

The Highland Council

Agenda Item	9
Report No	EDU/27/26

Committee:	Education
Date:	26 August 2026
Report Title:	Eden Court Update
Report By:	Chief Executive – Eden Court

1.	Purpose/Executive Summary
1.1	Highland Council has a contract with Eden Court in relation to the promotion, improvement and advancement of the arts and public education across Highland, to provide the best available entertainment for the widest public audience.
1.2	Eden Court's business plan is organised across three themes: Cultural; Social and Economic. A report is provided at Appendix 1 which this year focuses on Eden Court's creative engagement work, as the aspect most relevant to the Education Committee. The Chief Executive, Rebecca Holt, will also provide a verbal presentation to the committee.
2.	Recommendations
2.1	Members are asked to: i. Note the contents of the report at Appendix 1
3.	Implications
3.1	Resource There are no resource implications arising directly as a consequence of this report. As the attached report sets out, the Council's grant of £300,000 to Eden Court unlocks c.£1million of funding from other sources annually. When considering all income, Eden Court generates £7 for every £1 invested by public funding sources. The Eden Court building is owned by the Highland Council and Eden Court Theatre participates in the Highland Council Pension Fund, which is part of the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS). The Highland Council acts as the Administering Authority for this fund.
3.2	Legal There are no direct legal implications arising as a consequence of this report.

3.3	Risk There are no direct risks arising as a consequence of this report.
3.4	Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people) Not applicable.
3.5	Gaelic There are direct no implications on the provision of Gaelic services as a result of 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 report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.
	Designation: Chief Executive – People Date: 22 July 2026 Author: Fiona Malcolm – Chief Officer Integrated Services Background Papers: Appendices: Appendix 1 – Eden Court Report to the Education Committee

Eden Court

Update to Highland Council Education Committee

Rebecca Holt, Chief Executive, August 2026



This report will focus on Eden Court's creative engagement work, as the aspect most relevant to the Education Committee. However, before this, I thought it was worth taking a moment to reflect on the diverse and far-reaching work taking place to celebrate Eden Court's 50th – this anniversary year demonstrates the pride in Eden Court's past and how ambitious we are for its future.

Section 1: 50th Anniversary

Beginning in April, to coincide with Eden Court's opening gala on 15th April 1976, each month of 2026 sees a headline event to celebrate a different aspect of Eden Court's programme. Events so far have included:

- **Orchestral Music & Opera:** In April we launched the celebrations with a one-off concert from Royal Scottish National Orchestra featuring Scottish Opera. In a specially curated programme, legendary American conductor Leonard Slatkin led the RSNO in the rarely heard '*Confluence*', composed by late Highland-based William Wordsworth, which had been commissioned for Eden Court's 1976 opening gala.
- **Film History:** In May, audiences were invited to step back in time with a week-long Cinema Flashback, celebrating five decades of film at Eden Court. Classics, cult favourites and rediscovered gems were screened for just 73p – the 1976 price of a cinema ticket. The season opened with the first film screened at Eden Court – Martin Scorsese's *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, with all the other titles suggested by audience members. Over 2,800 people attended and many screenings sold out, including the opening film, the closing film (*Local Hero*) and the Mystery Movie chosen by Tilda Swinton (*Hairspray*).
- **Young People:** June saw a Youth Takeover shine a spotlight on young creatives, with the Eden Court Youth Arts Festival and Scotland's National Festival of Youth Theatre taking over the building. *This is expanded on in Section 2 of this report.*
- **Local Companies:** In July, Inverness Musical Theatre, Starlight Musical Theatre and Ness Entertainment joined forces for *One Night Only!* – a celebratory evening honouring fifty years of musical theatre on the Empire stage, and Eden Court's long partnership with the local companies. Over 1,000 people attended across two shows and the feedback from audiences and all those involved was fantastic.

Upcoming events include:

- **Gaelic & Traditional Music:** August sees a special celebration of Gaelic music and culture at Eden Court's outdoor summer festival Under Canvas: opening with a newly commissioned work by Sian to celebrate Highland women, a big birthday party-themed Family Fun Day, and a 50th anniversary closing event in the Empire Theatre, featuring Chisholm, McGoldrick, O'Connor and Byrne .

- **Schools & Communities:** September will focus on activity outside the building with schools' production *The Lonely Pine* (expanded on in Section 2 of this report) and Feast – a project which brings people together in venues across the Highlands for free workshops and to share food, conversation and creative connection. Golspie Youth Action and Lairg Community Centre are confirmed with two more locations to be finalised soon.
- **Live Performance:** October will see the building transformed for *Confluence*, a unique promenade performance that captures the spirit of Eden Court as a place where people, ideas and creativity meet. Audiences will embark on an immersive journey through hidden corners of the historic building, encountering newly commissioned performances across theatre, music and dance. *Confluence* will celebrate connection, exchange and shared experiences, honouring Eden Court's legacy while inviting audiences to imagine the creative possibilities of the next fifty years.
- **Immersive Film:** November brings a special Inverness Film Festival moment, which will include site-specific screenings developed in partnership with other local venues.
- **Visual Arts & Stories:** The year culminates in December with Eden Court Stories, an exhibition led by Jacqueline Briggs, whose work spans large-scale public artworks, illustration and creative engagement projects. Drawing on visual storytelling and public art, the project will gather and celebrate stories exploring Eden Court's impact across the Highlands.

Throughout the rest of our programme, we will continue to deliver dozens of classes, hundreds of live performances and thousands of film screenings.

As you read through the rest of this report, you'll notice that several strands of our activity are made possible through funding from Trusts and Foundations. The funds received via our SLA with Highland Council provide the crucial core infrastructure that enables us to secure this further support, bringing investment into Highland that would otherwise go elsewhere. The £300,000 annual investment that Highland Council makes into Eden Court enables us to unlock c.£1million of funding from other sources annually. When considering all income, we generate £7 for every £1 invested by public funding sources.

Section 2: Eden Court's Creative Engagement Work

Our Engagement programme offers supported access to the arts, positively impacts health and wellbeing and provides training for the next generation of talent. We offer inclusive, creative engagement opportunities to people at every stage of life. Through our work we aim to create a thriving and resilient creative community across the Highlands. We do this by offering a yearly programme of classes, qualifications and targeted projects that work with people who face barriers to accessing the arts. Each year we engage with over 15,000 people aged 0-80+ in schools, out in the community and at Eden Court.

Our work is delivered across three strands:

1. Our **Schools & Qualifications** programme offers an entry point to the arts for young people across the Highlands, with a focus on reaching those with the least access and developing creatively confident teachers.
2. Our **Young Creatives** programme offers training and development for those interested in pursuing a career in the creatives industries.
3. Our **Community** programme supports wellbeing, brings people together and addresses social issues through creativity.

1. **Schools & Qualifications**

a) Qualifications

Eden Court offers SQA Higher qualifications courses in Dance and Drama for young people from across Highland who are unable to access them at school. In 25/26 we also delivered National 5 drama and achieved 100% pass rate – in 27/28 we aim to reintroduce National 5 Dance and Drama to provide a fuller range of qualifications for young people.

In addition to the SQA courses, we run the BFI Film Academy short course, a free programme which offers 16-19 year olds the opportunity to develop their filmmaking skills and take the next step towards a career in the industry. Participants make short films, taking on a range of roles, learn from top talent working in the industry through masterclasses, and gain commercial and cultural knowledge to begin their journey towards a career within the screen industries. Participants also become part of a BFI Alumni group which opens up additional training opportunities across the UK.



b) Teacher Development Fund

We recently concluded a two-year project working with nine primary schools through which Eden Court's artist practitioners worked collaboratively with teachers to introduce arts-based approaches into their teaching of the Curriculum for Excellence. The programme focused on rural schools with composite classes where meeting the varied needs of the students is more complex and the opportunities for peer learning are more limited. The schools worked with were: Kyleakin, Poolewe, Bualnaluib, Northwest Sutherland Schools (Scourie, Kinlochbervie and Durness), Tongue, Halkirk and Farr.

There was a Cohort Day earlier this year bringing the teachers together and their feedback was universally positive about their experiences. These ranged from adopting creative approaches; to finding new ways of engaging neurodivergent pupils; to using filmmaking to secure new books for their library that better reflected diverse experiences (see [here](#)). Teachers also developed closer working relationships with schools in their cluster, sharing resources, meeting socially and arranging school trips together.

The Cohort Day was attended by two members of Highland Council's Pedagogy team who were impressed by the project and stated that they want to support in getting the resource pack out to other schools, as well as arranging CPD sessions around it. In addition, because of learning from the programme, Eden Court has committed to hosting a yearly inset day for all drama teachers in the Highlands, alongside a free CPD session.

This project was supported through £164,000 funding from Paul Hamlyn Foundation. The nature of this funding means we can't reapply to the same fund for the same project, but we are in the process of developing our case for a new schools' project to apply to them for, working with primary schools to boost pupil attainment, confidence, self-expression and creativity through dance and embodied learning.

c) The Lonely Pine (50th Anniversary special event)

Eden Court's Engagement team will take *The Lonely Pine*, a brand-new production, to primary schools across the region. The show follows a tree in its 50th year and the community of animals it shelters, offering children a warm, hopeful story about growth, connection and the environment for children in Primary 1 - 7. Trees for Life are partners, providing ecological input on the show's content and gifting each participating school a free pine sapling to plant in their community.

It will tour to 20 schools across Highland (performing to pupils from over 30 schools due to clusters) at no cost to them. Schools were chosen by an application process through which 81 schools applied (nearly 50% of all Highland primaries). In response to demand, a free digital version will be released to all primary schools later in the year.

d) Workshops, Tours & Online Resources

In addition to these more in-depth programmes, schools can choose from a menu of workshop and tour options or get in touch to request a bespoke programme of work.

This year we delivered one-off dance workshops at Bualnaluib, Dalneigh, Drummond and Poolewe Primary and one-off animation workshops at Balloch, Helmsdale and Tore. We piloted a new drama for resilience workshop which has been delivered at Ben Wyvis Primary and Invergarry Primary. We delivered drama sessions at Central Primary from Sept 2025-June 2026 and at Inverness High School from April-June. Finally, we attended careers events at Culloden Academy, Glen Urquhart High School, Golspie High School, Inverness High School, Inverness Royal Academy and Millburn Academy.

2. Young Creatives

a) Classes with young people

We deliver a year-round programme of Youth Dance, Film and Theatre classes offering a supportive and accessible introduction to the arts and creative careers. In 25/26, there were **5,238** attendances at these sessions. We deliver three terms of activity each year (10 sessions per term), with the following groups:

- 5 x **Youth Theatre** groups – 5-7 Years, 8-10 Years, 11-13 Years, 14-16 Years & 16-19 Years
- 2 x **Musical Theatre** group – 11-13 Years, 14-16 Years
- 3 x **Youth Dance** groups – 5-8 Years, 9-12 Years & 13-18 Years
- 3 x **Youth Film** groups – 9-12 Years, 13-15 Years & 16-18 Years
- 1 x **Bùth-obrach Drama** (Gaelic Drama Workshop) – 9-15 Years (fortnightly)
- 2 x **Ceòladairean Beaga** for Under 5s (1 x Gaelic & 1 x bilingual)
- Special school holiday sessions at Christmas and in summer

a) Young Company

Earlier this year we introduced an Eden Court Young Company in response to feedback from participants that they would like a group focused on performance, devising and skills development. It provides the opportunity for participants to develop and refine their skills, taking things beyond the more inclusive and fun experience currently offered, with aim of engaging participants in a professionally grounded experience. The free six-month project offers up to 15 young people aged 14-21 the chance to take part in a multidisciplinary performance company, culminating with at least one performance opportunity.

b) Festivals & Showcases

The Youth Takeover was the third of our special 50th anniversary events and it was an important opportunity to shine a spotlight on young people, their creativity, and the central role that they play in the Eden Court community. Over the 12-day takeover there were 18 performances, four film screenings and five social events. Over 300 young people took part and more than 1,000 audience members attended. It consisted of two parts:



- **Youth Arts Festival:** Our annual celebration of new work created by Eden Court programme participants. Over the course of one weekend, young people had the opportunity to share their work on stage and screen and to take part in workshops, learn skills and meet people. The Eden Court Young Company premiered their first show *Enter Chaos* (pictured above) before also performing it as part of the National Festival of Youth Theatre (see below & below) and Aberdeen Performing Arts' Light the Blue festival later in the year.
- **National Festival of Youth Theatre:** We were really pleased to be the host venue for Youth Arts Scotland's National Festival of Youth Theatre. The festival saw seven companies perform in addition to the Eden Court Young Company, these were Bute Youth Theatre, Solar Bear's Deaf Youth Theatre, Young Quines, Firefly, Stange Town, Macrobert and Platform. As well as the programmed shows there were artistic workshops, social events and a final-night wrap party. The young people camped at the Northern Meeting Park next door.

The National Festival of Youth Theatre is a biennial event – and Eden Court will be hosting it again in 2028. In 2027, we are planning to partner with Scottish Youth Theatre on their 50th anniversary production, *Shindig*, a new devised touring show that will integrate local young people through a year-long process of taster workshops, R&D and rehearsal.



c) Film Board & Placements

The Film Board is an opportunity for young film fans from across the Highlands to programme free screenings, attend and help deliver industry events and support in spreading the word about independent, classic and world cinema. In October 2026 they will lead a Takeover week in the cinema, setting all the programming.

We are also in the process of organising six placement opportunities per year with Screen Highland for young people aged 18+ who are interested in a screen career.

d) Futures Studio

We recently concluded our three-year Futures Studio project, funded by National Lottery Young Start (£75,000 funding). Futures Studio worked with young people who face complex challenges in their lives due to factors such as economic disadvantage, living in care or having caring responsibilities, with the aim of helping them to build their skills and confidence through taking part in creative activities spanning filmmaking, sound design, music production, photography and performing. We decided that this is the right time to conclude Futures Studio although we do intend to apply to National Lottery Young Start in the autumn for a new project.

Our referral partner, Action for Children, said: *"Action for Children's partnership with Future Studios at Eden Court is more than just a creative outlet—it's a launchpad for young people to build skills and self-worth. Through one-on-one sessions with professionals and group projects, participants have flourished. Seeing them showcase their finished work to family and friends at the exhibition is a powerful testament to their dedication and the incredible personal growth we've witnessed."*

3. Community

a) Classes for Adults

Eden Court's adult classes deliver activities across a range of disciplines, aimed at nourishing individuals' creativity, health and wellbeing. Classes include Gracenotes (dance for older adults), Contemporary Dance, Jazz Dance, Ballet, Just Sing and Just Act.

We also deliver disabled-focused work, including I Heart Drama, which works with disabled adults to explore physical theatre, improvisation and performing; Horizons, which is an inclusive dance group with disabled and non-disabled young people aged 13-21 years; and Dance for Parkinson's.

In 26/27, we intend to expand on our work with LGBTQIA+ people living in the Highlands by developing a theatre-based programme for older adults. We also plan to develop new classes in writing for live performance.

b) Cashback Next Gen Creatives

Earlier this year, Eden Court was awarded £230,000 of funding via Scottish Government's CashBack for Communities for a project focussed on working with young people who are risk of coming into conflict with the law or being criminally exploited. CashBack Next Gen Creatives will be a youth-led project for 12-16 year-olds to find their artistic outlet, have fun and express themselves. There will be four cohorts each year, two groups in Inverness, one in Invergordon and one in Alness. The project will begin in the new 26/27 academic year and c. 60 young people will take part each year (120 in total).

CashBack Next Gen Creatives is a 12-month creative pathway (delivered twice) supporting young people to:

- **Find their artistic outlet:** By trying out multiple disciplines (Acting, Dance, Filmmaking, Music, Sound Production).
- **Develop their creative skills:** By choosing the creative pathway they want to pursue, from which a development programme is created.
- **Provide access to new opportunities:** By showcasing their creative work at Eden Court.
- **Advance their workplace skills:** Through opportunity to take part in a work placement at Eden Court (for a smaller cohort).

Working in partnership, we will reach those identified as being at higher risk of coming into conflict with the law, including those:

- Living in SIMD Quintile 1
- With less than 90% school attendance
- With social, emotional & behavioural difficulties (SEBD)

We will focus on S2-S4 year-groups, as the age when criminal responsibility begins (12), but whilst there remain multiple school years in which to support towards positive post-school destinations. Participants will be paired with a pastoral lead to support them throughout their journey. Our project partners are:

- Highland Council, Education Team, plus Inverness High School, Alness Academy and Invergordon Academy
- Youth Action, part of Highland Council's social care team
- Police Scotland, Children & Young Person Safeguarding Team
- Action for Children

The overall aim of the programme is to support young people to find their purpose and sense of their own value, to prevent them from becoming engaged in criminal activity or being criminally exploited.

c) Compass Collective – Screen Sparks

Earlier this year we secured £65,000 of funding to partner with Compass Collective on a creative employability project for young refugees and asylum seekers aged 16-24 in the Highlands called Screen Sparks. The project will use filmmaking and performance to support the development of key employability skills such as confidence, communication, teamwork and problem-solving. In addition, the programme will build community connections and provide a platform for youth voice, promoting integration and increasing understanding of refugee experiences.

Over the 26/27 academic year, Screen Sparks will work with three cohorts of participants – unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, young refugees from the Afghan resettlement scheme, and young adult asylum seekers. One cohort will be based at Eden Court, another in Alness and a third in Elgin in order to reach a range of people across the Highlands and Moray.

d) Showcases

In addition to the Youth Arts Festival and National Festival of Youth Theatre Eden Court delivers Elevate every two years. This is Eden Court's dance platform celebrating the participatory dance sector in the Highlands, which will return in Nov-26. Elevate sits within our programme of dance development which aims to nurture the participatory and community dance sector in the Highlands. The groups performing will be from across the region and will represent a diversity of ages, styles and cultures.

Members are asked to: Note the report, which will be accompanied by a presentation from Eden Court's CEO at the Education Committee on Wednesday 26th August.