

Agenda Item	9.
Report No	CPPB/20/26



Highland
Community
Planning
Partnership

Com-pàirteachas
Dealbhadh
Coimhearsnachd

na Gàidhealtachd

Highland Community Planning Partnership Board – 11 September 2026

Title of report – Delivery Group Progress Report – Poverty Reduction (including Highland Local Child Poverty Action Report Annual Report)

Report by – Poverty Reduction Delivery Group

Report Classification (tick as appropriate):

Strategic Priority: ☒ People ☒ Place ☒ Prosperity

Cross-Cutting Theme (tick all that apply):

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☒ Connecting People and Places | ☒ Employment / Employability |
| ☒ Whole Family and Community-Based Approaches | ☐ Housing |
| ☐ Shared Approaches to Commissioning | ☐ Community Wealth Building |
| ☒ Aligning Partnership Practices | |

Report Purpose (tick as appropriate):

☒ For Noting ☐ For Approval ☐ For Decision ☐ For Comment

Recommendation(s)

The Board is asked to:

- i) Consider and note the actions carried out in 2025/26 as set out in Section 2 of Highland's Child Poverty Action Report in Appendix 1
- ii) Consider and agree the actions for delivery in 2026-29, as set out in Section 3 of the Action Report in Appendix 1;
- iii) Note that further actions are likely to be added following full consideration of the Poverty and Equality Commission Report; and
- iv) Agree that partner organisations will reflect on "*Embedding lived experience into service design, delivery and policy development across Highland*" (presented to the Board at agenda item 5), before a further report is presented to December HCPP Board proposing next steps for lived experience.

Executive Summary

Reducing child poverty remains a key priority in the Highland Children's Services Plan 2026-29 and contributes directly to the delivery of the Highland Outcome Improvement

Plan. This report presents Highland's Local Child Poverty Action Report (LCPAR), outlining progress during 2025/26 against the 2023-2026 Plan and planned actions for 2026-29. Significant progress has been achieved through partnership working in 2025/26 including the development of flexible childcare models in rural communities, delivery of whole family support, financial inclusion initiatives, employability support for parents, and targeted action to address the cost of living crisis.

The report highlights the alignment between Highland's child poverty priorities and the recommendations of the Highland Poverty and Equality Commission, with further consideration underway to strengthen future actions.

The report introduces the appended Lived Experience Feasibility Study and proposes further consideration of options, before recommendations on next steps are brought to the HCPP Board in December 2026.

1. Background

- 1.1 In 2017, the Scottish Government introduced the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act. This replaced the previous UK Child Poverty Act 2010 and included duties on both the Scottish Government and local partners to address child poverty. It also introduced targets as a driver for reducing child poverty across Scotland. Child poverty can have negative effects on the health, wellbeing and educational attainment of the children who experience it. It also has a wider cost for society. By introducing a Child Poverty Act, which sets out clear targets for reducing the number of children living in poverty, progress can be monitored on meeting these targets.
- 1.2 The legislation requires:
 - The Scottish Government to produce a Child Poverty Delivery Plan every four years highlighting how it intends to meet the child poverty targets laid out in the Act. The latest plan, Bringing Hope, Building Futures the Scottish Government Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2026-31, was published in March 2026.
 - Local Authorities and Health Boards to jointly prepare annual Local Child Poverty Action Reports which set out a retrospective look on activities that have been undertaken in the Local Authority area during the previous year to reduce child poverty and contribute to the delivery of the national targets and any planned future activities.

2. Highland Approach and Our Priorities

- 2.1 Highland Community Planning Partnership (HCPP) partners share a strong commitment to tackling poverty and inequality. The Highland Poverty Reduction Delivery Group (PRDG), a thematic group within the HCPP, provides leadership on the Child Poverty Plan as part of the Highland Children's Service Partnership Plan 2026-29. It is also responsible for preparing the annual Local Child Poverty Action Report (LCPAR), a joint statutory requirement of Health Boards and Local Authorities. The PRDG is chaired by Highland Council and brings together representatives from Highland Council, NHS Highland, community planning partners, and third-sector organisations.

- 2.2 The priorities for addressing child poverty in Highland for 2025/26 were set out the Integrated Children's Services Plan 2023-26. Poverty is a standalone theme, but this also crosscuts across the other themes of the plan, including child protection, health and wellbeing, drugs and alcohol and corporate parenting. It also recognises that child poverty cannot be seen in isolation and that poverty is experienced in families.
- 2.3 A life courses approach informed the Integrated Children's Services Plan 2023-26 and actions to address poverty were structured under the following three life course stages:

Theme 1 – Getting Started (Pre-birth – 5 years)
Improvement Priority – We will reduce the financial barriers in order to increase participation, raise aspiration and address impact of poverty.
Action 1.1 Develop flexible models of childcare in rural areas
Action 1.2 Implement the Whole Family Approach to mitigate the impacts of poverty
Action 1.3 Develop financial inclusion pathways

Theme 2 – Growing Up (Primary Years)
Improvement Priority – Mitigate the impact of the cost of living crisis.
Action 2.1 Increase the uptake of sanitary products in schools
Action 2.2 Roll out the Cost of the Day Toolkit

Theme 3 – Moving On (Secondary and Young Adulthood)
Improvement Priority – We will raise attainment and close the poverty related attainment gap
Action 3.1 Raise awareness of the impact of poverty amongst children and young people
Action 3.2 Roll out Family First Approach
Action 3.1 Identify ways to provide targeted support within universal services

- 2.4 Whilst these are the priorities identified in the plan, it is recognised that work to tackle and mitigate child poverty is embedded within business-as-usual activity across partnership organisations and the third and community sectors.

3. 2025/26 Progress

- 3.1 The Local Child Poverty Action Report in Appendix 1 sets out progress against the priorities during 2025/26. The following outlines key highlights:

3.2 Developing flexible models of childcare in rural areas

- Funding from the Scottish Government Addressing Depopulation Action Plan fund enabled ongoing partnership work between Highland Council, HIE and CALA to develop flexible, affordable childcare models for rural communities.
- Ardnamurchan 'Work and Play Club' piloted affordable sessions for 6months-3 years.
- Newstart/CALA Family Hub Model combines employability support with onsite childcare.

- Integrated Single Care Model continues to progress.
- Childcare round-table event held in Ullapool with national and regional partners bringing together government, local authority and community organisations to identify solutions to the challenges faced by rural communities.
- Over £134k secured to fund breakfast club provision through the Bright Start programme.

3.3 Scottish Government Child Poverty Accelerator Funding (CPAF)

- Two successful bids securing over £200k to support the development of new models of childcare provision in rural areas and to design and establish a lived experience partnership in Highland.

3.4 Implement the Whole Family Approach to mitigate the impacts of poverty

- 46 projects funded through the Children and Young People Community Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund evidencing positive impact on early intervention and prevention; emotional wellbeing and resilience; reduction in isolation through social connection; confidence, voice and participation; and whole family and community wellbeing.
- 9,012 children and young people supported with over 3,000 referrals to services and support.
- 50 projects funded through the WFW Element 1 Fund reaching approx. 2,000 children and young people.
- 74 families supported by the Family Links Workers, 65% children supported showed improved school attendance.
- Local partnership network groups in place across all 9 Community Partnership areas strengthening local collaboration.

A detailed report to the whole Family Wellbeing Programme was considered at Highland Council Health and Social Care Committee on 19 August 2026.

3.5 Develop financial inclusion pathways

- Highland Council Welfare Team, in partnership with Housing, delivered targeted support to Council tenants experiencing rent arrears.
- Food insecurity pathways supported over 70 families to access emergency infant formula.
- Promotion of the Better Use Calculator has increased support to Highland households

3.6 Increase the uptake of sanitary products

- 12,376 products issued in 2025/26.
- Marketing campaigns have led to increase in uptake.
- Strengthened partnerships have resulted in more sites available for people to access products.
- Pupil engagement has resulted in new ways to distribute.

3.7 Money Counts training

- 14 in-person training events with 70 participants.
- New e-learning module now available. 40 people have completed it.

3.8 Improve our understanding and use of data

- Members of the PRDG worked with the Highland CPP to develop the Health Inequalities Dashboard, supporting partners to be better informed about health inequalities and their impact on outcomes.

3.9 Work with parents on their journey towards employment

- Highland Council Employability team supported 370 parents in 2025/26 including 104 already in employment.
- Worklifehighland.co.uk has received 24.6k views from 11.5k visitors.

4 **Actions planned for 2026/27**

4.1 The actions for the coming year are detailed in the 2026-29 Highland Children's Services Plan, which sets out how partners will collaborate to deliver well-organised, high-quality, joined-up, trauma-informed and preventative support for children, young people and families. The plan has been informed by the following:

- Bringing Hope, Building Futures the Scottish Government Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2026-31
- Integrated Children's Services Partnership Plan 2023-26 Life stages approach
- Highland Children and Young People's Needs Assessment (March 2026)
- Three improvement statements developed following a self-assessment exercise supported by the Improvement Service and Public Health Scotland in summer 2025:
 - Be data informed in identifying need and measuring success/progress.
 - Work with those with Lived Experience, specifically identified priority groups, to help to identify gaps and priorities for improvement and to work together to design solutions.
 - Work in partnership with other services and partners to develop a shared understanding of current needs and existing actions to address poverty.

4.2 Bringing Hope, Building Futures

The Highland Child Poverty Plan adopts the four key themes and 15 interconnected areas in Scottish Government's Child Poverty Plan Bringing Hope, Building Futures. This allows Highland partners, in addition to focusing on the 6 priority family groups, to take a broader view to include a range of issues that drive child and family poverty including housing, transport and access to services, and to engage with a wider range of partners across the public, private and third sectors.

4.3 The four key themes and associated outcomes for addressing child poverty 2026-2029 are as follows:

Increasing earned incomes

- *Providing aligned skills and employment support for parents and young people.*
- *Expanding the availability of flexible and affordable childcare for families.*
- *Ensuring public transport is available, affordable and accessible and connects parents and young people to work.*
- *Driving positive change in labour market and workplace conditions.*

Reducing cost of living

- *Delivering more social and affordable homes for families.*
- *Ending child homelessness.*
- *Making homes cheaper to heat.*
- *Tackling public sector debt.*

Maximising income from social security

- *Strengthening support through social security.*
- *Maximising take-up of Scottish and UK Government benefits.*
- *Making money and debt advice more accessible for families.*

Supporting children and families to thrive

- *Delivering Whole Family Support.*
- *Supporting young families: investing in early child development.*
- *Ensuring children and young people can reach their full potential.*
- *Making best use of data to support children and families and improve public service.*

5 Alignment with Highland Poverty and Equality Commission

- 5.1 The Highland Poverty and Equality Commission's Essential Elements report was presented to Highland Council on 25 June 2026 and is on today's Board agenda. The report sets out a series of calls to action across six key themes: ways of working, financial security, access, housing, early years and education, and fair work. A workshop with Councillors, senior managers and the Co-Chairs of the Commission was held at the end of August to consider the calls to action in more detail, and a similar session is planned with CPP Board members at the end of September. Elsewhere across the Partnership, the findings and calls to action within the report are being considered, and this will inform the Board session later this month.
- 5.2 The priorities within the Child Poverty Action Plan 2026-29 closely align with the six themes identified in the Essential Elements report. Work is underway to consider and assess the findings and calls to action from the Highland Poverty and Equality Commission and how these influence the work on child poverty. The child poverty plan is an evolving document, and it is anticipated there will be additional actions and revisions to existing activity to address child poverty based on the findings from the Commission.

6 Lived Experience Feasibility Report

- 6.1 As noted in section 4.1, the self-assessment process undertaken by PRDG identified working with those with lived experience as an area for improvement in addressing child poverty. This is also a key finding within the Poverty Commission Report. Highland Council, on behalf of HCPP, secured funding for a feasibility study and pilot for a Lived Experience Partnership.
- 6.2 The purpose of the feasibility study was to advise on options for embedding lived experience of poverty and inequality into service design, delivery and policy making within Highland. Specifically:
- Research best practice and ways of working around lived experience of poverty and inequality, particularly understanding a remote rural context.

- Engage with HCPP partners and stakeholders to understand partners' requirements and aspirations.
- Engage with people with direct lived experience of poverty and inequality or who represent those with direct experience.
- Scope out options for embedding Lived Experience into service design, delivery and policy making, taking into account the Highland context.
- Workshop with HCPP partners and stakeholders to examine options and finalise design.
- Produce a final report with recommendations for presentation to HCPP Board.

6.3 Following the procurement process, Rocket Science was appointed to undertake the feasibility study and has been carrying out this work, including a mix of desktop research, interviews and workshops, throughout summer 2026. The final report, including its findings and recommendations, is included within today's Board agenda.

6.4 It is proposed that partners are given time to consider the options for establishing a Lived Experience Partnership. Therefore, a report will be brought to the HCPP Board in December 2026 seeking a decision on whether the HCPP wishes to proceed with the creation of a Lived Experience Partnership and, if so, how the pilot should be implemented.

7. Risks and Mitigations

7.1 Ongoing review of implementation of the Plan is essential to ensure a continued focus on reducing child poverty. Ongoing monitoring is carried out at the quarterly HCPP Poverty Reduction Delivery Group and overseen by the Highland Children's Services Board.

7.2 There are no current risks associated with the Lived Experience feasibility report. Any risks, associated with implementing next steps, and their mitigation, will be identified in a subsequent report.

8. Resource Implications

8.1 Actions to address child poverty will be delivered within existing partner resources.

8.2 There are no current resource or staffing implications associated with the Lived Experience feasibility report. Any implications associated with implementing next steps will be identified in a subsequent report.

Impact Assessment

An integrated Impact Assessment screening has been undertaken on the Highland Child Poverty Action Plan update. The conclusions have been subject to the relevant Manager Review and Approval.

Equality, Poverty & Human Rights - The focus for the plan is reduce poverty and mitigate the effects of poverty for children and young people in Highland. The proposal

therefore will have a direct positive impact on the lives of children and young people, particularly on the most vulnerable.

Children's Rights and Wellbeing - No Children's rights will be negatively affected and the ultimate focus of the plan is on improving the lives of children and young people through reducing poverty. Several actions within the plan focus on education, including cost of the school day and reducing the poverty related attainment gap. This will help to increase children and young people's access to education.

Island & Mainland Rural Communities - The plan recognises the additional challenges faced by rural and island communities and has actions within it to mitigate these, for example new models of childcare in rural communities.

There are no Data Protection or Climate Change Impacts.

Any impacts associated with the implementation of recommendations in the Lived Experience Feasibility Study will be presented in a subsubmit report to HCPP Board.

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Date: 27 August 2026

Appendices: Appendix 1 Local Child Poverty Action Report 2025/26



Highland Local Child Poverty Action Update Report April 2025 to March 2026

The Approach in Highland

There is a strong commitment in Highland to address poverty and inequality within individual agencies and across the Community Planning Partnership. The vision for the Community Planning Partnership through its Highland Outcome Improvement Plan is:

“Maximise Opportunities and Tackle Inequality to Build a Thriving Highlands for All”

This is underpinned by three high level strategic priorities:

- People – Enable people to live independently, safe and well within their community
- Place – Work in partnership to develop sustainable and resilient local communities
- Prosperity – Creating opportunities for all people and places to prosper and to thrive economically

The Highland Community Planning Partnership (HCPP) brings together public agencies, third sector organisations and other key community groups to work collaboratively with the people of Highland to deliver better outcomes.

The HCPP works strategically at a Highland level, through a series of nine geographical local Community Partnerships as well as regional thematic groups. Ultimately these deliver our Local Outcome Improvement Plan.

The Highland Outcome Improvement Plan sets out the vision, purpose and focus for HCPP from 2024-2027. The partnership believes working towards this plan will have a significant impact on reducing inequalities in Highland.

Reducing child poverty is a priority theme within the [Highland Integrated Children's Services Plan](#) which sits within a context of the Community Planning Partnership and delivering against the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan.

Our partnership recognises that children's services planning and planning to reduce child poverty is an ongoing process and that central to good planning is to ensure robust connections between all national and local strategic planning. Our child poverty plan connects the partnership strategic planning within a single framework. This framework provides both the tools for planning, self-evaluation, reporting, performance management and assurance.



Our child poverty plan articulates how partners work together to provide services which are organised, equipped to deliver high-quality, joined-up, trauma-informed and responsive and preventative support to children, young people and families.

Highland's Integrated Children's Services Board provides oversight to the on-going work of the plan. This group has broad membership, including lead officers from The Highland Council, NHS Highland, Police Scotland, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and a number of Third Sector organisations. The

Board reports to the Community Planning Partnership Board with additional reporting to Highland Council and NHS Highland Board.

A new Integrated Children's Services Plan was agreed at the Community Planning Partnership Board in June 2026. As part of the development of this plan, each delivery group, including the Poverty Reduction Delivery Group, have undertaken a review and self-assessment. This, along with the [Highland Children and Young People's Strategic Needs Assessment](#) have formed the evidence base for the outcomes and actions for the Child Poverty Plan for 2026-2029.

The Highland Poverty and Equality Commission published their report in June 2026. *Essential Elements*, sets out a series of calls to action across six key themes: ways of working, financial security, access, housing, early years and education, and fair work. Work is underway to consider and assess the findings and calls to action from the Commission, and it is anticipated there will be additional actions and revisions to Child Poverty Plan 2026-2029 based upon the findings from the Commission over the coming months.

Section 1: Background and Context

1.1 Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017

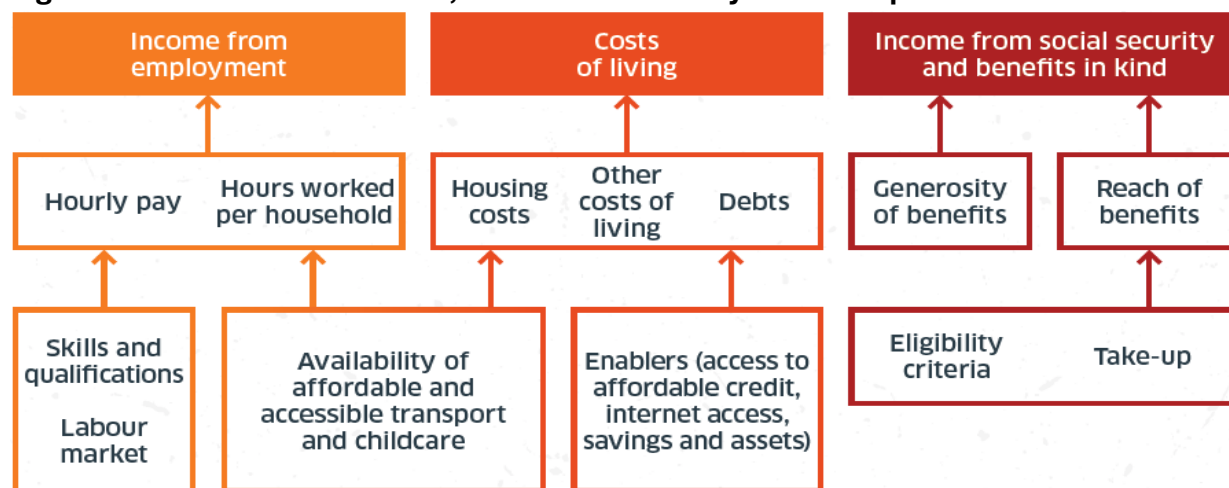
In 2017, the Scottish Government introduced the [Child Poverty \(Scotland\) Act](#). This replaced the previous UK Child Poverty Act 2010 and included duties on both the Scottish Government and local partners to address child poverty. It also introduced income targets as a driver for reducing child poverty across Scotland. Child poverty can have negative effects on the health, wellbeing and educational attainment of the children who experience it. It also has a wider cost for society¹. By introducing a Child Poverty Act, which sets out clear targets for reducing the number of children living in poverty, progress can be monitored on meeting these targets.

The legislation requires:

- The Scottish Government to produce a Child Poverty Delivery Plan every four years highlighting how it intends to meet the child poverty targets laid out in the Act. It must also publish annual progress reports setting out progress towards meeting the child poverty targets. The Scottish Government's second Delivery Plan – [Best Start Bright Futures](#), covers the period 2022-26 and sets out policies and proposals to help reach the child poverty targets set for 2030.
- Local Authorities and Health Boards to jointly prepare annual Local Child Poverty Action Reports which set out activities that have been undertaken in the Local Authority area during the previous year to reduce child poverty and contribute to the delivery of the national targets and any planned future activities.

Evidence suggests that there are three key drivers which influence the experience of child poverty. These are income from employment, costs of living and income from social security and benefits. These drivers are set out in figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Scottish Government, Local Child Poverty Action Report Guidance 2018



Increasing incomes and reducing costs of living are mechanisms for reducing child poverty but there are many other actions that take place to improve children's quality of life and life chances.

¹ A 2023 study found that child poverty in the UK was costing over £39 billion a year - <https://cpag.org.uk/news/cost-child-poverty-2023#:~:text=In%202008%2C%20the%20total%20cost,cost%20could%20be%20substantially%20higher.>

1.2 Child Poverty in Highland

Child poverty is not only a social and economic challenge, but a breach of children's rights as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 places a legal duty on public bodies to act compatibly with children's rights, including a statutory obligation to reduce child poverty. Poverty undermines children's rights to an adequate standard of living, health, education, play, and protection from harm (UNCRC Articles 6, 24, 27, 28, 31). Tackling child poverty in Highland is therefore essential to fulfilling our responsibilities under the UNCRC and ensuring every child can thrive.

Why This Matters

- Around 22 percent of children in Highland live in relative poverty after housing costs, slightly below the Scottish average, but still significant.
- Child poverty is strongly linked to health inequalities and life-course outcomes, influencing physical health, mental wellbeing, and educational attainment.
- Drivers include low wages, high housing and childcare costs, and rural living expenses, with in-work poverty common in sectors such as hospitality and care.
- Priority groups at higher risk include lone-parent families, minority ethnic households, families with disabled members, and those in remote rural areas.
- Lived experience evidence highlights the cost of the school day, digital exclusion, and transport barriers as significant sources of stress and stigma.
- National targets under the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 are not being met, requiring urgent action and investment in social security, housing, and childcare.

Child poverty is a critical determinant of health and wellbeing. Experiences of poverty in childhood shape outcomes across the life course, influencing physical health, mental wellbeing, educational attainment, and future economic security. Tackling child poverty is central to reducing health inequalities and achieving the ambitions of the Scottish Population Health Framework and Marmot Principles.

Policy Context

The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 sets statutory targets to reduce child poverty by 2030, supported by the Scottish Government's Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan and Best Start, Bright Futures Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026.

From July 2024, the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act requires all public authorities, including Highland Council and NHS Highland, to ensure that decisions, policies, and budgets uphold children's rights. This includes the statutory duty to produce Local Child Poverty Action Reports (LCPARs) that demonstrate how local actions contribute to realising children's rights.

Locally, the current Highland Child Poverty Action Plan aligns with these commitments, focusing on employment income, the cost of living, and income from social security.

Despite progress, the Poverty and Inequality Commission reports that interim child poverty targets have been missed and calls for urgent, ambitious action.

Definitions and Measurement

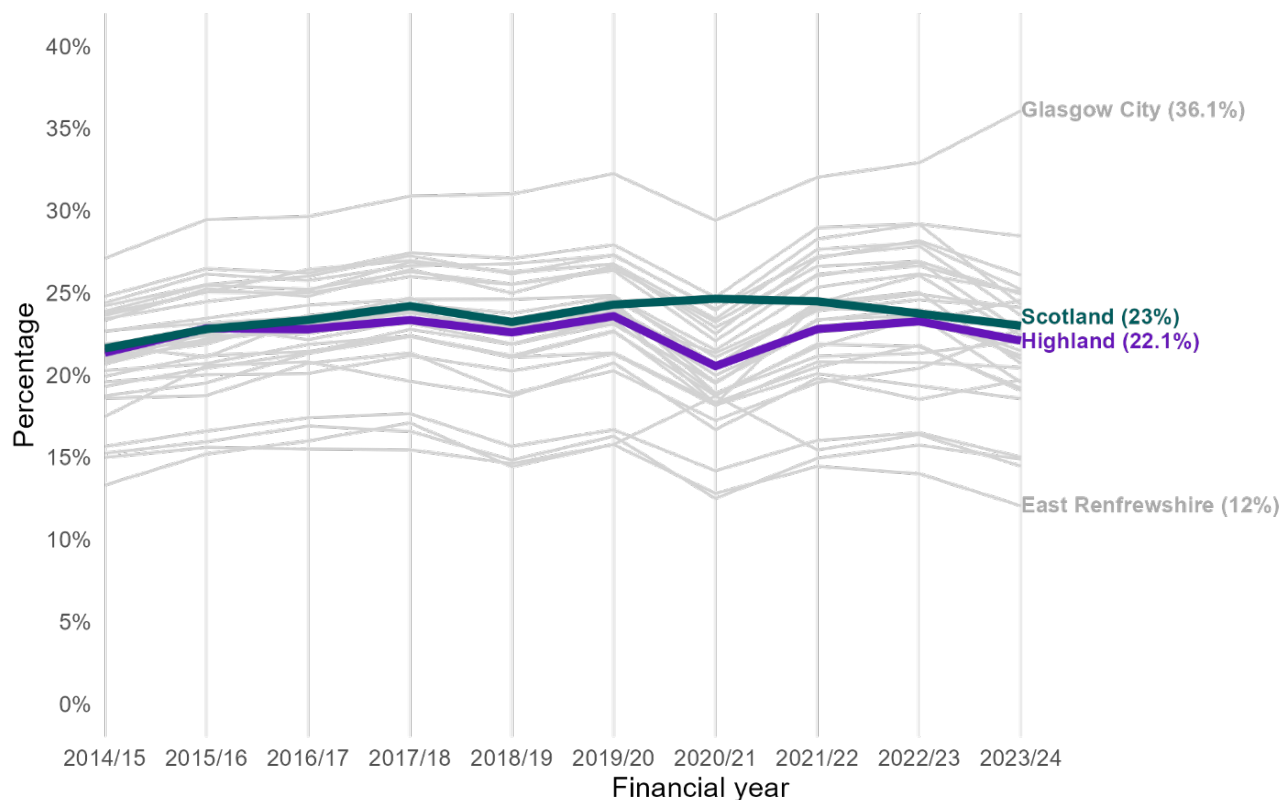
Child poverty is commonly measured as relative poverty after housing costs (AHC), defined as households with income below 60 percent of the UK median after housing costs are deducted. This measure reflects disposable income more accurately than before housing costs, particularly in rural areas where housing and transport costs are high. Other indicators include material deprivation and persistent poverty.

Current Situation in Highland

An estimated 22 percent of children in Highland live in relative poverty AHC, compared to 23 percent nationally. Trends have remained broadly stable over the past five years. At the national level, recent analysis suggests reductions in urban poverty and increases in rural poverty, but these changes may fall within sampling variability and should be interpreted cautiously. However, deep poverty - families far below the poverty line - is increasing across Scotland.

Rurality adds complexity: higher living costs and limited access to affordable childcare and transport exacerbate disadvantage. Although headline rural poverty rates remain lower than urban rates, the reported rise from 15 percent to 21 percent nationally highlights structural challenges in rural communities, including cost pressures and service access limitations. These trends suggest that rural families may be disproportionately affected by economic stressors, even where overall prevalence appears stable.

Figure 21: Proportion of children in relative poverty after housing costs – Highland vs Scotland, trend over time



Source: End poverty coalition

Drivers of Child Poverty

Actions in Best Start, Bright Futures focus on three key drivers of child poverty: employment income, living costs, and income from social security.

However, essential costs for housing, energy and childcare have outpaced wage growth and benefit uprating, leaving many families unable to meet minimum living standards. The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) estimates the current cost of raising a child to age 18 at £250,000 for couples and £290,000 for lone parents, while out-of-work families can cover only 37 percent of basic costs. Real-terms cuts to social security, the two-child limit, and the benefit cap deepen this affordability gap, particularly for larger families.

Key drivers include:

- Low wages and insecure employment, particularly in hospitality, retail, and care sectors.
- High housing and childcare costs absorb a large share of household income.
- Transport and digital exclusion limit access to services and opportunities.
- Structural factors such as social security adequacy and cost-of-living pressures.

The recent small, but not statistically significant, reduction in the proportion of children in poverty has been linked to the Scottish Government's use of the Scottish Child Payment to mitigate hardship. In 2024/25, 1,075 children under 16 in Highland living in low-income families received the Scottish Child Payment from newly submitted applications.

However, as noted by the Poverty and Inequality Commission, progress on the other drivers is less clear, given the restrictions on funding for other significant actions in Best Start and Bright Futures, including early learning and childcare and school-age childcare.

Recent modelling indicates that increasing the Scottish Child Payment to £40 per week and removing the two-child limit for Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit could reduce child poverty in Scotland to below 15 percent by 2030. Under current policy plans, rates are projected to remain above 20 percent. The report emphasises that UK-level measures such as the two-child limit and the benefit cap continue to pose significant barriers, and it calls for sustained investment in social security, alongside childcare and housing interventions, to achieve long-term reductions in poverty.

Impact on Children and Young People

Poverty affects every aspect of childhood, shaping health, education and wellbeing outcomes in ways that persist across the life course. Children living in low-income households are more likely to experience poor nutrition, chronic illness and mental health problems, with evidence linking poverty to higher rates of low birth weight, obesity and hospital admissions.

Educational attainment is consistently lower among children in poverty, compounded by reduced participation in extracurricular activities and limited access to enrichment opportunities. Beyond material deprivation, poverty exerts a profound psychosocial toll: stress, stigma and social isolation are recurring themes in children's voices, reflecting the emotional burden of financial hardship.

These disadvantages accumulate, leading to poorer outcomes in adulthood, including higher morbidity rates and reduced economic security.

Income instability and financial uncertainty

Poverty is not a fixed state for many families. Children often experience repeated transitions in and out of poverty due to insecure work, fluctuating hours of employment and changes in benefit entitlement. This financial uncertainty creates stress and anxiety for parents and children, undermining wellbeing and family stability. Evidence shows that even short periods of poverty can have lasting effects on health and educational outcomes, while deep and persistent poverty is linked to severe material deprivation and long-term disadvantage.

Families in Highland received Best Start Grants and Best Start Foods, providing help with costs at key stages of childhood. These payments reduce financial pressure on families at critical points, helping to improve nutrition, support early learning, and ease school costs -key factors in mitigating child poverty. 2024/25 applications:

- Pregnancy and Baby Payment (under 6months): 1,030
- Best Start Foods (Pregnant or child under 3): 1,370
- Early Learning Payment (2.6 years to 3.6 years): 340
- School Age Payment (around 4.5–5.5 years): 135

From 2019/2020 onward, Highland had a downward trend across all Best Start application types. The Pregnancy and Baby Payment remained relatively stable, falling slightly from 1,075 to 1,030, while Best Start Foods declined from 1,555 to 1,370 after peaking at 2,735 in 2020/2021, yet continued to be the highest overall application. In contrast, Early Learning and School Age Payments experienced steep drops, with Early Learning falling from 1,490 to 340 and School Age from 855 to 135. Nationally, overall applications also declined after an early peak, but the mix differs: Scotland saw School Age Payment grow to around one-third of applications and Pregnancy and Baby Payment fall to under one-fifth, whereas Highland moved in the opposite direction, maintaining high numbers for pregnancy-related and food support. Both Highland and Scotland share a marked decline in Early Learning Payment uptake, this may suggest less knowledge or promotion of this grant.

Highland Context

In Highland, the impact of poverty is amplified by geography and service access. Families in rural and remote areas face additional costs for transport and heating, alongside limited availability of affordable childcare and extracurricular opportunities. Digital exclusion remains a barrier to accessing benefits and educational resources, particularly in communities with poor connectivity. Health inequalities manifest in poorer health outcomes and challenges in accessing specialist care due to distance. Local evidence suggests that stigma and isolation may be intensified in small communities, where poverty is more visible and support networks are fragmented.

Groups at Higher Risk

There is a significant overlap between poverty and equality dimensions with age, gender, ethnicity and disability characteristics of families identified as placing children more at risk.

Family types at disproportionate risk:

- Lone-parent households
- Families with disabled children or parents
- Minority ethnic families
- Larger families with three or more children
- Families with a child under one year of age
- Families where the mother is less than 25 years old
- Families in remote rural areas, where costs are higher and services are less accessible

Most children in one of the priority groupings live in family circumstances where they experience combinations of these overlapping factors that can result in long-term severe poverty. For some multiple priority families, such as children in households with a baby under one and children with a mother under 25, over half of these family types are also in households in three or more other priority groups.

These groupings do not cover all the family types at higher risk of poverty, with around one in ten children in poverty living in households with none of these characteristics. There will also be children living in families where these circumstances apply who do not experience poverty.

Figure 1: Estimated number of households in priority risk groups for child poverty

Measure	Highland	Scotland
Households with dependent children ¹	13,200	556,900
Families with children receiving support from Universal Credit ²	8,270	233,072
Lone parent families on Universal Credit ³	5,962	173,451
Lone parent families with dependent children ⁴	6,067	145,625
Large families (3+ children) on Universal Credit ⁵	1,719	46,242
Households with dependant children where someone has a disability ⁶	3,113	91,401
Children under 1 ⁷	1,748	45,763
Mothers under 25 ⁸	263	6,225
Ethnic minorities population under 25 ⁹	2,521	171,509

1: Nomis official census and labour market statistics, Annual population survey, 2023

2: Stat-Xplore, Households with dependent children receiving support from Universal Credit, August 2025

3: Stat-Xplore, Lone parent households with dependent children receiving support from Universal Credit, August 2025

4: Scotland's Census 2022, Lone parent households with dependent children

5: Stat-Xplore, Households with 3 or more dependent children receiving support from Universal Credit, August 2025

6: Stat-Xplore, Households with dependent children receiving support from Universal Credit with Disabled Child Entitlement and/or Limited Capability for Work Entitlement, August 2025

7: National Records of Scotland, Births Time Series Data,2024

8: National Records of Scotland, Births Time Series Data, 2024

9: Scotland's Census 2022, Ethnic minorities include: White: Gypsy/ Traveller, Mixed or multiple ethnic groups, Asian, Asian Scottish or Asian British: Total, African: Total, Caribbean or Black: Total, Other ethnic groups: Total.

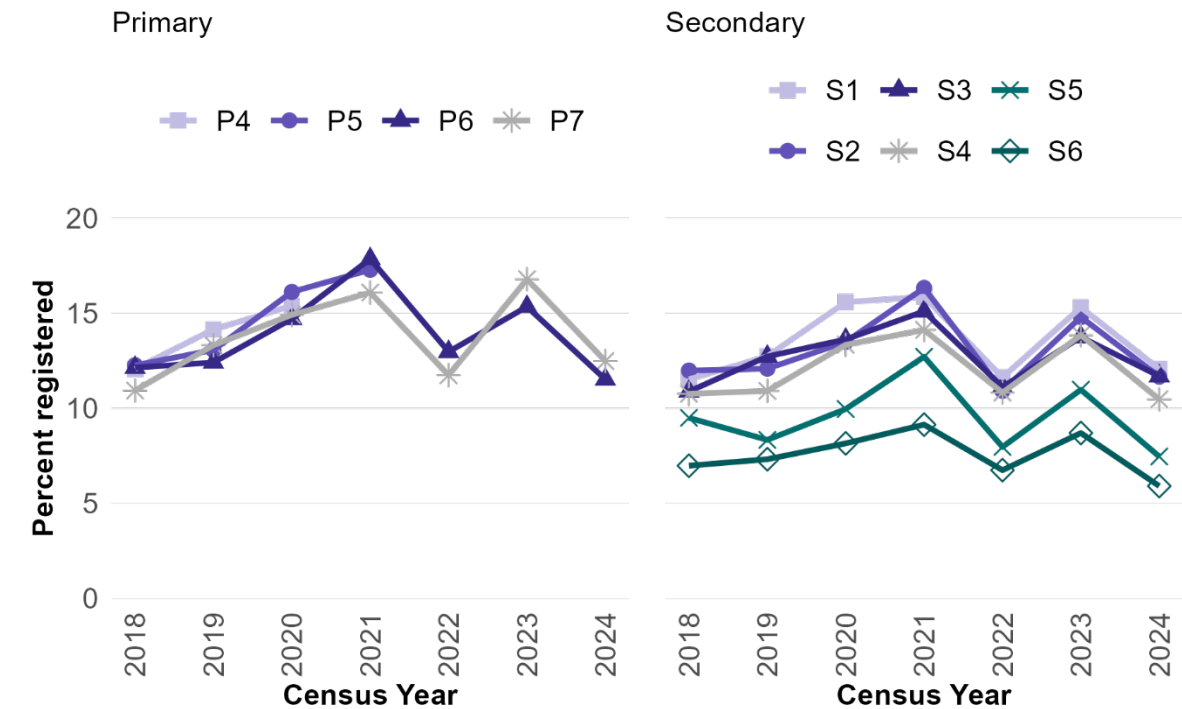
Free school meals

Free school meals (FSM) are considered a critical tool for mitigating the adverse health effects of child poverty among low-income families. They can improve health and wellbeing and reduce health inequalities.

Since January 2015 all primary one (P1) to P3 pupils in Scotland attending schools run by the council have been entitled to receive free school meals during term time. In the 2021/22 school year this universal provision was extended to include all P4 pupils and was extended again from 2022/23 to include all P5 pupils and all pupils in special schools.

Currently P6 up to secondary year 6 pupils are only entitled to a free school meal if their household receives one of several qualifying benefits. For children in households that are experiencing financial hardship but not receiving a qualifying benefit (e.g. due to immigration status), FSM may still be provided.

Figure 23: Percentage of pupils registered (with qualifying benefits) for free school meals by stage in Highland



Source: Scottish Government School Education Statistics, Pupil Census

Note: From 2015 onwards all P1-P3 pupils were entitled to FSM; from 2021 onwards all P4 pupils were entitled to FSM; from 2022 onwards all P5 pupils were entitled to FSM. These school stages are not plotted in the chart after the point at which all pupils became entitled to FSM as registration for this was no longer based on qualifying benefits.

Registration (with qualifying benefits) for free school meals is considered a marker of poverty due to its restrictive criteria. Children registered for FSM are more likely to be living in low-income households. However, evidence suggests that many poorer families are slipping through the FSM net due to restrictive eligibility thresholds, leading to greater levels of food insecurity among children.

In 2024, around 12 percent of primary school and ten percent of secondary school pupils were registered (with qualifying benefits) for free school meals in Highland (Figure 21). Across secondary school stages the lowest percentages registered are seen in S5 and S6. In all school stages the percent of pupils registration for FSM (with qualifying benefits) has reduced over the last few years. Free school meal registrations are affected by changes to the eligibility criteria and the economic circumstances of pupils and their parents.

The Scottish Government has plans to continue expansion of the free school meals programme as a key driver in its national mission to eradicate child poverty. The latest phase of this is a trial offering FSM to S1 to S3 pupils who are in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment, at selected schools in eight local authority areas, which started in August 2025.

What this means for Highland

Child poverty remains a critical driver of early health inequalities and lifelong outcomes. Over one in five children in Highland live in households experiencing poverty, with disproportionate impact on priority family types. Reducing child poverty should remain a core priority across the Highland Community Planning Partnership and Integrated Children's Services Plan.

Child poverty in Highland is shaped by a mix of national economic conditions, UK and Scottish Government policies, the local jobs market, and the practical challenges of living in a largely rural and remote area. National factors such as benefit levels, wages, inflation and housing costs set the overall level of risk. Local factors such as transport, digital connectivity, childcare and access to services affect how strongly families feel these pressures.

The Highland Community Planning Partnership must take a leadership role in reducing child poverty and strengthening family resilience, ensuring that the impact of local plans to increase access to healthy food, childcare services and other resources is maximised. Delivering against partnership actions set out in the child poverty action plan would meaningfully reduce the impact of child poverty and improve outcomes for children and young people across Highland.

This section is an adapted extract from: Highland Children and Young People's Needs Assessment (2026) available at <https://highlandcpp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Highland-Children-Young-Peoples-Needs-Assessment-2026-2.pdf>

Section 2: Action in Highland – What have we done to address Child Poverty in 2025/26

Theme 1: Getting Started - Pre-birth – 5 years

Improvement priority:

We will reduce the financial barriers in order to increase participation, raise aspirations and address the impacts of poverty.

1.1 Develop flexible models of childcare in rural areas

What we said we would do in 2025/26

- Develop and pilot an Integrated Single Care Model (SCM) in one or 2 areas in Highland.
- Continue to push for flexibility and a rural childcare approach/policy including childminding
- Provide a toolkit of flexible childcare options for rural communities
- Develop and deliver the parental employability programme
- Plan and develop a pilot for the Caithness area for childcare to support parents who want to undertake work experience. Local employers will be approached to partake in this pilot.

What we did

Develop flexible models of childcare

Funding from the Scottish Government Addressing Depopulation Action Plan fund enabled ongoing partnership work between Highland Council (THC), HIE and CALA to develop flexible, affordable childcare models for rural communities. An evidence report to Scottish Government Ministers (2025) highlights the need for policy change to support rural childcare flexibility, particularly to; enable parental employment, reduce underemployment. Work includes progressing a flexible childcare toolkit and exploration of regulatory changes (e.g. school-age childcare, childminding rules).

Innovative, flexible childcare pilots have been tested:

Ardnamurchan “Work & Play Club”

Pilot offering flexible, affordable sessions for ages 6 months–3 years.

Features short, structured sessions (2 x 2 hours), parents remain onsite with access to workspace. This enables parents to work or study locally and provides a gentle alternative to traditional childcare. Due to strong uptake, the pilot has been extended beyond initial trial.

Newstart / CALA Family Hub Model

- Combines skills/employability support with onsite childcare
- Parents attend training while children are cared for in the same building
- Removes barriers to participation in employability activity

Across all activity, a consistent focus on designing childcare that reflects rural realities and supports flexible hours and sessional provision, co-located childcare with other services, non-traditional settings and delivery models. Positioning childcare as a key economic enabler for employment, population retention and community sustainability.

Integrated Single Care Model

Development of an Integrated Single Care Model (SCM) is progressing toward implementation in pilot communities. Engagement was undertaken with communities, regulatory bodies and Scottish Government. The model aims to streamline and integrate childcare provision, addressing gaps in rural areas. CALA presented on the SCM at the Community Planning Partnership (CPP) Conference and has collaborated with THC and HIE to submit a follow-up report to the next CPP meeting. This report will outline key asks to help address barriers and support the next phase of implementation.

National and Regional Collaboration - a national rural childcare roundtable (Ullapool May 2026) brought together government, local authorities, and community organisations. Key issues identified across rural communities included a lack of childcare for:

- Under 2s
- School-aged children
- Areas with no childminders

Resulting impacts of parents unable to work or increase hours and families leaving communities. Key improvement themes are:

- Greater flexibility in regulations
- Workforce recruitment and retention
- Joined-up transport and infrastructure
- Allowing childcare provision in non-domestic settings

Bright Start Breakfast Clubs

- SG programme £3M Bright Start Breakfast fund opened in May.
- 13 successful applications.
- Total funding £134,489.60

Develop and implement a pilot project aimed at progressing unemployed parents in the Wick area into employment, with the SCQF Level 4/5 Employability Award re-designed for adults at its heart and with input from local employers throughout. Childcare, transport, lunch, and all materials will be provided to enable attendance. If successful, the plan would be to roll out the programme to other towns across Highland.

Since this action was proposed, employability provision for people of all ages—including parents—in Caithness has expanded under the Work. Life. Highland. banner. This growth has been supported by the appointment of two Highland Council key workers in the area, alongside the establishment in early 2026 of the *All in Highland* third-sector consortium, of which Wick-based Pulteneytown People's Project is a member. In addition to their leading role within *All in Highland*, Enable Works delivers specialist, Highland-wide employment support for disabled people and those with long-term health conditions.

The new Highland Employability Framework went live in Spring 2026, enabling a range of providers to deliver person-centred services across Highland on a call-off basis, tailored to the specific barriers faced by individuals.

Home Start Caithness have started to deliver the initial phase of the project, providing employability support to a group of parents in Wick. The next phase of the project will be to conduct a survey amongst a wider cohort of parents to help determine demand and identified needs. A key ambition for the project is to help parents achieve work readiness and connect them with local employers.

1.2 Implement the Whole Family Approach to mitigate the impacts of poverty

Whole Family Wellbeing Programme

- **Whole Family Wellbeing Programme Element 1 fund and Children and Young People Community Mental Health and Wellbeing fund**

The Whole Family Wellbeing Programme's **Element 1 funding** (small grants up to £10K) has now closed, and the Programme has now gathered outcome data from each project. A Thematic overview has been produced which can be accessed via this [link](#)

Similarly, the **Children and Young People Community Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund for 25/26**, administered by the Whole Family Wellbeing Programme has closed. Activity around outcomes has been collated for this fund also and a Thematic overview has been produced which can be access via this [link](#)

Both reports outline how the activities of these community based small grants have supported Children and Young People and their families at a community level, particularly showing strong, consistent and meaningful impact at scale around the following themes:

- Early intervention and prevention
- Emotional wellbeing, mental health and resilience
- Reduction of isolation through social connection
- Confidence, voice, participation and life chances
- Strong evidence of inclusive, whole-family approaches
- Positive progression into education, employment and volunteering
- Development of sustainable community assets and partnerships

Both funds have outcome evidence showing significant impact of:

- Delivering large-scale reach across Highland
- Providing effective early intervention and prevention
- Improving mental wellbeing, confidence, and social connection
- Supporting families as well as individuals
- Reducing demand on statutory and crisis services

The activities demonstrate strong alignment with Whole Family Wellbeing and GIRFEC principles, delivering accessible, community-based early intervention support that improves emotional wellbeing, strengthens relationships, and enables children, young people and families to thrive.

The Whole Family Wellbeing Programme's Family Links 1.0 project was the first 18-month phase of a whole-family wellbeing test of concept developed within the Inverness High School Associated Schools Group (ASG) in response to persistent issues with school attendance and engagement. Identified through the Inverness Community Partnership and local partners (particularly schools) in 2023, there was a clear recognition that poor attendance was not simply an educational issue, but a reflection of wider, interconnected challenges experienced by families. These included poverty, mental health difficulties, trauma, housing instability and complex family relationships, all of which contributed to unmet needs that existing services were not consistently able to address.

➤ **Whole Family Wellbeing
Programme - Family Links Service**

This shared understanding led to the development of Family Links as a test of concept funded through the Highland Whole Family Wellbeing Programme (WFWP) and delivered by a third-sector partnership of Care and Learning Alliance (CALA), Home-Start East Highland and Thriving Families. The core aim was to design and test a model that could improve school attendance and engagement by addressing root causes through holistic, relationship-based support for families. Family Links 1.0 was delivered between October 2024 and March 2026. Support for families in the Inverness High School ASG continues as part of Family Links 2.0, for which funding is currently secured until June 2027.

Family Links 1.0 demonstrates clear, measurable impact for children, young people, parents, and carers experiencing complex and overlapping challenges affecting wellbeing, school engagement, and family functioning. Across 74 families supported, around 65% showed improved school attendance and engagement, with further emerging progress in additional cases. The most significant outcomes were seen in children's emotional wellbeing, confidence, and strengthened relationships between families and schools. Positive change was reflected across all SHANARRI indicators, particularly in children feeling more nurtured, respected, included, and able to achieve.

The data highlights the scale and complexity of need among families. Most experienced multiple, interrelated challenges, including emotional dysregulation, mental health difficulties, neurodevelopmental needs, behavioural challenges, poverty, housing instability, and parental stress or trauma. Many families also struggled to navigate fragmented systems and access appropriate support.

Findings reinforce that school non-attendance is rarely an isolated behavioural issue; rather, it is often an adaptive response to unmet need, family stress, and environments that feel overwhelming or inaccessible.

Family Links' relational, whole-family approach has been central to its success. Outcomes were strongest where practical and emotional needs were addressed together, supported by trusted relationships, flexible delivery, and sustained engagement.

However, wider system limitations remain significant. High thresholds, fragmented pathways, and limited specialist capacity continue to restrict progress for families with the most complex needs.

Overall, Family Links 1.0 provides strong evidence that sustainable improvement requires coordinated, relationship-based, and preventative support that recognises the interconnected nature of family need.

Plans are now being developed for the expansion of the Family Links Service to three further test sites in Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch and Strathspey. This activity is planned to comment in August 2026.

A full Evaluation and Impact Report has been produced and is available via this [link](#)



➤ Whole Family Wellbeing Programme Locality Model

The Whole Family Wellbeing Programme (WFWP) in Highland is a strategic, locality-based approach to transforming how support is delivered to children, young people, and families. Grounded in national policy and the principles of holistic whole family support, the programme aims to improve wellbeing outcomes, reduce inequalities, and ensure families can access the right help at the right time, within their own communities.

Central to the programme is its locality model, operating across nine Community Planning Partnership areas. This approach ensures that funding and activity are needs-led, community-informed, and asset-based, with children and families placed at the centre of design and delivery. It promotes collaboration across partners and sectors, building local capacity while addressing gaps in provision and tackling poverty-related inequalities.

Through the activity of the Locality Co-Ordinators in the Programme strong partnerships have been formed through the WFWP Local Partnership Network Groups and the use of [Padlets](#) to share communication across the community/partnership. This provides the conditions for collaboration and enables work in partnership to develop the Element 2 Collaborative Partnership funds, which will bring joined-up approaches to test new innovative ways to support families in their communities and improve their wellbeing.

The WFWP funding framework provides a structured and equitable mechanism for distributing resources to areas of greatest need. To date, funding has been released through Element 1 (Small Grants Fund) and Element 2 (Collaborative Partnership Fund). Element 1 supports locally led, Third Sector and community-based initiatives, enabling early intervention and preventative support.

Funded projects reflect a diverse range of activity, including parenting support, wellbeing and mental health services, community-based family support, and initiatives addressing social isolation and financial hardship. These projects demonstrate strong alignment with early help principles and provide accessible, flexible support within communities.

Element 2 focuses on partnership and system collaboration, supporting multi-agency projects and whole-system applications that test innovative approaches to service delivery. These initiatives strengthen connections between services, improve pathways, and enhance coordination around families with more complex needs. The thematic analysis across Element 1 and 2 highlights common priorities, including improving emotional wellbeing, strengthening family relationships, increasing service accessibility, and addressing the wider determinants of poverty.

Looking ahead, **Element 3 (Transformational Commissioning)** represents the next phase of the programme and the opportunity to drive whole-system change at scale. The vision for Element 3 is to move beyond individual projects towards integrated, sustainable system redesign, where early help is embedded across all services. This includes aligning commissioning, funding, and delivery models to create a more joined-up system that reduces fragmentation, lowers thresholds for support, and prioritises prevention.

Ultimately, Element 3 seeks to ensure that families in Highland experience a seamless system of support that is relational, accessible, and responsive tackling poverty, building resilience, and enabling all children and families to thrive.

The [Whole Family Wellbeing Programme Overview and Analysis Report](#) outlines the Programme's funding activity to date and highlights how the activity is targeting those families most affected by Poverty and Poverty Inequalities.

1.3 Develop financial inclusion pathways

- Adapt Food Insecurity Pathway for families with infants to access emergency formula milk.
- Provide Access to emergency funds for families in remote and rural areas and explore cash first approaches.
- Explore what measures can be put in place to provide assurance on the delivery of the FI Pathway
- Cash first approaches are difficult in remote and rural areas. Argyll and Bute have newly developed, an emergency voucher scheme which may be able to be adapted for North Highland and provide a solution. Explore other models of good practice in remote and rural areas to support cash first approaches. Update The Highland Information Trail.
- Provide information on the maternity section of the NHS Highland website. This will enable the information to be reviewed/updated every quarter.

Previous funded FI pathways between the Highland Council Welfare Support Team & Health Visitors continues to go from strength to strength with the Welfare Support team assisting with families with income maximisation and benefit checks.

Improvement Services Pathway – Welfare Advice & Health Partnership (WAHP) funding ended in March 2025. The Council's Welfare Support Team are present at various GP practices across rural Highland and will continue with this service if the demand is there. Job Centre Plus – Welfare Support are present weekly/fortnightly in Dingwall and Invergordon Job centres assisting families with all financial checks, mainly disabilities/reviews/appeals. A further two Job centres have reached out for the Welfare support services – Portree & Fort William started February 2025. New on-line service for schools to refer directly into Welfare support to assist with families facing crisis – Welfare presentation on how schools can help were delivered May/June 25 to Head Teachers and Guidance teams.

Integrated Financial Inclusion Pathway for Highland Council Tenants in Rent Arrears

The Welfare Support Team, in collaboration with Housing Services, deliver a targeted financial inclusion pathway to support Highland Council tenants across the region who are experiencing rent arrears. This includes individuals at risk of losing their tenancies or facing court action due to non-payment of rent. The purpose of this is to prevent homelessness by improving tenants' financial resilience through tailored support, benefit maximisation, and access to financial inclusion services.

Pathway Overview - Early Identification

Housing Officers and Welfare Team staff identify tenants in arrears or at risk of eviction. Triggers include missed payments, court notices, or crisis grant applications. Referral and Assessment: Tenants will be referred to the Welfare Support Team for a financial health check.

Food Insecurity Pathway for families with infants to access emergency formula milk

This pilot has now been live since Monday 30th June 2025. The Steering Group in place to track progress. A communications strategy is in place and is updated by the Steering Group as needed. To

date HALO have supported 70 families with their interventions through the pilot. HALO and NHS Lead attended PRDG meeting in September providing an in-depth overview and progress to date.

Theme 2: Growing Up – Primary Years

Improvement priority:

Mitigate the impact of the cost-of-living crisis

2.1 Increase the uptake of sanitary products in schools and other public sector facilities.

What we said we would do in 2025/26

- Ensure free period products are available in Highland to everyone who needs them.
- Raise awareness of how to access free period products through community collection, schools or home delivery run by Highland Council or through GP distribution model run by Health Information Service (HIRS)
- Increase in product take-up from young people

What we did

- 2026/27 focus on pupil uptake, a pupil survey identified, most would like access to products within school toilets. Quotes are being gathered for dispensing machines that can be implemented across schools and community centres/libraries.
- Pupils have also requested more access to reusable products - these were not provided in the large schools order - so pupils are being encouraged to make online orders for reusables to gather information on the level of need for these products.
- Contact with Social Work/Housing to identify other locations for products. An area in Highland Council has been identified where products can be collected and distributed.
- Increased advertising through HC Staff website has resulted in increased orders for various departments such as Justice/Harbour team/Social Work in outlying areas.
- Products also available through charities such as Mikeysline and CAB and HMP Prison Inverness are also providing products to families who are visiting the prison.
- Facebook campaign in February for home orders and received a great response and uptake in orders. Further campaign planned for Summer holidays.
- Team also working closely with Highlife Highland and have a 'Period Promotion' week with tables in the main centres with products to take away and promotional material detailing how to order/community collection points.
- Further community collection points added to the MyPeriodApp in more rural areas such as Isle of Rum, Kinlochleven, Glenmoriston, Sutherland and Caithness
- Total mail order products issued 2025/26 - 12,376

2.2 Roll out cost of the school day toolkit

- Increase the number of schools using the toolkit
- Cost of the School Day will continue to be a focus for schools over the coming years. At the end of the 2024/25 school session 7 Highland schools signed up with Voice Network, and the aim is to increase this to 10 by the end of August 2026. Last session, several professional learning networks received training on Cost of the School Day, and this has been followed up with an August newsletter and baseline survey to all schools. It is the intention to establish a Cost of the School Day Network across Highlands by April 2026 which will be led by the Attainment Advisor.

Theme 3: Moving On – Secondary and Young Adulthood

Improvement Priority:

We will raise attainment and close the poverty related attainment gap

3.1 Raise awareness of the impact of poverty amongst children and young people

What we said we would do in 2025/26

- Deliver 8 Money Counts courses to 40 people over the course of the year-through NHS Highland Public Health training programme.
- Develop and pilot a Money Counts 3 course designed to support teams and services to become more poverty sensitive
- Undertake a 3-6 month post evaluation survey for those attending the course
- Improve our shared understanding and use of data
- Embed Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and Whole Family Wellbeing Strategic Assessment

What we did

Money Counts Training

This continues to be offered as a means of increasing the number and quality of conversations around money worries. The training highlights the “Worrying About Money?” leaflet and app as tools to support individuals access a range of appropriate support services and organisations.

Money Counts Training delivered since April 25:

- 9 Brief Conversations (Money Counts 1) courses with 40 attendees
- 5 Supportive Conversations (Money Counts 2) courses with 30 attendees
- A new easy access e-learning module for Brief Conversations is now available on Turas Learn. This new e-learning module has replaced the facilitated Brief Conversations online course. Since launch in November 25, 40 individuals have completed the module.
- Feedback on training - Confidence to talk to someone about money pre-course averaged 5.68 and increased post course to 8.36 where 1 is not confident and 10 is very confident. For knowledge about service to support people with help to maximise income, pre-course this was 5.08 and post course 7.95.

Improve our understanding and use of data

Highland Community Planning Partnership has created a health inequalities dashboard to support the Partnership to:

- be aware of health inequalities, their impact on outcomes and what can be done to reduce health inequalities
- monitor health inequalities in Highland
- identify areas of need for action

The aim is to update the dashboard on an annual basis.

The indicators used in dashboard are aligned with the Marmot principles and so provide health, social, economic, and environmental indicators useful to a board range stakeholders including a section on Child poverty

Embed Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and Whole Family Wellbeing Strategic Assessment

Collection of feedback from families and lived experience to find out what worked, what didn't, how things could be improved. This will support future planning within the Poverty Reduction Delivery Group

3.2 Roll out the Family First approach

- Reduce the numbers of children in external residential provision
- Increase the proportion of children in kinship care
- Increase the number of foster carers
- Increase community services and supports
- Implement the Whole Family Wellbeing Programme in Highland.

The most effective protection of children involves early support within the family, before urgent action is needed. In Highland, this relates to the 'Family First' approach and the Whole Family Wellbeing programme. If children do require placement away from home, real protection involves attuned, trauma-informed and sufficiently sustained support towards reunification, or towards an alternative secure home base when this is not possible.

Reduce the numbers of children in external residential provision

The numbers of placements outwith Highland were at the lowest level ever recorded at 9 placements in Oct 2023 but have since increased to 24 in March 2026. Movement analysis shows that 4 YP left placements outwith Highland and 11 YP have moved into placements outwith Highland, since July 2025 when there was a total of 17. While two of the eleven new placements are in Secure Accommodation. This increase is a result of several young people with needs and behaviour that required specialist placements which were outwith Highland. In Nov 2025, the Council approved the redevelopment and expansion of existing residential houses in addition to the purchase of 2 additional residential properties for Care Experienced Young People. This is to enable the return to Highland of some of these young people out of area.

Increase the proportion of children in kinship care

Kinship care continues to be a key component of Highland's approach to shifting the balance of care, supporting children to remain within their wider family networks where it is safe to do so. During

2025/26, there has been continued focus on strengthening kinship arrangements, with particular emphasis on providing support to carers to maintain placement stability and meet increasingly complex needs. Alongside this, work has progressed to enhance kinship family finding activity, including the development of a distinct kinship team to improve identification, assessment, and ongoing support of kinship carers. Overall numbers have remained stable across the year. In April 2025 there were 230 children in combined kinship and residence order arrangements, compared to 231 in May 2026. While this does not demonstrate significant growth, the stability reflects a continued commitment to maintaining children within family-based care where appropriate. As much of the operational development in kinship support and family finding is relatively recent, it is anticipated that the impact of this work will become more evident over time.

Increase the number of foster carers:

Fostering continues to play a critical role in Highland's approach to shifting the balance of care, supporting more children to remain within family-based settings where it is safe to do so. During 2025/26, there has been a sustained focus on both the recruitment and retention of foster carers, recognising ongoing pressures in meeting local demand and reducing reliance on external residential placements. Targeted recruitment activity, alongside strengthened support to existing carers, has aimed to increase placement stability and capacity within Highland. During 2025/26, overall numbers have remained relatively stable, with a slight reduction from the baseline. As of April 2025, there were 78 fostering households, reducing to 76 by March and April 2026, remaining at 76 in May. Whilst this is below the baseline, the relative stability reflects positive retention of existing carers, which is a key strength given the increasing complexity of need and national recruitment challenges. As much of this recruitment and retention activity is relatively recent, it is anticipated that the impact of this work on increasing resources will become more evident over time.

3.3 Identify way to provided targeted support within universal services.

- Distribute around 1500 IFAN Worrying About Money leaflets in 25/26 to those in need of financial support
- Worrying About Money leaflets/ WAM app***
 - 3338 WAM leaflets distributed in total by the Health Improvement Resource Service (does not include downloads of the online version)

- Figures for the WAM app for 2025/26 indicate 200 active users, 150 new users, average engagement time 2mins 51secs



Employability

- Aim to work with 300 parents on their journey towards employment
- Identify parents that could benefit from offers from employability service.
- Support private sector take on employability clients in-work progression
- Launch WorkLifeHighland.co.uk
- Develop further links between NHH employability plans and HC to support young people and parents into employment.

Aim to work with 300 parents on their journey towards employment

Highland Council Employability team supported 370 parents in 25/26 including 104 already in employment.

Identify parents that could benefit from offers from employability service.

The Highland Council employability team includes the Employability Child Poverty Co-ordinator whose main task is to identify parents across Highland who could benefit from employability support – both out-of-work parents and working parents on Universal Credit. This involves close working with other Highland Employability Partnership (HEP) partners, particularly JobCentre Plus staff across the Highlands. Another key part of the work is to organise and / or attend events aimed at engaging with parents who could benefit from employability support but aren't aware of the services on offer. HTSI is another of the HEP partners, and this link has been essential in helping to reach out to potential clients via 3rd sector organisations across the Highlands.

Support private sector take on employability clients in-work progression

A full-time Employer Engagement officer has been appointed to the team and is working closely with employer organisations including Chambers of Commerce, FSB, DYW and Business Gateway and individual businesses of varying sizes - to ensure a stronger connection with employability clients.

Launch WorkLifeHighland.co.uk

www.worklifehighland.co.uk was launched in Autumn 2024. For the 12 months to 31 March 2026, the site had 24.6k views from 11.5 visitors.

Develop further links between NHH employability plans and HC to support young people and parents into employment.

NHS Highland and Highland Council employability staff continue to work closely together. NHS Highland is one of the Highland Employability Partnership (HEP) partners and will also be represented on each of the 3 sub-Highland operational Local Employability Partnerships (LEPs) shortly. Strong collaboration continues particularly in relation to recruitment events in communities across the Highlands which has seen dozens of people offered jobs. This has included both young people and parents. Links are also being developed in relation to employability and tackling health inequalities across Highland.

Section 3: What are we planning to do to address Child Poverty in 2026/27

Highland Child Poverty Plan 2026-2029

Highland Community Planning Partnership (HCPP) partners share a strong commitment to tackling poverty and inequality. The Highland Poverty Reduction Delivery Group (PRDG), a thematic group within the HCPP, provides leadership on the 2026-29 Child Poverty plan as part of the Highland Children's Service Plan 2026-29. It is also responsible for preparing the annual Local Child Poverty Action Report, a joint statutory requirement of Health Boards and Local Authorities. The PRDG is chaired by Highland Council and brings together representatives from Highland Council, NHS Highland, community planning partners, and third-sector organisations.

The 2026–29 Child Poverty Plan outlines how partners will work together to deliver well-organised, high-quality, joined-up, trauma-informed and preventative support for children, young people and families. The plan is informed by the following:

- Three improvement statements developed following a self-assessment exercise supported by the Improvement Service and Public Health Scotland:
- Bringing Hope, Building Futures the Scottish Government Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2026-31
- Highland Integrated Children's Service Plan Life stages approach

Improvement Statements

The plan's overall structure aligns with the following three improvement statements:

- Be data informed in identifying need and measuring success/progress.
- Work with those with Lived Experience, specifically identified priority groups, to help to identify gaps and priorities for improvement and to work together to design solutions.
- Work in partnership with other services and partners to develop a shared understanding of current needs and existing actions to address poverty.

Bringing Hope, Building Futures

The Child Poverty plan adopts the four key themes and 15 interconnected areas in Bringing Hope, Building Futures to organise the partnership working to address child and family poverty in Highland. This allows partners, in addition to focusing on the 6 priority family groups, to take a broader view to include a range of issues that drive child and family poverty including housing, transport and access to services, and to engage with a wider range of partners across the public, private and third sectors.

Life stages approach

The child poverty plan also adopts and cross references the life stages approach (getting started, growing up, moving on) used throughout the Integrated Children Service Plan for each action.

Child Poverty Plan 2026–29

1 Be Data Informed

The 2026-29 plan seeks a greater focus on using data to inform the response to poverty in Highland , through better understanding of where poverty lies and what causes it. Data will be used to target support to those most in need. This part of the 2026-29 plan will develop during the three years and will include:

- Baseline using PHS, HCPP dashboards and other info
- Monitor against baseline for LCPAR
- Use data for effective targeting (e.g. Welfare Team and CACI)

2 Listen to the voice of lived experience

HCPP has secured support for a two year pilot to explore the opportunities for a partnership or network of stakeholders to share their lived experience with service providers through a variety of methods, tools and fora and for reasons ranging from consultation to codesign and production of services. The partnership or network will provide a ready means of communication and partnership between service users and service providers, with a particular emphasis on capturing the voices of children and families, and of marginalised and deprived individuals and groups within our communities.

3 Work in Partnership to address child and family poverty

Outcomes and actions are outlined on the following pages.

3.1 Increasing earned incomes	Getting started	Growing up	Moving on
<i>Providing aligned skills and employment support for parents and young people</i>			
Support employability clients to gain employment in childcare and childminding settings.	✓	✓	✓
Support unemployed and in-work young people and parents improve income through employment	✓	✓	✓
Support adults and young people improve their core skills to secure and sustain employment.			✓
<i>Expanding the availability of flexible and affordable childcare for families</i>			
Develop flexible models of childcare in rural areas	✓		
Develop flexible models of childcare in rural areas to support parental employment	✓	✓	✓
<i>Ensuring public transport is available, affordable and accessible and connects parents and young people to work</i>			
Support transport initiatives that remove barriers to accessing services and employment	✓	✓	✓
<i>Driving positive change in labour market and workplace conditions</i>			
Work-based initiatives that improve access to work and provide support for disadvantaged families			✓

3.2 Reducing costs of living	Getting started	Growing up	Moving on
<i>Delivering more social and affordable homes for families</i>			
Highland Housing Challenge delivers significant increase in affordable housing for Highland	✓	✓	✓
<i>Ending child homelessness</i>			
Support to reduce homelessness; and where unavoidable, reduce time in temporary accommodation	✓	✓	✓
<i>Making homes cheaper to heat</i>			
Improve energy efficiency of Highland homes and provide support and advice to address fuel poverty	✓	✓	✓
<i>Tackling public sector debt</i>			
Support for indebted families to reduce debt burden	✓	✓	✓

3.3 Maximising incomes from social security and benefits in kind	Getting started	Growing up	Moving on
<i>Strengthening support through social security</i>			
Scottish child payment-> £40/week/child; removal 2 child benefit cap	✓	✓	
<i>Maximising take-up of Scottish and UK Government benefits</i>			
Develop financial inclusion pathways	✓	✓	✓
Maximise benefits/entitlement uptake	✓	✓	✓
<i>Making money and debt advice more accessible for families</i>			
Improve financial literacy	✓	✓	✓
Raise service-provider awareness of the impact of poverty on children and young people	✓	✓	✓

3.4 Supporting children and families to thrive	Getting started	Growing up	Moving on
<i>Delivering Whole Family Support</i>			
Implement a Whole Family Wellbeing Approach	✓	✓	✓
Establish a CLD Family Learning offer in Highland targeted to those most in need.	✓	✓	✓
<i>Supporting young families: investing in early child development</i>			
Provide targeted support within universal (health/ early years) services	✓		
<i>Ensuring children and young people can reach their full potential</i>			
Roll out cost of school day toolkit		✓	
Targeted support to improve food security	✓	✓	✓
Strengthen the role of the third sector in reducing child poverty.	✓	✓	✓
Young people have access to Youth Work opportunities		✓	✓

Addressing the poverty-related attainment gap		✓	✓
<i>Making best use of data to support children and families and improve public service</i>			
Use data to create baseline, target interventions and monitor progress	✓	✓	✓
Lived Experience Partnership pilot	✓	✓	✓