

Agenda Item	10
Report No	HC/27/26

The Highland Council

Committee: Highland Council

Date: 17 September 2026

Report Title: UK City of Culture Bid 2029 - Update

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 Since the last report, the Inverness and Highland UK City of Culture 2029 bid has been submitted, with the shortlist expected to be announced in October 2026.
- 1.2 Work is ongoing to establish the Cultural Assembly and further develop a Culture Strategy for the Highlands, alongside preparation for potentially being successful at shortlisting.
- 1.3 Governance arrangements continue to develop, with the Creative Highland Board now fully established and driving the strategic vision behind the bid.

2 Recommendations

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

3 Implications

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

Should the bid be shortlisted, it would receive an additional £125k from DCMS towards the next stage of activity required.

- 3.1.1 The bid is expected to generate considerable economic benefit for the winning city. Previous winners had delivery budgets of approximately £26m (Derry/Londonderry), £33m (Hull), and £45m (Coventry). Those cities collectively leveraged more than £1 billion of additional investment: The funding plans and financial implications of a winning bid are detailed in the submitted bid documents.

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

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

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

3.3 **Risk** – In this extremely competitive undertaking, there is a reputational risk should the bid not be shortlisted, or be shortlisted but not win. Mitigation in the form of multi-scenario planning, stakeholder management and partnership working is in place to ensure that, whatever the outcome, there is a positive legacy for Highland.

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

3.5 **Gaelic** – None arising directly from this report. The bid programme includes elements of celebration and promotion of Gaelic language and culture.

4 **Impacts**

4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.

4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.

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

5 **UK City of Culture 2029 – Background**

5.1 Previous reports to the Council on 14 May and 25 June 2026 have set out the background to the bid and updated Members on progress from longlisting to the deadline for submission of the full bid on 10 August 2026.

5.2 On 18 June, a Cultural Conversation has been held, bringing together over 80 individuals and organisations from across the cultural sector in Highland to inform the programme and bid. This gathering agreed the establishment of a Cultural

Assembly, which would form a permanent representative body and forum for the creative industries.

- 5.3 On 29 June, a Children's Assembly brought together children and young people with an interest in culture to contribute their ideas and ensure that the voices of this key audience were represented in the bid.
- 5.4 On 10 August, the Inverness and Highland full application to be considered for UK City and Region of Culture 2029 was submitted. A Member briefing on 24 August gave Members the opportunity to hear the content of the programme and wider bid, which remains confidential.

6 Governance

- 6.1 The Creative Highland Board has been established. Including representatives from the creative industries, heritage, tourism and hospitality, higher education and sport and leisure, the Board is co-chaired by Convenor Bill Lobban and Ellen Fogel Walker, Chief Executive of Visit Inverness and Loch Ness. Co-vice chairs are Highland Council Chief Executive Derek Brown and UHI Principal Vicki Nairn.

A full list of members is available at **Appendix 1**.

The Board will oversee the bid, including the establishment of an arms-length body, should the bid be successful.

7 Cultural Assembly

- 7.1 The Cultural Assembly will convene for the first time on 16 September 2026, with the agenda including a review of the submitted City of Culture bid and engagement work to inform a future Culture Strategy. Fèis Rois Chief Executive Fiona Dalgetty has agreed to take on convenorship of the Assembly and is also a member of the Creative Highland Board, acting as a key link between the two bodies.

8 Engagement

- 8 Engagement to date has been extremely positive. Not only have Highland-based artists, communities and organisations strongly supported the bid, but national agencies have also input, encouragement and formal letters of support.

Letters of support have been received from:

- Scottish Government
- Creative Scotland
- Museums and Galleries Scotland
- National Library of Scotland
- Bòrd na Gàidhlig
- VisitScotland
- Eden Court
- HIE
- UHI
- NHS Highland
- Camanachd Association
- Scottish Football Association

- Scottish Rugby Union
- Municipality of the County of Inverness in Nova Scotia

9 Financial

- 9 A detailed financial plan was submitted as part of the full application. This included funding and support in kind which will be secured in the event of a successful bid, as well as projected income. Early indications are that the programme offers a range of opportunities which public and private sector organisations are keen to support with investment or sponsorship.

The strongly evidenced link between a successful City of Culture bid and economic impact indicates the legacy value of funding the cultural programme.

11 Next Steps and Key Dates

- 11.1 The shortlist is expected to be announced in October 2026, after which shortlisted cities will host a visit from the panel of judges. The final announcement of the winning city is expected to be in January 2027.
- 11.2 Work is progressing to plan for both shortlisting and a panel visit, and the possibility of not being shortlisted.
- 11.3 A Creative Highland Board meeting will be held before the shortlisting announcement.
- 11.4 A second event for children and young people is being planned for autumn 2026, with a focus on engaging with young people from some of the more remote and rural communities in Highland.

12 Conclusion

- 11.5 A comprehensive Full Application for the UK City of Culture 2026 has been completed and submitted within the required timeframe. The work to date has already been successful in creating and strengthening relationships and initiating work to develop a wider cultural strategy, with the aim of celebrating and regenerating creative industries in Highland and working with them to improve wellbeing and opportunities for people across the area.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

Date: 17 September 2026

Author: Ruth Fry – Chief Officer HR & Communications
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Appendix 1

Creative Highland - Board Composition

Name	Organisation	Board Role
Cllr Bill Lobban	The Highland Council	Co-Chair
Ellen Fogel-Walker (CEO)	Visit Inverness Loch Ness	Co-Chair
Derek Brown (CEO)	The Highland Council	Co-Vice Chair
Vicki Nairn (Principal and Vice-Chancellor)	University of the Highlands and Islands	Co-Vice Chair

Rebecca Holt (CEO)	Eden Court Theatre	Board Member
Charlotte Mountford (Director)	Lyth Arts Centre	Board Member
Lucy Conway (Director)	Isle of Eigg Trust	Board Member
Frances Gunn (Chair)	Flow Country Partnership	Board Member
John Morrison (Managing Director)	Morrison Media	Board Member
Stuart Black (CEO)	Highlands and Islands Enterprise	Board Member
Colin Marr (CEO)	Inverness Chamber of Commerce	Board Member
Steve Walsh (CEO)	High Life Highland	Board Member
Chris Taylor (Destination Development Director, Highlands & Islands)	Visit Scotland	Board Member
Karen Dick (Director of Place, Partnerships and Communities)	Creative Scotland	Board Member
Leah McBain (Youth Convenor – outgoing)	Highland Council	Board Member
Eilidh Primrose (Youth Convenor – incoming)	Highland Council	Board Member
Fiona Dalgetty (TBC) (CEO and Artistic Director)	Fèis Rois	Board Member
Ingrid Henderson	Producer; musician	Board member