

Agenda Item	5
Report No	BIER/21/26

The Highland Council

Committee: Black Isle and Easter Ross

Date: 10 August 2026

Report Title: Easter Ross Community Partnership Area Place Plan Progress

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 Highland Council approved a [Highland Place Based Framework](#) for community planning and investment in December 2021. This approach was endorsed by the Community Planning Partnership and recognises 'Place' as central to service delivery and partnership working.
- 1.2 Area Place Plans, form a key part of the framework. Area Place Plans coordinate objectives across Local Place Plans, Local Development Plans, the Regional Spatial Strategy, and Community Partnership Plans, supporting place-based funding and services.
- 1.3 Area Place Plans deliver on the Council's strategic priority of Resilient and Sustainable Communities, support the implementation of the Operational Delivery Plan, and highlight priority areas for investment opportunities, such as those linked to the Social Value Charter's Highland Wealth Fund and Community Regeneration Funds.
- 1.4 The Easter Ross Area Place Plan, Our Place Our Future, was adopted by the Black Isle and Easter Ross Committee on 12 May 2025. This report provides an update on progress since the Plan was adopted.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:-
 - i. **Consider and note** this annual report, recognising the progress made by the Easter Ross Community Partnership; and
 - ii. **Agree** to support the targeting of service programmes and external funding to meet the Area Place Plan priorities when appropriate.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** – while the Area Place Plan contains priority projects for delivery, these are each subject to discussion and development of specific funding packages, therefore, there is no direct resource implication currently.
- 3.2 **Legal** – there are no specific legal implications.
- 3.3 **Risk** – there are no specific risk implications.
- 3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** –there are no specific health and safety implications.
- 3.5 **Gaelic** – there are no specific Gaelic implications.

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/or update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5 Background

- 5.1 The Easter Ross Area Place Plan (ERAPP) was adopted by Black Isle and Easter Ross Committee on 12 May 2025.
- 5.2 The ERAPP, within **Appendix 1**, was developed alongside the Easter Ross Community Partnership (ERCP) using a Place Based approach. The Plan presents the common themes and priorities and aims to serve as a comprehensive document that not only reflects the aspirations of the local community but also aligns with existing strategic and localised plans, ensuring that Easter Ross thrives as a prosperous area where people want to live, work and visit.

6 How the plan is delivered

- 6.1 The ERCP agreed to adopt a more streamlined approach to partnership activity to reduce duplication and maximise the effective use of resources across partner organisations. Key areas of work, including reducing inequalities and locality planning, Adult Services District Planning, Whole Family Wellbeing, and Area Place Planning, were brought together under the Community Partnership structure. Delivery of these priorities is organised through three thematic working groups - People, Place and Prosperity - to support coordinated planning, improve partnership working, and achieve better outcomes for communities across Easter Ross.

7 Progress and Achievements over the past year

- 7.1 Members are invited to review **Appendix 2**, which outlines the activity, achievements and progress delivered over the past year through the work of the ERCP and its People, Place and Prosperity Working Groups. This document will be used wider to promote and communicate the work of the partnership's work and achievements across the area.

8 Next Steps

- 8.1 The ERCP will continue to build on the work carried out in 2025/26 with particular focus on:-
- Hosting a community network event to celebrate and promote the services and opportunities available across Easter Ross.
 - Delivering collaborative projects - progressing Whole Family Wellbeing Fund Element 2 projects where they can have the greatest local impact.
 - Strengthening whole-system working - further improving alignment between services, funding streams and planning structures.
 - Improving access to support - developing clearer pathways and better communication to help people find and navigate available support.
 - Providing person centred support to help people overcome barriers and access employment opportunities.
 - Strengthening links with the community to enable greater involvement and influence.
 - Carrying out street audits to inform priorities
 - Promoting sustainable travel opportunities.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

Date: 17 July 2026

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Background Papers: None

Appendices: Appendix 1 – Easter Ross Area Place Plan
Appendix 2 – Easter Ross Area Place Plan Progress Report

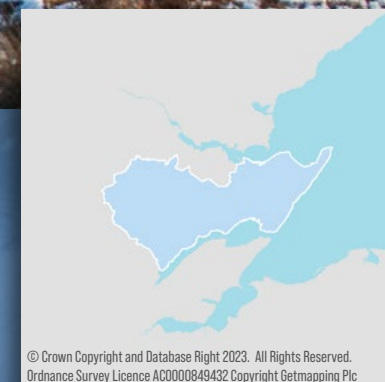


Easter Ross Area Place Plan

Plana Àite Sgìre Rois an Ear

<https://engagehighland.co.uk/easter-ross-place-plan>

<https://highlandcpp.org.uk/community-partnerships/easter-ross-community-partnership>



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Introduction

Ro-ràdh

Welcome to **Our Place Our Future**, a shared Area Place Plan (APP) for Easter Ross. Our Place Our Future presents a shared vision and set of ambitions aimed at shaping the area's future in terms of community development, infrastructure, economy, and environmental sustainability.

This Plan does not set out to replace existing plans and policies for the area, instead it aims to capture and present what the common themes and priorities are from the range of existing plans – all sense checked and validated through engagement and conversations with those who live in Easter Ross and those who provide services to the people of Easter Ross. The Area Place Plan is not a detailed action plan, but provides an overview of challenges and opportunities to inform future development of community and partnership led action planning.

This plan aims to be a useful tool for people who live and work in Easter Ross by helping to:

- Establish a shared understanding of local needs and opportunities.
- Inform decisions on service design and delivery.
- Provide evidence to support funding bids for projects.
- Encourage public, private, and community collaboration for long-term sustainable growth.
- Make best use of available resources and be prepared when new funding and investment opportunities arise.

The plan has been developed in partnership with local communities and key partners within Easter Ross. The plan sits in line with the Scottish Government's Place Principle, which prioritises collaboration among communities, public agencies and the private sector to achieve a shared vision for Easter Ross.

We hope you enjoy reading it and more importantly, we hope the priorities set out in this plan reflect what you see, hear and feel in your community. No one wants to see this plan sit gathering dust on a shelf. We want individuals, groups, service providers, funders and decision makers to pick it up, read it, use it to start conversations about improvement, investment and change. We need public agencies, organisations and local people to get involved in delivering on the priorities, update them as needs change and celebrate achievements along the way.

<https://engagehighland.co.uk/easter-ross-place-plan>

Easter Ross Area Place Plan

Plana Àite Sgìre Rois an Ear



Area Place Plan explained

Our Place Our Future focuses on Easter Ross, stretching from the Ardullie Roundabout in the west through to the Tarbet Ness Lighthouse in the east. It is one of a suite of plans prepared for each sub regional area of Highland in partnership between Highland Council, public agencies, the third sector and local communities.

Brief background to Area Place Plans

Highland Council and the Highland Community Planning Partnership maintain a commitment to develop Area Place Plans (APPs). Each Area Place Plan is tailored to the context, needs and local capacity of the Area. This means they have been developed and facilitated in various ways across Highland, recognising that each area is different.

Each plan features a vision for the area with ambitions and priorities for people and place. The aim is to inform and support the targeting of resources, service delivery and to provide a clear vision to help attract external investment, to ensure investment helps to realise local priorities. The plan will help the Highland Council, partners and communities make better decisions about service design and delivery and provide clarity and manage expectations around how and where resources are prioritised.

Area Place Plans don't sit in isolation; they inter-relate with a number of other plans, including community-led Local Place Plans (LPPs), the Highland-wide Local Development Plan (HLDP), the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan (HOIP), the Highland Investment Plan (HIP), the Highland Delivery Plan (HDP) and Community Partnership Plans, among many others.

Our Place Our Future Ar n-Àite Ar n-Àm Ri Teachd

Our Place Our Future aims to be both ambitious and realistic, pulling together aspirations articulated by individuals, groups and service providers from communities across Easter Ross with a focus on outcomes for the area as a whole. As outlined above it will help inform local and regional decision making about public services, budgeting and policy areas, as well as helping inform those wider statutory plans. It recognises the good work already taking place in our area and supports community action to make the most of opportunities.

Our Shared Vision

The overarching vision for Easter Ross centres on working together to create the conditions for communities to be:

Engaged, Attractive, Sustainable, Thriving, Empowered, and Resilient

It sets out strategic priorities under three main themes:

People | Place | Prosperity

These are summarised as follows:

People - Enhancing Quality of Life

The People theme emphasises improving the well-being and quality of life for all residents by addressing mental and physical health, inequality, poverty, and access to services.

Place - Building Sustainable Communities

The Place theme focuses on developing sustainable, well-designed communities that are resilient to economic and environmental changes. It emphasises improving infrastructure, housing, and the local environment to create attractive, inclusive, and healthy living spaces.

Prosperity - Driving Economic Growth

The Prosperity theme is centred around economic diversification, job creation, and sustainable tourism. The plan seeks to capitalise on emerging opportunities, such as renewable energy, tourism and distillery sectors.

Our Place Our Future Ar n-Àite Ar n-Àm Ri Teachd

Some of the priorities within the plan will be achieved in the short term but others will take longer to realise. The plan is live and dynamic and will be reviewed and updated on a regular basis. The Easter Ross Community Partnership, as a forum of public and third-sector partners, will take on the role to oversee the delivery of the plan.

<https://highlandcpp.org.uk/community-partnerships/easter-ross-community-partnership>

Guiding Principles

During the engagement process of developing this plan, service providers and members of the community called for a commitment to **good communication** and continued focus on **trust** and **relationship building**. With many recognising the shared benefits of this plan will depend on **meaningful conversations, transparency, trust** and a **commitment** from everyone to foster and maintain **positive relationships**.

In delivering the ambitions in the plan, there will also be an ongoing focus on community engagement and collaboration to ensure that local voices continue to be heard and integrated into decision-making processes. Monitoring and reporting back to the community will be critical to ensure transparency, accountability and importantly, continued understanding of community need.



About Easter Ross Mu Ros an Ear

Easter Ross at a glance

Easter Ross is known for its blend of history, culture, and natural beauty. Bordered by the Cromarty Firth to the south, the Dornoch Firth to the north, and the North Sea to the east, Easter Ross features rolling farmland, picturesque coastal villages, and significant archaeological sites. The area is steeped in history, with ancient Pictish stones, medieval churches, and Victorian market towns. Tain, Scotland's oldest Royal Burgh, is a notable historical site with architecture spanning several centuries. Easter Ross has a rich cultural heritage, with traditional music, festivals, and local crafts. The area is also home to several whisky distilleries and has been used as a location for film and television. The coastal and rural landscapes provide habitats for a variety of wildlife, making it a great destination for nature enthusiasts. The economy of Easter Ross is supported by agriculture, fishing, and tourism, with a growing focus on renewable energy.

Easter Ross has long history of settlement because it contains much of Highland's flatter, better drained, agriculturally productive land, has a drier and sunnier climate than the Highland average, and sheltered deep water ports which were initially used for military purposes. Despite these advantages, significant development and population didn't establish until the 1960s and 1970s with the inward investment in heavier industries such as those servicing offshore oil and gas production.

Each of the principal towns has road and rail transport connections, and fewer physical and environmental constraints to development than other areas. The landscape is principally rolling farmland often with attractive coastal views across the Cromarty, Dornoch and Moray Firths. Settlement is concentrated in a series of small towns or large villages most of which are strung along the old A9 route and railway line. The rural hinterland is upland, far less populous and large parts of it have been afforested.



Background photo of farmland at Evanton by Donald Fisher

How well does the area function?

The area is both close enough and well connected enough to Inverness to take advantage of its facilities and employment opportunities but sufficiently separate not to be affected too much by the “overheating” effects of rapid growth. It is also close to emerging employment opportunities connected with the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport (ICFGF) initiative.

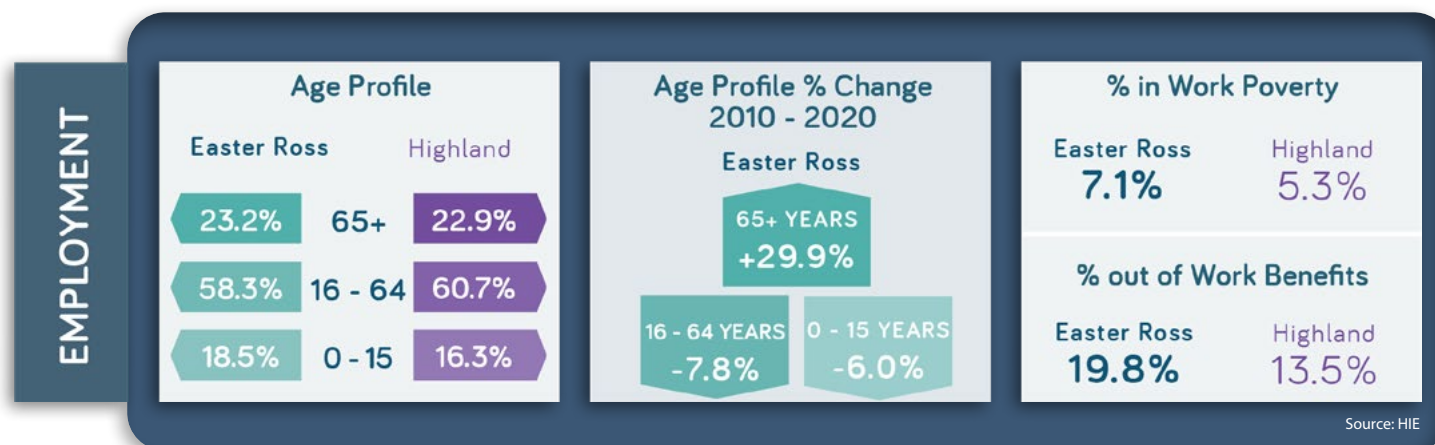
Challenges do exist, notably in terms of A9 junction capacity issues, control of sporadic housing development in the countryside, which has adverse landscape and service provision cost impacts, and making sure that the main towns and villages are as self-sufficient as possible in terms of a mix of uses and local access to daily needs. Revitalising towns with community hub facilities providing shared services are a key way to do this. The area is well placed to take advantage of the job opportunities from the Green Freeport and land is already safeguarded for employment use at Nigg, Evanton, Alness and Invergordon. Rural parts of Easter Ross face significant challenges with public transport. The low population density and dispersed communities make it difficult to provide frequent and reliable services. This can impact residents’ access to employment, education, healthcare, and other essential services.

Our People

There are 21,582 people living in Easter Ross which makes up 9% of the Highland population. The main settlements are Tain, Invergordon, Alness and Evanton. Demographic trends have seen a 2.4% reduction in the population since 2011. Compared with the Highland average there is a higher proportion of young



people, 19.4% aged 0-19yrs. The proportion of those aged 65yrs+, 23.2%, is similar to the Highland average. There is a lower proportion of working age people than the Scottish average.



The individual settlements of Easter Ross enjoy a strong sense of community with around 140 active third sector and community groups in and around each of the communities. In addition, Easter Ross has 12 Community Councils which are in place to represent and promote local issues and opportunities in each community.

Education provision - There are 3 secondary schools: Tain Royal Academy, Invergordon Academy and Alness Academy with a combined pupil roll of 1,633. There are 17 primary schools across Easter Ross with a total pupil roll of 1,660, as well as 16 Early Learning & Childcare settings with 386 children and 1 standalone special school with 29 pupils. The Sunday Times named Easter Ross Primaries in the top 5 in Highland in the 2025 League Table.

Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) identifies 6 areas (data zones) in Easter Ross which are among the 20% most deprived in Scotland with the SIMD data highlighting several key points:

- **Income and Employment:** Some areas in Easter Ross experience higher levels of income deprivation and unemployment compared to the national average.
- **Education:** There are disparities in educational attainment, with certain areas showing lower levels of qualifications among residents.
- **Health:** Health outcomes vary, with some areas facing higher rates of chronic illnesses and lower life expectancy.
- **Access to Services:** Rural areas in Easter Ross often have limited access to essential services, which can exacerbate deprivation.
- **Crime:** Crime rates can be higher in certain pockets, impacting overall community safety.
- **Housing:** Housing quality and availability can be a concern, with some areas having higher rates of substandard housing.

Employment – Alness and Invergordon Travel to Work Area 2023 data = 7,000 (full and part-time) jobs which makes up 8% of Highland's jobs. Gross average weekly full time pay = £773.90. Unemployment 2024 Highland data sets out claimant count at 3,440 or 2.4% of economically active. Employment sectors - 2020 HIE data for Inner Moray Firth area shows the top 3 employment sectors in Inner Moray Firth: human health and social work (19.8%), wholesale and retail (14.8%) and accommodation and food services (11.1%).

Strategic Fit – the fit with other Plans and Strategies

This plan doesn't aim to replace or duplicate other plans and strategies, it takes account of and has been informed by a range of existing plans, strategies and engagement. **Appendix One** provides a useful directory of key local, regional and national plans and their priorities which are relevant to Easter Ross.

How the Plan was developed

Mar a chaidh am Plana a leasachadh

Engagement Activity

This Plan has been written in partnership with local communities, public and third sectors. To achieve this, we undertook a range of engagement activity throughout 2023 and 2024 to gain a shared understanding of the needs and aspirations of those who live, work and visit in Easter Ross.

We established a cross-sector steering group tasked with analysing existing plans and consultations related to Easter Ross. The findings were then presented to stakeholders which kickstarted conversations and workshops (detailed below) which generated hundreds of valuable contributions setting out aspirations, ideas and priorities for Easter Ross.

- 2 Our Place Our Future Issues and Visioning Workshops involving key stakeholders from public, private, third and community sectors identifying the current issues, outcomes for the future and action needed to get there.
- 8 focus group conversation workshops with stakeholders, community groups, Community Councils, young people and families to establish what it's like to live and work in Easter Ross, gaining real insight into the lives and experiences of residents and service providers.
- Area Place Plan pop up stalls at 2 Talking Town Events to get more feedback from members of the public and service providers.
- Online 'Place Standard' survey, capturing information from 87 respondents on what it's like to live, work, play and visit in Easter Ross. Data was gathered from Easter Ross evidencing what people thought should be protected, changed and improved.
- Place Standard focus groups with 81 young people from Youth Forums in Tain, Invergordon and Alness. Workshop-based activity gathered data on the 14 Place Standard categories.
- Individual meetings with statutory and third sector partners to inform the content of the plan.

What was included in the desktop review?

Our desktop review involved analysing the following plans, strategies and engagement findings:

- Individual Meetings with Partners
- Inner Moray Firth Development Plan 2 (2024)
- Easter Ross Community Partnership Priorities
- Easter Ross Cares Stakeholder Findings (Spring 2023)
- NHS Highland Easter Ross Area Profile (2022)
- Have your Say Highland Easter Ross findings, Autumn 2022
- Climate Action Towns engagement and report (2024)
- Place Making Priorities (2024)
- Education Priorities (2024)
- SIMD
- THC Community Support Coordinator's end of project report (2023)
- Town Centre Health Checks (2023)
- Highland Outcome Improvement Plan (2024-27)
- Highland Community Learning and Development Plan (2021-24)
- Active Travel Masterplan
- Easter Ross Talking Town Events (2023)
- Funding activity
- National Planning Framework 4.

Challenges and Opportunities

Dùbhlain is Cothroman

Communities and partners told us that the challenges facing Easter Ross are significant and require a committed partnership response to tackle them. Some of these significant challenges are as follows:

■ Finance:

Public and third sector budgets are 'strapped', with limited money in the pot to deliver essential services; such as mental health support and maintenance of our roads, social housing and green spaces.

■ Access to Services:

Limited transport connectivity in rural villages creates barriers for those accessing core services such as health including GP practices, employability and training.

■ Housing:

Many reported a lack of affordable housing, including mid-market rentals.

■ Inequality and Poverty:

The cost-of-living crisis is pushing prices up across the board, particularly with energy, food and rent, making it harder for people to make ends meet.

■ Ageing population:

Easter Ross, like the rest of Highland, is faced with an ageing population, some with long term health conditions. This, coupled with workforce shortages, is putting pressure on Health and Social Care services across Easter Ross.

■ Drug and Alcohol use:

High levels of drug and alcohol use and associated mental health and wellbeing issues. With drug use closely linked to poverty, people living in the most deprived areas were 18 times more likely to experience problem substance use, compared to people in the least deprived communities.

Specific Challenges for Young People

■ Youth Services:

Post Covid rise in referrals to youth services with increase in mental health needs.

■ Neurodiversity:

Mainstream education can be challenging leading to poor outcomes and limited employment prospects.

■ Crime:

Young people can be targets for online crime, with reported rise in 'Sextortion.'

■ Health:

Concerns about young people using alcohol, illegal drugs and increased use of vapes. Lack of knowledge about health implications.

■ Travel:

Lack of public transport in rural areas increases pressure on young people to pass the driving test, with the driving theory test being a particular barrier for some.

■ Barriers:

School leavers can be a hard-to-reach group with increased time required to build trusted relationships and provide continuity of support via established youth work.

Emerging opportunity for Easter Ross

Inverness Cromarty Firth Green Freeport

Key to conversations around challenges and opportunities for the future, was recurring mention of Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport (ICFGF)

www.greenfreeport.scot

ICFGF is a partnership of public and private sector organisations which aims to ensure the Cromarty Firth and wider region becomes a major global hub for green energy and deliver benefits to Highland communities and the decarbonisation agenda.

With Easter Ross being at the centre of Green Freeport activity many recognised it as a huge

opportunity for economic regeneration and transformational change. Whilst many were optimistic about the potential investment and other opportunities, others sought clarity about what the green Freeport is, what benefit it would bring specifically to Easter Ross, and how opportunities would be made available for local communities and their residents. Some people shared their concerns that the ICFGF could exacerbate existing pressures on services such as schools and GP surgeries, housing shortages - particularly for those already struggling to find affordable accommodation in the area.

People spoke of being ready to welcome new people into the area but also made it clear that some people locally would need extra help and support to build skills and confidence necessary to benefit from anticipated job opportunities. The community has requested more opportunities to engage with ICFGF and suggested working through existing mechanisms such as the Easter Ross Community Councils and the Community Partnership.

Climate Action Towns

The Climate Action Towns project in Alness and Invergordon took place over 2021-2024 and was part of a broader initiative by Architecture & Design Scotland, aimed at supporting community-led climate action in small towns across Scotland. As part of the project a series of workshops were delivered which uncovered wider climate, social and infrastructure issues which have informed the priorities within this plan. Specific recommendations relating to climate action were identified to help Easter Ross communities tackle climate change effectively:

■ **Community-Led Initiatives:**

Encourage and support community-led climate action projects. This includes providing resources and guidance to local groups to develop and implement their own climate action plans.

■ **Improving Public Transport:**

Enhance public transport options to reduce reliance on private vehicles. This can help lower carbon emissions and improve accessibility for residents.

■ **Energy Efficiency:**

Promote energy efficiency measures in homes and businesses. This includes retrofitting buildings to improve insulation and reduce energy consumption.

■ **Green Spaces:**

Increase and maintain green spaces to support biodiversity and provide recreational areas for the community. Green spaces also help mitigate the effects of climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide.

■ **Education and Awareness:**

Raise awareness about climate change and its impacts through educational programmes and community events. This helps build a culture of sustainability and encourages more people to take action.

■ **Local Food Production:**

Support local food production to reduce the carbon footprint associated with transporting food from distant locations. This can include community gardens and local farmers' markets.

■ **Waste Reduction:**

Implement waste reduction strategies, such as recycling programmes and initiatives to reduce single-use plastics.

www.ads.org.uk/resource/climate-action-towns

Priority Themes

Our Place Our Future is organised around three key themes:

People | Place | Prosperity

Each representing an area of focus to support improved outcomes. In future, decision making about service design and delivery should seek to support the delivery of the following priority outcomes as identified through the community engagement.

People Daoine

Enhancing Quality of Life

The People theme emphasises improving the well-being and quality of life for all residents by addressing mental and physical health, inequality, poverty, and access to services.

What are the current issues and challenges?

- **Ageing Population:**
Placing a strain on health and social care services.
- **Health and Social Care:**
Increasing demand for health and social care services, including mental health and addiction support. Ageing workforce.
- **Continued Post Covid Recovery:**
Ongoing economic, social and health consequences of the pandemic.
- Public Services have constrained budgets making it challenging to fund essential services and infrastructure projects.
- Third Sector organisations are often reliant on small, time limited grants making it challenging to forward plan and sustain services.
- Advocacy for increased **local control over decision making, including funding necessary to address local needs** – including the role of local volunteers in maintenance and civic activity.

Background photo of Evanton by The Highland Council

Priorities

■ **Mental Health and Addiction Support:**

One of the key priorities outlined under this theme was the need to strengthen mental health services and addiction recovery support plans. The need for a focus on early intervention, reduction of stigma, and improved access to addiction recovery services was also highlighted.

■ **Ageing population and increased number of people living with chronic diseases:**

Provide support to enable people to live longer in their own home through increased access to care at home for those in need. Change mindset and behaviours through education in self-management and increase social prescribing.

■ **Community Hubs:**

Improved equity and access to services through the development of cross-sector, multi-agency hubs to provide local access to healthcare, mental health services, social care, and other essential services. Such hubs would reduce travel times and improve service delivery for vulnerable populations.

■ **Youth and Family Support:**

Increasing opportunities through Whole Family Wellbeing, including job training, access to affordable childcare, and youth services, is highlighted to retain and attract families to the area. Emphasis was placed on the need for targeted support for families in poverty, with a focus on maximising incomes and reducing isolation.

- Decrease suicide and alcohol and drug specific deaths.

Place Àite

Building Sustainable Communities

The Place theme focuses on developing sustainable, well-designed and supported communities that are resilient to economic and environmental changes. It emphasises improving infrastructure, housing, and the local environment to create attractive, inclusive, and healthy living spaces.

What are the current issues and challenges?

■ Environmental Constraints:

Managing climate change and the protection of prime agricultural land pose challenges to expanding housing and industry.

■ Infrastructure Constraints:

The area's infrastructure, particularly roads, water, sewerage, and digital connectivity, is under strain.

■ Public and Third Sector Finance:

Strained budgets are making it challenging to fund essential services and infrastructure projects. Third Sector organisations reliant on small, time limited grants. This makes it challenging to forward plan and sustain services.

■ Care home provision:

Closures raise concerns about the availability of **local care provision** for residents in Easter Ross. This, coupled with challenges in maintaining sufficient staffing levels, further impacts availability.

■ Older social **housing stock** is in need of upgrading,

including building condition, heating and insulation. Perceived need for significantly increased social housing and mid-market rental property for both residents and seasonal workers. Demand for smaller, accessible homes for elderly and disabled people.

- Concerns about limited access to GP appointments, distant pharmacies, and the absence of **medical facilities** in some communities.
- Widespread concern over poor **pavement** condition (particularly for wheelchair users and those with poor mobility), **road condition** (potholes, surfaces and crumbling gutters). Desire for segregated routes for walking, with zebra crossings and dedicated cycling lanes.
- Importance of commuting to Inverness for employment opportunities is challenged by **public transport links and integration** between train and bus services. Perceived high cost, infrequency and unreliability of some public transport services, particularly direct connections between settlements.
- While there is high regard for the area's **architectural heritage**, concerns were raised about **vacant town centre property**, derelict buildings and maintenance of public spaces – including overgrown areas, blocked drains and regular flooding. General frustration with the **condition of school buildings, town halls and public spaces**.
- Demand for **community-focused outdoor areas** with seating, shelter, bins and amenities like cafes and toilets. Improved drainage and accessibility of existing green spaces for year-round use.
- Poor **maintenance of some formal play areas** – broken equipment, overgrown areas and broken glass, lack of bins for dog waste. Demand for play spaces designed for older teenagers and adults. **Maintenance of existing community facilities** was also raised as a significant concern.

Priorities

■ Active Travel, Transport and Connectivity:

Promote active travel (walking, cycling, wheeling) as a key aspect of future infrastructure development. Investments in safe walking and cycling routes, particularly in Alness, Invergordon, and along the coast, are prioritised to reduce car reliance, safety and improve health outcomes. Improvements are also sought to public transport links with a focus on timetabling and connections. Upgrading road infrastructure at Tomich Junction. Improved signage and wayfinding for walking and cycling routes for navigation and safety.

■ Housing and Development:

There is a pressing need for affordable, mixed-housing developments to accommodate the ageing population, young families, and local workers. Engagement identified key areas for future housing, such as brownfield sites in Invergordon and Seaboard Villages. Housing developments must also be environmentally sustainable, incorporating energy-efficient designs and renewable energy sources. Many people called for improvements to road conditions and infrastructure to enhance the safety and appearance of streets.

■ Heritage and Culture:

Calls for the safeguarding and conserving of key heritage sites and cultural assets, particularly in Tain and Milton. Commitment from partners to work together to actively seek out new uses for redundant buildings, including exploring community ownership.

■ Environmental Sustainability:

Easter Ross' rich natural environment is seen as both an asset and a constraint. The plan emphasises safeguarding the area's built, cultural, and natural assets, while promoting sustainable energy practices. Initiatives such as community energy schemes, tree planting, and water conservation are highlighted as essential for the area's future.

Prosperity Soirbheachas

Driving Economic Growth

The Prosperity theme is centred around economic diversification, job creation, and sustainable tourism. The plan seeks to capitalise on emerging opportunities, such as renewable energy, tourism and distillery sectors.

What are the current issues and challenges?

■ Economic Pressures:

While Easter Ross has a lower unemployment rate than the national average, some areas, particularly Alness and Invergordon, face high levels of poverty. The Plan emphasises the need to create jobs, particularly through renewable energy and tourism, to diversify the economy and reduce inequalities.

■ Public and Third Sector Finance:

Strained budgets are making it challenging to fund essential services and infrastructure projects. Third Sector organisations are typically reliant on small, time limited grants, making it challenging to forward plan and sustain services.

■ Scale of Renewables:

Recognition of diverse opinions and social, economic and environmental implications, particularly by communities most impacted by increasing levels of development.

Priorities

■ Job Creation and Training:

A key priority is increasing employment opportunities, particularly for young people and those facing barriers to getting and sustaining work. Priorities for targeted training programmes aligned with new industries such as renewable energy, green hydrogen, and sustainable tourism are called for. Supporting small businesses and social enterprises is also seen as vital for creating long-term local employment. Support best working practices through promoting the Highland Employer Charter.

■ Sustainable Tourism:

Many recognised the growing potential of tourism, especially with the rise of eco-tourism and the North Coast 500 (NC500) route. Improved tourist infrastructure, such as waste disposal facilities for campervans, public toilets, and visitor attractions including a digital heritage trail, is essential for making Easter Ross a more attractive destination.

■ Community Wealth Building:

Calls were made for initiatives to promote community wealth, including; adoption of fair work practices (including promotion of the Real Living Wage), maximise local spend through procurement activity, increase local supply chain development, explore shared ownership models for both renewable energy and local businesses. This approach aims to ensure that economic growth benefits local communities and reduces inequality.

■ Embed Inclusive Decision-Making:

Work meaningfully with communities to shape how benefits from renewable developments are used to ensure funds are directed towards prioritised local and strategic needs. Use the Highland Social Value Charter to achieve strong governance and community engagement to empower communities in managing and directing benefit funds.

How will the Plan be used

Mar a chleachdar am Plana



Photo of Road Lining on the A836 at Easter Fearn by The Highland Council

The Plan has been written for the local community, third sector organisations, businesses and Easter Ross Community Planning Partners. To achieve the aspirations and outcomes set out in the plan, it will require all partners - community, public, third and private sector - to work together.

The Plan should be used as it is intended – as a tool to bring people together to inform decision making, to collaborate on and achieve better outcomes for the community and those within it. The Plan is an ambitious evidence-based statement of community aspirations, based on community engagement. It therefore provides all who are responsible for delivering services, looking after assets or with a vested interest in the Easter Ross area with a tool to inform decision making about service design, delivery and investment.

It requires collaboration based around the 2 key guiding principles of an ongoing commitment to **good communication** and continued focus on **trust and relationship building**. In doing this, the plan will:

- support and enable the community to influence and understand their future;
- empower the local community as an active partner;
- create more trust and collaboration between communities, authorities and public bodies; and
- enable equitable and smoother delivery of services and investment.

To support this in practice, public sector partners and funders are asked to utilise the Plan to inform discussion and decision making on service design, delivery and budget allocation. The Plan should help influence how budgets are allocated, how services could be delivered, provide evidence for decision making, inform policy and support communities to acquire and develop their own income-generating assets and funding sources.

Take Away Message

The Easter Ross Area Place Plan is a visioning document which sets the scene for subsequent development of action plans to support progressing local ambitions and aspirations and addressing local issues together. The priority themes of People, Place and Prosperity seek to create resilient, sustainable and thriving communities that are well prepared for the future. Successful implementation requires long term collaboration and investment to ensure that the area's full potential is released and the vision fully realised.

<https://highlandcpp.org.uk/community-partnerships/easter-ross-community-partnership>

Appendices Eàrr-ràdhan

There are a number of appendices / associated documents linked to the Easter Ross Area Place Plan. These are listed below for reference, although not included as part of this document for ease of printing. They can be found on the Area Place Plan website:

<https://engagehighland.co.uk/easter-ross>

Appendix 1: Existing plans of relevance to Easter Ross



2025/26

Easter Ross Area Place Plan Progress Report



Easter Ross Community Partnership

Annual Progress Report 2025/26

Our Place Our Future

Welcome

2025/26 has been a year of strengthening partnerships, building community capacity and creating more joined-up approaches to supporting people and places across Easter Ross.

Through our working groups, partners, communities, Elected Members and local organisations, we have come together to identify priorities, share intelligence and develop practical solutions to local challenges. This report highlights the progress achieved over the past year and sets out our priorities for 2026/27.

Our Starting Point: The Easter Ross Area Place Plan

The Easter Ross Community Partnership's work during 2025/26 has been guided by the priorities identified within the Easter Ross Area Place Plan. [Easter Ross Area Place Plan](#) (ERAPP)

The ERAPP brought together community views, local intelligence and partner knowledge to identify the issues that matter most to people across Easter Ross. It highlighted the importance of taking a more coordinated approach to addressing challenges around wellbeing, community resilience, transport, access to services, housing, sustainability and inclusive economic development.

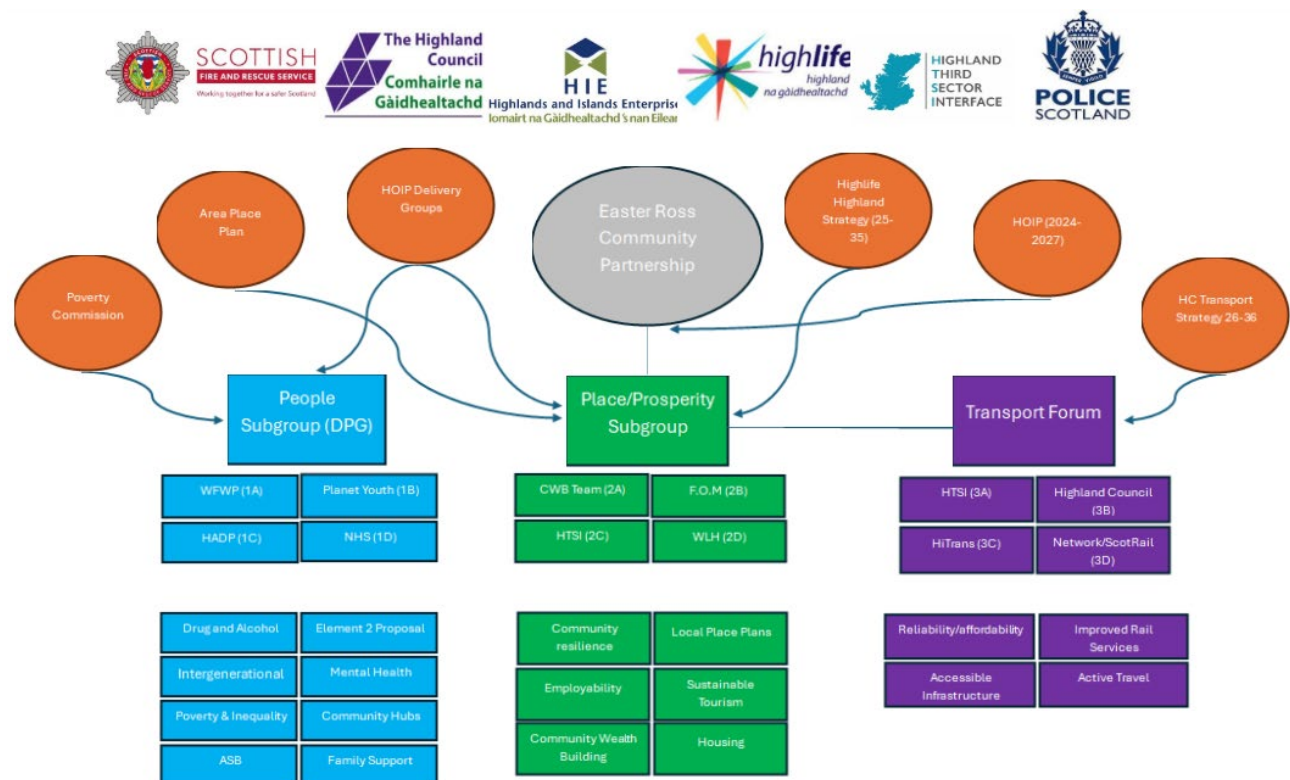
Rather than creating new priorities, the Partnership focused on aligning existing programmes and services around the ambitions set out within the Place Plan. This approach has helped connect a range of workstreams including:

- Whole Family Wellbeing Programme
- Adult Services District Planning
- Local Place Planning
- Community Planning priorities
- Community resilience activity
- Transport and accessibility initiatives



creating a more joined-up approach to delivering local outcomes.

The establishment of dedicated People, Place and Prosperity Working Groups has enabled partners and communities to focus on delivering the priorities identified through the ERAPP while ensuring local voices remain central to decision-making. Terms of Reference, action trackers and increased Elected Member engagement have all strengthened this approach.



Working structure of the ER CP 2026

Progress at a glance 2025/26

- 4 full Easter Ross Partnership meetings held
- 16 working group meetings held - supporting partnership working across People, Place and Prosperity priorities.
- Community Capacity Building - Two online workshops delivered for community groups focusing on; Local Place Planning - 7 October 2025; and Community Resilience Planning – 12 February 2026.
- Strengthening Governance - Terms of Reference established for all working groups; action trackers introduced across all groups to improve accountability and delivery; and growing membership and engagement across partnership structures (approx. 75 members on the ERCP distribution list).
- Stronger Local Representation - positive involvement from Elected Members has strengthened links between communities and decision-makers, helping ensure local priorities are effectively represented.
- Better Alignment Across Programmes - the partnership approach has improved coordination between; Whole Family Wellbeing Programme; Adult Services District Planning; Area Place Planning; and Community Planning activity. Creating a more joined-up approach to local delivery and making best use of people's time through streamlined meetings and activities.

Easter Ross Community Partnership Meetings

The Easter Ross Community Partnership has held themed meetings on several different topics throughout 2025/26. The meeting themes are identified based on discussions at the various subgroups, meaning partners drive forward the overall priorities of the Partnership. During this

period, the Partnership meetings have focused on: opportunities afforded by the Cromarty and Firth Green Freeport, poverty and data, drug and alcohol support and training and employment for young people in Easter Ross.

The primary objective is to bring partners together to explore opportunities for partnership working and unearth gaps in provision. As an example, the thematic meeting on drug and alcohol support brought together key partners in the area to discuss what provision is out there and where the gaps are. This then led to a drug and alcohol scoping session to discuss the prospect of having a drug and alcohol forum for Easter Ross. The scoping session was attended by partners from both public and third sector and after a fruitful discussion it was agreed that there was no capacity for a specific forum, however drug and alcohol support would be more formally and consistently covered through the People subgroup. This ensures that a wide range of partners are aware of all the work happening across Easter Ross, leading to greater collaboration and reducing duplication

The Working Groups in a little more detail

PEOPLE: Supporting Wellbeing Across Easter Ross

Building a Collaborative Forum

The People subgroup has become an established and constructive partnership forum, bringing together organisations and services to support a more coordinated, place-based approach to improving wellbeing.

Originally aligned to the District Planning Group and Whole Family Wellbeing Programme, the group now provides a broader "cradle to grave" platform, connecting services and partners around shared priorities.

Whole Family Wellbeing Fund

Throughout 2025/26, partners supported delivery of Element 1 Whole Family Wellbeing Fund projects across Easter Ross.

As these projects move into review and evaluation, work has also progressed to develop Element 2 proposals, focusing on a smaller number of collaborative projects informed by local need and partner intelligence.

Understanding Our Communities Better

Partnership work has helped create a clearer picture of local support provision by mapping services across Easter Ross.

This work has:

- Improved understanding of available services
- Identified gaps in provision
- Highlighted areas of duplication
- Increased recognition of the vital contribution made by community and third-sector organisations.

Key Highlights in 2025/26

Reducing Isolation and Supporting Wellbeing

Feedback from local engagement highlights the value of community-based activities in:

- Reducing social isolation
- Supporting mental wellbeing
- Strengthening local connections
- Encouraging preventative approaches to support.

Moving Towards Prevention

Good progress has been made in establishing the foundations for a more preventative and joined-up model of support, helping partners move away from isolated service delivery and towards a whole-system approach.

Challenges Identified

While significant progress has been made, Partners have identified key challenges communities continue to face barriers in accessing support.

Common Challenges

- Limited transport options, particularly in rural areas
- Cost of activities and wider financial pressures
- Timing of services and lack of childcare
- Limited awareness of available support.

Gaps in Provision

Partners also identified continuing gaps in:

- Mental health support
- Early intervention services
- Crisis response provision
- Support for additional support needs
- Transitional support
- Intensive support for families with complex needs.

Capacity and Sustainability

Ongoing pressures on services, particularly within the third sector, continue to impact capacity and long-term sustainability. Further work is required to improve visibility, coordination and connectivity between services.

Planet Youth in Easter Ross

Planet Youth is a prevention-based model which was developed in Iceland and is now used in more than 30 countries. Planet Youth is now established in all three secondary schools in Easter Ross. The most recent survey was conducted in September 2025. 375 S3 and S4 pupils from Tain Royal Academy, Invergordon Academy and Alness Academy were asked a range of questions on topics, including substance use, sleep, bullying and more. The survey achieved a strong 77% response rate across the 3 Easter Ross schools, providing robust data on young people's health, wellbeing, behaviours and risk factors.

Analysis showed a strong relationship between positive mental health and healthy behaviours, particularly adequate sleep and avoiding substance use.

Sleep was identified as a significant issue for many young people, with further exploration of factors affecting sleep quality and duration. The presentation also highlighted concerns around sharing images online, bullying experiences and self-harm among young people, reinforcing the need for early intervention and support.

Planet Youth partnered with Sleep Action Scotland to deliver a fully funded sleep improvement programme for pupils. This included:

- A live webinar on improving sleep for performance.
- Access to sleep education resources and lesson plans for schools.
- A parent and carer session on supporting adolescent sleep routines, now available through The Parent Hub.

Community Action Groups (CAGs) have been established in Alness, Invergordon and Tain school cluster areas to develop local actions based on survey findings and community priorities.

Place and Prosperity Working Group – Building Sustainable Communities and Driving Economic Growth

Recognising the significant overlap between the Place and Prosperity priorities, the two working groups agreed to come together as a single cross-sector partnership. Membership includes



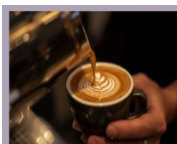
Alness Academy

Community Action Group

We are absolutely delighted to have received funding from Planet Youth to expand the fantastic partnership we have developed with the young people of **Alness Academy**. We currently have two exciting projects underway, with many more already being planned for the new school term.

One of these projects has seen a group of S3 boys transform a long-disused garden at the back of our Community Hub into a beautiful outdoor space. Working for just two hours each week, the boys have achieved an incredible amount through their hard work, commitment and teamwork. What they have accomplished is simply outstanding, and it has been a privilege to watch both the garden and the young people flourish together. They have become so invested in the project that several are planning to continue attending during the school holidays, bringing along friends and family to enjoy the wonderful space they have created. We couldn't be prouder of every single one of them.

We were also delighted to host our first **intergenerational afternoon tea**, organised by a fantastic group of S3 girls from Alness Academy. The event welcomed residents from several local care homes and was filled with laughter, fun and friendship. Following its success, we are now planning to make this a regular event, inviting different year groups to help prepare, host and spend time with our older generation. The smiles on everyone's faces said it all and highlighted the incredible impact that bringing generations together can have on everyone involved. We are incredibly grateful to Planet Youth for believing in our vision and helping us create lasting opportunities for young people across Alness.



Invergordon Academy

Community Action Group

Cloutie McToot Community Cafe in Invergordon has implemented three Planet Youth sessions to date; a recycled Tower Challenge, Barista training and a Police Case Files night. This has been supported by the creation of marketing materials, social media presence, community information posters and parent engagement posters.

At the Barista Skills Training, young people received hands-on experience in coffee preparation and latte art. Participants were also awarded Planet Youth Achievement Certificates in recognition of the new skills they gained.

representatives from the public, third and community sectors, enabling a collaborative approach to addressing local challenges and opportunities across Easter Ross.

During the year, members agreed to focus on four key themes:

- Supporting community capacity and resilience
- Employability
- Connectivity
- Community Wealth Building

This collaborative approach led to a range of practical activities and outcomes. The group supported initiatives aimed at helping people into employment, delivered workshops on Local Place Planning and Community Emergency Planning, and worked to identify Community Wealth Building opportunities across Easter Ross.

Quarterly meetings have been consistently well attended, with strong representation from both public and third-sector partners. Through the working group's engagement with local Community Councils, a need for improved transport coordination was identified. This engagement directly contributed to the establishment of the new **Easter Ross Transport Forum**, creating a dedicated platform to address local transport issues and improve connectivity across the area.

Key Highlights in 2025/26

Local Place Planning

One of the key principles of the ERAPP is that local communities are best placed to identify opportunities and challenges within their own areas. This has been reflected in the Partnership's support for local place plans across Easter Ross, ensuring communities have a stronger role in shaping future investment, services and development within their local areas. At the start of 2025 only one community within both Wards 6 and 7 was preparing a Local Place Plan, fast forward to July 2026, there are now local place plans being developed in all communities across Easter Ross.

This represents a significant step towards community-led planning and local decision-making.

Supporting people into work

- Expansion of Youth Provision - Venture Forward proposal approved for delivery in Balintore.
- New Easter Ross Key Worker in place.

Session Plan	1. Welcome and Introductions
	2. Local Place Plans - why bother? Community led plans explained - benefits they bring to local communities - Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) LPPs for real - hearing how Ardross and Kilsnoo are getting on with their LPPs What's out there to help you get started - THC and national resources
	3. Easter Ross Area Place Plan update on the priorities spotlight on ER Transport Forum
	4. Community Council Issues and Opportunities opportunity to highlight CC matters, e.g. good practice, tricky issues, upcoming events/projects
	5. Date of next meeting



- Street League employability group delivered in Dingwall
- In work support offered to all clients based on individual need.
- Ongoing client feedback and compliance monitoring undertaken.
- Partnership work with HTSI and HC to develop Workplace Respect project.
- Events delivered – supported jobs fair on 5 Nov in the Averon Centre, family engagement event in Milton on 8 April, Invergordon employability event on 7 May. Future events planned for Milton and Balintore.
- New delivery contracts established with Barnardo's aimed at care experienced young people and Apex Scotland supporting criminal justice clients.
- Highland Employer Recruitment Offer (HERO) actively promoted to employers.
- Joint work with SDS to identify and support school leavers requiring employability support.
- All in Highland third sector employability consortium established and operational across Highland area.
- Promotion carried out for National Employability Day activity.
- NHS activity - career inspiration weeks developed for secondary pupils in Invergordon with further events planned.
- Scottish Govt. funding secured to develop transport initiatives to support people into work. Employability Service to work with Easter Ross Transport group to progress.



Easter Ross Transport Forum

Transport emerged as one of the most important themes and to respond to this, the Easter Ross Transport Forum was established. Community Councils were asked to identify their top five transport priorities, providing the basis for a series of themed discussions focused on:

- Reliable and Affordable Public Transport
- Rail Service Improvements
- Accessible and Safe Infrastructure
- Active Travel and Sustainable Choices

These themed sessions have now concluded and have provided valuable insight into local transport needs.

Looking Ahead for the Transport Forum

The next phase of work will involve:

- Greater community involvement
- Development of community transport solutions
- Street audits to identify accessibility improvements
- Promotion of sustainable travel opportunities across Easter Ross.

Looking Forward: Priorities for 2026/27

What Success Looks Like

- Stronger community voices
- Better partnership working
- Improved transport, connectivity and access to services
- Better health and wellbeing outcomes
- More resilient communities
- Coordinated investment and service delivery

These ambitions continue to underpin the work of the Easter Ross Community Partnership and will remain central to delivery. To achieve this the Partnership will focus on the following activity in 2026/27:

- Delivering collaborative projects - progressing Whole Family Wellbeing Fund Element 2 projects where they can have the greatest local impact.
- Strengthening whole-system working - further improving alignment between services, funding streams and planning structures.
- Improving access to support - developing clearer pathways and better communication to help people find and navigate available support.
- Key priority areas for People Subgroup - Mental health and emotional wellbeing; support for families with additional support needs, early support and prevention, reducing isolation, strengthening community connections.
- Key priority areas for Place & Prosperity Subgroup – supporting people into work; explore sustainable tourism options; improve connectivity, including community transport options; and continue to support community led planning and action.

Using Data

The ERCP is committed to embedding quality improvement approaches within the sub-group activity. Partners have focussed on identifying the data they hold and using this to inform discussion. The focus for the coming year is to build on this to better inform action planning and reporting of outcomes.

Thank You

The progress achieved during 2025/26 reflects the commitment of partner organisations, Elected Members and community groups who continue to work together to make Easter Ross a stronger, healthier and more connected place.

Together, we are creating the conditions for communities to thrive