

Agenda Item	8
Report No	HC/21/26

The Highland Council

Committee: Highland Council

Date: 25 June 2026

Report Title: UK City of Culture Bid 2029 - Update

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 Since the last report, the Inverness and Highland UK City of Culture 2029 bid has moved into a detailed development phase, with progress across engagement, programme development, governance and partnership building.
- 1.2 A key element of this has been the Cultural Conversation, bringing together voices from across the Highlands to help shape a place-based, bottom-up programme. Engagement is continuing to widen, including plans for a Children's Assembly to ensure young people play a meaningful role in developing the bid.
- 1.3 Work is also progressing to strengthen the evidence base through an Economic Impact Assessment, alongside early engagement on corporate sponsorship and wider private sector support.
- 1.4 Governance arrangements continue to develop, with progress on Board membership and increasing engagement with Scottish Government and national partners. As the only Scottish bid, this represents a significant national opportunity to secure UK City of Culture status for Scotland for the first time.
- 1.5 Overall, strong progress is being made, with momentum building across all aspects of the bid. Work is now focused on finalising a robust and competitive Full Application for submission to DCMS by 10 August 2026.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:-
 - i. **Note** the update on the UK City of Culture 2029 bid for Inverness-Highland.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** – The funding position for bid development remains as previously reported. The Council has secured £60,000 from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), with total development costs estimated at £200k.

Work is ongoing to secure additional match funding and in-kind support from partners to maximise available resources. Should this not be achieved, the use of reserves remains as the agreed contingency.

- 3.1.1 Consideration of any future financial implications arising from a successful bid will be taken forward as part of the next stage of planning, with further reports brought to Members as required.

- 3.2 **Legal** - The legal position remains as previously reported. The Council continues to act as Accountable Body for the bid development phase and will ensure that all funding is managed in line with relevant legal and regulatory requirements.

- 3.2.1 The Council is also required to comply with subsidy control and procurement rules, whether appointing external advisers or providing financial support to partners. If the bid is successful and an independent delivery organisation is established, clear legal agreements and governance arrangements will be put in place to ensure accountability, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and to safeguard the Council's statutory duties as the programme moves forward.

This includes ongoing compliance with equalities duties, subsidy control and procurement requirements as activity progresses. Appropriate legal and governance arrangements will be put in place as the bid develops, including in the event of a successful outcome.

- 3.3 **Risk** – The overall risk position remains as previously reported. The main risks relate to the scale and complexity of developing a region-wide bid across a large and dispersed geography, including capacity, coordination and stakeholder expectations. These continue to be managed through appropriate governance, partnership working and phased planning.

- 3.3.1 As with any national competition, there is a risk that the bid may not be successful. This is recognised within the current approach, with work being developed in a way that ensures lasting value regardless of the final outcome.

- 3.3.2 The activity underway is expected to deliver wider benefits in its own right, including strengthening partnerships, improving the evidence base, and supporting future cultural and funding opportunities across Highland.

- 3.4 **Health and Safety** (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people) – None arising from this report.

- 3.5 **Gaelic** – None arising directly from this report. The bid programme is expected to include elements of celebration of Gaelic language and culture.

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 report provides an update on the preparation and submission of a bid and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5 UK City of Culture 2029 – Background

- 5.1 UK City of Culture is a national programme led by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), working with the devolved governments. Every four years, one place is selected to use culture and creativity to drive regeneration, support economic growth, strengthen communities and improve wellbeing.

Recent Cities of Culture - including Derry/Londonderry, Hull, Coventry and Bradford - demonstrate the impact the designation can have when culture is placed at the centre of long-term planning and investment.

- 5.2 The competition for UK City of Culture 2029 launched in late 2025. For the first time, city regions are invited to bid. Following an open Expression of Interest stage, Inverness-Highland was confirmed in March 2026 as one of nine places invited to develop a full bid.

This longlisting reflects recognition of the area's cultural strengths and ambition, and provides a significant opportunity to position the Highlands on a UK-wide stage and raise its national profile.

- 5.3 Longlisted places are now required to submit a full application setting out a clear vision, a deliverable cultural programme for 2029, and robust proposals for funding, governance, delivery and legacy. Applications will be assessed against published criteria, including community engagement, economic impact, quality of programme, environmental responsibility and long-term benefit.
- 5.4 DCMS has confirmed £10m for the successful place to support delivery. Each longlisted area has received £60k to support bid development, with further funding available to support shortlisted places. Full applications are due in August 2026, with a decision expected before the end of the year.
- 5.5 The Inverness-Highland bid is being developed in partnership with organisations across the public, cultural, community, education and business sectors. It aligns with Council priorities including inclusive economic growth, regeneration, wellbeing, Gaelic and Scots language and culture, net zero and resilient communities.

While the focus remains on developing a strong and competitive bid, the process is also helping to strengthen partnerships, clarify shared ambitions and build momentum that will deliver lasting value regardless of the final outcome.

5.6 The following sections provide an update on progress in developing the full bid.

6 Cultural Conversation/Assembly

6.1 Since the previous report in May 2026, work has continued to develop the planned approach to cultural engagement as part of the bid.

As set out previously, it remains the intention to convene a Cultural Assembly as part of the overall engagement approach. However, in order to support engagement at this key stage in the process, a Highland Cultural Conversation is scheduled to take place in advance of this.

The Cultural Conversation will bring together cultural stakeholders, partners and communities from across the Highlands to inform the development of the programme and wider bid. This reflects a commitment to a place-based, bottom-up approach, ensuring that the bid is shaped by the voices, experiences and priorities of communities and partners.

At this stage in the bid development process, the engagement will enable early and meaningful dialogue, ensuring that emerging proposals are grounded in place and informed by those who will play a key role in delivery and participation.

The outputs from this process will directly inform the continued development of the bid, with the Cultural Assembly remaining a key element of the overall engagement approach at a later stage.

This approach ensures that engagement activity is aligned with the requirements of the Full Application and supports the development of a credible and deliverable bid.

7 Children's Assembly

7.1 As part of the overall engagement approach, a dedicated Children's Assembly will also be progressed, recognising the importance of engaging directly with children and young people as a distinct audience within the bid. This ensures that the voices and experiences of younger people are meaningfully captured alongside those of cultural stakeholders and communities, and that the developing programme reflects their perspectives, aspirations and priorities in shaping the bid and its future delivery.

8 Economic Impact Assessment

8.1 As part of the Full Application, the Council is required to submit an Economic and Social Outputs Datasheet. This is a mandatory element of the application and is a key assessment tool used by the panel alongside the written submission.

8.2 The datasheet is used to evidence the value of the bid, requiring quantified projections of economic and social outcomes, including job creation, skills and training opportunities, business growth and wider community benefits. It will also be

used to assess the credibility of the bid, including whether these impacts are realistic, additional and supported by robust assumptions.

- 8.3 In order to meet this requirement, it has been necessary to commission an economic impact assessment. This will ensure that the Council can develop a sound evidence base, applying HM Treasury Green Book principles and providing projections that are credible, proportionate and capable of withstanding scrutiny.
- 8.4 This work will be critical to demonstrating that the bid can deliver genuine and lasting benefits to the Highland economy and communities, and to ensuring that the Council is able to submit a compliant and competitive application.

9 Governance

- 9.1 The overall governance approach for the Inverness–Highland UK City of Culture bid remains as previously agreed. Arrangements are designed to provide clear leadership and accountability, support partnership working, and remain proportionate to the scale of the programme.
- 9.2 During the bid phase, Highland Council continues to act as Accountable Body, with responsibility for oversight and management of public funding. Strategic direction is being provided through the establishment of an Interim Bid Partnership Board. Work is underway to finalise membership, including identifying an independent Co-Chair alongside the Council Convener, in line with UK City of Culture expectations. The Board will bring together key partners from across the cultural, public, education and business sectors.
- 9.3 Day-to-day development of the bid is being progressed through a dedicated Bid Team, led by a Bid Director. This includes programme development, engagement activity, partnership working and preparation of the Full Application.
- 9.4 A Council Officer Group, chaired by the Chief Executive, is in place to provide corporate oversight and coordination. This supports alignment across services and ensures the bid continues to be progressed as a corporate priority.
- 9.5 Engagement is ongoing with Scottish Government and wider national agencies to support the development of the bid. This reflects the bid's position as the only Scottish application within the UK City of Culture 2029 competition, and the significant national opportunity this presents for Scotland.

No location in Scotland has previously been awarded UK City of Culture status, and the bid presents a unique opportunity to secure the title for Scotland for the first time. Discussions are focused on how national partners can align with and support this ambition, including through advocacy, strategic alignment and opportunities to support delivery. Initial engagement has indicated a positive level of interest, which will continue to be developed as the bid moves towards submission.

- 9.6 In the event of a successful bid, it remains the intention to establish an independent delivery organisation, in line with the model adopted by previous UK City of Culture areas. The Council would retain its role as Accountable Body, with appropriate governance and legal arrangements put in place to support delivery.

External legal advice is being sought to appraise the most appropriate delivery vehicle and governance structure, including consideration of models adopted by previous UK City of Culture areas. This will ensure that arrangements are robust, compliant and best suited to support effective delivery of the programme.

- 9.7 Overall, governance arrangements continue to develop in line with the requirements of the programme and reflect a phased and proportionate approach. This provides a clear and robust framework for both bid development and, if successful, future delivery.

10 Financial

- 10.1 Work has continued on the development of the financial framework, including refinement of costs and the identification of potential funding sources. Discussions with partners are ongoing, and a detailed financial plan will be finalised as part of the Full Application.

Alongside this, work is progressing to explore opportunities to secure corporate sponsorship and wider private sector support as part of a balanced funding approach. While no formal agreements are in place at this stage, early engagement is focused on positioning the bid as an attractive proposition for investment, aligned to the ambition, profile and anticipated economic impact of UK City of Culture.

Developing a strong evidence base and clear value proposition will be key to leveraging external support and maximising opportunities to attract private sector investment alongside public funding in support of the Full Application.

11 Next Steps and Key Dates

- 11.1 As the bid moves into its final development phase, communications and engagement activity will continue to support delivery of the next stages. This will focus on keeping partners and stakeholders informed, providing opportunities to contribute, and ensuring the emerging vision for the bid is shaped collaboratively and reflects both local priorities and wider UK relevance as part of the Full Application.
- 11.2 Work is now focused on finalising and submitting a robust Full Application for UK City of Culture 2029. This includes continued development across programme, engagement, governance and financial planning.
- 11.3 Since the previous report in May 2026, the bid has continued to progress across all key areas, including programme development, stakeholder engagement, and governance and financial planning. This includes programme development, stakeholder engagement, and the ongoing development of governance and financial arrangements. Attendance at the DCMS Information Event on 2 June 2026 has further informed the preparation of the Full Application. Work is now focused on finalising the submission ahead of the 10 August 2026 deadline.
- 11.4 The bid continues to progress through the following key stages:
- **To date**
Continued development of the full application, including programme design, engagement activity, partnership development and supporting evidence.

2 June 2026

Attendance at the DCMS Information Event for longlisted places.

- **June–July 2026**

Finalisation of the full application, including programme, governance, delivery and financial arrangements.

- **10 August 2026 (5.00pm)**

Submission of the full application to DCMS.

- **Autumn 2026**

Announcement of shortlisted places, with further assessment activity including potential visits and presentations.

- **Late 2026**

Announcement of the UK City of Culture 2029.

11.5 The bid remains on track, with activity continuing at pace to ensure that all elements of the Full Application are completed and submitted within the required timeframe. Regardless of the outcome, the work undertaken through the bid process will continue to strengthen partnerships, clarify long-term ambitions, support wider place-based development and long-term growth across Inverness–Highland, and position the area to realise the wider opportunity of securing UK City of Culture status for Scotland for the first time.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

Date: 10 June 2026

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Background Papers:

Appendices: