employer branding**. A marketing plan has been developed in partnership with Corporate Communications, alongside a business case for the production of a promotional video. It is proposed the video will be used across the Council website, My Job Scotland, and social media platforms. The aim is to enhance the attractiveness of Highland Council as an employer, as well as promote the Highlands as a desirable place to live and work, thereby increasing the volume and quality of applicants for vacant posts. Promotional materials also highlight the following staff benefits:
- family friendly policies
 - competitive terms and conditions
 - generous benefits – Employee Assistance Programme
 - live and working in Highlands
 - accredited Scottish Local Government Living Wage Employer
- 9.3 The Summer Placement programme has been extremely successful, providing S4–S6 students with their first opportunity to experience Highland Council as an employer. Participation increased significantly from 7 students in 2025 to 34 this year. Drop-in sessions for managers were held in spring to explain the benefits of programme and highlighting its contribution to developing the Council’s future workforce. Continued year-on-year growth in participation is anticipated as the programme becomes more established. A video featuring one of last year’s students was created to showcase their experiences and promote the programme ([Summer placement interview \(2\).mp4](#)).
- 9.4 A further focus over the last 12 months of **Talent Attraction** has involved engaging with our schools. The school leadership survey responses have been analysed to gain a clearer understanding of curriculum provision aligned to My Highland Future (MHF) aims. This analysis has identified gaps in access to Foundation Apprenticeships (FAs) and assessed how current provision supports progression into internal Modern Apprenticeship (MA) delivery. To strengthen progression planning, an internal apprenticeship data dashboard has been established to track and support learner transitions from FAs to MA opportunities within the Council’s post-school provision. Approximately 10% of the Senior Phase cohort are now participating, between them taking part in 10 out of the 15 available FA frameworks across Scottish Credit Qualification Framework (SCQF) levels 4, 5, and 6. Expansion will be dependent on securing additional funding to offer more places through either college or training provision.
- 9.5 Social media recruitment pilots have also been undertaken to extend the reach of advertised vacancies. Further research and analysis will be undertaken to inform and refine future approaches to digital attraction activity.
- 9.6 A review of the Recruitment and Selection guidelines has included more focus on the applicants’ experience. The revised policy was published at the end of January. Improvements to the Talentlink system are providing a more consistent and timely experience for applicants.

- 9.7 Business Intelligence on recruitment has improved and is now available (driven by the My Highland Future Portfolio) with the purpose of designing more tailored recruitment strategies.
- 9.8 The Council recognises secondments as a key mechanism for supporting **employee development** while also meeting organisational needs. Secondments provide employees with valuable opportunities to broaden their skills, gain new experience and make a meaningful contribution to service delivery. The Secondment Policy and supporting Guidance were both reviewed and updated with approval received by the Resources Committee on [19 March 2026](#). The default position is now to approve secondment requests for permanent employees, unless there are clear and demonstrable business reasons not to do so. This reinforces the Council's commitment to employee development and internal mobility by encouraging more cross-Council opportunities.
- 9.9 **Retention** is supported through regular and consistent promotion of policies and guidance via the HR microsite, Viva Engage and the Daily Digest. Staff Connections is regularly refreshed, with key information also shared through the Education Weekly newsletter and the CCFM Facebook page. HR and Safety, Health and Emergency Planning (SHEP) colleagues continue to actively signpost staff to appropriate support, complemented by online drop-in sessions that explore a range of relevant topics.
- 9.10 **Exit questionnaires** are being sent to leavers with an option to link back with HR if the employee wishes to report any issues, positive as well as negative.
- 9.11 A revised Talent Strategy Action Plan is included as **Appendix 2** of this report.

10. People Development

- 10.1 A revised Learning and Development Strategy is being presented to this committee for consideration which sets out how Learning & Development (L&D) will enable a skilled, capable, confident workforce aligned to Council priorities. It also outlines key improvement programmes including mandatory training, leadership development, modern apprenticeships, improved Employee Review and Development (ERD) processes, and strengthened governance of the Council-wide L&D budget.
- 10.2 The L&D team also provides an accredited SVQ service both internally and to external providers along with a dedicated MA team. SVQ enrolments increased from 59 in 2024/25 to 66 in 2025/26 for Highland Council employees upskilling through the Skills Development Scotland training contract (Early Years Education staff working towards qualifications for SSSC registration requirements), representing a 12% increase. In the year ending April 2025, the Council recruited and supported 21 Modern Apprentices and 5 Graduate Apprentices. In the year ending April 2026, Graduate Apprentice recruitment doubled to 10, with 18 new Modern Apprentices recruited. The increase in Graduate Apprentices reflects a strategic focus on building advanced capability and strengthening the future skills base of the organisation see Figure 2 below (includes all job-related upskilling data).

10.3 Figure 2



10.4 New 'Guidance for Roles with a Qualification Pathway' was developed and published in February 2026. This provides clear support for services offering professional trainee opportunities and helps strengthen recruitment into specialist and hard-to-fill roles.

10.5 Members will recall a report on Member development was presented to March Council with a refreshed Learning and Development Framework and the outline Programme for 2026, together with targeted improvement actions arising from evaluation and Member feedback. Members' learning and development actions will remain separate to the People Strategy action plan appended to this report.

11. Data & Processes

11.1 There has been a renewed focus on producing workforce data and how this can be used by managers, members and our staff. HR, Learning & Development, Payroll & HR Transactions and Safety, Health and Emergency Planning teams have been involved in this improvement which enhances reporting on performance:

- Senior Managers now receive quarterly workforce data from **HR** including absence, turnover, age profile, overtime, mandatory training statistics and exit information. Data is also segmented by Chief Officer services.
- **The Learning and Development** Team have introduced an 18-month Mandatory Training Improvement Programme and progress on this Programme will be reported to future committees. A new Mandatory Training dashboard has been developed using Power BI, which includes monthly forecasting, RAG status indicators and filtering by Cluster and service. Mandatory training is now assigned to new joiners with a set completion window and automated reminders and escalations. Next steps include enabling reminders to existing staff when training expires and providing better visibility of training status.
- **Safety, Health and Emergency Planning** have improved reporting and awareness in the increased Accident Injury Rate, due to the new system introduced at the end of 2024. RIDDORS and incident data is being captured that would not have previously and used to put in place interventions/identify emerging trends to reduce the recurrences of incidents.

- 6 monthly **establishment checks** by all line managers improve on accuracy of data held as well as supporting the Payroll and HR Transactions team to report on salary overpayments and recovery rates.

11.2 The HR and Payroll Transformational Programme is also critical to transforming our HR and payroll processes, to create efficiencies and improve timing and quality of workforce data and how this is used. An update on the HR & Payroll programme of work is reported separately to this committee illustrating progress against agreed actions and milestones.

12. Workforce Planning

- 12.1 Staff remain the most important resource the Council has to deliver services and meet the needs of our citizens. We continue to prioritise workforce planning and development to address existing and future challenges. We need to find ways to ensure we have the workforce capacity and skills needed to deliver services in the future. Training and development opportunities can help to attract and retain employees and ensure a skilled workforce remains in place. There is also a growing recognition that the shape and nature of future roles will be influenced by technological advances, and that both employers and employees will increasingly place emphasis on career-long continuous learning and development.
- 12.2 As part of the Corporate Workforce Planning Strategy, all current Service Workforce Planning reports and action plans have been reviewed and annual update reports submitted to the relevant strategic committees. Following the Best Value Audit Scotland report on Workforce Planning, Cluster workforce plans were created in 2025 to reflect the new Highland Council structure. There is a link the Corporate Workforce Planning action plan in **Appendix 1** of this report.
- 12.3 The Succession Planning Toolkit e-learning was launched on 9 April 2026, providing managers with a standardised and easily accessible introduction to effective succession planning. The e-learning supports managers to identify critical roles and recognise high-potential talent, helping to develop and retain capability and build a resilient future workforce. 20 succession planning workshops have been delivered to managers, with further sessions planned.
- 12.4 The Council has made positive progress in strengthening our ICT infrastructure and expanding digital learning opportunities, supporting more flexible, innovative and inclusive approaches to workforce development. L&D have delivered a blended digital learning offer of around 20 courses, with over 3,300 learning engagements recorded across the financial year period of 2025/2026. The majority of provision is delivered through eLearning, particularly Microsoft Learn (Office tools) and Jadu Web Editor resources. This is complemented by targeted instructor-led sessions (via Teams and face-to-face) for core skills such as Excel, SharePoint and data literacy.
- 12.5 A pilot with Waste Services, supported by Improvement and Performance teams, is exploring new ways for employees without devices to access learning and other digital services and information. The findings will help shape and refine the approach, and inform any wider rollout of devices, aligned with progress in the ICT and Future Operating Model (FOM) programmes.

- 12.6 The introduction of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy on [19 March 2026](#) acknowledges the rapid growth in access to AI tools and their potential benefits and risks. As AI usage continues to increase across the Council the policy provides a clear framework for responsible and consistent application, enabling innovative and effective use of AI that is ethical, transparent and compliant with Scottish public sector standards.
- 12.7 Recruitment of Modern Apprentices is one of the key corner stones of our 'grow your own' approach. Our MA team work with services to identify Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) or Graduate Apprenticeships (GAs) pathways into hard to fill posts and current numbers of staff undertaking MA and GAs is shown in figure 2 section 10.2 of this report.

13. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- 13.1 The Council is committed to Equally Safe at Work (ESAW) initiative which is aimed at embedding a strong culture of gender equality in the council. We continue to work in development status which is due for renewal in May 2027. This will further demonstrate our commitment to being an inclusive employer and will support the attraction of a more diverse range of applicants.
- 13.2 As stated in the Corporate Cluster Workforce Plan Annual Progress Report we will develop an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy outlining the Highland Council approach to embedding equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) across all areas of our work and service delivery.
- 13.3 We recognise the invaluable contribution of unpaid carers within our workforce and wider community. Our [Carer Positive Policy](#) introduced in May 2023 provides access to Carer Positive Leave, flexible working arrangements and resources to improve wellbeing. The guidance was revised in June 2024 to incorporate the legislative 5 unpaid days in addition to the Council's maximum 5 paid days allocation which applies individually to employees caring for the same individual. This policy has enabled staff to balance employment and caring responsibilities. The carers network Carer Connect also helps staff share experiences, supported practice and has built a more inclusive workplace where carers feel empowered.
- 13.4 There are currently 164 staff on the carer register and since June 2024, 269 employees have benefited from the carer provision – 237 females and 32 males across all services. The Council is well placed to seek **Carer Positive Accreditation**, managed by Care Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Government. Participation in scheme is free and there are three levels of accreditation – **Engaged, Established and Exemplary**. Accreditation will enhance the council's work to support staff with carer responsibilities and promote recruitment and retention of our workforce.
- 13.5 A **Neurodiversity Peer Group** was set up to provide staff with a peer-to-peer forum to support and share staff experiences. The group has been running for over 6 months and has also been involved in reviewing the accessibility pack for elections material to improve format and information provided. The groups input has included advice on supporting voters who present as neurodiversity at polling venues.

- 13.6 External accreditations continue to play an important role in attracting and retaining talent, reinforcing the Council's reputation as an inclusive and supportive employer. The Disability Confident Leader reassessment is scheduled for October 2026 and we anticipate retaining this status, reflecting the continued strengthening of our inclusive practices. During the reporting period, further improvements were made to our approach, and we also supported another local authority to achieve Leader accreditation, demonstrating our commitment to sharing good practice.
- 13.7 The Council currently holds Armed Forces Covenant gold status. We will attend the Career Transition Partnership job fair in Elgin in late summer, which provides an opportunity to promote the Council as an employer of choice for ex-service personnel and their families as part of our approach to talent attraction.

14. Conclusion

- 14.1 Extensive work has been undertaken during 25/26 and is ongoing to support, retain, recruit and develop Council employees. Early signs are positive in terms of attracting a younger workforce and building new skillsets, and the Council is proactive in working to improve employee experience and implement legislative change. New investment in reducing sickness absence is being put to use and outcomes will be closely monitored and reported back to committee.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate

Date: 12 May 2026

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Appendices: Appendix 1 – People Strategy Action Plan
Appendix 2 – Talent Strategy Action Plan

Appendix 1: People Strategy Action Plan

People Strategy Thematic Action Plan 2026-2027

People Strategic Themes	Identified area of action	Target	How we will achieve	Measure/Impact	Target Date	Responsible
Staff Engagement	Investors in People (IiP)	Seek views from our staff to support improvement in how we lead, support and develop our people and organisational culture.	Roll out surveys to agreed six Service tranches and conduct feedback sessions to develop Service Cluster actions plans. IiP accreditation runs over a 3 year period and implementing actions plans will cover the same period.	Achieve 50% survey response rate for each tranche Survey.	September 2026	COs/IiP Programme Manager
			Analyse corporate themes from Service Cluster action plans.	Action plans implemented over the period of the IiP accreditation	July 2028-Sept 2029	COs/ IiP Programme Manager/ Strategic Lead HR (corporate actions)
			Develop a champion network to drive improvements from IiP action plans		Sept 2026	COs/ IiP Programme Manager
	Update Fair Work First (FWF) Statement	Review and sign-off FWF statement and publish for ease of access when bidding for government funds to demonstrate	Liaise with trade union representatives to review and agree update to Fair Work First Statement Embed FWF principles in procurement contracts	Revised statement published on HR Micro site by end March 2026	Completed	Head of People

		commitment to FWF Agenda		Statements included in contracts	Ongoing	Procuring service
Health, Safety and Wellbeing	Compliance of health and safety legislation	Senior Leaders aware of health and safety obligations	<p>Update Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing policy to reflect changes in senior leaders and OHSW team structure</p> <p>ISOH Training delivered to senior leaders and key officers on corporate health and safety legislation to ensure compliance</p>	<p>Policy agreed by Corporate Resource Committee</p> <p>Senior leaders and key officer's undertake training</p>	<p>Complete</p> <p>31 August 2026</p>	<p>SL SHEP</p> <p>SL SHEP/ OHSW Manager</p>
	Improve staff wellbeing	Improve attendance levels by reducing sickness absence	<p>Appointment of Attendance Support Officers to support service manager with complex cases</p> <p>'Flu vaccination vouchers purchased and links established with NHS Highland for a combined Boots Chemist and NHS delivery of the vaccines.</p> <p>Roll out of vaccination commencing end of Summer/early Autumn</p>	<p>New staff in post</p> <p>Uptake in vaccination offered by the Council</p>	<p>June 2026</p> <p>December 2026</p>	<p>HR Manager</p> <p>SL - SHEP</p>

	Establish Trauma Informed practice across the organisation	Sessions delivered on Trauma Aware and Impact Aware training during February, March and April 2026	Training sessions hosted on Traineasy on trauma and the impact will be delivered to raise awareness from February 2026 to staff. Purpose the training is to raise awareness, assess and mitigate issues caused by trauma. It will also look at next steps which can be taken to support individuals presenting with trauma.	Sessions ongoing and currently scheduled up to June 2026	Ongoing	SL - SHEP
Reward and Recognition	Terms and conditions of employment	Implementation of changes arising from Employment Rights Act	Develop a programme of work on Employment Rights Act changes taking effect by April 2026, October and January 2027. Update policies and issue guidance, implement changes to payroll system (changes taking effect by April 2026 only).	Introduce changes by April 2026 Introduce changes by October 2026 Introduce changes by January 2027	Complete	HR Manager/Payroll & HR Transaction Manager HR Manager/SL Audit HR Manager
	Inclusive system for recognising staff efforts	Recognition for: embracing change; project work; learning new skill and capabilities; going the extra	Develop a local staff recognition programme on an individual and team basis. Support any organisation-wide recognition event.	Develop and deliver programme locally.	March 2027 Autum 2027	CO HR and Coms/L&D Manager or SL for HR CO HR and Coms/L&D

		mile and local/team efforts		Deliver a corporate Awards event		Manager or SL for HR
Data and Processes	HR & Payroll Data & Process Enablement Project	Talentlink Recruitment System Project	Introduce a single sign-on process for users of Talentlink for easier and more secure access, provide manager dashboards for real-time recruitment insights, enhanced notifications to keep managers informed	Single Sign-on, system dashboard and notification implemented in April 2026	Complete	HR Manager/ HR Change Manager
		HR & Payroll Transformation Project	Move HR and Payroll data to new software procure through a national framework will provide a stable HR & Payroll platform to fully transform the council's HR & Payroll processes, data & service, whilst minimising risk to core functions during the period of change.	Smooth transition to new system which continues to successfully process payroll and HR data	June 2027	CO HR and Comms

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion	Embed a strong culture of gender equality	Equally Safe at Work accreditation	Build on the development status of ESAW	Continued accreditation	May 2027	Talent Manager
		Introduce an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy	Research and develop a policy based on good practice outlining approach to EDI across all staff service delivery	Policy Approved	March 2027	Talent Manager
	Embed in Trauma Informed practice	Sessions delivered on Trauma Aware and Impact Aware during February, March and April 2026	Training sessions on trauma and the impact will be delivered to raise from February 2026 to staff. Purpose the training is to raise awareness, assess and mitigate issues caused by trauma. It will also look at next steps we can take to support individuals presenting with trauma.	Sessions ongoing and currently scheduled up to June 2026	Ongoing	SL - SHEP
	Carer Positive	Achieve Carer Positive Accreditation	Prepare evidence to become Carer Established and aspire to achieve Carer Exemplary Accreditation. Link with Care Scotland to share their resources to support staff and local partners with carer positive agenda.	Accreditation achieved	December 2026	HR
	Embrace diversity and inclusiveness of our staff	Seek views from our staff to address issues being experienced by	Establish a Neurodiversity Peer Support Group which meets monthly consisting of 26 members. Team events/awareness sessions	Staff who have experience of neurodiversity will input to peer-to-peer group	Complete	SL SHEP

		neurodiverse employees	<p>promoted to staff through viva engage.</p> <p>The Neurodiversity group is also supporting on policy development in relation to neurodiversity</p> <p>Staffing policies and guidance will be reviewed and amended to better meet needs of our workforce. Awareness and topical sessions, videos will be promoted and share good practice.</p>	Staff who have experience of neurodiversity will input to policies and contribute to research.	Ongoing	OHSW Manager/HR
	Increase EDI Awareness	Target all staff to provide an awareness of EDI issues	<p>Publicise the national 16 Days of Activism – tackling aggression against women and girls in Scotland (25 November - 10 December 2025)</p> <p>Promote future 16 Days of Activism</p>	Engagement with staff through publicised material. Staff actively attend events held.	<p>Completed</p> <p>Dec 2026 Ongoing</p>	Talent Manager

Associated People Action Plans which should be read alongside the People Strategy Action Plan

Revised Talent Strategy Action Plan

[Link](#) to Workforce Planning Action Plan

Learning and Development Action Plan (to be approved)

Talent Action Plan

2025-2027 – Review and Update

Develop Employer Brand						
Identified area of action	Target	How we will achieve	Measure/impact	Target Date	Responsible	Update for 2025/26
Marketing of Highland Council	Increase the number of applications for vacancies	Communicate vision and values of HC internally <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Senior leaders to cascade Corporate Comms support material and messaging 	Employee satisfaction increase	Dec 25 ongoing Dec 25 ongoing	CMT Corporate Comms	Regular Senior Management led in-person Roadshows across the Highlands. Investors in People accreditation is now underway.
		Design an identifiable brand including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highland Council – where people matter (consider professional input) 	Highland Council viewed positively in community & Scotland and branded as the employer of choice	Oct 25	Talent Team WTF Corporate Comms	Marketing Plan produced. Business Plan to go to CMT late summer.
		Promote our family friendly policies; competitive terms & Conditions; generous benefits – Employee Assistance Programme, Living and working in Highlands. Accredited Scottish Local Government Living Wage Employer.	Potential & existing employees aware of offering	Mar 25 ongoing	Talent Team	Staff Connections and Viva Engage HR are used to update employees.
		Production of video for use on HC website, MJS and social media platforms.	Videos will add to attractiveness of Highland Council as an employer and the Highlands as a place to live, increasing applicants	Aug 25	Corporate Comms	*This will be part of the marketing plan.
		Develop Cluster specific videos highlighting range of jobs and careers in the Highland Council		Aug 26	Corporate Comms	*As above, incorporated into the wider marketing plan.
Diversity and Inclusion	Increase the diversity of our workforce	Align all People Policies to our Equal Opportunities Policy	Myview demographics	Jun 25 ongoing	HR	The workforce largely reflects the wider Highland population as publicised in the 2022 census result in regard to race and disability. ESAW and Disability Confident Leader

	<p>Increase EDI awareness</p> <p>Attract more diverse applicants</p>	<p>Promote Mandatory equality, diversity and inclusion e-learning Increase specialist EDI training Management training - neurodiversity</p> <p>Research available toolkits, local & national networks</p>	<p>Completion rates</p> <p>Increased diversity of applications</p>	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>Nov 25</p>	<p>L&D</p> <p>Talent Team</p>	<p>accreditation promotes inclusivity. The following policies have been updated, and align with our Equal Opportunities Policy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bereavement Guidance • Neonatal Care Leave and Pay Guidance • Ordinary Parental Leave Provisions Guidance • Shared Parental Leave Guidance • Special Leave Policy • Attendance Management Policy • Attendance Management Guidance <p>Over 500 staff completed the EDI online training from April 2025 to March 2026. Recruitment and Selection training and guidance has more in-depth training for EDI</p> <p>Link to SG Minority Ethnic Recruitment Toolkit and Anti Racist Employment Strategy added to Recruitment and Selection Guidance.</p>
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Talent Attraction

Identified area of action	Target	How we will achieve	Measure/Impact	Target Date	Responsible	Update for 2025/26
Foundation Apprenticeship	Pathway from schools to HC employment	Develop Foundation Apprenticeship opportunities	No. of pathways and opportunities developed	Jan 26	L&D/WFTF	Approx 10% Senior Phase pupils are participating in 10 out of the 15 available FA frameworks across SCQF levels 4, 5, and 6. MHF developed a new apprenticeship data dashboard.
Modern Apprentice and Graduate Apprentice	+ 20%	Encouraging services to use establishment vacancies for MA or GA's Expand the MA & GA Framework available to hiring managers	% increase of MA's and GA's employed	Jan 26	L&D	MAs and GAs rose from 26 new starts in 25/26 to 28 new starts in 25/26
Graduate trainee		Develop a Corporate Graduate Trainee Programme		Jan 26	L&D and HR	To be reviewed as part of the L&D strategy{
Shared Modern Apprenticeships	To have a structured approach to shared MAs	Develop an approach to shared Modern Apprenticeships – public, private & 3 rd Sector	Partnership Working & increased range of MA's and opportunities Positive impact on depopulation	Oct 25	WFTF Portfolio	Planning work has taken place and a pilot with HLH and THC is being explored with plans to commence summer 2026
Marketing the Council as an employer to Secondary School pupils	No. of engagement activities in schools	Career campaign	Positive impact on THC workforce age demographic	May 25 ongoing	Talent Team/CO WFTF Secondary Education	Summer Placements; Attendance at school jobs fairs. Going forward the proposed marketing video could be used across all secondary schools in Highland
Youth Trainee opportunities	Develop programme	Meeting Our Council's Future Workforce needs work stream	Implementation of Youth Trainee Programme	Oct 26	WFTF Portfolio Board	Summer Placements has been extremely successful. 7 placements in 2025, rising to 34 planned for 2026. This is the first opportunity for S4 to

						S6 students to experience HC as an employer. This is set to continue and will be removed from action plan after Oct 26
Professional Trainee opportunities	Develop corporate approach	Consolidate existing service approaches	Measured through workforce planning	Oct 25	Talent Team/HR BPs Cluster SMTs	Guidance for Roles with a Qualification Pathway was published Feb 2026 to assist in aligning a corporate approach to professional trainee opportunities. Action complete
Hybrid and flexible work models for some job roles	Officer roles are considered hybrid unless there is a justifiable business need to be fully office based	Include in Recruitment & Selection Guidance and training for managers Include in Flexible Arrangement Working Guidance	Improved reputation as flexible employer Reduction in hard to fill roles.	Ongoing	HR/Talent/L&D	Flexible Working Policy and Guidance has been reviewed and updated. Recruitment systems have been updated to allow advertising of vacancies as Highland-wide location, which has been welcomed by recruiting managers. Data on uptake of this will be available in the future.
Guaranteed Interview Scheme (disability & Armed Forces)	Maintain award status	Included in vacancy advertisements, guidance, policy and training	Accredited employer – Disability Confident Leader and Armed Forces Covenant Gold status	Disability Leader status review 2026 Gold Covenant status review 2025	Talent Team/OD BP	Disability Confident Leader reassessment is due in October 2026. We expect to retain the award, reflecting the continued strengthening of our offering. Armed Forces Covenant Gold Award reassessment is scheduled for 2026. We are confident Gold status will be retained based on our ongoing commitment and support.
Employee benefits	Competitive benefits offering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employee Benefits Platform & additional local discounts & lifestyle savings Terms and Conditions Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) Accredited Scottish Local Government Living Wage Employer 	Positive impact upon staff wellbeing Positive impact upon Highland Council employer brand	ongoing	HR	The new Highland Council website detail of employee benefits for potential applicants. MyJobScotland includes a downloadable

						benefits document with every vacancy. Action complete
Family friendly policies -		Policy & Guidance – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carer Positive Policy, Guidance and Support Sessions and paid leave • Flexible working arrangements • Special Leave • Maternity, Paternity, Surrogacy, Fostering & Adoption, Neo-Natal etc 	Positive impact upon staff wellbeing Reduction in absenteeism Positive impact upon Highland Council employer brand	As per Policy Review Schedule	HR/HR Sub	Policies and Guidance are reviewed on a rolling basis to ensure legislative compliance and continuous improvement. Policies and Guidance is available for potential employees to view on the Highland Council website.
Partnership Working TU's		Regular meetings to collaborate HR sub meeting	HR Sub meeting Union support	ongoing	HR/Unions	Trade Unions continue to work in partnership to provide constructive input into the development, implementation and review of policy and guidance.

Talent Development						
Identified area of action	Target	How we will achieve	Measure/Impact	Target Date	Responsible	Update for 2025/26
Supporting development opportunities for employees	100% ER/PRD completion	Annual Employee Review and Development meeting with Line Manager with a focus on career and/or professional development. Teachers PRD with Headteacher	Employee development Positive impact upon retention; succession planning and employee engagement and satisfaction	Sep 25	All Services Learning and Development	This remains an area of focused improvement for the Learning and Development team and is included in the L&D strategy and action plan.

Workforce Planning led development activities	Service Training Plans	<p>Implement the Workforce Planning Strategy</p> <p>Use the data from Service Annual Workforce Planning exercise to plan the future of the business need and identify staffing resources required</p> <p>Service specific programmes for example, Grow Your Own, Management Development Programme, undertaking LGV driving licence, etc</p>	<p>Identifying skills gaps and difficult to recruit to posts</p> <p>Mitigation of service skills gaps Addresses workforce planning areas of risk</p> <p>Employee Development</p>	<p>Annual Review</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>ongoing</p>	<p>HR BP's Talent Team</p> <p>HR HR BP's Talent Team</p> <p>L&D Career Coach</p>	<p>Workforce planning has supported managers in identifying specific skills gaps.</p> <p>Annual Cluster Workforce Planning update reports will be submitted to respective strategic committees in May, June and August 2026.</p>
Defined approach to supporting Secondments	Increase secondment opportunities	Supporting cross-cluster and service opportunities	<p>Employee development</p> <p>Organisational resilience & development</p> <p>Employee retention</p>	Aug 25	CMT Talent Team L&D (Management Connections)	Secondment Policy and Guidance revised with approval of secondment now the default for permanent staff. Every secondment opportunity is advertised supporting cross - fertilisation of skills across the Council
Opportunities for job rotation, on the job training and shadowing, employee coaching and mentoring	Create a shadowing and rotation programme	Work with services to develop a shadowing/ rotation programme to be discussed at ERD	Take up of shadowing/ rotation programme	Jan 26	HR BPs Career Coach & Services	Progress on this action has been paused due to current availability of resource.
Managers' use of Succession Planning Toolkit (SPT)	+ 25%	Soft roll out of SPT to cluster services Introduce into Management Connections training programme	Single points of failure within teams mitigated. 'Job ready' employees	Jan 26	HR BPS & Talent Manager	The Succession Planning Toolkit e-learning was launched on 09.04.2026. liP workshops and specific Succession Planning workshops have been delivered to managers. Proposed drop-in sessions paused due to current vacancies.

Employee Development	Upskilled & fulfilled Employees	Launch Career Hub 2025 – Promote through L&D, Traineesy, Viva Engage	Career Hub available to all employees	Dec 26	L&D Career Coach	Following a vacancy during this period, People Development is considering new delivery options
Professional Qualifications	Increased in job related qualified employees	Use of workforce plans to identify qualification need Increase investment & promote career related qualifications for employees.	Reduction in hard to fill vacancies More skilled workforce	Ongoing	HR BPs L&D Services	New Guidance for Roles with a Qualification Pathway has been published ensuring an equitable approach to professional trainee opportunities.
Employee Engagement/ Development	IIP Accreditation	Roll out across Council	Increased Satisfaction levels Employee development Organisational resilience & development Employee retention	Feb 26	CMT/Head of People	All of the Corporate Cluster and two services in the Place Cluster are so far accredited.
ICT and Digital Learning opportunities	Increase awareness across workforce Increase digital skills of workforce	Increase ICT and digital learning opportunities council wide (ie not just computer-based job roles) Digital Champions to support and promote digital learning	Increase in digital skills across the workforce	ongoing	ICT Digital Team	The Highland Council's Digital Maturity Assessment increased from 2.59 in 24/25 to 2.63 in 25/26, indicating a modest but positive shift. Digital Bites community launched. 250 places on Digital Champions Network opened on 09.03.2026
Career Pathways	Portfolio of Career Pathways	Pilot in one Service where there are hard to fill career vacancies Develop service specific career pathways	Clearly identifiable career pathways available to employees and managers. Support ERD's	Dec 25	L&D/Career Coach WFTF	Progress on this action has been paused due to current vacancies.

Talent Retention

Identified area of action	Target	How we will achieve	Measure/Impact	Target Date	Responsible	Update for 2025/26
Disability Reasonable Adjustment Passport	Increase awareness	Increase awareness – Managers to discuss at ERD as appropriate Promote through OHSW service	No baseline as personal to employee and line manager	ongoing	HR/L&D OHSW	Disability Reasonable Adjustment Passport has been promoted several times on Viva Engage HR.
Employee wellbeing	Increase awareness of policies and support available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carer Positive Policy – recognises and supports carers commitments • MH Reps available for employees • Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) • Employee Benefits Platform • Management support & comms • Right to Disconnect Policy • Flexible Working Policy 	wellbeing survey Staff survey Reduction in absenteeism	2025 Wellbeing Survey	HR OHSW L&D	Regular promotion of all policies and guidance is done through the HR microsite, Viva Engage, Daily Digest and Staff Connections are regularly updated, with information shared via the Education Weekly newsletter and the CCFM Facebook page. HR and OHSW staff signpost staff appropriately. SHEP drop ins with a variety of topics explored. Forum for neurodivergent staff
Occupational Health and Wellbeing Service	Keeping people at work	Informed guidance on how to support employees to remain or return to work	Reduction or avoidance of long-term absenteeism	Quarterly review	HR	Attendance management has been strengthened by increasing Attendance Support Officers to five, of which four are now in post, supporting earlier intervention and reduced absenteeism.
Increase employee engagement	% Improvement Employee Survey IIP Accreditation	Viva Engage Platforms- raise awareness of and use of. Staff Connections CE Engagement Sessions ACE Blogs Implement Suggestion Scheme	Improved data in next employee engagement questionnaire/IIP	Jul 26	HR Corp Comms CMT CMT Cluster ACE	IIP survey completion rates significantly higher than public sector average. SHEP Drop-ins 8 weekly Operational Management Team Meetings introduced for grade HC10 and above. Regular Senior Management led in-person Roadshows across the Highlands

Redeployment	Avoid redundancies	Upskill candidates on redeployment register	Successful placements	ongoing	HR/Career coach	HR have successfully redeployed 10 employees during 2025/2026 retaining a small number on redeployment register (usually under 10) at any one time
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Exit Strategy						
Identified area of action	Target	How we will achieve	Measure/Impact	Target Date	Responsible	Update for 2025/26
Exit Questionnaire data	Continuous improvement as an employer	Address any highlighted issues with services Share positive feedback with services	Improved retention	ongoing	HR Systems Team Talent Team	Highlighted issues are addressed on an individual basis.
Employee turnover rate	Reduction in employee turnover	Sharing positive and negative feedback with services will promote good practice and reduce turnover rate	Retention of skills and experienced employees	ongoing	HR Systems Team Talent Team	Employee turnover has reduced from 13% in 2024/25 to 11% in 2025/26. Survey of New Employees results for the first quarter highlight a very positive start, with 95% of new starters recommending Highland Council as an employer.