

Agenda Item	6
Report No	CCC/14/26

The Highland Council

Committee: Climate Change

Date: 12 August 2026

Report Title: Scotland's Climate Change Plan: 2026-2040

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an overview of Scotland's Climate Change Plan 2026-2040, highlight the key changes between the draft and final Plan, consider the extent to which Highland Council's consultation priorities are reflected in the final Plan, and outline the implications for Highland Council.
- 1.2 The report also considers the extent to which the final Climate Change Plan aligns with the strategic direction approved by Council in March 2026 through the Climate Change, Energy and Community Resilience report. The final Plan does not fundamentally alter that strategic direction; rather, it reinforces the Council's programme-led approach to climate mitigation, adaptation, energy transition and community resilience, together with the importance of continuing to strengthen governance, cross-service coordination, performance management and delivery arrangements across the organisation.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:-
 - i. **Note** the publication of Scotland's Climate Change Plan 2026-2040;
 - ii. **Note** the implications of the Climate Change Plan for the Council; and
 - iii. **Note** that the final Climate Change Plan reinforces the strategic direction approved by the Council in March 2026 and supports the Council's ongoing programme of work to strengthen coordination of climate mitigation, adaptation, energy transition and community resilience across Council services.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** - There are no additional financial commitments requiring approval as a direct consequence of this report.

However, the publication of Scotland's Climate Change Plan reinforces the conclusions reached by Council in March 2026 that the scale, complexity and cross-cutting nature of climate change, energy transition and community resilience now require a more coordinated corporate approach to delivery.

The final Plan places increased emphasis on implementation, place-based delivery, governance, monitoring, climate adaptation and partnership working. These are consistent with the strategic direction already agreed by Council and reinforce the need to strengthen coordination across services, supported by appropriate governance, programme management, performance arrangements and specialist capacity.

The Council is already progressing work arising from the March 2026 decision to develop these arrangements. Any future proposals requiring changes to staffing, governance, investment or financial resources will be considered separately through the Council's established governance and budget processes.

- 3.2 **Legal** - The Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 places climate change duties on public bodies, including local authorities, requiring the Council, in exercising its functions, to contribute to emissions reduction targets, adapt to the impacts of climate change and act in the way best calculated to deliver sustainable development. Climate-related risks also have implications for the delivery of the Council's wider statutory duties, including those relating to public health, resilience, equality and the protection of vulnerable people. The Climate Change Plan provides the Scottish Government's framework for meeting Scotland's statutory carbon budgets and net zero targets and forms part of the wider policy context within which local authorities operate.
- 3.3 **Risk** - There are no risks arising directly from this report. Climate change, the energy transition and infrastructure resilience present increasing strategic risks for the Council. Delivery of climate mitigation and adaptation objectives will continue to depend on factors including funding availability, infrastructure capacity, workforce skills and partnership working. Insufficient alignment between national policy ambition and local delivery capacity may present future implementation risks.
- 3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – There are no health and safety implications arising directly from this report.
- 3.5 **Gaelic** – There are no implications arising from this report.

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 Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 places a duty on Scottish Ministers to prepare a Climate Change Plan outlining the policies and proposals the Scottish Government will take forward to deliver Scotland's climate targets.
- 5.2 [Scotland's Climate Change Plan 2026-2040](#) is the first Plan to be developed under Scotland's carbon budget framework, replacing annual emissions targets with legally binding five-year carbon budgets covering the period 2026–2040. The Plan sets out the pathway to achieving net zero emissions by 2045 and places greater emphasis on long-term delivery, implementation and monitoring.
- 5.3 The Plan sets out a sector-based approach to emissions reduction, encompassing buildings, transport, waste, energy supply, industry, agriculture, and land use. It also places a strong focus on delivering a just transition, unlocking economic opportunities, tackling biodiversity loss, and adapting to the impacts of climate change that are already unavoidable.
- 5.4 The Scottish Government published a draft Climate Change Plan in November 2025 and undertook a public consultation on its proposals. [Highland Council's response](#) to the consultation was approved by the Climate Change Committee in January 2026.
- 5.5 The Climate Change Plan is accompanied by a series of supporting annexes, which provide:-
 - context and evidence supporting the Plan, including Scotland's climate policy framework, carbon budgets and approach to delivery and monitoring ([Annex 1](#));
 - sector-specific policies and proposals ([Annex 2](#));
 - analytical evidence, emissions modelling, assumptions and estimates of costs and savings ([Annex 3](#)); and
 - a summary of consultation and parliamentary scrutiny and how feedback informed the final Plan ([Annex 4](#)).

6 Key Variances Between the Draft and Final Version of the Plan

- 6.1 The final Climate Change Plan largely maintains the policy direction, emissions reduction pathway and overall ambition set out in the draft Plan. The most notable changes relate to delivery, implementation and monitoring rather than the introduction of significant new policies or emissions reduction targets.

The areas that have been strengthened or given greater prominence in the final Plan include:-

- climate adaptation, resilience and preparedness;
- monitoring, evaluation and reporting arrangements;
- place-based delivery and partnership working;
- implementation and governance arrangements; and
- just transition outcomes, wider social, economic and health co-benefits, including greater emphasis on the economic opportunities associated with climate action and the costs of inaction

7 Alignment with Highland Council Consultation Priorities

- 7.1 The final Climate Change Plan reflects a number of themes and priorities highlighted by the Council through the consultation process. These issues were also raised more widely through the consultation and parliamentary scrutiny process and informed a range of amendments and enhancements to the final Plan. The extent to which key priorities identified by the Council are reflected in the final Plan is summarised below:-

- Place-based delivery remains a central theme of the final Plan and has been given greater emphasis through a stronger focus on local partnerships, community-led approaches and tailoring delivery to local circumstances.
 - The role of local authorities as delivery partners is more clearly recognised, with increased emphasis on partnership working, local implementation and collaboration. However, the Plan provides limited detail on how responsibilities for local delivery will be translated into practice.
 - The Council's call for long-term and predictable funding is only partially reflected. While the final Plan provides additional information on investment requirements, costs and benefits, it does not introduce significant new funding commitments for local government.
 - Grid capacity and energy infrastructure constraints are acknowledged within the final Plan, but limited detail is provided on how these challenges will be addressed, particularly in rural and island areas where infrastructure limitations can present significant barriers to delivery.
 - Concerns regarding electricity pricing, affordability and regional disparities are not substantively addressed within the final Plan, despite their significance for areas such as Highland that play a major role in renewable energy generation.
 - The final Plan continues to highlight the importance of skills development and green jobs, aligning with concerns raised by the Council. However, further detail on place-based skills delivery, workforce development and regional training provision remains limited.
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- Climate adaptation and resilience receive significantly greater emphasis within the final Plan, including stronger references to climate risk, resilience and

adaptation planning. This aligns closely with the Council's view that adaptation should receive equal prominence alongside emissions reduction.

- The principles of a just transition and community benefit are reinforced throughout the final Plan, with continued emphasis on fairness, reducing inequalities and ensuring that communities benefit from climate action and investment.
- Monitoring, evaluation and implementation arrangements have been strengthened, with expanded indicators and greater focus on tracking delivery. However, uncertainty remains regarding delivery capacity, resourcing and the practical implementation of actions at local level.

8 Relationship to Highland Council's Strategic Approach

March 2026 Council Direction	Climate Change Plan
Place-based delivery	Strongly reinforced
Climate adaptation	Significantly strengthened
Programme-led governance	Strongly reinforced
Cross-service delivery	Strongly reinforced
Energy transition	Strongly reinforced
Community resilience	Strongly reinforced
Performance management	Strongly reinforced
Investment planning	Supported
Local partnerships	Strongly reinforced

Overall, the Climate Change Plan validates the strategic direction approved by Council in March 2026. The principal implication is therefore not the need for a new strategy, but the continued implementation of the governance, organisational and delivery arrangements already being developed by the Council.

9 Implications for Highland Council

- 9.1 The Climate Change Plan reinforces the role of local authorities as key delivery partners in supporting Scotland's transition to net zero and building resilience to the impacts of climate change. The implications for Highland Council are considered below.

9.2 Areas where the Council has a direct delivery role

9.2.1 Buildings and Heat

The Climate Change Plan identifies decarbonisation of buildings and heat as a key component of delivering Scotland's carbon budgets and achieving net zero by 2045. The Plan sets out policies and proposals to increase energy efficiency and accelerate the uptake of low-carbon heating systems across Scotland's domestic, public and non-domestic building stock. The Plan also highlights the importance of ensuring that the transition supports affordability, addresses fuel poverty and reflects differing local circumstances through place-based delivery approaches.

The Plan reinforces the importance of Highland Council's role in supporting the delivery of national objectives through local planning, partnership working and implementation of the Council's Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy (LHEES). Delivery within Highland will need to reflect the area's unique characteristics, including its dispersed population, large number of rural and island communities, high proportion of off-gas properties and comparatively high levels of fuel poverty.

The Council will need to continue progressing the decarbonisation of its own estate and work with communities, public-sector partners, housing providers and businesses to support improvements in energy efficiency and the uptake of low-carbon heat. The final Plan's stronger emphasis on delivery, monitoring and place-based action reinforces the role of local authorities in facilitating and supporting local implementation of heat and building decarbonisation programmes.

Successful delivery in Highland will depend on a range of factors that are largely outside the Council's direct control, including the availability of long-term funding, workforce and supply-chain capacity, consumer affordability, and supporting electricity network and renewable energy infrastructures.

9.2.2 Transport

The Climate Change Plan identifies transport as one of Scotland's largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions and highlights the need to reduce emissions through increased use of sustainable and active travel, improved public transport and the transition to zero-emission vehicles. The Plan recognises that transport solutions must reflect local circumstances and that different approaches will be required across Scotland's urban, rural and island communities.

The Plan reinforces the role of local authorities in supporting transport decarbonisation through transport planning, infrastructure provision, place-making and partnership working. For Highland Council, this aligns closely with the objectives of the [Highland Local Transport Strategy 2025–2035](#) and its associated [Delivery Plan](#), which set out the Council's approach to developing a low-carbon, accessible, resilient and sustainable transport system. The Local Transport Strategy includes objectives relating to reducing transport emissions, improving public and community transport, supporting active travel and improving the resilience of the transport network.

The Council is already progressing a number of initiatives that support the ambitions of the Climate Change Plan, including the expansion of electric vehicle

charging infrastructure through the North of Scotland EV Charging Infrastructure Partnership and the EZO charging network, continued investment in active travel, support for public and community transport, and implementation of actions identified within the Local Transport Strategy Delivery Plan. These initiatives will support the transition to lower-carbon transport while helping maintain connectivity for communities across Highland.

Delivery within Highland will need to reflect the area's dispersed population, extensive road network and the importance of maintaining access to employment, education, healthcare and essential services. For Highland, this reflects the reality that many communities remain heavily reliant on private vehicles due to geography, distance and the limited availability of alternative transport options. Successful delivery in Highland will also depend on factors including sustained investment, electricity network capacity, technological developments and the affordability of low-carbon transport options.

9.2.3 Waste and Circular Economy

The Climate Change Plan supports Scotland's transition to a circular economy through reducing waste generation, increasing reuse, repair and recycling, and reducing emissions associated with the production, consumption and disposal of materials. The Plan places increasing emphasis on waste prevention, resource efficiency and maximising the value of materials through reuse and circular economy approaches. It also recognises the contribution that these measures can make towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions and supporting wider environmental and economic outcomes.

While many of the policy and regulatory levers sit at a national level, local authorities have an important role in delivering waste collection services, supporting recycling, encouraging more sustainable resource use and supporting circular economy principles through service delivery and community engagement.

The Council has already delivered significant changes to waste service provision through the Highland-wide service change programme, supported by investment from the Recycling Improvement Fund. This has contributed to an increase in recycling performance from 37% in 2021 to a forecast 45% in 2025/26 and a reduction of approximately 10,000 tonnes of waste arisings over the same period.

The Council is also supporting reuse and repair initiatives through the Reuse and Repair Fund and is developing a refreshed Waste Strategy to respond to forthcoming regulatory changes, identify opportunities to further improve service performance and support the transition to a circular economy.

The Climate Change Plan is consistent with this direction of travel and reinforces the importance of waste prevention, increasing reuse and recycling, diverting biodegradable waste from landfill and reducing lifecycle emissions associated with resource consumption. Successful delivery will continue to depend on national policy developments, regulatory requirements, investment in infrastructure, market conditions for recyclable materials and public participation in waste reduction and recycling initiatives.

9.2.4 Adaptation, Resilience and Preparedness

The final Climate Change Plan places significantly greater emphasis on climate adaptation and resilience, recognising that some climate impacts are already unavoidable and that adaptation must be pursued alongside emissions reduction.

Consistent with the objectives of Scotland's Third National Adaptation Plan (SNAP3), the Plan highlights the need to increase resilience to a range of climate risks, including flooding, coastal change, severe weather events, biodiversity loss, overheating and pressures on infrastructure and services. It also places greater emphasis on preparedness, community resilience and collaborative approaches to adaptation planning and delivery.

Local authorities are recognised as important delivery partners in supporting climate adaptation through land-use planning, infrastructure management, emergency planning, community resilience and the provision of essential services. The Plan highlights the importance of place-based approaches and partnership working to identify and deliver adaptation measures that reflect local circumstances.

For Highland Council, this has particular significance given the area's exposure to flooding, coastal change and severe weather events, together with the vulnerability of transport, energy, digital and other critical infrastructure to climate impacts. The Highlands' dispersed geography and reliance on strategic transport and infrastructure corridors mean that disruption affecting one part of the network can have wider impacts on communities and services across the region.

The Highland Adapts programme, together with the Council's wider climate adaptation and resilience activities, provides an important regional framework for understanding climate risks and supporting adaptation planning across Highland.

The Plan reinforces the need to embed climate adaptation considerations within strategic planning, investment decisions, asset management, infrastructure investment and service delivery. It also strengthens the importance of working with communities, public bodies and other partners to identify and deliver climate resilience measures that reflect the specific risks facing Highland's rural, island and coastal communities, including opportunities for regional and cross-boundary collaboration on adaptation projects. The role of natural systems is also increasingly recognised, highlighting the importance of peatlands, woodlands, wetlands and coastal habitats in reducing flood risk, supporting biodiversity and strengthening long-term resilience.

Successful delivery will depend on continued collaboration across organisations, the availability of investment to improve resilience, access to climate risk information and the ability to integrate adaptation considerations into long-term planning and decision-making. Strengthening resilience can help reduce future costs associated with infrastructure damage, service disruption and emergency response, while ensuring that communities, assets and infrastructure are better prepared for future climate impacts.

9.2.5 Governance, Monitoring and Delivery

The Climate Change Plan places greater emphasis on implementation, partnership working and a place-based approach to delivery, supported by collaboration between national government, local government, communities, businesses and the wider public sector. This aligns closely with the Council's strategic approach to climate change, energy and community resilience, approved by Council in March 2026, which identified the need for strengthened coordination across services to support place-based climate adaptation, mitigation and resilience activity.

The Plan identifies local authorities as important delivery partners and highlights the importance of integrating climate action across organisational functions and decision-making processes. It also places greater emphasis on implementation, monitoring and reporting arrangements to demonstrate progress towards emissions reduction and adaptation objectives.

For Highland Council, this reinforces the importance of maintaining effective governance arrangements and embedding climate considerations across services, strategies, investment decisions and asset management processes. Continued monitoring and reporting will be important in demonstrating progress, identifying delivery challenges and ensuring that local strategies and delivery plans continue to support national climate objectives while reflecting the Council's wider climate, energy and resilience priorities.

The increased emphasis placed by the Climate Change Plan on implementation, monitoring and place-based delivery further reinforces the rationale for the programme-led approach approved by Council in March 2026. The strategic direction agreed by Council recognised that delivery of climate change, energy and community resilience outcomes increasingly depends upon effective coordination across services rather than delivery through individual projects or service areas in isolation. The national Plan provides further support for this approach by placing greater emphasis on integrated governance, organisational capacity and collaborative delivery arrangements.

9.3 Areas where the Council has an influencing and enabling role

9.3.1 Agriculture

The Climate Change Plan identifies agriculture as an important sector for emissions reduction through improved farm efficiency, sustainable land management, emissions reduction measures and increased carbon sequestration. While delivery is primarily led by the Scottish Government, agricultural businesses and land managers, Highland Council has an enabling role through planning, partnership working and support for sustainable rural communities.

9.3.2 Industrial Decarbonisation

The Climate Change Plan supports the reduction of industrial emissions through energy efficiency, electrification and the adoption of low-carbon technologies. Responsibility for delivery largely rests with industry and national government; however, Highland Council can support these objectives through economic development, planning, skills development and by helping to create the conditions that encourage investment in low-carbon industries and emerging green technologies.

9.3.3 Electricity Generation and Energy Supply

The Climate Change Plan highlights renewable energy and the continued decarbonisation of Scotland's energy system as essential to achieving net zero. While Highland Council does not directly control electricity generation or energy markets, it has an important strategic role through the planning system, infrastructure coordination, community engagement and support for place-based energy solutions.

The Highlands are expected to remain a significant contributor to Scotland's renewable energy ambitions and already host nationally significant renewable generation and electricity transmission infrastructure. The Council can help ensure that future energy developments support local economic, environmental and community benefits, in line with the principles of the Council's Social Value Charter and wider place-based approach to the energy transition. The Council will also continue to advocate for investment in electricity network infrastructure and energy system reforms that reflect the needs of Highland communities.

10 Next Steps

- 10.1 The publication of the final Climate Change Plan provides a clearer national framework for climate mitigation, adaptation and delivery over the period to 2040. The Plan's increased emphasis on implementation, place-based delivery, monitoring and climate resilience aligns closely with the Council's strategic approach to climate change, energy and community resilience, approved by Council in March 2026.
- 10.2 The Council is currently progressing a programme of work to strengthen the coordination of climate mitigation, adaptation and energy transition activities across services. This reflects the strategic direction agreed by Council in March 2026 and will help inform future proposals relating to the delivery of the Council's climate, energy and resilience priorities.

This includes further work on:-

- governance arrangements to support a coordinated, programme-led approach to delivery;
- performance management, monitoring and reporting arrangements, including the development of Corporate and Service-level Key Performance Indicators aligned with long-term climate, energy and resilience outcomes; and
- further development of the Council's strategic approach to climate change, energy and resilience, including consideration of future priorities, delivery mechanisms and investment requirements.

- 10.3 Alongside this work, the Highland Climate Change Risk and Opportunity Assessment has informed a programme of cross-service engagement to better understand the implications of climate-related risks and opportunities for Council services, infrastructure, assets and financial resilience. This work will support development of the Council's Corporate Climate Change Risk and Opportunity Assessment and future Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan. Together, these will provide an evidence-based framework to inform future service planning, investment decisions and the prioritisation of climate mitigation and adaptation activity across the Council.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

Date: 10 July 2026

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Background Paper: Scotland's Draft Climate Change Plan 2026-2040: Consultation
[Report](#)

Appendices: None