

Agenda Item	6
Report No	HC/33/26

The Highland Council

Committee: Highland Council

Date: 29 October 2026

Report Title: Promoting and Realising Children's Rights - Highland Council's Children's Rights Report 2024-26

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - People

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is one of the core international human rights treaties – a universally agreed set of minimum standards setting out the range of rights children should enjoy. It provides a holistic framework for the rights of all children. It articulates these fundamental rights within the framework of children's lives and experiences and has now been incorporated into Scots Law through the UNCRC (Scotland) Act 2024.
- 1.2 The UNCRC (Scotland) Act 2024 introduces a reporting duty for listed authorities, requiring them to publish reports every three years on their actions related to the UNCRC. These reports must detail steps taken to ensure compliance with the UNCRC and outline plans for enhancing children's rights in the future.
- 1.3 A report to cover the period 14 July 2024 to 31 March 2026 has been prepared to outline the work undertaken by Highland Council to implement the UNCRC within the wide range of services, not only those provided directly to children and families. This report includes data and examples of activity as evidence from across Highland. This evidence supports an evaluation of where we are in terms of our requirements and aspirations as a local authority and also provides a plan for next steps. As required, a child-friendly version of this report is also available [HERE](#).

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
 - i. Note the work undertaken to date as we implement the UNCRC (Scotland) Act 2024 within Highland Council.
 - ii. Support the plan for the next 3 years to further advance children's rights in Highland.
 - iii. Consider where, within their own case work and decision making, Elected Members can support the articles of the UNCRC.

3. Implications

- 3.1 Resource – there are no direct resource implications contained in the report.

- 3.2 Legal – The key legislative requirements link to the UNCRC (Scotland) Act 2024. However to promote equality and reduce possible discrimination against individual groups of children, there are also requirements for the local authority within the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, the Equality Act 2010, the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016, the [Armed Forces Covenant](#) and the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026.
- 3.3 Risk – Not implementing the UNCRC or reporting on progress and furthering children’s rights would mean that as a public body we would be in breach of our legal responsibilities. However, the greatest risk would be to the children and young people not having their rights realised and feeling disappointed and frustrated at not being involved in decision making that will affect them.
- 3.4 Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people) - there are no direct resource implications contained in the report.
- 3.5 Gaelic - there are no direct resource implications contained in the report.

4. Impacts

- 4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children’s Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.
- 4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.
- 4.3 This is a monitoring and update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5. Background/Context

- 5.1 The UNCRC (Scotland) Act 2024 requires statutory bodies to undertake several actions to ensure children’s rights are promoted and supported in all the work they do:
- Improve the culture of children’s rights.
 - Not to act incompatibly with the requirements of the UNCRC.
 - Report every 3 years on the actions taken and intend to take to evidence compliance with the duties, in addition to actions that secure better or further effect on children’s rights.
 - Ensure every service upholds children’s rights, not just children’s services.
 - Involve children and young people in the preparation of reports and create and publish a child friendly version.
- 5.2 The report presented to Members today is written to comply with our legal duty as a ‘Listed Authority’, but provides detailed narrative and links, so that it can also be a summary of the work we are undertaking in relation to children’s rights, to inform children, young people, families, practitioners, Elected Members and other services working in Highland.

- 5.3 Children are rights holders. However, their ability to enjoy their rights can be impeded by attitudinal and structural barriers that need to be identified and changed. Within the context of a large statutory organisation, the ways in which we ensure children's rights are upheld requires to be planned and evidenced and this report provides a vehicle for summarising this work within Highland Council.
- 5.4 The UNCRC provides the Highland Council with a platform to help us determine if we are improving and promoting the wellbeing of children. It isn't an additional task but provides an overarching framework within which all policy that affects children and young people should be developed, and within which sits the wellbeing of all children. As such the Convention also compliments the [Getting It Right For Every Child](#) (GIRFEC) wellbeing indicators, which are Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible and Included (SHANNARI) and also the recommendations of [The Promise](#), particularly in relation to care experienced children and young people.
- 5.5 Raising awareness of the UNCRC across Highland Council and offering support and guidance from services who regularly work with children, has enabled a wider range of Council services to be more involved in promoting and furthering children's rights. Some are now engaging in consultation with children to ensure they can start to shape decision making more effectively. Examples of such practice can be found throughout this report as brief **Case Studies**.

6. Children's Rights and Participation Improvement Group

- 6.1 The Children's Rights and Participation Improvement Group is a partnership group that oversees work in Highland to promote children's rights and the Community Planning Partnership's approach to participation and engagement. In particular, this group is charged with promoting 3 specific rights:
- Article 4 - Making Rights Real
 - Article 12 - Respect for Children's Views
 - Article 42 - Everyone Must Know about Children's Rights
- 6.2 This group:
- Oversees the action plan for improving and promoting children's rights and participation across Highland.
 - Co-ordinates the work being done that represents the collective ownership and delivery of the UNCRC across Highland.
 - Is responsible for the children rights planning requirements related to children rights reporting to the Scottish Government.
 - Promotes examples of good practice exemplifying defined rights within the UNCRC.
- 6.3 The Children's Rights and Participation Improvement Group also monitors key sources of qualitative evidence relating to the participation and engagement of children and young people. Quantitative data available from Community Planning Partners is also gathered and reviewed by the group and reported on to support the qualitative data available and to provide a baseline and trend data to track progress and improvement where appropriate.

- 6.4 Within this context, the Children's Rights and Participation Improvement Group has prepared the report relating to Highland Council attached at **Appendix 1**, with the previous chair of the group, Bernadette Cairns (Principal Educational Psychologist) being the main author of the report.

7. Highland Council Planning and Reporting

- 7.1 Elected Members have declared their wish to be 'ACE Aware' (Highland Council, 2018)¹ and 'Trauma Informed' (Highland Council, 2022)². Members on the Education Committee have also agreed to consider children's rights in decisions they will make with regards to children and young people (Highland Council, 2023)³. To support them in this endeavour, within Highland several strategic plans provide the planning landscape for children and children's rights across services, organisations and community partners:
- The [Highland Delivery Plan](#) (2024-2027), with Service Plans for People, Place and Community linking directly to the delivery outcomes.
 - The [Highland Outcome Improvement Plan](#) (2017-2027), with [The Child Poverty Action Plan](#) providing direct support for a section of the HOIP.
 - The updated [Integrated Children's Services Plan](#) (2026-2029) with a number of subgroups responsible for the Children's Rights and Participation Plan, The Child Protection Plan and the Plan for The Promise.
- 7.2 We have attempted to ensure that these plans link with each other and provide the framework for clusters of work to promote and realise children's rights in Highland as summarised in this report.
- ## 8. Evidence and Actions Taken to Deliver Better or Further Effect to Children's Rights
- 8.1 To help make sure that every child and young person has their rights realised, there are five principles within the national model, to support the implementation of the articles within the UNCRC. These principles are essential when taking a children's human rights approach across any element of service delivery.
- 8.2 **1. Embedding:** children's rights should be at the core of planning and service delivery and the UNCRC should be embedded into every aspect of decision making through procedures and actions. For example, we should be thinking about how to ensure children's rights are always considered when policies, service guidelines or budgets are being developed.
- 8.3 **2. Equality and Non-Discrimination:** ensuring every child and young person has what they need so that they have equal opportunity to fulfil their potential and that no child or young person should be limited in what they can do or achieve because of discrimination. For example, we should be thinking about how to make changes to ensure children and young people are supported to access their rights equally.

¹ Highland Council Committee (13 December 2018), Item 5 – Adverse Childhood Experiences
https://www.highland.gov.uk/meetings/meeting/4063/highland_council/attachment/74970

² Highland Council Committee (June 2022) Press release.

https://www.highland.gov.uk/news/article/14651/highland_council_to_implement_trauma_informed_practice

³ Highland Council Education Committee (23 November 2023), Item 6 – Children's Rights and Participation
https://www.highland.gov.uk/meetings/meeting/4887/education_committee

- 8.4 **3. Empowerment:** supporting children and young people's agency and capacities as individuals, so they are better able to claim their rights, and to engage with, influence and hold accountable individuals and organisations that affect their lives. For example, we should be thinking about how to enhance children and young people's knowledge and understanding of their rights.
- 8.5 **4. Participation:** listening to children and young people and taking their views seriously. Children and young people should be supported to freely express their opinions and give meaningful feedback about the outcomes. For example, we should be thinking about how to ensure children and young people's views are heard and taken into account in any decision-making process that affects them.
- 8.6 **5. Accountability:** the need for staff and officers to be transparent about their decision making in any way that it enables children and young people to influence, scrutinise and challenge decisions that affect them. For example, we should be thinking about how to ensure accountability to children and young people by making sure that systems and standards are in place that support compliance with children's rights.
- 8.7 This report outlines the actions we have taken and those we plan to take in the future, to ensure that these five principles guide services in undertaking their day-to-day activities.
- 9. Summary and Next Steps**
- 9.1 This report provides a very detailed analysis of the current 'State of Children's Rights' in relation to Highland Council services and provides the benchmark for the work anticipated for the future. Where data and evidence from children themselves is available, this has been included to highlight the strengths and indicate where progress is required. In particular, inequality in realising rights is noted for those children living in poverty, those who are care-experienced and those with significant additional support needs.
- 9.2 There are many examples provided as case studies throughout this report, shared by services that up until recently, have not considered children as part of their stakeholder or client group. There are many examples where services who don't directly support children have understood their responsibilities to engage with children and to consider the impact of decisions on them. Our use of Integrated Impact Assessments in Highland has supported this work but has also highlighted the need to more rigorously use the impact assessment process to gain the lived experience and views of children more widely.
- 9.3 We have engaged with over 800 children of varying ages in the co-production of a [Participation Strategy](#), which we advocate is used across Council Services, alongside its supporting [resources](#). We recognise however that engagement and participation could be further supported in all aspects of life where children are impacted, to ensure they are able to directly influence decisions made by officers and Elected Members on a regular basis.
- 9.4 **Appendix 3** of the report provides a list of actions we will undertake over the next 3 years to further the work we have been engaged in to realise children's rights, with the aim of building in accountability and best practice to all services within Highland Council.

- 9.5 All Highland Council employees are Rights Holders and Corporate Parents, however more work is required to ensure everyone understands these responsibilities, especially in relation to the UNCRC and The Promise. There is a clear focus within Highland Council on promoting and realising children's rights and there has been considerable work undertaken to date to achieve this but still much more to do. The commitment for us to get this right starts with the Chief Executive and runs throughout the organisation and with accountability at all levels across all services, we are confident that we can sustain the progress made to date and ensure improvements over time.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - People

Date:

Author:

Background Papers:

Appendices: Appendix 1 – Promoting and Realising Children's Rights HC Statutory UNCRC Report

Promoting and Realising Children's Rights

Highland Council's Children's Rights Report 2024-26

FRONT PAGE

HC logo/picture/format to be added

Foreword by Derek Brown, Chief Executive, Highland Council

The incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots law in July 2024 marked a significant milestone in strengthening children's rights. It also reinforced our responsibility to ensure those rights are respected, protected and realised through the decisions we make and the services we deliver.

I am pleased to introduce Highland Council's first statutory Children's Rights Report, covering July 2024 to March 2026. It provides an opportunity to recognise our progress, reflect honestly on the challenges that remain and set out our commitment to further improvement.

Children's rights are everyone's responsibility. Decisions about education, housing, transport, communities and resources all affect children's lives. This report highlights examples of excellent practice across the Council, including within services whose primary focus is not traditionally on children and young people. These examples demonstrate the value of recognising children's rights in all areas of our work and provide important foundations for embedding this approach more consistently across the organisation.

We have made important progress in strengthening rights-based practice and children's participation. Highland's Children and Young People's Participation Strategy, co-created with children and young people across our Community Planning Partnership, provides a foundation for their meaningful involvement in decision-making. I particularly want to recognise the children and young people whose experiences, ideas and challenges have helped shape this work. Their contribution reminds us that participation must go beyond listening; children's views must be taken seriously, influence decisions and translate to feedback about what happens as a result.

However, this report also highlights inequalities in children's experiences of their rights, particularly for those who are Care Experienced, experiencing poverty or requiring additional support. We must strengthen how children's rights inform strategic and financial decisions and ensure rights-based practice is consistent across our wider services.

The accompanying action plan within the report sets out our priorities for improvement. As Chief Executive, I am committed to ensuring we measure progress not simply by what we do, but by the difference it makes to children's lives. Children and young people must have meaningful opportunities to help evaluate that progress and hold us accountable for the changes we make.

Looking ahead, we will continue strengthening children's influence at every level, including through the development of a Chief Executive's Children and Young People's Forum.

Realising children's rights requires more than legislative compliance. It requires a culture in which children's rights shape our decisions, children and young people have genuine influence, and we are accountable for the difference we make. That is the standard we must set ourselves across Highland Council.

Promoting and Realising Children's Rights

Highland Council's Children's Rights Report 2024-26

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Executive Summary

1. This report outlines the work undertaken in Highland Council to incorporate the UNCRC into all services across all Council functions. It covers the period 14 July 2024 to 31 March 2026. It highlights good practice and current strengths and also next steps and issues to address in the next 3 years.
2. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides an agreed set of rights for all children up to age 18.
3. There are 5 principles Highland Council aims to work within. They include ensuring all services embed children's rights in planning and service delivery; ensuring no child is discriminated against and has equal opportunity to fulfil their potential; children being empowered to claim their rights; children being listened to and supported to freely express their views and for these to be taken seriously; staff being transparent about their decision making and enabling children to challenge decisions that affect them.
4. The process of considering the impact on children's rights, of service changes and developments, is monitored through our [Integrated Impact Assessments](#). 445 screenings have been completed during the period covered by this report, with 9 full Children's Rights Impact Assessments undertaken. Many service changes will be positive and so a screening is sufficient, but we will also review how we can ensure and support full impact assessments are undertaken where required.
5. In particular, there need to be more opportunities for children and young people to be involved in informing recommendations coming forward to Council and committees, including budget priorities.
6. There are around 44,476 children in Highland (0-18), all of whom are considered within this report. In general, most children in Highland are well cared for, access early years provision or education and transition from school into positive destinations. However, the main focus of our actions in this report are those who are furthest from accessing their rights – our youngest children; children experiencing barriers to their wellbeing or learning; children with long term health needs or disabilities; children living in families experiencing poverty; children who are care experienced; children who have come to Highland as migrants or seeking asylum; those where English is an additional language; children within our youth justice system.
7. The Highland Lifestyle Survey is completed every 2 years by pupils in P7, S2 and S4. It asks these groups a range of questions about their wellbeing and their rights. Children increasingly report that they are taught much more about their rights in school and over recent years they report that we are getting better at ensuring their rights are realised. However, on all measures, children who are care-experienced, find it hardest to have their rights met.
8. All Highland Council employees are Rights Holders and Corporate Parents, however, more can be done to ensure everyone understands these responsibilities, especially in relation to the UNCRC and The Promise.
9. The number of children in Highland born pre-term is slightly higher than the national average. Children born very early and those with congenital issues account for most neonatal deaths. This number is small in Highland, with the number of children surviving very premature births and those surviving with complex health needs increasing. This increase over time can be seen in our special schools and provisions where numbers of children with complex disabilities has increased significantly over the past decade. There is

more we can do to increase the skills and confidence of our education and care systems to better meet the needs of this changing population.

10. Staff working to support children with additional support needs have a range of skills and qualifications. An Inclusive Practice training programme was established for teachers in 2025, running through session 2025-26. This has been well evaluated by staff and so will be a regular feature of the training offer from the Psychological Service. The training for Pupil Support Assistants is less systematic. A strategic training plan for support staff is being developed to ensure they have the appropriate skills and knowledge to support pupils with a variety of needs.
11. Our Developmental Overviews provide a way of profiling the cohort of children transitioning from ELC to school each year. It shows general progress over time and also the long-term impacts of interventions in ELCs. It also clearly shows the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children born during this period and our slow recovery from it. The trend data illustrates the need to collaborate with partners in health (especially allied health professionals) and to intervene early to support preschool children identified with additional needs through Health Visitor screening.
12. Our early years data shows that boys living in families affected by poverty are developmentally less advanced than girls living in similar households and that children in general living in more affluent households do much better than their poorer peers. This gap continues and widens through the school years. To address this, we need to take a strategic approach, grounded in data and joined up between educators and specialist services, including allied health professionals. We also need to further improve the quality of interactions, and the relational environment in early years settings and schools.
13. Children with additional support needs are over-represented in our exclusion data and in the number of pupil-staff incidents. There is more we can understand from them about these processes and how we might be able to better support and meet their needs, to help them develop a sense of belonging and feel safe in the school environment. This is especially important for our youngest pupils.
14. Poverty is an accelerator for many differences noted in our data. The work of the Highland Poverty Commission and the Child Poverty Action Plan will significantly influence our work going forward as a Council, to reduce discrimination and inequity.
15. There is a system of assessment, planning and review for children in Highland as part of the GIRFEC model. For many children this works well, but there is still inconsistency in gathering the views of children, especially our youngest children. A new planning format is being developed and will be evaluated in relation to its effectiveness. This will include ensuring that children's views are central to the process of assessment, planning and review.
16. Officers within the Council and Community Planning Partners have worked closely with over 800 children and young people from 3-18 to co-create a Children and Young People's Participation Strategy. The implementation of this strategy has supported the development of a number of resources and processes co-created for children by children to enhance their opportunities to give their views and have a voice on matters that affect them.
17. Housing Services teams engage with families on a variety of issues that impact children. They prioritise repairs in households with children; arrange adaptations for children who have disabilities; address anti-social behaviour as a preventative strategy to help children feel safe; work with Highland Youth Voice and the Highland Youth Parliament to gather input from young people on housing services; support parents who are in rent arrears; support the provision of housing for 16-18 year olds who might otherwise be considered homeless; work with Children's Services to identify housing that may be suitable to provide residential

settings for children and young people requiring residential care; and they manage the official sites for Gypsy/Traveller families, ensuring they are of a good standard to support the needs of children on the sites. There is to date however limited regular consultation directly with children. As a service, they have made a commitment to work with the Council's Tenant Participation Team over the next 3 years, to ensure that the views of children and young people are reflected in future service planning. They will look for opportunities to incorporate youth and family feedback into policy development, service reviews, and performance reporting.

18. The Neurodevelopmental Service in Highland is a joint concern for both NHS Highland and Highland Council. £1.2m has been invested by the Council to assist NHS Highland in addressing the waiting list for this service and to invest in structural changes that will improve this process for children in the future.
19. Our Child Protection Committee oversees the work we do to keep children safe. Members of the CPC engage in work on prevention (including pre-birth), with a range of strategies and interventions that support children, families and practitioners. They arrange a number of training sessions for our staff, so that they can be confident and maintain their skills and also work with the Scottish Children's Reporters Association (SCRA) and 3rd sector organisations such as [Safe, Strong and Free](#) to deliver additional interventions as required. Linking with Police Scotland and other services we will support the changes in the Youth Justice system that will provide a more compassionate response to children who offend.
20. There is a clear focus within Highland Council on promoting and realising children's rights across the organisation. There has been considerable work undertaken to date to achieve this but still more to do. The commitment for us to get this right starts with the Chief Executive and runs throughout the organisation and with accountability at all levels across all services, we are confident that we can sustain the progress made to date and ensure improvements over time.

PART 1 – Introduction

Background

Children and young people require special attention in respect of their rights because of their particular vulnerabilities and their reliance on adults. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a core international human rights instrument which was ratified by the UK Government in 1991. It articulates these fundamental rights within the framework of children's lives and experiences and has now been incorporated into Scots Law through the UNCRC (Scotland) Act 2024. This act requires statutory bodies to undertake several actions as summarised below, to ensure children's rights are promoted and supported in all the work they do:

- Improve the culture of children's rights in Scotland.
- Not to act incompatibly with the requirements of the UNCRC.
- Report every 3 years on the actions taken and intend to take to evidence compliance with the duties, in addition to actions that secure better or further effect on children's rights.
- Ensure every service upholds children's rights, not just children's services.
- Involve children and young people in the preparation of reports and create and publish a child friendly version.

Children's Rights Reporting

As noted above, the Act introduces a reporting duty for listed authorities, requiring them to publish reports every three years on their actions related to the UNCRC. These reports must detail steps taken to ensure compliance with the UNCRC and outline plans for enhancing children's rights in the future. This report is the first required, covering the period 14 July 2024 to 31 March 2026.

This report includes data and examples of activity as evidence from across Highland. It includes work undertaken by a wide range of Services within Highland Council. This evidence supports an evaluation of where we are in terms of our requirements and aspirations as a local authority within the Community Planning Partnership and also provides a plan for next steps. A child-friendly version of this report is also available [HERE](#).

There are four questions we have asked in relation to our planning process:

1. What are the key issues/challenges?
2. What do we need to do to address these?
3. What actions are required to be taken (by whom and by when)?
4. What evidence will we have of completion/impact?

The report is written to comply with our legal duty as a 'Listed Authority', but provides detailed narrative and links, so that it can also be a summary of the work we are undertaking in relation to children's rights, to inform children, young people, families, practitioners, elected members and other services working in Highland.

UNCRC

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is one of the core international human rights treaties – a universally agreed set of minimum standards setting out the range of rights children should enjoy. It provides a holistic framework for the rights of all children. The different articles are interdependent – civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights all have equal status and are indivisible. Governments are expected to do all they can to implement the UNCRC – to make sure all law, policy and decisions which impact on children from birth to 18 comply with their human rights. The general measures of the Convention include measures which give legal effect to the UNCRC, as well as ‘non-legal measures’ – for example, awareness raising, training, budgeting – or other processes that can be used to progress implementation of the Convention.

Every child and young person under the age of 18 has rights, no matter who they are, where they live or what they believe in (as defined in Article 1 of the UNCRC). Fundamental to those rights is the notion that children are entitled to appropriate care, protection and consideration from adults.

Children are key actors in their own development. Even though they are autonomous rights holders, children and young people are often dependent on others to give effect to their rights because they:

- Have limited political and social power.
- Are dependent on adults for food, shelter, clothing, care and protection.
- Are subject to rules that do not apply to other population groups.
- Are vulnerable to ill treatment, coercion and control by adults.
- Are key users of public services, though not often asked to contribute to the planning, design, development, delivery and evaluation of those services.
- Are often excluded from or unable to access effective complaints mechanisms when things go wrong.

They are rights holders whose ability to enjoy their rights can therefore be impeded by attitudinal and structural barriers that need to be identified and changed. Within the context of a large statutory organisation, the ways in which we ensure children’s rights are upheld requires to be planned and evidenced and this report provides a vehicle for summarising this work within Highland Council.

The UNCRC is based on four key principles that are underpinned by four “special” articles:

- Article 2 – All rights belong to all children without discrimination or exception.
- Article 3 - The best interests of the child should be the first consideration for actions that affect them.
- Article 6 – All children have the right to life, survival and development.
- Article 12 – All children have the right to participate and to have their views taken into account.

The UNCRC provides the Highland Council with a platform to help us determine if we are improving and promoting the wellbeing of children. It provides an overarching framework within which all policy that affects children and young people should be developed, and within which sits the wellbeing of all children. As such the Convention also compliments the [Getting It Right For Every Child](#) (GIRFEC) wellbeing indicators, which are Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible and Included (SHANNARI) and also the recommendations of [The Promise](#), particularly in relation to care experienced children and young people.

The UNCRC has 54 Articles setting out the range of rights that children should enjoy. Forty of these rights can be matched against the SHANNARI wellbeing indicators, demonstrating coherence in the underpinning rationales:

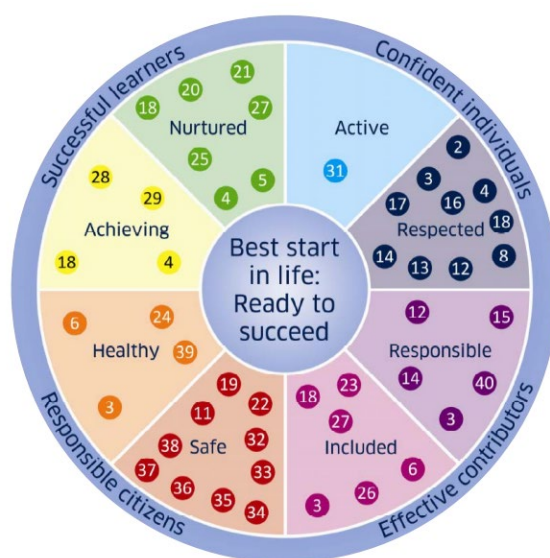


Figure 1 Linking UNCRC Articles with the Wellbeing Indicators, within Curriculum for Excellence

Children's Rights approach to planning

Taking a children's rights-based approach to planning and service delivery creates a clear values base for our work:

- Ensuring dignity for all children/young people.
- Working in their best interest.
- Non-discrimination of any specific groups.
- Promoting life, survival and development.
- Participation and engagement in activities and decision-making.
- Transparency and accountability in service delivery and decision making.

Engaging children and young people in decision making, taking account of their views in any processes/services/policy/decision-making that may affect them, requires specific attention. In Highland we have used the Participation Ladder (Hart, 1992)¹ and the Lundy Model (Lundy, 2017)² to inform our own work on a [model for participation](#) to use across Highland to ensure that engagement is not tokenistic.

To ensure children and young people from all geographic areas and representative groups are able to contribute their views and to be involved meaningfully in decision making we need to be:

- Safe and sensitive to risk;
- Child friendly and relevant to the children/young people;
- Inclusive and ensure children/young people are involved voluntarily;
- Transparent and informative;

¹ Hart, R (1992). *Children's Participation: From Tokenism To Citizenship*, Innocenti Essays (Number 4), UNICEF

² Lundy, L (2007). "Voice" is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, *British Educational Research Journal*, 33:6, 927-942

- Respectful;
- Accountable and provide a feedback loop;
- Skilled and confident to work with children.

Raising awareness of the UNCRC across Highland Council and offering support and guidance from services who regularly work with children, has enabled a wider range of Council services to be more involved in promoting and furthering children's rights. Some are now engaging in consultation with children to ensure they can start to shape decision making more effectively. Examples of such practice can be found throughout this report as brief **Case Studies**.

Children's Rights and Participation Improvement Group

The Children's Rights and Participation Improvement Group is a partnership group that oversees work in Highland to promote children's rights and the Community Planning Partnership's approach to participation and engagement.

This group:

- Owns the action plan for improving and promoting children's rights and participation across Highland.
- Co-ordinates the work being done that represents the collective ownership and delivery of the UNCRC across Highland.
- Is responsible for the children rights planning requirements related to children rights reporting to the Scottish Government.
- Promotes examples of good practice exemplifying defined rights within the UNCRC.

In particular, this group is charged with promoting 3 specific rights:

- Article 4 - Making Rights Real
- Article 12 - Respect for Children's Views
- Article 42 - Everyone Must Know about Children's Rights

The Children's Rights and Participation Improvement Group also monitors key sources of qualitative evidence relating to the participation and engagement of children and young people. Quantitative data available from Community Planning Partners is also gathered and reviewed by the group and reported on to support the qualitative data available and to provide a baseline and trend data to track progress and improvement where appropriate.

Highland Council Planning and Reporting

Elected Members have declared their wish to be 'ACE Aware' (Highland Council, 2018)³ and 'Trauma Informed' (Highland Council, 2022)⁴. Members on the Education Committee have also agreed to consider children's rights in decisions they will make with regards to children and young people

³ Highland Council Committee (13 December 2018), Item 5 – Adverse Childhood Experiences
https://www.highland.gov.uk/meetings/meeting/4063/highland_council/attachment/74970

⁴ Highland Council Committee (June 2022) Press release.

https://www.highland.gov.uk/news/article/14651/highland_council_to_implement_trauma_informed_practice

(Highland Council, 2023)⁵. To support them in this endeavour, within Highland several strategic plans provide the planning landscape for children and children's rights across services, organisations and community partners:

- The [Highland Delivery Plan](#) (2024-2027), with Service Plans for People, Place and Community linking directly to the delivery outcomes.
- The [Highland Outcome Improvement Plan](#) (2017-2027), with [The Child Poverty Action Plan](#) providing direct support for a section of the HOIP.
- The updated [Integrated Children's Services Plan](#) (2026-2029) with a number of subgroups responsible for the Children's Rights and Participation Plan, The Child Protection Plan and the Plan for The Promise.

We have attempted to ensure that these plans link with each other and provide the framework for clusters of work to promote and realise children's rights in Highland.

⁵ Highland Council Education Committee (23 November 2023), Item 6 – Children's Rights and Participation https://www.highland.gov.uk/meetings/meeting/4887/education_committee

PART 2 – Evidence and Actions Taken to Deliver Better or Further Effect to Children’s Rights

Introduction

In Highland Council, we aim to take a children’s human rights approach across all elements of service delivery. To help make sure that every child and young person has their rights realised, we promote the five principles, within the national model, to support the implementation of the articles within the UNCRC.

1. **Embedding:** children’s rights should be at the core of planning and service delivery and the UNCRC should be embedded into every aspect of decision making through procedures and actions. For example, we should be thinking about how to ensure children’s rights are always considered when policies, service guidelines or budgets are being developed.
2. **Equality and Non-Discrimination:** ensuring every child and young person has what they need so that they have equal opportunity to fulfil their potential and that no child or young person should be limited in what they can do or achieve because of discrimination. For example, we should be thinking about how to make changes to ensure children and young people are supported to access their rights equally.
3. **Empowerment:** supporting children and young people’s agency and capacities as individuals, so they are better able to claim their rights, and to engage with, influence and hold accountable individuals and organisations that affect their lives. For example, we should be thinking about how to enhance children and young people’s knowledge and understanding of their rights.
4. **Participation:** listening to children and young people and taking their views seriously. Children and young people should be supported to freely express their opinions and give meaningful feedback about the outcomes. For example, we should be thinking about how to ensure children and young people’s views are heard and taken into account in any decision-making process that affects them.
5. **Accountability:** the need for staff and officers to be transparent about their decision making in any way that it enables children and young people to influence, scrutinise and challenge decisions that affect them. For example, we should be thinking about how to ensure accountability to children and young people by making sure that systems and standards are in place that support compliance with children’s rights.

Children’s Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment (CRWIA)

Following a decision by the Highland Council (Highland Council, 2024)⁶ Children’s Rights Impact Assessments are included as part of the Integrated Impact Assessment process. New or adapted policies and procedures should be impact assessed using the new process. Details of our [completed assessments](#) are available online.

The purpose of carrying out a CRWIA is to ensure that when developing policies, planning services or taking financial decisions, we are not adversely affecting or discriminating against any group within Highland, and we are promoting equality and considering the needs in detail of our younger people. It is a tool to help us make sure our policies, and the way we carry out our functions, translate the

⁶ Highland Council Committee (27 June 2024), Item 14 – Integrated Impact Assessments
https://www.highland.gov.uk/meetings/meeting/5003/highland_council

UNCRC and specifically Article 3 (giving priority to children's best interests), into practice in a concrete and structured manner. This ensures that our services fulfil the requirements of anti-discrimination equalities legislation and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

An example of how a Children's Rights approach has been supported by the completion of a CRWIA when a new Waste Management process was being put in place, has been highlighted by the National Improvement Service and can be accessed [here](#). As a result of considering children's rights within the process of this project, changes were incorporated eg larger families and families with children who have disabilities, who may create more waste as a result, were able to retain larger sized bins, rather than the smaller bins provided as part of the strategy. Visits for school children to recycling plants were also included in the strategy to support Article 29, to provide knowledge and information to children on the Sustainable Development Goals embedded within the overall school curriculum.

In terms of the wider culture across Highland Council, we have actively sought to engage services other than those working directly with and for children, in discussion about children's rights, to ensure that all significant service changes and all Committee reports would be screened and where appropriate, a full impact assessment would be completed. In the time since this was put in place, 445 Integrated Impact Assessments have been completed, with most pertaining to activity related to a delivery plan or budget proposals, as can be seen in the graphic below. Few assessments move beyond screening and only 9 full impact assessments have included Children's Rights (largely relating to statutory consultations about new schools). Many service changes will be positive and so a screening is sufficient, but we will review how we can ensure full impact assessments are undertaken where required and consider ways in which children and young people are able to have their views consistently reflected in the development of Council and partnership policies and spending priorities.



Figure 2 Dashboard for all Highland Council Integrated Impact Assessments undertaken between July 2024 and March 2026

This process has helpfully also enabled conversations with services that in the past would not have specifically considered children's rights as being a core part of their work.

Case Study - Corran Ferry Fare Uplift Budget Proposal

The current Corran Ferry fare income is approximately £1.7M. A 10% rise would generate an increase of £0.179 per annum. The increase is required in order to meet the inflationary costs of delivering the ferry service including re-fit costs of the ferry itself. A new foot passenger only fare will be introduced to reflect well established practice on other ferry routes. The 10% increase is in line with Caledonian Macbrayne Increases.

What likely impact will the proposal have on children and young people?

Indirect impact through the additional costs to access activities over a wider geographic area.

Which children's rights will be affected by the proposal?

Children have a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and social needs and support their development (Article 27).

Explain how the children's rights selected above will be affected:

The increase in costs may restrict families being able to access extra-curricular activities. In mitigation however, local concessionary books are in place to reduce the cost of the journey. Increases are in line with other ferry operators although fares overall will remain lower

Training

It is important that training and awareness raising of children's rights is available across all council staff and that all employees are aware that they have a role to support this agenda. As such a range of training opportunities have been made available to staff and will continue to be offered in a variety of ways.

Children's Rights training is mandatory for every manager in Highland Council and anyone who could be asked to complete an Impact Assessment for a programme, project, policy change or committee report. This training is part of the Traineasy suite of modules (Highland Council's employee CPD platform), and draws from resources made available by Together Scotland and the Improvement Service.

A further, more detailed module is also available on the Council's CPD platform for any member of staff to complete.

To highlight the passing of the UNCRC Incorporation Act in 2024, all Highland Council Elected Members were sent the link to the Together Alliance for Children's Rights' 'Guide for Elected Members'⁷, to support understanding of their responsibilities as Children's Rights holders within the local authority.

Children's rights training is arranged for Rights Respecting Schools (RRS) leads via one of the central officers who organises inhouse training in schools in line with the UNICEF RRS guidance and

⁷ <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/34211b28fb1d4a5ca6517170f3c7c8f3>

assessment process. This programme has also provided a clear opportunity to share information directly with children about their rights.

Children's rights are at the heart of wellbeing and subsumed into the GIRFEC approach that underpins all our practice in terms of Child Protection, Additional Support Needs and Health and Wellbeing work. All training in these areas is underpinned by the UNCRC. There is an e-module on GIRFEC, for completion by all practitioners working with children and families. This is supplemented with monthly multi-agency training for practitioners on the GIRFEC process and practice model using a workshop style to model and shape best practice across agencies.

There is a comprehensive [child protection training calendar](#) which equips professionals to ensure that children are kept safe, protected from violence and can recover from traumatic experiences. This includes training on children's rights, domestic abuse, trauma informed practice, Solution Focused Approaches etc. The training offered is reflective of changing national policy and the needs of the workforce.

Training and support for the mental health and wellbeing of both staff and children is central to the work we do in Highland Council. Understanding that adults supporting children cannot 'pour from an empty cup', there is a dedicated strand within the Occupational Health Team, focused on staff wellbeing⁸, with advice and support for managers to aid them with this. In the Health and Social Care teams, staff wellbeing has been supported through a dedicated focus on Staff Wellbeing. Head Teachers and Senior Managers within the Education and Learning Service are also given the opportunity to access Professional Reflective Supervision⁹, offered by the Educational Psychology Service. This has been commended by the Children's Commissioner for Scotland as a positive way of supporting children and ensuring they access their rights¹⁰. To date (March 2026) 53 HTs and Senior Managers have accessed this service with 100% of evaluations being positive (scoring above the threshold for 'effective supervision' on a standard measure of Supervision¹¹).

Reporting Format

There are 3 themes that provide the basic principles for our reporting:

1. Definition of the child;
2. General measures of implementation;
3. General principles of the UNCRC;

Six clusters of the UNCRC Articles form the basis for the summary of actions also exemplified within this PART of the report and are as follows:

1. Civil rights and freedoms - Focus on children's civil rights and freedoms including children's right to move freely in public space, to access information and to privacy;

⁸ https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/1454/mental_health/1026/mental_health_and_wellbeing_toolkit/6

⁹ <https://highlandcouncilpsychologicalservice.store/2024/03/04/professional-reflective-supervision-for-highland-head-teachers/>

¹⁰ <https://www.cypcs.org.uk/news-and-stories/commissioner-highlights-support-programme-for-headteachers-with-positive-impact-on-childrens-rights/>

¹¹ Winstanley J. (2000). Manchester Clinical Supervision Scale. *Nursing Standard*, 14(19), 31–32.
<https://doi.org/10.7748/ns.14.19.31.s54>

2. Violence against children - focus on violence against children including abuse and neglect and the right not to be subjected to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. (Youth Justice, Child Protection, Data Protection);
3. Family environment and alternative care - focus on the family environment, the right of children to be well cared for if they live apart from their parents, and the right to be protected from all forms of violence and abuse;
4. Basic health and welfare - focus on the health and welfare of all children and the consideration of disabled children's rights.;
5. Education, leisure and culture - focus on the right of all children to access an education that will help them achieve their potential without discrimination;
6. Special protection measures - focus on groups of vulnerable and marginalised children who require special protection.

Each heading within this section of the report provides baseline measures or data on the current situation as well as information on activity in relation to each cluster and/or UNCRC article from 14 July 2024 to 31 March 2026. The detail provides evidence of how we are progressing in this area of activity, what is working well and where there are gaps or areas for improvement.

Where we have baseline information and evidence on outcomes for children, this is recorded and where available we have included information on how our evidence is informed by the views and experiences of children.

Future actions we intend to take to build on strengths, address weaknesses or target children furthest from having their rights met are recorded in PART 3 of this report

Theme 1. Definition of the Child

Article 1 - A child is any person under the age of 18.
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There are around 44,476 children in Highland (0-18). 29,973 are pupils at one of our schools. 13,891 attend one of our 29 secondary schools, 15,897 attend one of our 164 primary schools and 185 are educated within our 3 special schools. There are 138 Local Authority ELC Settings and 43 Partner ELC Settings, with 3,853 pupils registered for ELC.

15,643 of the pupil population live in urban areas and small towns while 14,298 live in rural areas.

6.7% of pupils in P1-P7 in Highland are in Gaelic Medium Education settings, with 2,201 pupils (3-18) being taught through the medium of Gaelic. Additionally, for 7.46% of pupils English is an additional language.

10.3% of pupils live in SIMD 1&2 and an estimated 1 in 5 children in Highland are affected by poverty within their family. However, the SIMD does not always accurately represent deprivation in a rural setting. 3,395 pupils have an entitlement to free school meals and 11.7% of pupils are entitled to claim a clothing grant.

Around 2.3% of children are Care Experienced, which is around 645 pupils (286 currently in the Care System and 359 previously in Care). All employees within the local authority are considered Rights Holders and Corporate Parents although it is acknowledged that many employees will be less familiar with their responsibilities in this respect than those working in Children's Services and this is an area for development in the future that will be taken forward through The Highland Promise Board and [The Promise Plan 2025-28](#).

In the 2025 Highland Lifestyle Survey¹², 23% of pupils reported that their parents or grandparents came from countries outside the UK. 2.7% self-identified as belonging to a Gypsy/Traveller family and almost 10% identified as being a young carer. 3% of pupils who completed the survey did not wish to identify as either a boy or a girl. 26% of pupils reported that they came from an Armed Forces Family – 5.7% currently serving and 22.4% having veterans in the family (some families have both veterans and serving personnel).

National identity among children and young people in Highland is becoming more mixed, with a slight increase in those reporting multiple or non-Scottish identities. While the majority continue to identify as Scottish-only, these trends reflect the region's growing diversity and the importance of recognising and supporting multiple identities. Highland is experiencing a marked increase in ethnic and cultural diversity among its children and young people. According to the 2022 Census, 4.2% of those aged 0–24 in Highland identified as being from black or minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds, more than doubling from 1.9% in 2011.

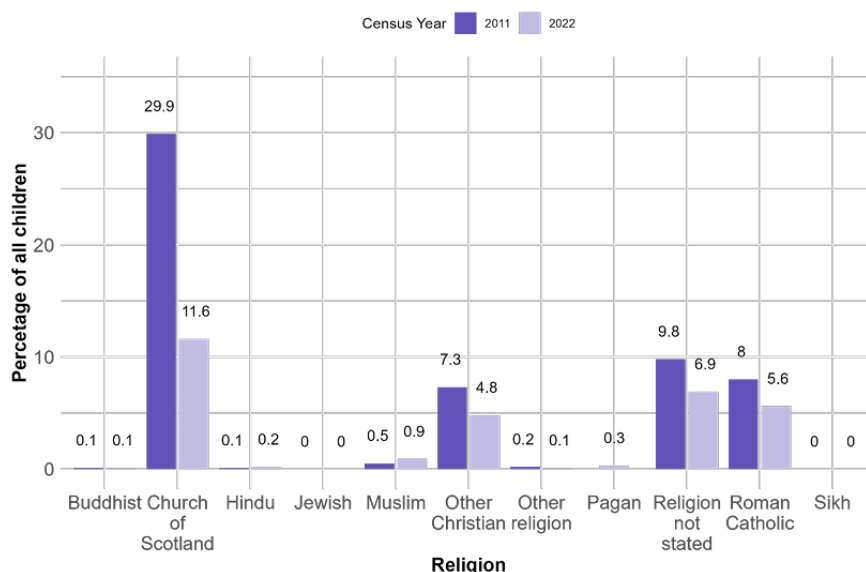
Language diversity is also increasing. In 2024, 2,310 pupils in Highland schools reported a primary language other than English, Gaelic, Scots, Doric, or British Sign Language, with 74 different languages represented. The most common were Polish, Latvian, Russian, Ukrainian, and Arabic. This linguistic diversity presents both opportunities and challenges for schools and services, requiring targeted support for English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners and culturally sensitive

¹² The Highland Lifestyle Survey is a bi-annual survey asking 100 questions of P7, S2 and S4 pupils. It provides self-report information on a variety of themes providing trend data from 2011.

approaches to communication. Nationally, Scottish schools are seeing similar trends, with many different languages now spoken by pupils and a growing need for language support.

Although the number of asylum-seeking and refugee children remains relatively small, these groups have distinct needs, including support for trauma, disrupted education, and language barriers.

Alongside increasing ethnic and linguistic diversity, Highland's children and young people are also reporting a wider range of religious affiliations, with Census data showing a marked decline in those identifying with the Church of Scotland and a rise in those affiliating with non-Christian faiths such as Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.



Source: Scotland's Census 2011 (Table DC2107SC) and Scotland's Census 2022 (Table UV205a)
 1 The 'Pagan' option was added in 2022 so there is no comparable data for 2011.

Figure 3 Proportion of all children and young people (0 – 19) in Highland by religious group: Census 2011 and 2022

The proportion of children who do not identify with any religion has also increased from 45.7% in 2011 to 69.5% in 2022. These changing patterns reflect broader trends in which secularisation and religious pluralism are reshaping the cultural landscape. The UNCRC guarantees every child's right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (Article 14), and to non-discrimination and participation in decisions affecting them (Articles 2 and 12). For education, these changes mean schools must be equipped to support pupils from a range of faith backgrounds, including provision for religious observance, dietary requirements, and the right to withdraw from faith-based activities. In health and community services, culturally sensitive approaches are essential to ensure equitable access and positive experiences for children and families, recognising the impact of faith on health beliefs, practices, and support needs. There is an increasing uptake of staff training on inclusive practices and anti-racist work, and active engagement with faith communities to promote respect, understanding, and effective service delivery. The Council's link with [Highland One World](#) has been particularly important in supporting staff development in these areas.

Theme 2. General Measures of Implementation

We have various data sets that provide more information about our children and help us to understand the experiences of children within each classification, as well as the impact of intersectionality and how multiple forms of inequality can intersect and compound, leading to unique challenges and experiences for individuals who belong to multiple groups. These sources of data are gathered and used by various parts of children's services and are pulled together to create the [Joint Strategic Needs Assessment](#) that informs our wider Integrated Children's Services Plan.

In summer 2025, practitioners from a wide range of services, organisations and teams attended a number of workshop sessions, coordinated by the [Whole Family Wellbeing](#) Team to consider the 6 family types. These workshops provided a detailed picture of how services support these types of families, where the overlaps appear and where there are gaps in service provision. This [qualitative data](#) is informing ways in which families can be better supported in Highland through the Children's Plan.

The Highland Child Poverty Plan has been mapped across the new Scottish Government delivery plan for tackling child poverty [Bringing Hope, Building Futures](#). The 2026-29 plan will create a baseline measure for monitoring improvement in Highland, using The Public Health Scotland and Highland Community Planning Partnership dashboards. The plan will also use data for effective targeting (e.g. through the Welfare Team to check everyone who can access benefits does, and triangulating this with [CACI](#) data analytics - classifying full post codes with income types and pay-check data.)

One key source of data we have is provided by our children themselves through the Highland Lifestyle Survey. This is a survey that has been completed by pupils in P7, S2 and S4 ever 2 years since 2009. Since 2019 the survey has included specific questions on Children's Rights and the Wellbeing Indicators (See Appendix 1). Because the survey is completed every 2 years, we have self-report trend data for these age cohorts and how their views have changed over time. However, we also have trend data for the same cohorts of pupils as they increase in age from P7 to S4. This is particularly useful in tracking changes over time.

This data shows that over the past 6 years, children have increasingly become more aware of their rights (see Appendix 1). Rights are talked about in school, with an increasing number of children reporting that lessons on children's rights are not just a one-off event. In large part, children perceive that their key rights are met, however this is not evenly reported across all groups and even as a whole is not close enough to 100% yet and so there is still work to do, especially around listening to children's views.

There is also more to do in relation to accountability to children at a strategic level which is demonstrated through the current engagement with the Community Planning Partnership and their plans for the future.

Case study - Community Planning Partnership engagement with children

The Highland Community Planning Partnership (CPP) provides the strategic framework through which public bodies, third sector partners and communities work collaboratively to tackle inequalities across Highland. The CPP is supported by a delivery structure that includes Delivery Partnerships, Community Partnerships, Delivery Groups, and Short Life Working Groups, each of

which contributes directly or indirectly to improving outcomes that affect children and young people particularly in areas such as health, wellbeing, safety, and access to services.

The wider Highland CPP delivery system supports children and families through region-wide initiatives. For example, the Highland Housing Challenge Action Plan aims to address housing needs and improve living conditions for families, helping support children's rights to adequate housing and a stable family environment. Likewise, the development of a Single Care Model pilot that integrates childcare into wider care models in rural areas, strengthens children's rights to access essential services.

Delivery Groups and Short Life Working Groups also work on tackling health inequalities, mental wellbeing and environmental conditions, all of which influence the quality of life experienced by children and young people across Highland.

The Highland CPP's Poverty Reduction Delivery Group contributes to children's rights by supporting the development of a new Child Poverty Action Plan, ensuring partners address the socio-economic factors that most affect young people.

A strong example of localised children's rights in practice comes from the Mid Ross Community Partnership meeting held in March 2025, which was specifically themed around youth. The meeting included a presentation from the Black Isle Youth Forum, where youth workers and young people explained how multiple youth groups across the Black Isle engage with key issues affecting them. Young people directly shared their perspectives with Community Partnership members, demonstrating practical delivery of UNCRC rights relating to participation, expression and involvement in decisions affecting their lives.

What activity is planned over the next few years to further children's rights in service delivery?

Over the next few years, activity within this service area will continue to strengthen the consideration of children's rights within community planning, aligned to the refreshed 2027–2030 Highland Outcome Improvement Plan (HOIP) priorities. Planned activity will focus on embedding children's rights more consistently within local planning, improving participation opportunities for young people, and strengthening preventative and whole-family approaches across Community Partnership areas.

Future engagement will include encouraging Community Partnerships to hold youth-themed meetings, creating opportunities for young people to present local issues and priorities, and working with youth work colleagues to ensure these engagement methods are accessible, supported and valued.

Future activity will also make greater use of evidence from the Health Inequalities Short Life Working Group, particularly the indicators relating to children and young people (including early child development, school attainment, participation in education, training or employment, child poverty and active travel to school). This evidence will help Highland CPP identify where inequalities for children and young people are greatest and target action accordingly.

How will children and young people be engaged in planning, implementing and evaluating future service delivery?

The Highland CPP plans to strengthen engagement with children and young people by embedding their voices more consistently across Community Planning processes and local partnership work.

Building on the successful youth-themed approach used by the Mid Ross Community Partnership, we will support Community Partnerships to create structured opportunities for young people to contribute. This includes working with youth workers, schools, youth forums and CLD partners to ensure engagement is accessible, supported and meaningful.

Through the Whole Family Wellbeing Programme, and in collaboration with Locality Coordinators, the Partnership will work to ensure that young people's views inform place-based planning and whole-family approaches. This will include involving them in shaping local priorities, contributing to locality-focused improvement work, and helping to identify gaps in support or services.

Highland CPP will also make greater use of the Health Inequalities indicators relating to children and young people to target engagement where inequalities are most evident. This evidence will inform conversations with young people about their lived experience of local inequality, access to services, education, health and community safety, enabling their insights to feed into future service design.

CLD partners will play a key role in facilitating youth participation through youth work, adult and family learning, and community capacity building. We will work through the CLD Strategic Management Group and Youth Work Delivery Groups to create supported environments where young people can develop the confidence, skills and opportunities required to participate meaningfully in service planning and evaluation.

To support continuous improvement, Highland CPP will explore opportunities for young people to contribute to the evaluation of programmes and activities within Community Planning. This will ensure that development is informed by the experiences of those most affected and that young people can see the impact of their contributions over time.

Theme 3. General Principles of the UNCRC

Article 2 - No child should be discriminated against

Article 3 - Children should have their best interests accounted for as a primary consideration

Article 6 - Children have the right to survive and develop

Article 12 - Children have the right to have their views heard and taken seriously

Non-Discrimination

General Inequality

[The Highland Outcome Improvement Plan](#) (2017-27) – *Working to reduce Inequalities*

Child Poverty Reduction Group supports four cross cutting themes:

- Employability, employment and skills development – this recognises the importance of providing economic opportunities to communities as a way of addressing inequality
- Community Investment and development – this promotes inclusion and builds strong communities
- Digital Inclusion – ensuring that people have the knowledge and confidence to actively participate in the use of digital technology.
- Equality of opportunity and inclusion – recognises that certain groups within our communities are more likely to experience inequality than others.

It supports the work of the Fairer Highland Improvement Group that has a focus on eliminating inequality for both children and adults, with a more recent group being established specifically focused on children and young people.

The lived experience of Highland residents has been sought through 4 workshops and a series of interviews being led by the [Highland Poverty and Equality Commission](#), including the views of children, to help shape next steps for the Poverty and Equality groups in Highland, including the Child Poverty Action Group. The Commission has published [a report](#) with a range of recommendations that link to poverty, which will inform next steps for the Highland Council and NHS Highland as well as shape the future activities of the Commission itself. The aim of the Commission is to “*identify the causes and consequences of poverty across Highland’s diverse communities, improve early intervention, and develop coordinated approaches to support people and reduce poverty and inequality.*” The views of over 200 children were sought through the facilitation of Youth Highland to provide a strong emphasis on what children see as necessary actions to reduce poverty. Through this process our young people have co-produced a [companion report](#) to support the work of the Poverty Commission.

Highland Council provides mandatory Equality and Diversity training for staff and Members to ensure compliance with the Equality Act 2010 and foster an inclusive culture. In addition, training is provided by Highland Council Psychological Service for staff working with children. This included 5 x 1 day training courses delivered in school session 2025-26.

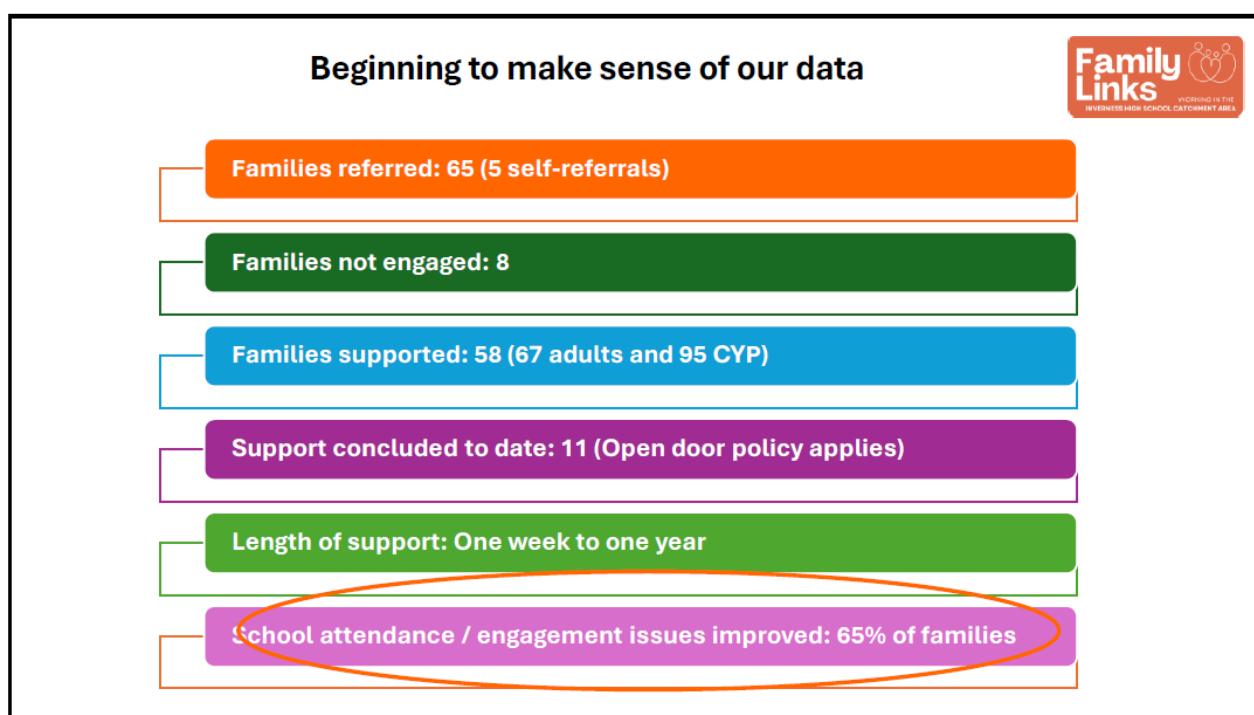
Case Study – Housing adaptations to meet needs of a child with a disability

Following an assessment by an occupational therapist of a child's housing adaptations requirements, Housing Officers decide in line with Highland Housing Adaptations Policy and either carry out and fund the recommended adaptations (via the Housing Revenue Account) or offer alternative suitable housing. This supports **Article 23**: A child with a disability has the right to live a full and decent life with dignity and, as far as possible, independence and to play an active part in the community.

School Attendance

Family Links is a test of concept supported by the Highland Whole Family Wellbeing programme aimed at delivering holistic support to families experiencing school attendance and engagement issues in the Inverness High School Associated Schools Group (ASG). This is an area of multiple deprivation, including the 8th most deprived ward in Scotland (SIMD). The service began in October 2024 and is delivered by a team of Family Links Workers through a Third Sector Alliance involving The Care and Learning Alliance (CALA), Homestart (East Highland) and Thriving Families. Support is tailored to the needs of individual families and seeks to empower families to be in the driving seat in addressing the challenges they face.

Early indications from this work are positive, with improvement in school attendance being reported in 65% of families (Dec. 2025 data):



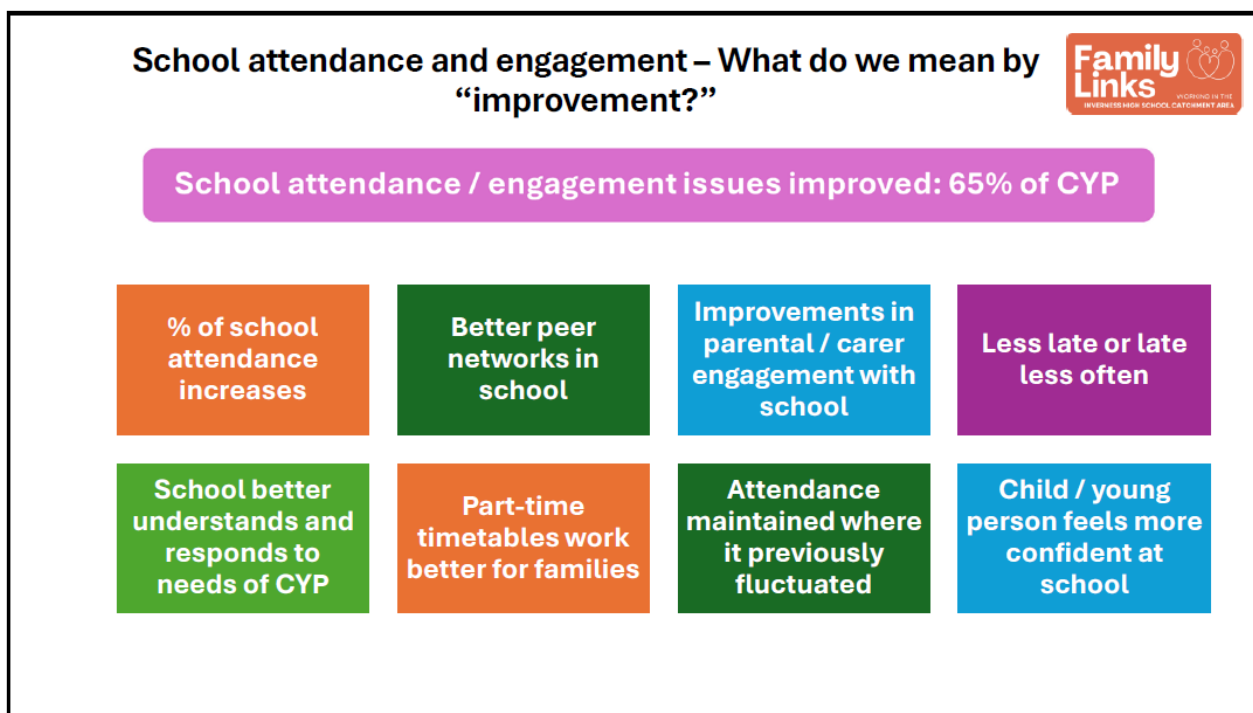


Figure 4 Initial outcomes of the Family Links Attendance and Engagement project

Care Experience

The Highland Promise Board (formerly the Corporate Parenting Board) launched a new language guide in May 2024¹³, developed in partnership with young people and practitioners across Highland. This has supported practitioners to be more considerate of the language they use when communicating about children, especially those who are care experienced, to reduce stigmatising and/or discriminatory language.

To gather more robust data on care experienced children and young people in relation to having their rights met, in the 2025 Lifestyle Survey a question was asked about where children were living at the time of the survey and whether they had ever lived with anyone other than their immediate family. This allowed a data set to be created in relation to children who are or have been ‘Looked After Away from Home’ (see Appendix 2). On all measures, children who report living away from home either now or in the past, report lower scores relating to the wellbeing indicators and lower scores in relation to realising their rights. This dataset has been incorporated into a dashboard for The Promise Board, to use to track the impact of actions taken over the next 2 years.

The joint inspection of Highland Health and Social Care Service in 2022¹⁴ highlighted areas for improvement in upholding the rights of children in protective processes. Most children and young people interviewed by inspectors at the time knew why workers were involved with them and their family and felt their worker explained their rights to them. However, the inspection found most child’s plans to be inadequate, with children not always being asked their views on the planning process. This subsequently led to training for staff to listen to and record the views of children and

¹³ <https://www.highland.gov.uk/news/article/16065/language-guide-aims-to-help-highland-keep-the-promise->

¹⁴ <https://www.careinspectorate.scot/strategic-scrutiny/library/strategic-reports/joint-inspection-of-services-for-children-and-young-people-at-risk-of-harm-in-highland>

young people but particularly, the views of younger children. A toolkit has been developed by the Care and Learning Alliance entitled Communicating with our Youngest Children. This sits alongside an existing guidance on [Gathering the Views of Children and Young People](#), created by the Highland Council Psychological Service. Both the toolkit and the training have been welcomed and positively evaluated by staff.

Short term funding has recently come to an end, but from July 2024 to March 2026, this enabled three Children's Rights and Participation Officers to be employed to work alongside the Promise Programme Manager to ensure we are delivering on The Promise Plan for Highland, and that the rights of our children and young people are upheld in line with the UNCRC legislation. While in post they supported the implementation of the [Better Meetings Guidance](#) for social work staff, which has improved the reported engagement in their meetings by children and young people.

Best interests as a primary consideration (Article 3)

Food Insecurity Pathway

The Food Insecurity Pathway, launched by the Scottish Government in February 2024, aims to support families in crisis—particularly those with infants under one year old—through a cash-first approach. NHS Highland has implemented this pathway in partnership with Halo, a charity that facilitates emergency formula milk provision. Health professionals in Highland Council routinely inquire about money worries and infant feeding concerns, and if a crisis is identified, referrals are made to Highland Council Welfare Teams and Halo, who respond within 24 hours. Volunteers deliver formula milk along with necessary equipment and guidance to ensure safe feeding practices.

Right to survive and develop (Article 6)

The 2026 Joint Strategic Needs Assessment for Children and Young People [Highland-Children-Young-Peoples-Needs-Assessment-2026-2.pdf](#) places Highland in a strong position to understand the needs of its children and families and to respond in a way that is consistent with the UNCRC. By bringing together evidence from across health, education, social care and community planning partners, it provides a shared understanding of child development, health, wellbeing, vulnerability and inequality across Highland. This intelligence supports a rights-based approach to planning and improvement, enabling partners to identify those children most at risk of poorer outcomes and target action to ensure all children have the opportunity to survive, develop and thrive

Child Deaths

Childhood deaths are rare in Highland and small numbers mean that trends need to be interpreted with care. National evidence demonstrates the continuing relationship between infant mortality, premature birth and socioeconomic inequality, reinforcing the importance of prevention, early identification of need and equitable access to health and family support. Every child death in Highland is subject to structured review, supporting shared learning across agencies and informing improvements in care.

The Council's guidance on [Tragic Events](#) supports schools in the immediate and mid-term after the death of a child or a significant death in the school or community that might impact on children and young people.

Age group	Male	Female	Persons	Summary
0 year	3–4	2–3	6	Neonatal causes dominate
1–4	1	1	2	Minimal numbers; high volatility
5–9	0–1	0	1	Deaths are rare
10–14	1	1	2	Small numbers; pooled data only
15–19	4–5	2	6	External causes are more common
Total 0–19	~10	~7	~17 per year	Combined 10-year total = 164

(Source: National Records of Scotland: Deaths Time Series data, 2024)

Figure 5 Average annual number of deaths among children and young people in Highland, 10-year average 2015–2024

Further detail on child mortality, births and population health is available within the [Director of Public Health Annual Report | NHS Highland](#)

Child Births

The birth rate in Highland has been dropping slowly for a number of years¹⁵ and is projected to continue to drop, as the average age of the Highland population rises. Lower birth volumes and geographic dispersion of the Highland population create capacity and access challenges, particularly for the continuity of care and universal programmes.

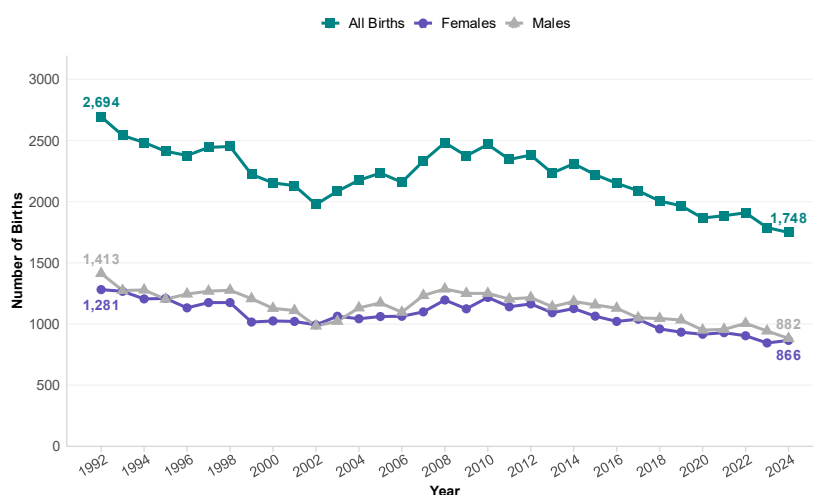


Figure 6 Birth rates in Highland from 1992 to 2024

¹⁵ Source: National Records of Scotland Births (Time Series)

In 2024-25, 90.7% of children born in Highland were born within 37-40 weeks gestation. 7.1% were born between 32-36 weeks and 0.9% were born under 31 weeks. The Scottish averages were 92.2%, 5.9% and 0.9%¹⁶.

Highland has a slightly higher proportion of preterm births than Scotland overall. Preterm birth rates are higher for older mothers and for those living in more deprived areas. Advances in healthcare mean more children born prematurely and with complex health needs survive, reinforcing the importance of coordinated support across health, education and care throughout childhood.

Early Years Assessment of Need

In ensuring Highland's children thrive, Highland Council recognises that equity does not always mean providing every family with identical input. The Highland Health Visiting model therefore seeks to achieve universal access and equity of outcome, combining universal provision with needs-led early prevention and enhanced support for children and families where additional need is identified. Around 30% of families receive enhanced support, alongside the offer of the 11 Universal Health Visiting Pathway contacts, ensuring universal support for all with targeted and intensive support for those most in need. This approach is associated with positive developmental outcomes, with Highland reporting 12.8% developmental concerns at the 27–30 month review compared with 17% nationally.

Highland Council is continuing to strengthen children's right to consistent, appropriate and high-quality healthcare in the early years through digital transformation and practice improvement. The aim is to increase consistency of universal pathway delivery without diluting successful early intervention for children and families with additional need, supporting the UNCRC principles of universal access, equity and every child's right to the best possible health and development and to thrive to their potential.

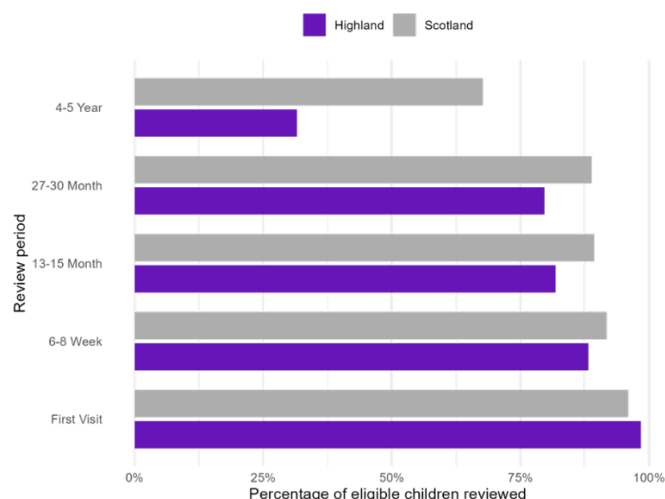


Figure 7 Percentage of eligible children reviewed by Health Visitors at each age. A comparison between Highland and Scotland

¹⁶ Source: Public Health Scotland (SMR02) Open Data

Figure 7 (above) demonstrates variation in reported coverage across the Universal Health Visiting Pathway. In Highland, this 23/24 data does not reflect the current positive position nor a weakness in the Highland Model, rather data lag and limitations, system challenges and – particularly at the 4 year review point – parental choice when children are established in nursery. The service is focused on improving data quality and universal pathway consistency while protecting enhanced support for families with greatest need.

Speech, Language and Communication Difficulties are also highlighted in our [Developmental Overviews](#) that were developed in Highland by a multi-agency team of practitioners, pooling their knowledge and expertise to provide a way of profiling each child leaving ELC and entering P1. We now have trend data on child development since 2014 across 7 domains.

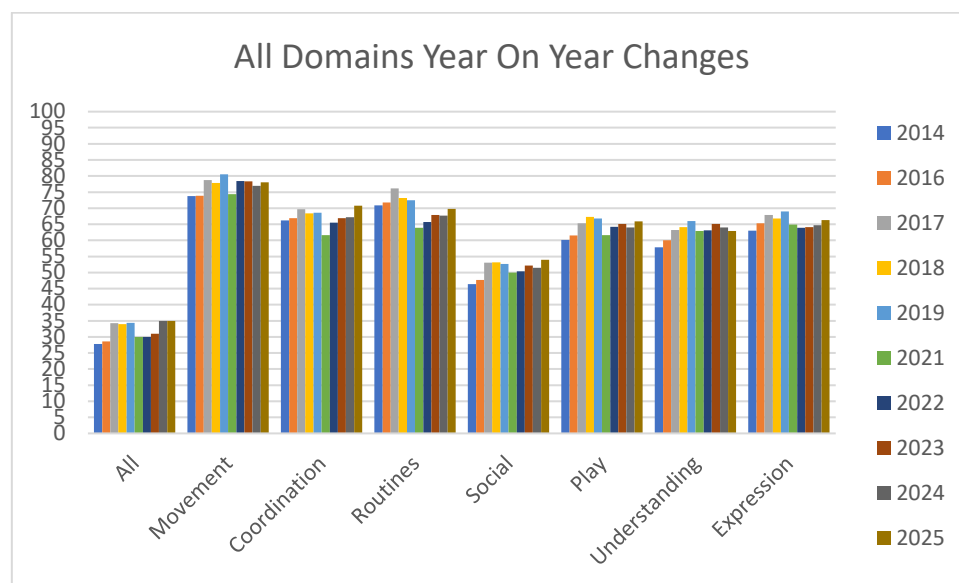


Figure 8 Percentage of children achieving developmental milestones as measured on the Developmental Overviews year on year from 2014-2025

This longitudinal understanding of children’s development directly supports Article 6 of the UNCRC and every child’s right not only to survive, but to develop and thrive. Highland’s Developmental Overviews enable emerging developmental needs and inequalities to be identified at a population level, informing early intervention, service planning and targeted support. The data provides an important means of understanding where children may require additional support and of directing collective action across health, education and early years services to give every child the best opportunity to reach their developmental potential.

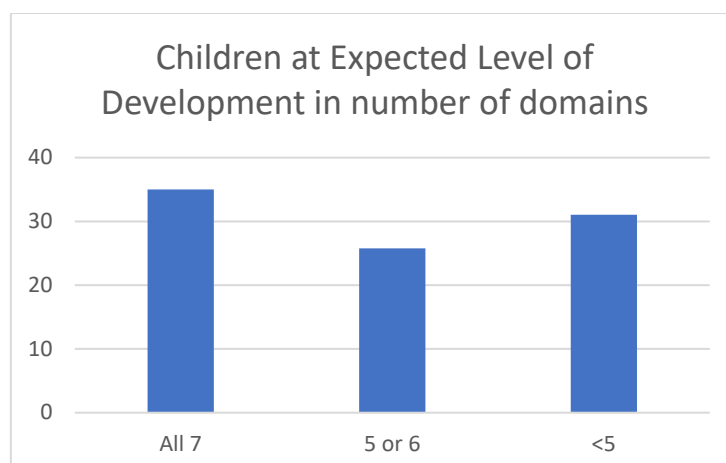


Figure 9 The % of children in Highland moving into P1 who are at expected levels of development in varying number of domains (2025)

The post-pandemic recovery is largely driven by girls, with boys lagging behind and the gap growing. Biologically, boys tend to have slower developmental trajectories than girls, and their development is also more sensitive to the environment around them. Future boys' levels of development would be a useful metric for effects of improvements put in place.

This is all consistent with the “depth” picture, with boys more likely to have issues in more domains than girls:

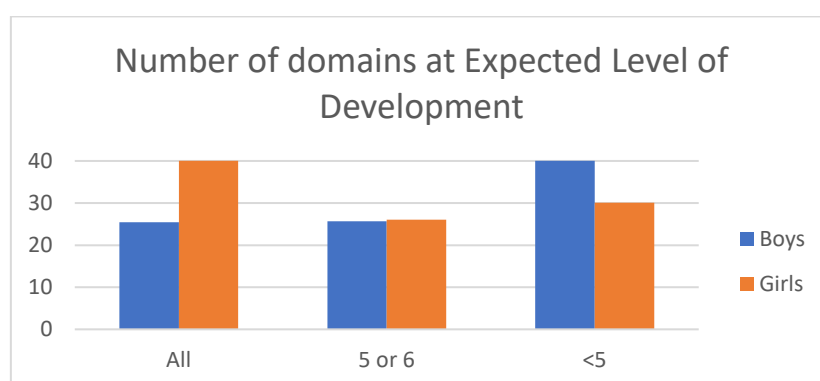


Figure 10 % of girls and boys reaching expected levels of development in varying number of domains (2025)

Deprivation effects are based on a comparison between children in vigintiles 1-4 (for most deprived) and 17-20 (for least deprived) according to the SIMD, with due acknowledgement of the limitations of that characterisation in a rural context.

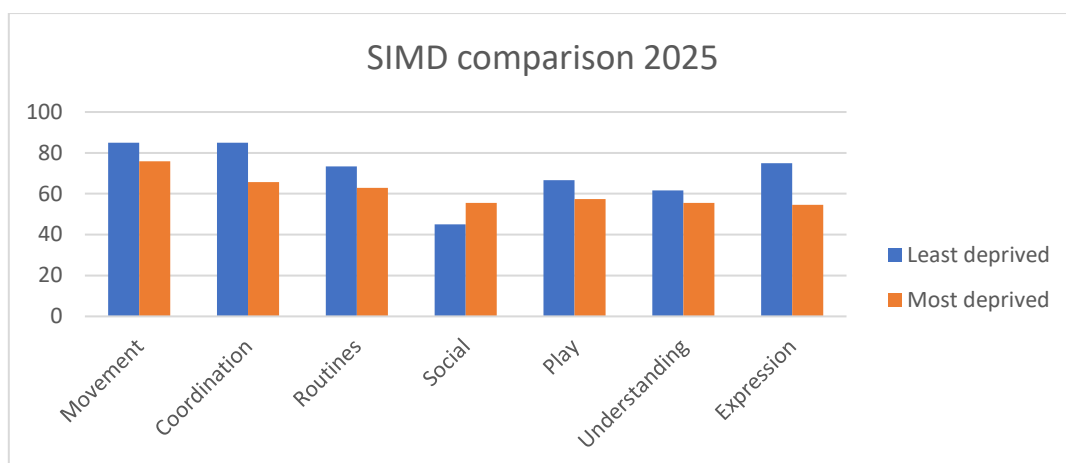


Figure 11 SIMD comparisons for % of children reaching expected levels of development at P1 transition in 2025

Combining sex and SIMD group differences, and taking a composite measure of language development, we see the differences in starting points for girls and boy living in different levels of affluence as they start their journey into formal education in 2025.

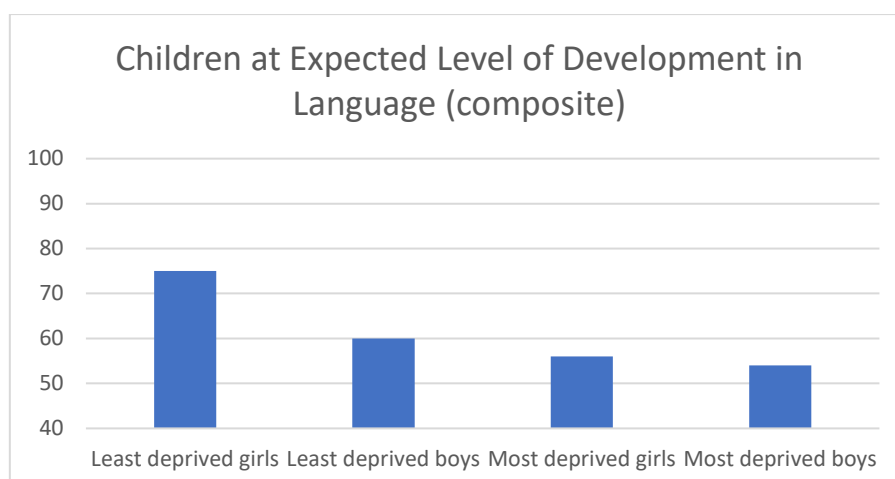


Figure 12 Composite comparisons for boys and girls living in deprivation/relative affluence in relation to expected level of development in language skills

Addressing these issues will take a strategic approach, grounded in data and joined up between educators and specialist services, including allied health professionals; as well as emphasis on the quality of interactions, and the relational environment in settings, including the further rolling out training created by early years specialists on approaches to developing positive relationships to support behaviour.

Protecting access to healthcare for care experienced children and young people

Care experienced children and young people can experience inequity in access to consistent healthcare, contributing to poorer health outcomes. Placement moves, including moves between localities or outwith Highland, can disrupt relationships with health services and create gaps in assessment, treatment and continuity of care. Highland Council has sought to redress this known inequity through the development of a specialist Promise Health Team, providing coordination and continuity of healthcare regardless of where a child is looked after. The team ensures that all care experienced children and young people for whom Highland has responsibility are supported by the

appropriate health care professionals, helping to ensure that the care system itself does not become a barrier to healthcare and directly supporting their Article 24 right to the highest attainable standard of health and access to healthcare. The model also supports Article 12, with children receiving information and feedback in an accessible, child-friendly format and their views actively sought to influence their care and the ongoing development of the service

Vision Screening

Within the Highland Council area, vision screening is delivered in nurseries during term time. Children who do not attend nursery are offered an appointment at a local eye clinic, supporting accessibility across a large, geographically dispersed area while maintaining consistent assessment standards.

Public Health Scotland reports variation in uptake by socioeconomic deprivation and ethnicity at the Scotland level, highlighting the importance of monitoring inequalities within a universal programme and ensuring that operational delivery continues to reach all groups equitably.

The Highland Council area typically records higher uptake than Scotland as a whole, which supports early identification and timely referral across rural and remote communities. High coverage indicates strong coordination between the orthoptic service, early years settings, and families, and reduces the likelihood of missed or late detection of visual problems that could affect learning and development.

Family Support

Family and parenting support, including pre-birth and during pregnancy, can positively impact on child early learning and development. Supporting families can improve mental health, reduce isolation and better enable people to be effective parents. Statutory support is provided via social care and health visiting services within Highland Council who may also refer to third sector partners such as Home Start, which provides family support across various areas in Highland.

Parenting programs have also been shown to improve parenting skills and improve early child outcomes¹⁷. Highland's parenting strategy has included training practitioners working in various roles to deliver [The Solihull Approach](#) and to use this knowledge in their support of children and families. There are national parenting support initiatives aiming to improve early outcomes through positive adult-child interaction e.g. Play, Talk, Read; Ready, Steady, Baby and Bookbug, which provides free books and sessions to share songs, stories and rhyme to families across Highland, being mainly delivered in our Libraries.

Supporting parents to be able to help their children grow and develop is a key part of the work we do to personalise and individualise how we engage and our [Bumps2Bairns](#) website is well used by parents and practitioners working particularly in the early years. We also provide an enquiry line called [Just Ask](#), twice a week for anyone to phone up to access direct advice from a range of professionals. There are almost 1,000 calls to this line each year, mostly from parents who rate this direct support very highly.

¹⁷ NESTA. A fairer start The Challenge <https://www.nesta.org.uk/fairer-start/>

How useful was the discussion with the Professional?



Figure 13 Evaluation of 31 callers to Just Ask January 2025

Right to have views heard (Article 12)

Views of children should be systematically embedded in our systems to ensure their voices are listened to and heard, especially in relation to education, schools and early learning settings. This has been a significant priority in Highland and has built on the work that has been undertaken over a number of years.

Case Study – Caol Tenant Participation - Youth participation in local committee and group events

There is youth participation in the Caol Groups events, and there is a youth representative on the Caol Groups committee. Having a youth rep allows a youth voice on what they want to see happening and for them to be heard, supporting them with their health and well-being by bringing them to meetings and events and listening to their needs and future wishes.

A youth member received a special recognition award at TPAS Conference in 2024 (Tenants Participation Advisory Service), for his involvement in the committee.

Youth attendance and representation at meetings and events is recognised and can contribute toward the Solitaire award, for volunteering hours, learning new skills and contributing to the local community.

There are regular youth events in the area where officers listen to what they want and support their health and wellbeing. There was a meeting with the youth to discuss and plan our next event and at the AGM in March 2026.

Children's Participation Strategy

Between October 2023 and April 2024, engagement in various forms took place with over 800 children and young people between the ages of 4 and 26, as the basis to the creation of the [Highland Children's Participation Strategy](#). Six key themes were identified through the thematic analysis of the data collected which formed the recommendations within the strategy. A child friendly version of the strategy was produced by young people who have a variety of needs and can be found [here](#).



Figure 14 Six themes identified by children to frame the Participation Strategy

As part of this work, we have curated some resources for practitioners to support them in gathering the views of children and young people at all ages and developmental stages:

- [Highland Council Psychological Service - Gathering the views of Children and Young People](#)
- [CALA - Consulting Our Youngest Children Toolkit](#)
- [Highland AHPs - Getting the Views of Children and Young People](#)

In addition, as part of the GIRFEC process, practitioners have been supported to Use the Better Meetings guide to help make meetings child and young person friendly – [Better Meetings – Social Work Practitioner’s Guide 2](#)

Since creating the strategy, the group has moved into implementation with a suite of innovative, rights-based resources designed *for* children, *by* children. These include an ethics framework, consent tools, a practitioner participation guide, and the “[Library of Voices](#)” a digital platform amplifying children’s views and reducing consultation fatigue.

We have worked with children to create some talking points around capacity and consent in line with the UNCRC Incorporation Act and also in support of our Child Friendly Complaints process. These relate to a number of ‘Myths’ that adults may believe, with counter statements and scenarios written by children and young people. These myths and counter comments have been used in training to engage practitioners in discussion, to both raise awareness and dispel some of the closely held beliefs in a way that is non-threatening to practitioners. An example of these statements is reproduced below:

MYTH!

They won't cope with the meeting where we have to decide things

NOPE

So change how you do the meeting then! And/or find other meaningful ways to involve them

MYTHICAL MUNGO

Mungo held a big meeting with lots of people the child did not know, and then criticised them for getting upset and walking out



CAPACITY CALLUM

Callum asked the child who should(n't) be at the meeting, and made sure they met them first; he gave the child the first turn, so they could go when they wanted without losing their "voice"



A "[Voice & Influence Process](#)" is being piloted to embed children's input directly into the governance of the Integrated Children's Services Board ensuring their voices inform strategic planning. This process enhances rather than replaces existing Highland children and young people boards or groups. While youth boards remain vital, they often require significant support and may not represent the full diversity of children across Highland. The "Voice & Influence Process" offers a wider, more accessible route for any child or young person to raise issues or contribute ideas, supported by trusted adults. Submissions will be reviewed by the Integrated Children's Services Board (ICSB), and insights gathered through this process will inform the Integrated Children's Services Plan alongside formal participatory work captured in the [Library of Voices](#).

To future-proof the initiative:

- A dedicated [website](#) ensures open access to all resources and updates.
- Sub-groups focused on voice and practitioner support drive ongoing development.
- [Communities of Practice](#) (launched in 2025) will embed learning across services.
- The Voice & Influence Process creates a sustainable, scalable mechanism for children's influence.
- Reflexive engagement ensures the work evolves with children's needs and insights.

We believe this approach to be both innovative and also promoting a shift in culture, practice, and power, ensuring that children's voices are heard and acted upon in line with Article 12 of the UNCRC.

Children's Voices Informing Priorities

Alongside quantitative data and the Children and Young People's Needs Assessment, Highland Children's Services Partnership has sought to ensure that the views and experiences of children and young people directly inform strategic planning and service development.

To support the development of the Integrated Children's Services Plan 2026-2029, a Children's Voice Report brought together feedback and engagement findings from children and young people across Highland. The report identified a number of consistent themes relating to children's experiences, priorities and aspirations for support services.

Children and young people highlighted the importance of being listened to and taken seriously in decisions that affect them. They also identified challenges associated with distance, transport and the cost of accessing activities and services, particularly in rural communities. Mental health and emotional wellbeing featured strongly, alongside concerns about stigma and the need for support to be available at the right time.

The report also highlighted the importance of services being joined up, accessible and non-judgemental, as well as the significant role that trusted relationships with adults play in helping children and young people feel safe, supported and able to seek help when required.

These themes informed the priorities within the Integrated Children's Services Plan 2026-2029 and continue to shape service improvement activity across Highland. The report demonstrates Highland's commitment to Article 12 of the UNCRC by ensuring that the views of children and young people are sought, heard and given due weight in strategic decision making.

A copy of the Children's Voice Report is available at: <https://highlandcpp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/ICSB-Voice-Document-.pdf>

Case Study - Vision 29

Vision 29 was a major partnership event held at the Northern Meeting Park, Inverness, to celebrate children and families and mark the launch of the Integrated Children's Services Plan 2026-2029. The event attracted an estimated 1,500-2,000 children, young people, parents and carers from across Highland and involved over 30 organisations and services working together to provide activities, information and opportunities for engagement.

From a children's rights perspective, Vision 29 provided an opportunity to promote awareness of children's rights and enable children and families to engage directly with services that support those rights in practice. The event demonstrated a commitment to Articles 12, 13, 15, 24 and 31 of the UNCRC through creating opportunities for children and young people to participate, express their views, access information, connect with services and enjoy play, recreation and cultural activities within their local community.

Families were able to meet staff from a wide range of services in an informal and welcoming environment, helping to strengthen relationships, improve awareness of available supports and reduce barriers to accessing assistance when needed. Children actively participated in activities throughout the day, while families received information, resources and contact details for participating organisations to help them access support and opportunities beyond the event itself. The success of Vision 29 reflected the strength of partnership working across Highland and provided a visible statement of our collective commitment to promoting and realising children's rights. It also created an opportunity to share the ambitions of the Children's Services Plan 2026-2029 and reinforce the importance of children, young people and families being at the centre of service planning and delivery.

Rights Respecting Schools

Many of our schools are engaged with the UNICEF [Rights Respecting Schools](#) programme and engage with children on a variety of issues that directly affect them in schools. We have 19 Primary Schools

and 1 Secondary School that have achieved GOLD awards and 46 having achieved Silver (39 Primary Schools, 6 Secondary Schools and 1 special school). These schools are further embedding this approach across their school as they strive towards a Gold Award.

We check what the impact of these types of interventions are through our Lifestyle Survey every 2 years with pupils in P7, S2 and S4. Our 2025 Lifestyle Survey showed that children feel more listened to have more lessons in school about their rights and feel their right to have their views taken into account is increasingly being realised. However, as children become aware of their rights, they have higher expectations of practitioners and so we know work in this area will remain a priority for some time.

Case study- Embedding Children's Rights in School Governance and Service Delivery: Ullapool High School

Ullapool High School has embedded the UNCRC as a central framework informing service planning, delivery and evaluation across learning, wellbeing, inclusion and school governance. Children's rights are considered alongside attainment, wellbeing and inclusion data when determining strategic priorities and service delivery approaches.

Over the past two years, the school has strengthened implementation of Article 12 (respect for the views of the child) through structured participation approaches. Pupil participation operates through connected structures which form part of routine school governance rather than standalone consultation activity. These include:

- pupils working directly on priorities drawn from the School Improvement Plan;
- pupil-led focus groups, to gather peer feedback on learning, wellbeing, school culture and safety;
- use of Education Scotland's Youth Participation and Engagement Tool as evaluation.

During session 2025–26, the school introduced a pupil participatory budgeting model, enabling young people to influence allocation of resources linked to school improvement priorities. Pupils developed proposals, considered equity and impact, and contributed to collective funding decisions supporting wellbeing initiatives, wider achievement opportunities and school improvement activity. This approach strengthens young people's understanding of fairness, democratic participation and shared responsibility.

Children's rights have directly influenced review and delivery of core services, including:

- revision of the Positive Relationships Policy, embedding restorative approaches grounded in dignity, respect and non-discrimination;
- restructuring of the Inclusion Department to strengthen equitable access to education for learners requiring additional support;
- expansion of wellbeing provision including nurture approaches, mental health supports and targeted attendance intervention;
- development of flexible curriculum pathways supporting Articles 2, 23, 28 and 29 relating to equity and educational entitlement.

Staff increasingly recognise their role as UNCRC duty bearers, adapting policy, classroom practice and relationships approaches to uphold children's rights in practice.

Young people increasingly apply their understanding of rights beyond the classroom through:

- youth philanthropy activity supporting local charities;

- pupil journalism through *UHS Press* exploring local and global rights issues;
- sustainability and climate education linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals;
- equality and inclusion initiatives promoting diversity and respect within the school community.

Impact

Evaluation evidence demonstrates a clear cultural shift across the school community. Young people report increased confidence in expressing views and a stronger expectation that their perspectives will influence decisions affecting school life. Participation approaches, particularly pupil-led focus groups, have enabled quieter learners and younger pupils to contribute meaningfully.

Measured impact includes:

- sustained improvement in wellbeing and belonging indicators through Glasgow Motivation and Wellbeing Profile data;
- improved attendance rates increasingly aligning with or exceeding local and national averages;
- high levels of pupil-reported safety and inclusion;
- increased participation in leadership roles, extracurricular activity and wider achievement;
- strengthened relationships between staff and pupils founded on mutual respect for rights.

UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools Silver accreditation (February 2026) recognised that actions and decisions affecting children are increasingly rooted in children's rights and that pupil participation is contributing positively to school improvement. It has moved beyond simple consultation. Rights-based approaches are now embedded within routine planning and evaluation cycles, supporting long-term sustainability beyond individual initiatives.

What activity do you plan over the next few years to further children's rights in your service delivery?

From August 2026, Ullapool High School will implement a whole-school framework bringing together learning and teaching, relationships, inclusion and participation within a shared rights-based model. The framework represents the next phase of the school's Rights Respecting journey, ensuring consistent application of UNCRC principles across all aspects of school life.

How do you plan to engage children and young people in planning, implementing and evaluating future service delivery?

Children and young people will increasingly act as co-designers of school services. This work demonstrates how children's rights can be operationalised within existing school systems, contributing to Highland Council's wider ambition to embed UNCRC principles across public services.

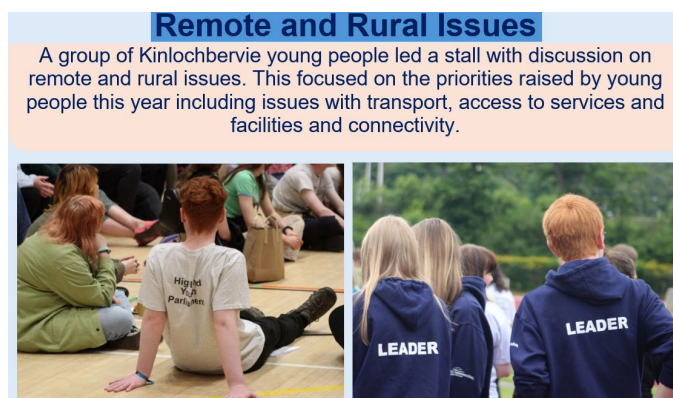
Cluster 1. Civil Rights and Freedoms

Transport

Young people in Highland have access to the National Entitlement/Young Scot Card, in the same way as every other child in Scotland and also access to school transport where required (which is a pre-requisite in a very rural local authority). However, for travel outside of school hours, our young people regularly complain that transport links are poor, curtailing their access to social events and gatherings and to engagement in sports and recreational activities.

In a recent (November 2025) consultation undertaken by those engaged with The Highland Youth Parliament, of the 80 suggestions of issues they could become involved in, 27 related to transport.

This is not a new issue and in the Highland Youth Parliament Conferences in 2024 and 2025, issues around transport to and from rural areas also featured highly.



In 2025 Highland Council expanded its investment in an in-house bus service to 23 buses, including 7 double-deckers, 8 single-deckers, 4 minibuses, and 4 coaches, to deliver passenger and school transport services at a lower cost than commercial contractors, operating in parts of Inverness and Caithness. The aim is to “ensure connectivity for communities who would otherwise be underserved.” Our young people are hoping they will benefit from this vision.

On a similar theme, one of our 3rd Sector Organisations, Inspiring Young Voices, has been working with a group of young people with learning disabilities who have called themselves Inspiring Cantraybridge. They have been actively working on a project to get a visible hard stance/bus stop on the B9006, so that they can more safely access their college. Engagement has taken place with a Highland Council Transport Officer and local councillors to resolve the issue for those young people who find transport most difficult to access and use independently.

Physical restraint and seclusion

In November 2024, the Scottish Government published Physical Intervention in Schools – [A Relationships and Rights-Based Approach: Guidance](#). This provided a definition of physical intervention as *“Physical contact carried out with the purpose of providing support to or preventing the actions of a child or young person.”*¹⁸ Highland Council policy¹⁹ and practice in accordance with this guidance, including a policy on reducing the use of physical restraint in schools. As a result, there has been a reduction in the number of physical restraints used in schools. During the period August 2025-March 2026, there were 311 Pupil-Staff incidents where physical intervention was used with children, 43% of which occurred in special schools and provisions. The need for the UK to *“adopt appropriate measures to eradicate the use of restraint for reasons related to disability within all settings”* was noted by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2017.

Issues of restraint are not new and in 2020, the Independent Care Review published seven reports forming The Promise, which includes the following commitment: *“Schools in Scotland must also not exacerbate the trauma of children by imposing consequences for challenging behaviour that are restrictive, humiliating and stigmatising. This includes seclusion or restraint...”* The Additional Support for Learning Review, published in 2020, emphasises that *“early intervention and preventative approaches reduce the need to consider exclusion, physical intervention and seclusion...”*

The [Restraint and Seclusion in Schools \(Scotland\) Act 2026](#), which came into force in May 2026, sets out provision for the protection of children and young people’s rights in relation to the use of restraint and seclusion in Scottish schools. It provides a definition of seclusion as: *“An act carried out with the purpose of isolating a child or young person, away from other children and young people and staff, in an area in which they are prevented from leaving.”*²⁰ Seclusion was used on 34 occasions between August 2025 and March 2026, again with the majority of these incidents (76%) occurring in special schools.

The Act makes it a legal requirement for education providers to inform parents and carers if their child is subject to restraint or seclusion, and to record and report on incidents. Highland Council is reviewing our practice and processes in light of the new legal requirements, with a view to reducing the use of seclusion and physical intervention.

¹⁸ Scottish Government (2024), Included, Engaged and Involved Part 3: A Relationships and Rights-based Approach to Physical Intervention in Schools, ISBN: 978-1-83601-968-8, p.13

¹⁹ <https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/download/678/school-policies-and-guidance---support-for-learners>

²⁰ Scottish Government (2024), Included, Engaged and Involved Part 3: A Relationships and Rights-based Approach to Physical Intervention in Schools, ISBN: 978-1-83601-968-8, p.17

On-line safety

Our Youth Convener for 2025-26 undertook a major consultation with students in almost all secondary schools in Highland as she toured around Highland delivering on-line safety sessions. The responses she received indicated a range of responses, some of which were quite surprising. This information will be available to schools to feedback to their pupils and continue the discussion about on-line safety.

Statement	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
It's up to me to keep myself safe online	79%	9%	12%
The adults in my life do enough to protect me online	62%	12%	26%
I spend the majority of my time on some form of technology	69%	17%	14%
Phones are a bigger distraction than they are a benefit	40%	30%	30%
I have spoken to people online I would consider friends	50%	33%	17%
I have good access to phone signal or internet wherever I need	47%	32%	21%
Teachers forget not everyone has reliable Wi-Fi at home	57%	9%	34%
I'd rather use AI than a search engine to look for things	22%	65%	13%
Apps (social media, YouTube) decide what I see more than I do	41%	30%	29%
I'm more concerned about bullying online than in person	33%	37%	30%
It's not my place to speak up about online content if uninvolved	32%	26%	42%
My accounts have my personal information visible to anyone	31%	44%	25%
I don't know who collects my data and how it's used	76%	10%	14%

Figure 15 Responses from secondary school students from 17 secondary schools in Highland

In 2025/2026, all secondary schools have undertaken engagement with their school communities on the use of mobile phones with a number deciding to ban their use except in exceptional circumstances such as for health monitoring purposes. The situation will remain under review.

Cluster 2 - Violence Against Children

Child Protection

Keeping children safe and protected from harm are critical determinants of health and wellbeing for children and young people. The UNCRC sets out the specific rights for all children relating to protection from violence, abuse and neglect (Article 19), children unable to live with their family (Article 20), exploitation (Articles 33, 34, 35) and youth justice (Article 40). These dimensions are integral to the national approach in Scotland to improving outcomes and supporting the wellbeing of children and young people through Getting It Right For Every Child, The Promise, Best Start Bright Futures and national guidance for Child Protection in Scotland. Collectively, these interlinked legislative and policy initiatives aim to ensure that all children, particularly those with care

experience, grow up to reach their full potential in a Scotland where they are loved, safe and respected. Upholding children's rights can help to realise corporate parenting duties and improve the whole system to achieve better outcomes for children's health and wellbeing.

The Child Protection Committee in Highland is represented on the Integrated Children's Services Board. The committee chair is part of the Public Protection Chief Officer Group, working with Public Protection partners in relation to the links between Child Protection and Adult Support and Protection. The committee also works closely with the Alcohol and Drugs Partnership and the Violence Against Women Partnership. The CPC are members of the Highland Alliance, bringing together statutory and third sector partners to improve outcomes for children, young people and families. By working in partnership, gaps in service provision can be identified, duplication of efforts can be avoided, and collaboration can improve outcomes for children and young people.

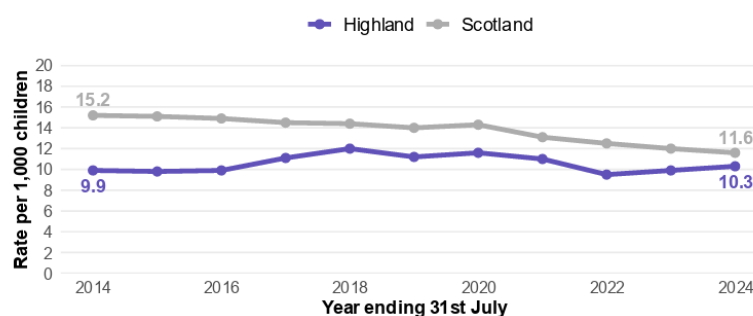
Child Protection Data

The Child Protection Committee (CPC) collects data on a quarterly basis in line with a national minimum dataset. The data shows us any trends appearing and helps us set our audit cycle for the next year. In 2023/24 the CPC introduced the National Minimum Dataset Version 2 with key changes to the risk and vulnerability factors recorded in child protection registrations. Key headlines from the child protection data include:

- The highest number of concerns recorded in child protection registrations relate to domestic abuse, parental drug and alcohol use, parental mental health and neglect.
- There is a decreasing trend in the number of children on the child protection register.
- The majority of children on the child protection register remain under 5 years old.

This is useful data in terms of service planning and development and working with partners within the Alcohol and Drugs/Violence Against Women Partnerships. It is important to note that other types of abuse can have significantly higher risks for a smaller number of children (e.g. criminal exploitation). Therefore, it is important that the CPC Quality Assurance Sub-Group continues to monitor all data available.

Highland data trends for 2025-26, show 440 looked after children and young people in Highland, representing one percent of the population aged 0-18 years. The latest demographic information shows one fifth (20%) of those children were aged under five and a similar proportion were aged over sixteen. Around 20% had a known disability. The number of children registered on the Child Protection Register in Q3 increased from 113 to 115 due to a higher number of children being registered (38) and a lower number of children, being deregistered (36).



Source: Scottish Government Children's Social Work Statistics, Scottish Public Health Observatory profiles tool

Figure 16 Rate of looked after children per 1,000 children aged 0-17 years, Highland and Scotland, 2014-2024

Suspected physical abuse is the most common reason for Interagency Referral Discussions, accounting for around half of all meetings. Of the 32 pre-birth child protection planning meetings in 2025, 22 (69 percent) involved concerns raised around domestic abuse and 18 (56 percent) about parental substance use. The multi-agency partnerships in Highland play a key role in supporting prevention activities for alcohol and drugs and gender-based violence.

Starting Out

In 2025-26 23% of IRDs in Highland related to preschool children. Over recent years, the Child Protection team have had a focus on unborn babies and infants and have been supporting early intervention where there are 'vulnerable pregnancies' to improve the outcomes for children at the very earliest stage possible. Health Visitors within the Council have had a focus on early anti-natal contacts to support families where substance misuse or domestic violence is evident and to accept help and support from social work services as soon as possible. Their aim is to be able to intervene before 28 weeks gestation and the number of families entering the Vulnerable Pregnancy Pathway at an early stage has been steadily increasing as a result of their efforts.

Date	% of Mothers
2023	13%
2024	15%
2025	46%

Figure 17 Percentage of mothers engaged with through the Vulnerable Pregnancy Pathway <28 weeks

Once on the pathway, parents have access to a range of supports and interventions, including further work on harm reduction, access to staff trained in [Early Protective Messages](#) advice on sleeping safely through the [Sudden Infant Death](#) (SUDI) strategy and advice on developing healthy relationships, including the use of our locally developed approach, [PICABOO](#) as a way to reflect on what matters to babies in our interactions with them.

The Scottish Children's Reporter Administration

The Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) are focused on children and young people most at risk. In Highland, 551 children were referred to the SCRA in 2024/25. Four in five referrals (84 percent) were on care and protection (non-offence) grounds. A small number of children were referred to the Reporter on both non-offence and offence grounds.

In 2024/25, the most common ground assigned by Reporters to children referred was lack of parental care, followed by offence, close connection with a person who has carried out domestic abuse, and child's conduct harmful to self and others. The police were the main source of referrals to the SCRA. In Highland, 93 compulsory supervision orders (CSOs) were made as a result of children's hearings in 2024/25.

In summer 2025, a multi-agency audit was carried out with 22 file readers looking at 32 cases over 2 weeks. The audit highlighted good practice in relation to initial responses to child protection, particularly the recording of Interagency Referral Discussions (IRDs) and multi-agency inputs to child protection planning meetings. Areas for improvement include the quality of assessment and planning processes, ensuring the views of children and parents/ carers are reflected within child's

plans and evidencing outcomes for children. We have seen significant improvement in the effectiveness of work undertaken with children at risk of harm to themselves or others, and those at risk of community harm.

[GIRFEC and Child Protection procedures](#) were brought together in revised guidance in December 2024. These joint procedures were brought together to reinforce the importance of the continuum of care, support and protection. An APP has also been developed to allow easy access to the guidance, which sits alongside a range of supporting documents on the [CPC Website](#).

Scottish Child Interview Model and Bairns' Hoose

In September 2023 Highland introduced the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM), a national approach to joint investigative interviewing. Highland became an affiliate member of the National Bairns' Hoose project, receiving funding from the Scottish Government to develop properties in Wick and Inverness to provide safe spaces for children, young people and families who need support from local services.

In 2024/25, Highland continued to implement the Bairns' Hoose standards set out by Scottish Government to ensure children and young people who have experienced abuse or harm receive support in relation to child protection, justice, health and recovery in line with their rights and needs.

This approach is trauma informed, maintaining the focus upon the needs of the child in the interview and minimising the risk of further traumatising. A specialist training programme has been developed nationally for police and social work interviewers, to provide them with the expertise for forensic interviewing of children. In the initial phase of the project, Highland trained 3 Police Officers and 3 Social Workers to undertake interviews with children who have experienced abuse or harm in line with specific criteria. The project has moved towards a dedicated SCIM team to ensure the availability of SCIM interviews for all children who need them.

Funding has recently been provided to support a partnership with the Highland Council Psychological Service, to co-produce an evaluation with children who have used The Bairns Hoose, to feedback to officers on a regular basis how services can be improved for the benefit of children and young people in the future.

Reimagining Justice

The [Police Scotland Corporate Parenting Plan](#) considers language, relationships, scaffolding and opportunities. This plan is reviewed and refreshed annually and submitted to the National Police Authority. It is important we also have [The Route Map: Justice Plan 2024 – 2030](#) to drive the national agenda and look at new local opportunities, this has been done alongside charities such as Who Cares? Scotland. A Care Experienced group has been established, and collaborative work is happening alongside children's homes looking at the Respect Program²¹ where we seek to resolve issues without further police action and respond in a way you would in a traditional home environment to reduce criminalisation of young people in care. There is also a focus on ensuring care experienced young people entering custody receive appropriate support. We have corporate parenting champions who take the lead on moving forward with the plans. A language and stigma

²¹ *Reducing Unnecessary Police Contact with Children in Care: An Evaluation of Glasgow's Respect Programme* (2025). The Open University

poster created by young people has been shared across Highland Police Stations. This creates discussions about how to shift from some of the language used previously. The aim moving forward is to build relationships with care experienced young people. This is crucial in times where police deal with young people in crisis and encourages young people to go to police officers outwith those times. Beat officers have reported that this has been a positive approach and some young people are actively engaging with them. As a measure of success, there was a reduction in care experienced young people going missing, from 178 in 2024-25 to 67 in 2025-26.

The Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 will be fully implemented by April 2027. The Act represents a major shift in how Scotland supports and responds to children who are in conflict with the law or in need of care and protection. The Act is grounded in UNCRC principles, emphasising children's rights, welfare, and the reduction of all forms of deprivation of liberty. Using the Whole System Approach, community alternatives such as diversion from prosecution, early and effective interventions (EEI) and multi-agency case planning should be considered to support children and young people in their local communities wherever possible. The introduction of the 2024 Act ended the detention of all under-18s in prison/youth offending institutions, with secure care being used where no alternative can protect the child or others. The Act is likely to have a significant impact on referrals to the Children's Reporter (SCRA) for offence grounds, and on services such as Police Scotland and Social Work. It is unclear to what extent this will occur and close monitoring of available datasets will help inform future service needs.

The work undertaken on Reimagining Justice during 2024, taking account of the change in legislation²², addressed UNCRC Articles 33, 34, 36, 40. It gathered the views of some young people who were going through the justice system at the time, who were able to provide comment on their experiences to influence future decision making. This work also included the views of services working within this area who acknowledged that although we did have a range of services, we perhaps could work in a more coherent way and use the framework of the Human Economic Cost Model to better meet needs and uphold the human rights of young people within the justice system.

My journey (in the justice system)



²² Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024

Figure 18 Comments made by young people <18 in the justice system in Highland

The young people were clear about the changes they felt that would improve the process for them and provide better access to Article 40. Several young people mentioned wanting a separate place for people under 18 to be spoken to by police; more services for their needs such as mental health supports; as well as more training to help the police understand their needs and communicate better with them. These comments were shared widely with other services in considering what changes could be made. They remain a feature of the work in considering the further local implementation of changes to the justice system. The shift towards trauma-informed, welfare-based support and rehabilitation is welcome in Highland.

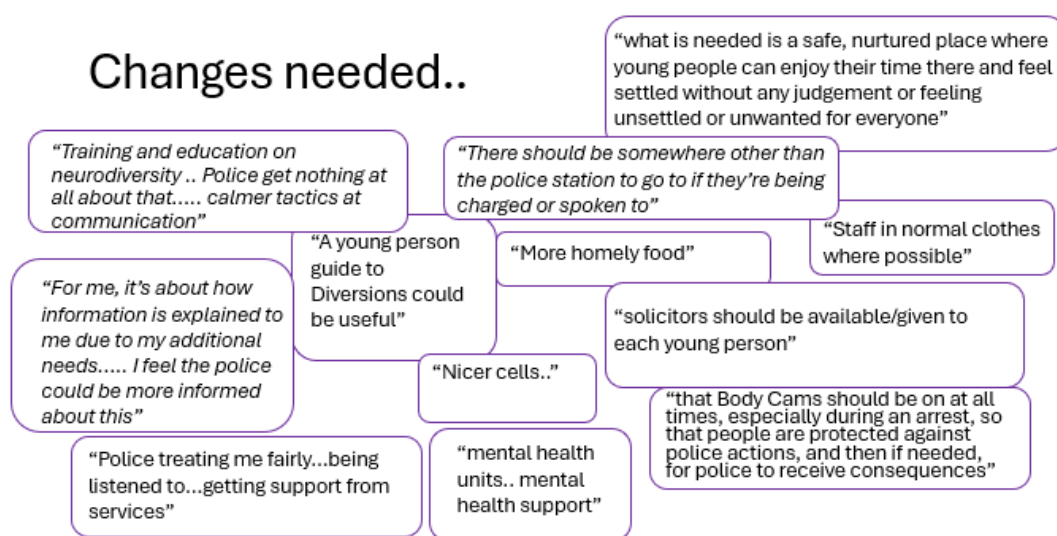


Figure 19 Further comments made by young people <18 in the justice system in Highland

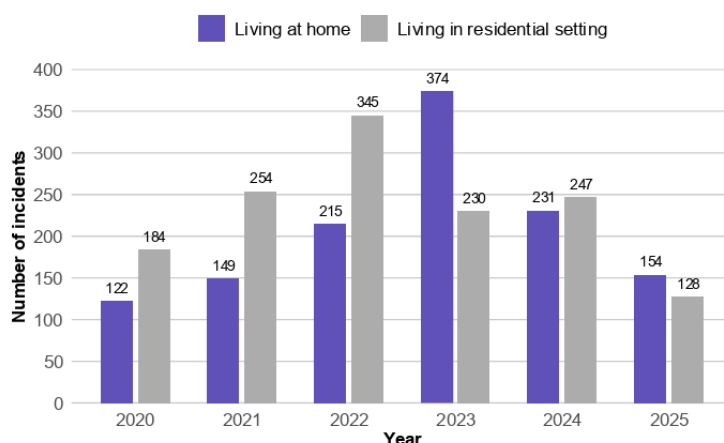
Gender based violence

Gender based violence can take many forms including domestic abuse, relationship abuse, sexual abuse, sexual harassment or intimidation, honour-based violence (e.g. female genital mutilation) and trans- homo- or bi- phobic bullying. Witnessing, or being targeted in, gender-based violence (GBV) is an adverse experience that can impact a child or young person's mental health, ability to concentrate and socialise, physical (including sexual) health, and result in educational outcomes below their potential. GBV is most commonly perpetrated by men, but children and young people of all genders can experience and be affected by GBV. Children are often present in cases of domestic abuse even if not directly involved. In the Highland Council area, police recorded roughly 2,789 domestic abuse incidents during 2024, an increase of nearly 50% over the last decade. By October 2025, a further 2,084 cases had been reported, although more recently the rates have started to reduce. The reported data are likely to be a considerable underestimate of the true extent of the issue however and domestic abuse remains one of the most common concerns for children on the child protection register.

Highland's incident rate remains below the broader Scottish average. Strategic leaders within the Education Service have been established with the remit to work with schools to address and challenge sexism, misogyny and gender-based violence and this links in well with Highland's widespread success in engaging with the Rights Respecting Schools approach referred to earlier in this report.

Children missing from home

In Scotland during 2024-25 approximately 7 out of 10 missing persons investigations involved children and young people (62% aged 17 and under; 7% aged 18-25). Care experienced children and young people are often at higher risk of going missing on multiple occasions. Police Scotland recorded 2,634 incidents of missing children in Highland over the six-year period since 2020. Of the recorded incidents just over half (1,388, 53%) involved children from a residential setting. The number of incidents reported has declined in the last two to three years for both children living at home and those living in residential settings and has reduced further to 67 in the most recent figures for 2025-26 for children in residential settings.



Source: Police Scotland management report from the National Missing Persons Application (NMPA)
Note: Number of incidents recorded refer to the number of police reports not the number of missing children.
Children may be reported as missing on multiple occasions and for different time periods.

Figure 20 Number of incidents of missing children recorded by the police, Highland, 2020-2025

The numbers reported in 2020 and 2021 were likely affected by periods of lockdown enforced during COVID-19 restrictions. Recent reductions in numbers have been suggested to be due to collective efforts to develop better partnership working, encouraging other agencies (health, education and social work) to use their own policies for missing children before reporting incidents to the Police, greater awareness and confidence in use of the National Missing Persons Application (NMPA), and building positive relationships and open lines of communication with families.

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) and Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

The most common form of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) is through 'county lines' where organised criminals and gangs exploit children to store, move and sell illegal drugs. The model of CCE in Highland is no different to that seen in other areas. Inverness has seen an increase in children coming up from London to sell drugs although it is however more difficult to identify victims in more rural areas of Highland due to fewer professionals working in these areas.

Child sexual exploitation can occur both in person and/or online. Use of online tools to groom children and young people is concerning.

Improving awareness of child exploitation is important to improving early identification. To this end, recent guidance and toolkits have been published to support practitioners in their efforts to keep children safe. The evidence would suggest that support for those experiencing risk factors, and contextual safeguarding outside the home, including online, can help reduce child exploitation.

Bullying

Our Lifestyle Survey provides a number of data sets that are self-reports from P7, S2 and S4 pupils, gathered on a 2-year cycle. This provides trend data that comes from the children themselves and is felt to be a better measure of their experience, rather than officially reported statistics. For example, the number of incidents of bullying reported on SEEMiS for the past school session would indicate that 360 children (1.2%) have been bullied. However, our lifestyle data shows a much higher number (40% report being bullied in the last 12 months) See table below. That said however, we have seen a steady reduction in reported incidents over a number of years as we have supported schools to survey and intervene with their pupils, to raise their awareness of bullying and the supports available to address issues where they arise. Individuals are asked if they have been bullied themselves and whether their friends have been bullied. The friends' question is more likely to be a better measure of prevalence as some children (even in an anonymous survey) will not admit to being bullied themselves.

	2017	2019	2021	2023	2025
Yes	Have there been times when you felt bullied in the last year?				
	40.7%	37.44%	31.48%	37.67%	39.64%
	Have any of your friends been bullied?				
	56.0%	48.82%	42.38%	42.18%	40.81%

Figure 21 Lifestyle Survey responses on bullying 2017-2025

Our data also shows that of those children reporting being bullied, 82% report being bullied in various areas of the school, with 44% reporting being bullied in the classroom. 10% report being bullied at home and 21% report being bullied on-line. The figure for online bullying has remained fairly consistent since 2017, even though there has been a significant increase in the use of mobile devices. The work schools are supported with provides information about on-line bullying and keeping children safe, but on-line bullying should be viewed as an extension to in-person bullying, which is far more prevalent and needs to be addressed through a Positive Relationships approach²³.

Through our Lifestyle Survey, our young people tell us that they generally do not have an explanation for why they have been bullied. Second to 'I don't know' however is homophobic bullying, which occurs whether or not the child identifies as LGBTI+. When undertaking Equalities Training, teachers regularly report that their confidence in addressing gender-based bullying is low. This is an ongoing area of focus. In addition to homophobic bullying, our data shows that racially based bullying is rising. Children whose parents or grandparents come from outside the UK are more likely to be bullied than those children whose families have been resident in the UK for several generations 41.3% vs 39.6%. When looking at the reasons for being bullied however, there is a significant difference in racial incidents, with 27% of children whose parents or grandparents come from outside the UK reporting bullying incidents relating to their race or culture while this is the case for only 9% of the participants completing the survey as a whole who report having been bullied in the last 12 months. Further work to address racism across our schools is being supported by an Anti-Racist Network within Education that was formed in 2025/26 and is supported by several members

²³

https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/file/19361/positive_relationships_and_bullying_prevention_guidance_for_children_and_young_people_-_leaflet

of our teaching staff and Psychological Service, as well as other practitioners, 3rd sector groups and [Highland One World](#).

Our anti-bullying guidance for schools was written by a group of young people from Skye and is written from a children's rights perspective²⁴. It recommends the use of the Highland Bullying Survey (or similar) to gather baseline data within a school, then to follow through with interventions and check the impact this has had after a designated period of time. It is particularly important for children who are less visible in Highland because numbers are small, such as those from Global Majority Groups as there may be a perception that racism is not a major issue. Schools are not always systematic in tackling bullying however, or in using the valuable views of their pupils to consider creative and supportive ways bullying might be reduced. This is an area for development.

Pupil-Staff Incidents

The Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research Report²⁵ published in 2023 shared the general consensus of headteachers, class teachers and support staff that there had been a general deterioration in the behaviour of pupils in primary and secondary schools in Scotland since 2016, although it continued to be the case that the majority of pupils still behave well and cause teaching staff few difficulties.

In Highland, Staff-Pupil Incidents are tracked and reported annually. They provide information on the needs of pupils who experience distressed behaviour and the potential interventions that might address need and ensure children are able to access their right to an education in a calm environment.

Around 1.3% of children in ELCs or schools in Highland, had been involved in reported Pupil-Staff Incidents in the 9 months from August 2025-March 2026. This is in line with previous data sets where consistently less than 2% of children are involved in reported incidents in schools or ELCs over a school session²⁶. Consistently there is a higher percentage of boys involved in such incidents (around 78% of incidents involve boys).

Given this known and consistent feature, as noted previously in relation to early years, more thought needs to be given to how we better support younger boys in particular and to take a more developmental approach to help them develop their skills of communication and regulation over time. Consideration also needs to be given to how we gather the views of children involved in Pupil-Staff Incidents, to understand their perspectives on how situations escalate and what preventative measures might help them feel safe.

80% (426) of children involved in reported incidents have identified ASN. Most not identified with ASN are some of the youngest pupils and possibly are progressing through early assessment at the time of the incident. 55% of those pupils identified with ASN are neurodiverse and a further 19% have broader language and communication issues. 49% have identified social and emotional

²⁴ https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/file/19358/anti_bullying_-_guidance_for_schools

²⁵ chrome-

extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/research-and-analysis/2023/11/behaviour-scottish-schools-research-report-2023/documents/behaviour-scottish-schools-2023/behaviour-scottish-schools-2023/govscot%3Adocument/behaviour-scottish-schools-2023.pdf

²⁶ In session 2024-25, 613 children were involved in reported staff-pupil incidents, which is equivalent to 1.8% of all children registered in schools and ELCs in Highland.

difficulties and 10% have wider family issues to contend with. Interventions supporting the development of language and communication needs, working alongside speech and language therapists are likely to be supportive of pupils with these types of need.

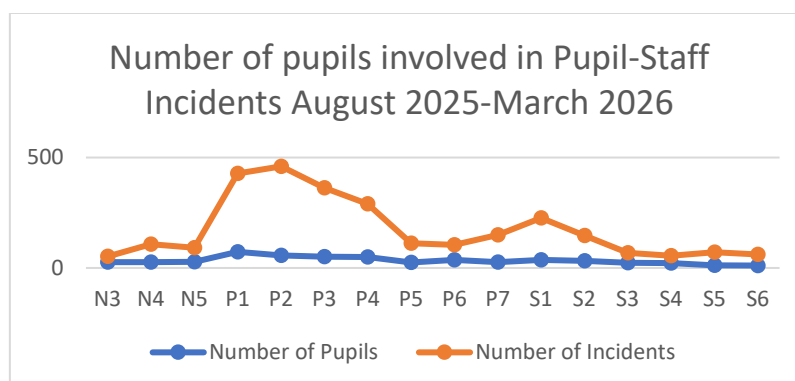


Figure 22 Number of pupils involved in Staff-Pupil Incidents 2025-2026

15% of the total number of children involved in Staff-Pupil Incidents attend ELC, 51% are in PS and 17% are in Secondary School, with 18% in special schools and specialist ASN provisions.

Positive relationships are key both to preventing inappropriate behaviour by students and to addressing these when they arise (O'Connor et al., 2011²⁷). Within a developmental understanding, it should be expected that any and all children and young people will, from time to time, struggle with following norms and rules. Positive relationships do not mean an absence of conflict and difficulty (McGrath & Bergen, 2015²⁸) but do mean that how the adult interprets issues and then acts on that interpretation are the decisive factors. Proportionate responses require an understanding not just of what is happening for the student, but also the assumptions being made by the adults.

Highland Council's Promoting Positive Relationships Training and Guidance²⁹ draws on best practice and research to support staff in early years' settings and schools to understand and support distressed children, rather than taking a punitive approach that will often be shaming or re-traumatising. Increasingly the evidence points to the importance of school connectedness and school relationships in terms of long-term positive outcomes for pupils and where the focus is on building positive relationships and supporting pupils, academic and social outcomes for all children and staff are enhanced (Learner & Kruger, 1997³⁰; Bergin & Bergin, 2009³¹). To support the Whole School Approach to wellbeing, our [Wellbeing Highland website](#) provides tools and resources to help staff and parents maintain those positive relationships with the children they support and care for.

54% of Staff-Pupil incidents occur in P2 or earlier. They peak at transitions from ELC to school and from Primary to Secondary School. We know that some groups of children find these transition points difficult to manage and supporting them well through these times is likely to lead to better

²⁷ O'Connor, E. E., Dearing, E., & Collins, B. A. (2011). Teacher-child relationship and behaviour problem trajectories in elementary school. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48(1), 120-162.

²⁸ McGrath, K. F., & Van Bergen, P. (2015). Who, when, why and to what end? Students at risk of negative student-teacher relationships and their outcomes. *Educational Research Review*, 14, 1-17.

²⁹ [promoting-positive-relationships-framework-and-guidance](#)

³⁰ Learner, D. G. and Kruger, L. J. (1997), Attachment, self-concept and academic motivation in high school students. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 67(3), 485-492

³¹ Bergin, C. and Bergin, D. (2009) Attachment in the Classroom, *Educational Psychology Review*, volume 21 (2), pp 141-170

outcomes. We advise the use of [The Principles of Good Transitions](#) to aid staff in this approach. Only 14% of incidents occur from S2-S6. Our understanding of this pattern is that very young children haven't yet developed their language skills or understanding of social situations to enable them to positively engage in busy early years spaces or to communicate their needs well. After P2 the number of reported incidents fall, indicating the developmental nature of this issue in primary schools.

To address this, the Psychological Service and ELC staff have implemented a training course specifically for early years, to support staff to better understand and support the developmental needs of children at this stage. This is especially important as we know that children born during the COVID years experienced much less socialisation than might have been the case for other cohorts. Confidence in addressing ASN was significantly increased in the 252 people who attended the sessions delivered in 2024-25, 72% of whom were Early Years Practitioners and a further 10% who had a management role in ELC.

Do you feel more aware of sources of help and advice around Additional Support Needs?
50 responses

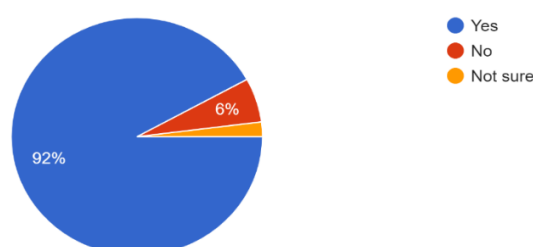


Figure 23 Percentage of participants indicating that the training had given them greater awareness of sources of ASN support

Cluster 3 - Family Environment and Alternative Care

Alternative Care

The Highland Council provides safe, accommodated care for children who are not able to live at home, through foster care, kinship care, and residential homes. Placements prioritise keeping children within local Highland communities, offering both short-term support and permanent homes up to age 18. There are 357 Accommodated Children in Highland (May 2026³²), of which, 59 are in residential settings.

The national data for 2025 identifies that Highland placed 5% of Looked after Children in residential care while the national average is 4%. Children's Services had identified this trend when developing its shifting the balance of care strategy, where a small number of children who could have been placed in a foster placement were placed in residential care as residential was the only available option at the time. There were also examples of children in residential care where kinship options were not fully explored. Social work have developed a dedicated kinship service and invested in improvements in foster care recruitment and retention in order to increase the availability of kinship and foster care across Highland for children who are unable to live safely in their family home. For

³² <https://www.highland.gov.uk/meetings/meeting/5347/health-social-care-and-wellbeing-committee>

those children in residential care at present there are regular reviews to include family finding, mediation and reconciliation. A Highland wide service undertaking family finding and assessment began in January 2026 and has supported children and their carers across Highland, to achieve Article 9 since then. A greater use is now being made of Kinship Care, with 28.6% of children within the care system in Highland now being cared for by other family members and therefore unlocking their right to maintain their important links with parents, siblings and wider family members. This is part of an upward trend and an increase from 26.99% in October 2025.

The *Developing the Workforce project* within Health and Social Care, is a core enabling strand of the Service Delivery Plan, supporting the Council's ability to deliver statutory responsibilities and priority outcomes in the context of sustained workforce pressures, demographic change, and financial constraint. Previous reports, particularly in relation to children's service social work, have highlighted challenges including recruitment and retention, skills availability, succession planning, and the need to adapt workforce models to support integrated and community led service delivery.

Foster/adoptive care

There is currently a national shortage of foster carers, which is reflected in Highland. There are currently (May 2026³³) 82 registered foster carer households in Highland.

However, the number of enquiries to foster or adopt has significantly reduced in recent years with the result that providing safe, local placements for children in Highland is limited:

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Fostering	47	46	24	36	26	33
Joint Fostering & Adoption Enquiry	18	12	14	9	10	6

Figure 24 Number of enquiries for Fostering and/or Adoption in Highland

Children and young people in care are therefore less likely to be able to remain within their communities and may need to be placed at some distance with an Independent Fostering Agency carer, or in residential provision, separating them from family contact. This issue is contributing to the rise in the average number of children being accommodated in residential care outwith Highland, from 13 in 2023-24 to 17 in 2024-25 and now 21 in 2025-26. The Council has provided significant additional capital funding to develop more children's accommodation in Highland, which should result in fewer out of authority placements.

A recent review of Fostering Services in Highland identified the need for additional resources and as a result, two new roles of Recruitment and Retention Officer have been created to focus specifically on the onboarding and support of prospective and existing foster carers locally. In addition, significant attention has been paid to streamlining fostering and adoptions processes to deliver a faster and more positive experience for prospective carers.

Case Study - The Alliance Welcome box

Listening to the views of young people from the care experience journey consultation it was agreed that the residential sub-group would lead on the development of personalised, welcome information and resources that young people have time to understand and that makes them feel wanted. Several

³³ <https://www.highland.gov.uk/meetings/meeting/5347/health-social-care-and-wellbeing-committee>

young people in attendance at the consultation worked with the residential sub-group to create a 'Welcome Box' for young people going into care. The contents of this box are things that will help a young person feel welcome in their new home. The contents of these boxes include:

Wooden box that can be decorated and personalised how they choose;
Unisex wash bag with shampoo, conditioner, shower gel; toothbrush and toothpaste;
Water bottle;
Photo album;
Diary & Pen;
Therapeutic colouring book;
Colouring pens;
Fidget spinner;
Inspirational quote cards that were developed by care experienced young people in Highland.



50 of these boxes were initially made available for young people moving into a residential care placement with funding for more welcome boxes to be provided to young people. Moving forward Highland Council Placement services team will take responsibility for the replenishment of future boxes to ensure this is embedded in practice.



Case Study - My Journey Book

In 2024 Aberlour Trust in Highland undertook a detailed consultation with a group of young people in the care system. They commented:

"There is no transparency, it feels like an assessment is often done in the background, but I don't know about it – we're not involved or asked what we think."

"I don't know what this assessment is, how they know if I am ready or have the skills to move on."

"We have a say, we have a choice, and we are in control."

A small group of care-experience young people undertook further consultation to identify how best to support others and the idea of the 'My Journey Book'³⁴ was created. Young people worked with a cognitive behavioural therapist and graphic designer to help them design a book/journal for other care-experienced young people to help them feel in control of what is happening on their care-experience journey, and this is now used extensively in Highland

The book is person-centred and interactive. It has a number of different sections which include:

Section 1 – About Me: My Profile, Important things about me, My Family Tree, My Important People, How I like to spend my week, My wheel of life, My Feelings about everything.

Section 2 – My Home: Where I live now, Where I lived before, Where I dream to live in the future, My Feelings about everything.

³⁴ <https://www.aberlour.org.uk/news-item/children-in-care-day-sees-launch-of-my-journey-journal-to-empower-care-experienced-young-people-in-scotland>

Section 3 – My Community: My School Community, My College Community, My Dreams and Goals, What's in my Community for me, My Feelings about everything.

Section 4 – Important Meetings for Me: Notes section for me to complete at meetings I attend about me and my future, my people who are there to support me and their contact details, My Feelings about everything

Section 5 – Moving On and Living Independently: Do I Feel Ready, My wheel of life now, Important Contacts, My Money, What's in my community

Section 6 – Important Things to Me: My pictures, My stories / poems, My drawings

The Council has established a 'Learning Without Boundaries' workstream and created a 'Virtual Head Teacher' post which is focussed on ensuring Looked After Children achieve positive educational outcomes. It also prioritises support for children and young people who are struggling to engage with mainstream education.

Whole Family Wellbeing

The Whole Family Wellbeing Fund and Team in Highland focuses its support on the six priority family groups as outlined in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act (2017):

- Lone parent families
- Families with a child or adult with a disability
- Larger families with three or more children
- Minority Ethnic families
- Families with a child under one year of age
- Families where the mother is less than 25 years old.

To directly support families, three third sector Holistic Whole Family Support Workers have been in post since August 2024, with these providers forming an alliance to work with families within the Inverness High School ASG, during the 18-month test of concept. This enables families to receive early holistic supports. Through a partnership with schools and community organisations the 'Family Links' project aims to build meaningful connections to enhance the wellbeing of families and promote children and young people's learning and development. The early evaluation of this work is referred to under 'Theme 2' above, demonstrating positive outcomes for children and families

Case Study – Family Links

A family links worker has been supporting a Mum who has a son in p5 and a preschool daughter. Mum has anxiety and PTSD and her relationship with her son is fractious. The son is often tearful and challenging with his Mum, who, in turn, can be impatient and irritable with the boy. The boy's frequent refusal to go to school was a constant source of tension and shouting between them, with Mum often saying she couldn't cope with him. Some days, when he should have been at school, the boy would spend hours in the street on his scooter.

What children's rights has your input supported? (Article 5, Article 18, Article 28 and Article 24)

The Family Links worker and Mum began to work on getting support for Mum, who preferred to access this from the internet alongside the Family Links worker rather than going to her GP. Mum now better understands the effects of trauma in her everyday life. Using approaches from the Parents Under Pressure training, the Family Links worker has spoken to Mum about her emotional

availability for her son and Mum has begun to work on that. Things with her son are improving, and they have talked about not liking school meals. They both went shopping for a new lunch box and, with the Family Links worker's help, they have created a menu of healthy and nutritious packed lunches, which the boy now takes to school every day. At the moment, he is in school every day.

Our work on Whole Family Wellbeing and our [Family First strategy](#) and Family Decision Making has also helped us work directly with families to empower them in making decisions and finding solutions at an early stage, to support children and young people living in situations of adversity and/or vulnerability, upholding Article 18. Full details of activities supported through Whole Family Wellbeing can be found [here](#).

Housing Services

Highland Council's Housing Service aligns with the UNCRC through several key initiatives:

- **Legal Incorporation of UNCRC:** Following the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024, Highland Council is legally required to consider children's rights in all policy decisions, including housing
- **Corporate Parenting Duties:** The Council actively supports care-experienced young people by prioritising them in housing allocations. In 2025, 16 care-experienced young people were successfully housed
- **Integrated Children's Services Plan:** The housing service contributes to the broader Children's Services Plan, which promotes trauma-informed, preventative, and responsive support for children and families.

There is clear evidence of positive outcomes:

- **Independent Living Support:** 16 households with support needs transitioned into independent tenancies with help from NHS Highland
- **Reduced Homelessness:** The Highland Housing Register Allocations Policy prioritises families with children and those at risk of homelessness, helping prevent housing instability
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** The Council conducts annual performance reviews and uses data from the Highland Housing Register to assess impact and inform future planning
- **Youth Engagement:** The Council works with Highland Youth Voice and the Highland Youth Parliament to gather input from young people on housing and other services

The following further improvements are planned:

- **Review the Housing Allocations Policy:** A stakeholder-led review is underway to better understand and address the specific housing needs of children and families
- **Expand our Housing Supply:** The Council is committed to increasing housing supply across all tenures to meet growing demand, especially for vulnerable families
- **Enhance our Community Support:** Recommendations from independent reviews are being implemented to strengthen early intervention and reduce reliance on residential care
- **Improve Strategic Planning:** The Council has refreshed its Integrated Children's Services Plan for 2026–2029, with a focus on poverty reduction and holistic family support

Financial Inclusion

The Highland Council 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 overarching aim of this work is to prevent homelessness by improving tenants' financial resilience through tailored support, benefit maximisation, and access to financial inclusion services.

Housing Officers and welfare staff will identify tenants in arrears or at risk of eviction, using triggers including missed payments, court notices, or crisis grant applications. Tenants will then be referred to the Welfare Support Team for a financial health check.

Assessment includes:

- Rent liability vs. income
- Existing benefit entitlements
- Debt and budgeting challenges

The Welfare Support Team also support Income Maximisation: Helping families identify and apply for missing benefits (e.g. Housing Benefit, Universal Credit, Council Tax Reduction). They provide Debt Advice: Support tenants with personal budgeting and referral to trusted partners for debt management. They provide guidance on Financial Capability: Guidance on managing money, prioritising bills, and planning for future stability. The Follow-Up and Monitoring offer includes ongoing support to ensure benefit claims are successful and income is stabilised, as well as monitoring of tenancy status and financial wellbeing.

By increasing tenants' income and improving access to financial support, this pathway aims to meet the rights of children and families to live together in consistent, safe, well maintained and affordable housing by:

- Reducing rent arrears and preventing evictions.
- Enabling tenants to meet essential costs like heating and food.
- Improving their overall quality of life and housing stability.

Case Study - Housing Services

The Housing Service supports children's rights in many practical ways as part of our commitment to ensuring that everyone has the right to an accessible, affordable home.

The main activities include:

- Preventing homelessness which is a traumatic and unsettling experience for children;
- Minimising time in temporary accommodation for children who have been made homeless;
- Prioritising vulnerable and looked after children in our Allocations Policy so that those children in greatest housing need can access rehousing;
- Helping families maintain tenancies and access help through structured support and protocol arrangements with various Council services, public and third sector agencies;
- Implementing a domestic abuse housing policy to help protect children who may be experiencing domestic abuse in their households;

- Maintaining houses and investing in them so children can live in warm, safe and healthy environments;
- Adapting houses where appropriate to ensure families can live independently in their own homes.

The Allocations Policy is under review in 2026 and will incorporate other housing-related remits such as homelessness. The review will include an impact assessment on how any changes to the policy will lead to better housing outcomes for children in families which require re-housing in line with their housing needs. Settled housing is a key feature of providing security for children and has knock-on impacts on their education and social development.

Housing has a good record of engaging with tenants and service users and the intention is to widen this where appropriate to take the views of young people into account, particularly where there will be housing needs in the future.

Alongside this, Housing teams have recently visited schools to inform pupils of the work undertaken by Housing and to promote housing as a career option whether through trades apprenticeships or through housing management pathways.

Cluster 4 - Basic Health and Welfare

Work with children and young people of all ages in Highland is based on the key values of the UNCRC and Getting it Right for Every Child. With the revised national GIRFEC guidance, we have taken the opportunity to review, revise and refresh our own GIRFEC guidance, practices and training. Our guidance is now incorporated into one document that also includes our Child Protection Policy and Processes <https://hcpc.scot/policies-guidance/>. We see support for children as a continuum through universal prevention and early intervention, through to specialist support and intervention as we aim to meet the wellbeing needs of our children and young people and primarily to keep them safe as they grow and develop.

Disability

Disability is defined under the Equality Act (2010) as a 'physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities'.

In the 2024 school census, 1,069 pupils across Highland schools were assessed by a professional or declared by parents as having a disability. By law, reasonable adjustments must be made for disabled pupils. Data from Social Security Scotland indicated that 3,380 children in Highland were in receipt of Child Disability Payment at September 2025. This is a benefit for disabled children and young people who have a terminal diagnosis or who have lived with a disability for at least three months and who can expect to continue to have this disability for at least six months.

The rate of school children with a disability is similar in Highland and Scotland. Rates vary considerably across local authority areas suggesting different interpretations of disability and/or potential inequalities in recognition of disability across areas.

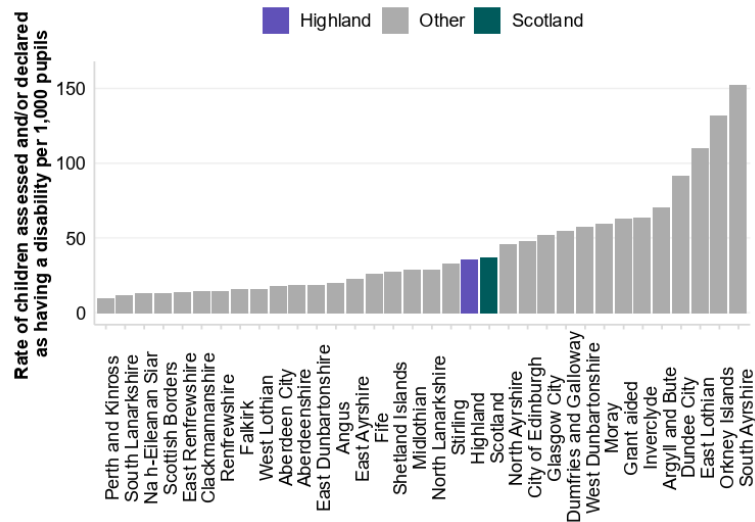


Figure 25 Rate of children assessed or declared as having a disability per 1,000 pupils, by council, 2024

Years of Life Lost

The leading causes of health loss for children and young people in Highland are shown in Figure 27 below. For those under 15, the main causes of Years of Life Lost (YLL) are neonatal disorders and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Although rare, they contribute a relatively large number of years of healthy life lost. For those aged 16 to 24, self-harm, interpersonal violence and transport injuries account for most YLL.

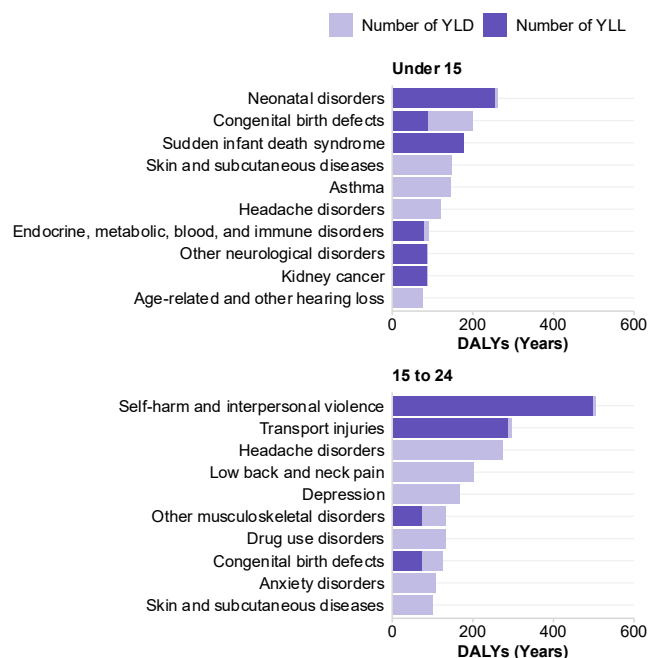


Figure 26 Top ten causes of Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALY) attributed to Highland residents, by age band and whether they are from years of life lost (YLL) or years lost due to Disability (YLD)

(Source: Scottish Public Health Observatory, Local Burden of Disease 2019)

The leading causes of years lost to disability (YLD) also differ by age. In those age 0 to 15, skin conditions such as eczema, asthma and headache disorders were the leading causes of health loss.

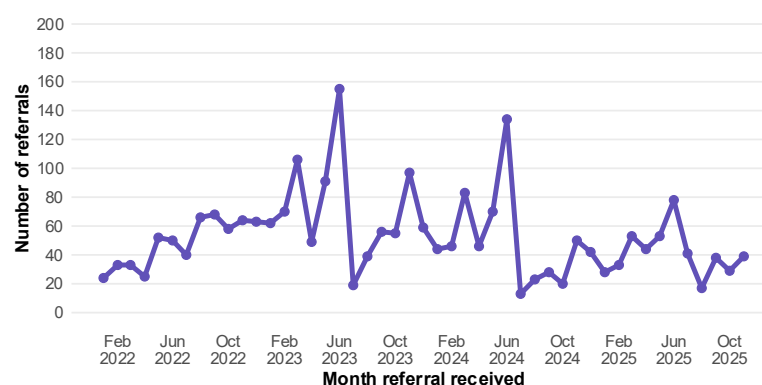
The five main causes of YLD for those aged 16 to 24 were headache, low back and neck pain, depression, drug use and anxiety.

Addressing those children with a variety of health conditions and supporting staff to understand these and support them through multi-agency health planning and support in ELCs and schools is an important feature in providing access to Article 24. This requires to be included in a strategic training plan to enhance inclusive practice.

Neurodevelopmental Assessment Service

In Highland, the Neurodevelopmental Assessment Service (NDAS) is a joint, multi-agency service delivered by NHS Highland and The Highland Council. The service assesses and diagnoses, through a multi-disciplinary approach, neurodevelopmental disorders in children and young people.

The service has operated under sustained pressure since it was established. The number of children and young people on the waitlist for assessment has grown, while referrals to the service remain consistent, adding to the overall demand.



Source: NHS Highland Management Information

Figure 27 Top ten causes of Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALY) attributed to Highland residents, by age band and whether they are from years of life lost (YLL) or years lost due to Disability (YLD)

Children are frequently waiting multiple years to receive a neurodevelopmental assessment, with waiting times of over four years reported in some cases³⁵.

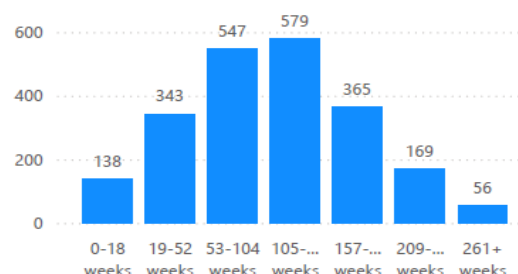


Figure 28 Length of time waiting for NDAS Assessment April 2026

³⁵ Adam B. SPICe Briefing: Neurodevelopmental Pathways and Waiting Times in Scotland. 2025. <https://digitalpublications.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefings/Report/2025/6/24/>

The Highland Council and NHS Highland are currently working in partnership to develop a different approach to autism assessments based on a locality model and the creation of specialist community-based teams. It is hoped that the locality model will build on the staged approach to assessment aligned with GIRFEC to reach an autism diagnosis and prevent unnecessary escalation to specialist complex neurodevelopmental assessment process and unnecessary lengthy waits. The work is supported by an investment of £1.2M one-off funding approved by the Highland Council in March 2026 linked to address the long waiting list of over 2000 children seeking a neurodevelopmental assessment in our Local Authority area. Part of the funding is being used to purchase assessments from the private sector for those children and young people who have the longest wait times for assessment.

Currently the funding has been used to purchase 100 private autism assessments. In addition, a locality team has been created with staff from speech and language therapy, nurses, occupational therapy and teachers. While at an early stage, the team are currently undertaking 26 autism assessments as part of a test of change. Learning from this project will then inform next steps in developing the service. This approach will be aligned with the Whole Family Wellbeing Programme to deliver early intervention and prevention, strengthen multi-agency collaboration, and embed neuro-affirming practices across education, health, and social care.

A partnership approach between Thriving Families, The Highland Council and NHS Highland has enabled the development of the [Highland Neurodiversity Hub](#). This is an online resource providing reliable, neuro-affirming information, resources, and signposting to help neurodivergent individuals, families, and professionals across the Highlands navigate neurodivergence with confidence.

Recognising that an assessment often only changes the label provided for children, rather than the outcomes, the multi-agency training team, including Highland Council educational psychologists, allied health professionals and social care staff, created a [Neurodevelopmental Profile](#) for ELC and school staff to use alongside children and parents. The profile shifts the focus from looking for a diagnostic label to providing a map of a child's functional strengths and support needs in a practical, real-world way. Identification of needs in this way can then inform appropriate interventions that can meet need at an early stage, while children wait for a more detailed specialist assessment in due course.

In alignment with the National Neurodevelopmental Service Specification, NHS Highland and The Highland Council are progressing towards a neuro-affirming Highland that places neurodivergent children and young people at the centre of a strengths-based, inclusive, and coordinated system of support, upholding Article 23 and the rights of children with disabilities.

This will involve implementation of the Children's Neurodevelopmental Pathway Practice Framework alongside established GIRFEC principles. The approach will ensure that neurodevelopmental pathways are clinically robust and affirming of neurodivergent identities, experiences, and needs.

Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing

Highland Council recognises children and young people's right to the best possible health and access to appropriate healthcare (Article 24), including support for their mental health and emotional wellbeing. While access to specialist CAMHS has historically been challenging, with benchmarking in 2024 showing a higher-than-average distribution of long waits to access services in Highland compared to Scotland, the position improved towards the end of 2025 and has continued into 2026. Alongside specialist services, Highland has developed an emphasis on prevention, early identification and early intervention, seeking to ensure that children receive support appropriate to their level of need rather than relying solely on specialist mental health services.

The Primary Mental Health Worker (PMHW) Service provides early consultation and support across Highland schools, with 1,384 consultations undertaken in 2024/25. For 300 children, there was no further action required and the early consultation was sufficient to address the issue, thus removing the need for a referral to the Tier 3 CAMH Service. 318 further consultations were arranged to provide more support for children, families and practitioners. 528 consultations resulted in signposting to more appropriate services or onto a school based multi-agency discussion. **120** consultations required direct intervention. The structured provision of early consultation has enabled those children most in need of a specialist service to be able to access this more quickly.

The direct work of the PMHW Service is largely related to supporting children to manage their anxiety (44%), with 16.3% of direct work relating to emotional dysregulation and 14% supporting children with low mood.

On the basis of the referral information, a range of training opportunities are provided by the PMHW Service to practitioners working with children and young people. These include:

- Change, loss and bereavement awareness
- Togetherness – Solihull approach
- Self-harm and suicide - NES training informed and skilled levels
- Window of tolerance/emotional regulation
- Teenage brain
- Parent workshops on anxiety/emotion coaching
- Embedding trauma principles into practice
- Seasons for Growth – small group programme

Highland Council's School Nursing Service also reflects the nationally refocused role of school nursing, moving from a predominantly universal school health model towards targeted prevention and early intervention for school-aged children with identified additional needs. Nationally, emotional health and wellbeing is a central priority alongside vulnerable children and families and risk-taking behaviours, including substance use. This provides an important health response for children whose circumstances may place them at greater risk of poorer mental or physical health and supports earlier access to appropriate assessment, intervention and onward care.

FAMILIES AFFECTED BY SUBSTANCE USE

Parental or family substance use can significantly affect a child's health, development and wellbeing and can create additional barriers to families accessing healthcare. Highland's approach recognises that children and family members affected by another person's substance use require support in their own right, consistent with the wider national emphasis on whole-family, early intervention approaches.

Highland has strengthened the health response from pregnancy onwards. Specialist midwifery provision for alcohol and drug use supports early, coordinated links between maternity professionals, women and families, with the aim of providing an accessible, responsive and family-centred service and improving outcomes. Highland guidance recognises the stigma and barriers to care that can be experienced by pregnant women affected by substance use and emphasises accessible, welcoming, trauma-informed and individualised support. This creates an important opportunity to establish coordinated support before birth and strengthen continuity of care as the baby enters universal child health services.

For young people affected by their own substance use, Highland Council has also developed specialist nursing provision, strengthening access to health support for a group who may otherwise experience barriers to mainstream services. Together with School Nursing, early intervention and wider multi-agency services, this supports the Council's commitment to ensuring that substance use does not become a barrier to a child or young person exercising their Article 24 right to appropriate healthcare

NHS 10 Year Plan Consultation with Children

The Improvement Project Coordinator within the Psychological Service has supported NHS Highland to undertake a consultation with three groups of children as part of a wider consultation to consider the priorities for their 10-year Strategic Plan. Considering that in 10 years' time, many children will have transitioned into adulthood, it was felt important to include the voices of children in this consultation process in a way that they could engage and contribute their views on what being healthy means for them and therefore what the key priorities would be for the NHS to promote health and prevent ill-health in the future.

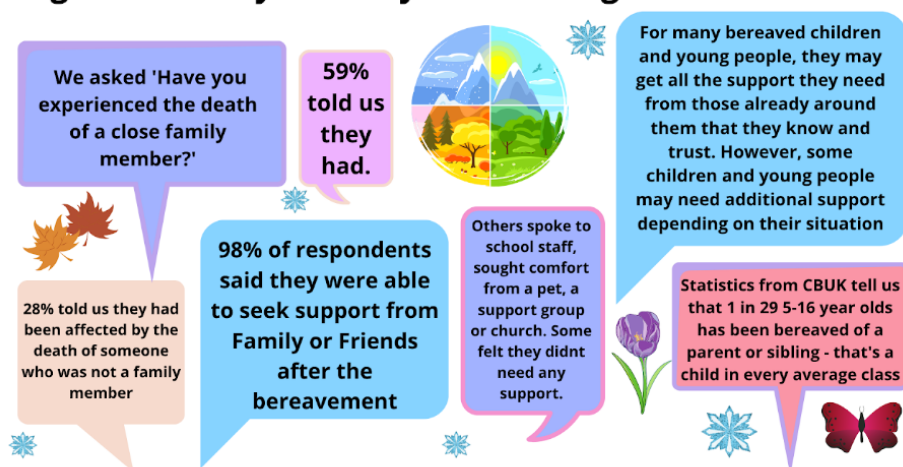
The children who participated in this consultation provided a very clear picture of health as being contingent on positive mental health and emotional wellbeing, requiring good social relationships. They noted the importance of having people around them with whom to engage in activities, positive spaces in the outside environment to help them relax and enjoy their wider worlds and also the need to maintain an active lifestyle. In addition, they had an understanding of the need to have basic needs met such as good quality air, water and housing and also free and fair access to services, including hospitals and medicines.

Wellbeing

[Our SHANARRI School](#) is a survey co-created by children in both primary and secondary schools, supported by a series of posters. It has been used by a number of schools in Highland as a self-evaluation tool to identify where a focus on a specific wellbeing indicator could improve the wellbeing of children in the school.

Our Lifestyle Survey asks a range of questions relating to [mental health and wellbeing](#). One of the areas we ask about is change and loss. Many of our children report significant losses in their lives, affecting their general wellbeing, school attendance and relationships.

Highland Lifestyle Survey 2025 - Change & Loss



To address these issues, training is provided in Seasons for Growth and Change Loss and Bereavement, supporting children and families with resources on a bespoke [Website](#)

Play Supporting Wellbeing

Play is a huge part of a child's early development and communication, but for very young children with Additional Support Needs connecting through play can sometimes feel like a puzzle. Parents, carers, and Early Years Practitioners often find themselves wondering: How do I join in without causing stress? How do I know if they want me there?

A booklet on [Playful Connections](#) has been created to help navigate those moments. It is designed to shift the focus away from traditional "structured" play and instead focus on what truly matters: building meaningful, joyful relationships. It also supports the need to respect the child's capacity to choose how to engage with others (or not) and describes how to gain assent from children who may be chronologically or developmentally too young and unable to give verbal consent.

Case Study - Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) for Highland

We have prepared a draft Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) that has identified and assessed formal and informal play spaces in Highland, within Settlement Development Areas, as defined in Local Development Plans – to understand:

- what play spaces we have
- what facilities and functions they offer
- where they may have limitations
- how accessible and inclusive they are

The PSA is part of the evidence base which will inform preparation of the new Highland Local Development Plan (HLDP). It will benefit Highland communities and stakeholders of play spaces, and be used to inform decisions on their provision, improvement, and long-term management.

According to the UNCRC General Comment 17, play is a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood, as well as an essential component of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and

spiritual development. Ensuring children's access to play and engaging children in the planning system upholds their right to play and relax; their right to freedom of association and their right for their views to be heard and be given due consideration under UNCRC Articles 31, 15 and 12 respectively.

The [Play Sufficiency Assessment](#) includes both a report and interactive map to support consultation with the public or stakeholder organisations. Alongside this, a targeted questionnaire designed particularly with children and young people in mind has been made available to schools, for completion by pupils either individually or in facilitated groups. This follows on from the Council's earlier engagement in 2023 as part of preparing the current [Play Park Strategy](#).

We are currently at the evidence gathering stage for our new Highland Local Development Plan. Further information is available at: www.highland.gov.uk/hldp. Once our Evidence Report progresses beyond Gate Check, we will be undertaking formal Plan Preparation and when it is ready and approved by Full Council then we will be consulting the public on it. The plan will deal with the future planning of Highland in terms of development and land use and as such will play a key role in making places for our current children's future and their children to come. Under Section 16A (1) of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997, a planning authority must make such arrangements as they consider appropriate to promote and facilitate participation by children and young people. This includes identifying the main publicity and engagement techniques that we intend to use for children and young people, and a commitment to make efforts to engage with that group at each milestone stage of the plan.

Cluster 5 - Education, Leisure and Culture

Our focus on gathering the views of children and young people, through our [Participation Strategy](#), supports learning conversations at all levels, to better ensure these supports meet the needs identified by our children themselves. We also recognise that the emphasis on academic success and high-stakes exams in Scotland, can mean that supporting children to access other opportunities for employment and skills development may not be prioritised as much as they could be. Our recent work on mentoring has supported a greater focus on employability and this is now a key feature of our newly formed Education and Learning structure. A dedicated portfolio in the Council's Operational Delivery Plan: "My Highland Future" also focuses on developing all routes to positive and sustained post school destinations for Highland children and young people. In addition, the Council has committed £1.2M to match with funding from SDS and businesses to develop wide ranging apprenticeship programmes across all sectors as part of the [Workforce North](#) partnership.

Those children who do less well academically in our schools are often those who present challenges to staff in relation to their dysregulated and sometimes distressed behaviours. We recognise this as an expression of their emotions and feelings and often an indication of an unmet need in relation to their wellbeing. We have a very detailed [Promoting Positive Relationships Framework](#) to guide staff and support their understanding of how to better build relationships with children and young people as we recognise that better outcomes lie in the recognition of this being a two-way relational process. The developmental nature of dysregulation is clearly shown in the work we do on tracking staff-pupil incidents, where the peak age for reporting such incidents is in 5–6-year-olds who haven't yet developed the understanding or communication skills to express themselves in more pro-social ways.

Additional Support for Learning

13,339 pupils in Highland have been identified with an additional support need (ASN) as defined by the Additional Support for Learning (Scotland) Act (2004). This equates to 44% of the pupil population. These figures are reasonably comparative across local authorities.

	Autism	Learning Disabilities	Physical/Motor Disabilities	Visual Impairment	Hearing Impairment	Total with ASN
2016	1060	573	378	197	177	12,051
2026	1306	522	421	188	171	12,427
% Change	+0.82%	-0.17%	+0.14%	-0.3%	-0.2%	+1.25%

Figure 29 Comparative 10-year changes in overall data for children with ASN and numbers with significant disabilities in Highland schools (Percentage differences were worked out taking an average of 30,000 school aged pupils.)

In Scotland, a child or young person has additional support needs if, for any reason, they need extra or different help than others their age to benefit fully from their education. This can be a relatively low level or short-term need or can relate to a child with a significant disability requiring a high level of personal care (and anything in between). This wide definition explains the high numbers of children with ASN, many of whom have their needs met by their class teacher, or by simple adaptations to their environment.

School Attainment

Raising attainment and achievement continues to be a key driver for improvement across Highland schools. Our three-year [Raising Attainment and Achievement Strategy \(RAAS\)](#), launched in August 2025, is being implemented through annual [Education and Learning Improvement Plans \(ELIPs\)](#). The four strategic themes and three underpinning principles contained within these documents provide a clear framework of support and challenge for schools, ensuring a sustained focus on improving outcomes for all learners.



Over the past five years, attainment across Highland has shown a sustained and positive upward trend, demonstrating the impact of collective efforts across schools and communities.

Data Set	Increase Since 2021
ACEL P1, P4 and P7 Literacy	21.2%
ACEL P1, P4 and P7 Numeracy	16.0%
Literacy Level 3	7.2%
Literacy Level 4	22.9%
Numeracy Level 3	3.6%
Numeracy Level 4	14.9%

These improvements provide strong evidence that Highland is systematically improving outcomes for learners year on year. While this progress is encouraging, both the RAAS and ELIP recognise that further improvement is required. As a result, they set out ambitious outcomes and targeted actions designed to support schools in continuing to raise attainment and achievement for all children and young people.

As part of school improvement planning during session 2025/26, 31 schools reviewed and refreshed their curriculum rationale. This process enabled schools to evaluate the extent to which their curriculum reflects their unique context, values and priorities, while aligning more closely with national curriculum developments and emerging principles from the Curriculum Improvement Cycle. Through this work, schools are developing a stronger rationale for curriculum design, helping to ensure learning experiences better meet the needs of all learners and contribute to improved outcomes.

The case studies below, which are highlighted within the report section of our ELIP, demonstrate the positive progress being made across Highland schools.

Empowering Learner Voice: Muirtown Primary School

Children and young people's participation in decision-making is a vital aspect of school improvement. Muirtown Primary School provides a strong example of the impact that meaningful learner participation can have on school culture and improvement.

The work of the school's Children's Leadership Groups and Pupil Voice Officers has been recognised as good practice by the Scottish Government Participation Team. As a result, the Head Teacher has been invited to join the International Parliament Engagement Network (IPEN), supporting the development of participation opportunities for children at a national level.

Pupils themselves articulate the value of this approach:

"I think it is important that we have Pupil Voice Officers because it means pupils have an extra safe place to share things they are worried about or upset about."

"It is important that we have Pupil Voice Officers because we can share our ideas and our thoughts about things."

This work demonstrates how empowering children and young people to influence decisions can strengthen wellbeing, engagement and belonging within the school community.

Tackling Poverty-Related Barriers: Invergordon Academy

Invergordon Academy continues to invest Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) in Inclusion Support Workers (ISWs), providing targeted support for learners experiencing poverty-related barriers to attendance, wellbeing, engagement and attainment.

Through strong partnership working with pupils, families and support services, ISWs deliver a range of highly targeted interventions, including:

- Home visits
- Attendance reviews
- Regular pupil support
- Family engagement
- Interpreter services
- Literacy and numeracy support

This relationship-based approach has strengthened engagement with learning and delivered measurable improvements for vulnerable learners. Attendance among targeted learners with English as an Additional Language increased from 75% to 89%, while attendance for targeted learners with Additional Support Needs improved from 78% to 81%. Positive impacts have also been observed in attainment, learner engagement and feedback from both pupils and parents.

In recognition of these outcomes, Invergordon Academy's 2026/27 PEF plan includes continued investment in this approach.

Learner and Parent Voice

"Knowing she is in school makes it easier for me to come into school."

S3 Pupil

"The support provided has been invaluable. My child has always found the school environment challenging, but the consistent support offered throughout schoolwork, college opportunities and work experience has helped them remain engaged and make positive progress. We are extremely grateful for the support received."

Parent

Looking Ahead

While Highland's overall attainment trajectory remains positive, we recognise that greater focus is required to accelerate progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap. During the coming session, targeted actions will be progressed to strengthen impact at both school and system level. This will include:

- Increased focus on the effective use and analysis of school-level data to inform improvement actions.
- Strengthened evaluation of impact to ensure interventions lead to measurable improvements in outcomes.
- Renewed emphasis on reducing financial barriers to participation through Cost of the School Day approaches.
- The implementation of a new Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy Framework, providing a consistent, evidence-informed approach to high-quality learning and teaching across Highland, while allowing schools flexibility to adapt implementation to their local context.

Together, these actions will build upon the strong foundations already established through the RAAS and ELIP, ensuring continued progress towards excellence and equity for every learner across Highland.

Home Education

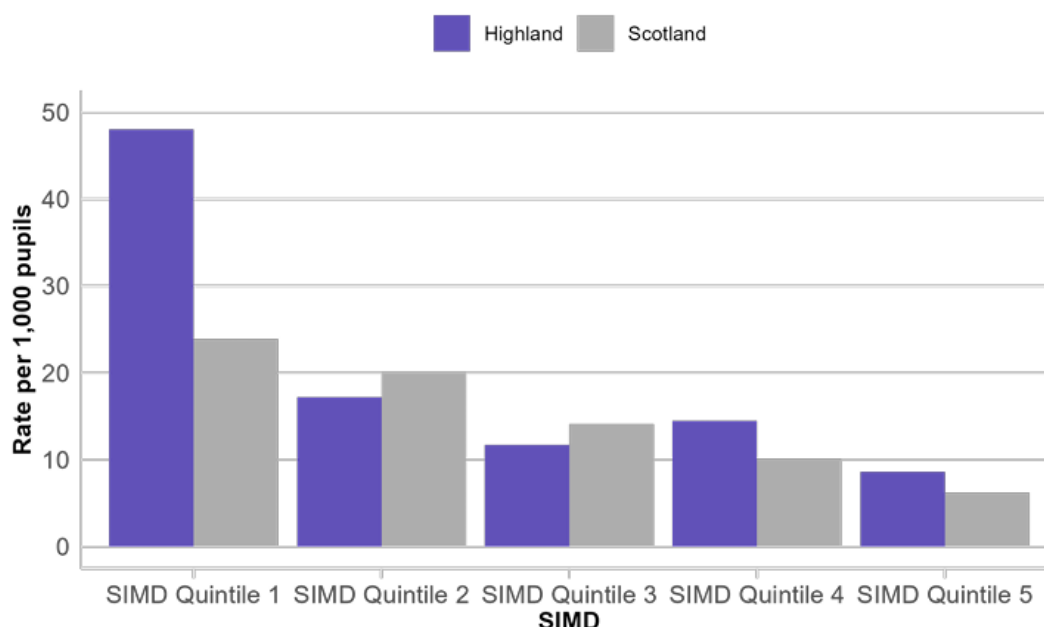
As of January 2026, there were 284 children and young people in Highland who were home educated and 286 who had requested flexi education. Every child has a right to an education, and it is the duty of the parents of every school age child to provide that education, either by sending the child to school, or by other means. Home education is a key aspect of parental choice and is an equally valid choice alongside the option to send a child to school.

Children start school between 4.5 and 5.5 years old. Parents may defer entry for four-year-olds they feel are not ready, and all deferred children can now remain in funded early learning and childcare (ELC). In 2025, 49% of eligible Highland children deferred, compared with 35% nationally (ranging from 23% to 71% across local authorities). Nationally, children in the most deprived areas have historically been less likely to defer, suggesting additional factors influence parental decisions. In Highland, past council ELC funding practice, local guidance, childcare availability, and affordability may all shape parents' choices. Many children in Highland therefore tend to access their right to an education slightly later than their age peers across Scotland. Parents are more likely to make the decision to defer if they feel their children lack social-emotional maturity or may feel their child won't be ready for the cognitive challenge of school.³⁶ This requires to be monitored if it exacerbates the poverty related gap at school entry. Staff in ELC and schools also have a role in creating child centred environments and reassuring parents that children have a right to have their presenting needs addressed in either setting, rather than them having to be 'ready for school'.

³⁶ Simpson, H. G., Booth, J. N., & Chevalier, N. (2025). Parent priorities when navigating the decision to delay school entry. *Research Papers in Education*, 40(3), 467–494. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2024.2411692>

Exclusion data

In 2024/25, the rate of exclusion in the 20% most deprived areas in Highland was 48 cases per 1,000 compared to 8.6 cases per 1,000 children in the 20% least deprived areas (Figure 32) and the rate of exclusion for these children was higher than nationally. This is an area for focused action going forward to prevent exclusions, particularly for those experiencing deprivation.



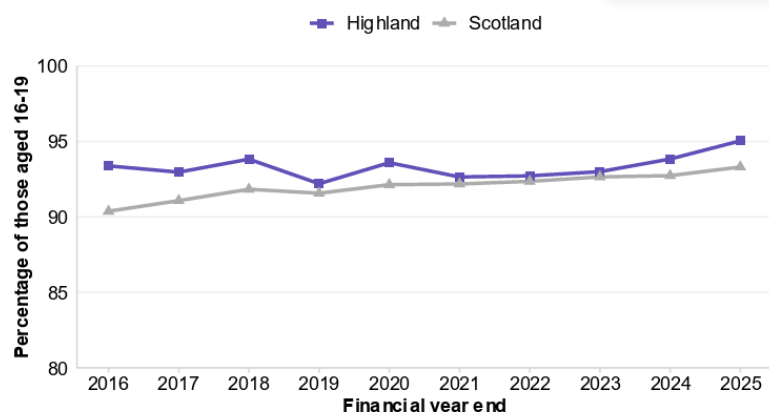
Source: Scottish Government, School education statistics, 2025

Figure 30 Cases of exclusion from school per 1,000 pupils by SIMD quintile, Highland and Scotland, 2024/25

School Leaving Data

53.5% of young people in Highland leave school to go into Further or Higher Education. Many use the local services of the University of the Highlands and Islands, but others have to leave home and move to other cities in Scotland. For some, this can be a considerable barrier to accessing University Education.

In 2024/25, 95% of those aged 16-19 in Highland were in education, employment or training (known as annual participation). This is higher than for Scotland as a whole.



Source: Skills Development Scotland
 1 The y-axis does not start from zero.

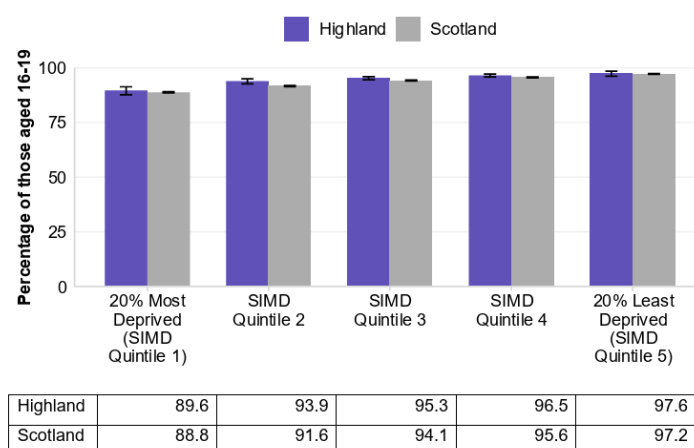
Figure 31 Annual participation (aged 16-19) in education, training or employment by year, Highland and Scotland

Nationally, participation rates decrease through ages 16 to 19 and disabled young people are less likely to be participating than those not identified as disabled. In both cases, the decrease in Highland is better than the national position. Participation is lower still for care experienced children over age 16 who are in After Care services where nationally only 54% are in education, training or employment. Participation also varies by deprivation with the lowest percentage in the most deprived SIMD quintile, illustrating socio-economic inequality. A focus on positive and sustained post-school destinations for all groups of young people is a high priority in Highland, as already referenced through the Council's Operational Delivery Plan.

Local Authority	Age				Disability (aged 16-19)	
	16	17	18	19	Disabled	not Identified as Disabled
Highland	99.4	96.5	96.5	90.3	90.6	95.4
Scotland	99.0	95.3	95.3	87.4	89.2	93.5

Source: Skills Development Scotland

Figure 32 Annual participation (percentage) in education, training or employment by age and by disability, Highland and Scotland, 2024/25



Source: Skills Development Scotland
Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 33 Annual participation (aged 16-19) in education, training or employment by SIMD quintile, Highland and Scotland, 2024/25

Highland has had consistently higher rates of apprenticeship starts than the Scottish average, with a higher proportion of apprenticeships within the hospitality and tourism sectors than the Scottish average, reflecting the region's economy. Nationally, in 2024/25, the achievement rate for apprentices from the most deprived areas increased and representation from ethnic minority and care-experienced groups reached record highs. These trends suggest that apprenticeships can be a strategic lever for reducing health and economic inequalities, particularly when aligned with local labour market needs and supported by inclusive recruitment practices.

To support this work, the secondary curriculum development³⁷ is supporting Article 29 through collaborative work with teachers, NHS colleagues and Developing the Young Workforce partners, ensuring learning experiences within Skills for Work courses such as the Health Sector and Laboratory Science and the NPA in Science and Health embed sector-specific skills, employer insight and real-world contexts. In parallel, a pilot approach is being developed to establish sustainable school–STEM employer partnerships with SSE Distribution and Transmission and associated contractors, with a focus on early career awareness and industry relevance.

Cost of the School Day

The Cost of the School Day was a key focus for Highland schools throughout the 2024/25 session. Currently, seven schools are engaged with the Voice Network, with a target to increase this to ten by August 2026. Professional learning networks received training on this topic during session 2025-26, which was reinforced through the August 2025 newsletter to schools and a baseline service offered to all schools.

A Highland-wide Cost of the School Day network was established in April 2026, led by the Attainment Advisor. This work connects with broader family wellbeing initiatives to avoid siloed efforts and promoting a more holistic approach.

³⁷ <https://www.highland.gov.uk/meetings/meeting/5354/education-committee> (item 10)

Youth Work

*“**UNCRC** has long been the foundation of good youth work, ensuring a children’s human rights approach. It is built into the National Youth Work Outcomes and Skills Framework. It remains at the heart of what youth workers do and the mechanism practitioners use with children and young people to hold those in power accountable for budgets, community planning, and local service provision.*

Tim Frew – Chief Executive – YouthLink Scotland

Youth workers in Highland, across all sectors, inform and educate young people about their rights, including specific rights such as education, protection from harm, and leisure and recreation. Youth Workers remain positioned well to empower young people to become advocates for their rights and the rights of others and to campaign for change effectively.

Highland Children and Young People’s Participation Strategy 2024-2029 sets out the vision of a Highland in which all children and young people from 0 to 25 years (26 years for care experienced young people) feel that they can meaningfully participate in decision making processes and influence change in their own lives and in the wider society. Youth Work and the wider professional practice of Community Learning and Development in Highland is fully aligned and working towards this vision.

Case Study – Highland Youth Parliament Climate Actions

An example of Highland Youth Work centred around the UNCRC and its application in practice is when Leah McBain, the Highland Youth Convenor 25-26 and representatives of the Highland Youth Parliament outlined their climate change priorities and key asks to the THC Climate Change Committee in January 20-26, sharing youth perspectives on urgent action and opportunities for meaningful engagement in shaping Highland’s journey to net zero and climate resilience. The THC Youth Work team supported them in this work.

Highland Youth Parliament made 4 key asks of the committee. These are:

- Community actions – Promote green initiatives like litter picking / upcycling
- Walking and cycling routes – have more, and safer, ways to get around that aren’t cars and buses
- Secondary Education – make climate change education part of the core curriculum
- More recycling options in schools – improve the recycling infrastructure to support everyday climate action

The full report to committee can be viewed here:



HYP Climate Change
Committee 280126.ppt



Cluster 6 - Special Protection Measures

Refugees and Resettlement

Highland Council has successfully resettled several groups of Syrian and Afghan New Scots through the UK Refugee Resettlement Programme since 2016.

Ministers wrote to Highland Council in February 2024 requesting ongoing support for families yet to arrive in the UK. As a result, the MOD site at Cameron Barracks, Inverness was used to support families arriving under the ARAP scheme while they wait to be matched into longer term accommodation. Children were enrolled in local primary and secondary schools with welfare support being contracted to The Mears Group through the Home Office. A weekly meeting was initially held with key partners to monitor progression and identify any issues. A further 8 Service Family Accommodation (SFA) properties in Inverness were offered by the MOD to support these families.

Since January 2022, Highland Council have supported asylum seeking children through the Home Office mandated National Transfer Scheme. Through partnership working with the third sector, the Comraich service was developed (December 2022) and has supported 82 young people, aged 16 and over, as of May 2026. The Comraich service supports young people through leasing Council and third sector properties to provide accommodation. The support team are alongside the young people, providing advocacy for them through all stages of their stay in Highland. There is a dedicated transitions co-ordinator and ESOL teacher within Comraich to support young people in their learning and language development. At the point of status being granted the young people are then transferred to the Barnardo's Springboard (Throughcare and Aftercare) service.

There have been many successes from this project: With the support of Adult Learning within Highland Council, two young Afghans applied for paid work offered to Young Leaders with lived experience of forced displacement. They were successful and gained experience working as part of the Compass Collective Organisation at Eden Court and Cameron Barracks on Inspiring Young Voices, a three-month theatre performance project for the Refugee Youth in Inverness. One of the Syrian families set up their own business in June 2024 and now have their own placement on the Highland Food and Drink Trail along the banks of the River Ness. Their Falafel Shop serves authentic Middle Eastern cuisine that has proved very popular with locals and tourists.

The Adult Learning Service has also supported Afghans to apply for courses at UHI, both ESOL and non-ESOL. Several Afghans have passed their driving theory test. One learner who arrived with no prior knowledge of English in 2023 is now studying at UHI.

Case Study - Resettlement & Asylum

The Resettlement Teams uphold children's best interests by: Coordinating safe, appropriate housing for families on arrival; Ensuring accommodation meets standards for safety, warmth and suitability; Supporting families to access health, education and welfare services promptly. This demonstrates a rights-based approach centred on children's wellbeing and safety.

They provide advocacy and ensure children can access education without delay by: Supporting school registration and placement; Liaising with Education, including EAL services; Assisting with uniform, transport, digital access and practical needs; Helping families understand school systems,

expectations and supports. This evidences the Council's commitment to upholding children's rights to education and development

Many resettled children have experienced conflict, loss or displacement. Resettlement Support Services: Help families register with GPs, dentists and health visitors/school nursing services. Signpost and facilitate access to mental-health and trauma-recovery supports. Provide culturally sensitive information about health entitlements and services. This supports children's rights to health, recovery and development.

Resettlement work often involves ensuring that children's voices influence decisions affecting them. Teams: Seek children's views on schooling, community activities and aspects of resettlement; Use interpreters, visuals or trusted adults to support participation where English is limited; Reflect children's preferences in multi-agency planning where appropriate. This supports children's rights to participation and influence in matters affecting their lives.

Resettlement Teams help reduce barriers for children and families by: Facilitating access to youth groups, sports clubs, libraries and community activities; Providing information in appropriate languages and formats; Addressing rurality, transport and digital inclusion barriers; Working with community partners to promote social inclusion. This supports equal access to services and prevents discrimination.

Children's views have been gathered during home visits (with interpreters where required) about their preferences for schooling, community activities, and aspects of their new environment. The team also work with Education colleagues who capture children's experiences and feedback when settling into school, which is then used to inform ongoing support.

Further activity planned

- Developing a child-friendly welcome information pack.
- Strengthening mechanisms for capturing children's views.
- Further training for staff on children's rights and trauma-informed practice.
- Enhancing links with youth services to improve support for young people.

Engaging children and young people in planning, implementing and evaluating future service delivery

- Child-friendly consultation is embedded in resettlement processes
- A child-friendly welcome and information pack will be co-designed with children and young people who have already been resettled, to ensure the information is meaningful, accessible and reflects their lived experience.
- Working with schools and youth services to capture children's experiences. Using feedback from EAL teams, youth workers and schools to understand children's experiences of education, belonging and wellbeing.

Creating simple participation tools including short surveys, drawing activities or supported conversations for younger children. Offering older young people, the option of digital feedback (forms, voice notes or messaging) to reduce barriers and encourage honest input.

Using children's feedback to shape future service delivery where possible. Incorporating children's views into housing decisions (where possible), orientation plans, community activity referrals and support planning. Reviewing feedback at regular intervals to evaluate the effectiveness of resettlement support and identify areas for improvement.

Building participation into multi-agency planning. Ensuring every relevant service (Education, Health, Housing, Children's Services, CLD) understands how children's views should be gathered and used. Strengthening joint practice so children are routinely asked for their views before decisions are made

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to the UK Government 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme to support Ukrainian Displaced People (UDP) who fled their homes because of the invasion. A total of 233 UDPs have been welcomed into properties in Highland since the scheme was announced in March 2022. The Resettlement Team, along with other Council Services and partner agencies including the NHS and High Life Highland, have helped sponsors supporting UDPs with the administration of host payments; access to benefits; facilitating English language classes; providing employability support; developing links to higher education; and other means to help the households integrate into Highland life. Many UDPs have resettled in Highland very successfully and been well supported by community groups. They have gained employment, and their children have engaged extremely well in local schools.

Children from Armed Forces Families

Children from Armed Forces Families (AFFs) have specific needs, especially at times of deployment and transition. To support them and their families we have created a specific [website](#) to house the resources that have been developed, many of them co-produced by children and young people from AFFs. In recent months (Jan-March 2026), children created an e-book to support others making the journey and [moving to Highland](#). Another resource created by children to explain to their peers what the AFF Covenant is all about was featured in this year's State of Children's Rights "[Children and young people's journey to empowerment through co-production of the 'Armed Forces Covenant'](#)" has been included in the report.

The resources on our [bespoke website](#) shine a spotlight on the incredible co-production work of children and young people from Armed Forces families in Highland. Their voices, creativity, and advocacy have helped transform how we understand the Armed Forces Covenant – Education section, making it accessible, relatable, and rooted in rights. As the children and young people have said themselves, *"We want everyone to know about it. Everybody needs to see this! It's better than the official guide."*

<https://armedforcesfamilieshighland.wordpress.com/childrens-rights-and-participation/>

The Highland Lifestyle Survey data provides clear measures that relate to children from AFFs, both serving and veteran families. This information has been discussed by the multi-agency group that makes up the Military Liaison Group (Education), who have been able to use this to consider priorities for the support they provide to children and young people.

PART 3 – Summary and Next Steps

There are a range of actions that have been taken in Highland Council over recent years to support processes and activities that can further realise children's rights. A huge number of children and young people have been involved in shaping our actions thus far and identifying where there are gaps, that we will work on over the coming three years.

Our aim is to ensure that regardless of who they are or where they are, children in Highland are able to access their rights to all articles of the UNCRC that are relevant to them at any point in time.

Children's safety, protection and stability are foundational determinants of health and wellbeing. Vulnerability arises not only from discrete safeguarding incidents but from overlapping adversities, parental mental ill-health, domestic abuse, substance use, neglect, exploitation and family instability, all of which have profound effects on children's development, education and long-term outcomes. Looked-after and care-experienced children continue to face some of the greatest inequalities, with national evidence identifying higher risks of developmental concerns, mental health difficulties, hospitalisation and mortality, particularly during transitions out of care. Child protection activity in Highland reflects the underlying risk pattern. Parental drug and alcohol use, parental mental health, domestic abuse and emotional abuse are the most common reasons for children to be placed on the child protection register. Extra-familial harm including child sexual and criminal exploitation is becoming more prevalent in reported concerns about children and young people. These aspects all feature in the activities undertaken by the CPC to help keep children safe.

Inequality is also seen on almost all indicators for those children living in households affected by poverty. Understanding the wider impacts of poverty for children can lead to more trauma informed and compassionate care and support. The recommendations of the recent report from the Highland Poverty Commission and the input from children, summarised by the Youth Highland report, will be key in supporting appropriate interventions to address these inequalities.

We have made progress in widening the knowledge and understanding of children's rights for children and families and also across our organisation and with our Community Planning Partners. However, there is still work to do as we recognise that while policies, guidance and training is available, we need to ensure that these are embedded and in regular use by all parts of our service. This is the true measure of implementation and a task we have set ourselves to achieve.

We have engaged with over 800 children of varying ages in the co-production of a Participation Strategy, which we advocate is used across Council Service. However, there is more work to be done to embed this across the organisation to inform policy development and decision making.

We have several data sets that can track our progress on many of the actions we are taking to realise children's rights in Highland Council and most importantly we have detailed information from our young people themselves through the Highland Lifestyle Survey. As The Library of Voices and The Voice process become more embedded, these will also give us a growing bank of views and comments from children that can be used to shape future decision making and give confidence that we are not simply hearing the same voices over and over again.

There are many examples provided as case studies throughout this report, shared by services that up until recently, have not considered children as part of their stakeholder or client group. They now do and having engagement from Housing, Waste Management, Libraries, Community Service and

Corporate Services all considering children's needs within their service delivery is very positive. Within health, social care and education, children and young people are of course the main priority, and the interventions in these services will be further focused on intersectionality, anti-discrimination and meeting the needs of the marginalised and often unrepresented in our schools ELCs and communities.

This report provides a detailed analysis of the current 'State of Children's Rights' in relation to Highland Council services and provides the benchmark for the work anticipated for the future.

[Appendix 3](#) provides a list of actions we will undertake over the next 3 years to further the work we have been engaged in to realise children's rights, with the aim of building in accountability and best practice to all services within Highland Council.

Appendix 1 – Highland Lifestyle Survey Data – Trends on Children’s Rights and Wellbeing

	2019	2021	2023	2025
Are you aware that all children and young people have rights?				
Yes	89.18%	89.64%	93.4%	95.40%
No	3.81%	3.59%	2.38%	1.51%
Don’t Know	7.01%	9.91%	4.21%	3.01%
Does anyone in school talk to you about your rights?				
Yes	43.63%	52.38%	65.9%	78.64%
No	56.37%	47.62%	34.10%	21.36%
So far during this school year, have you been involved in any lessons about children's rights?				
Never	45.08%	41.90%	27.55%	20.50%
Once	23.30%	25.70%	25.08%	23.29%
Twice	10.64%	11.05%	12.72%	14.54%
More than twice	20.98%	21.35%	34.65%	41.67%
To what extent do you feel the following rights are being met at least partly:				
Your right to education	95.13%	95.33%	96.09%	96.38%
Your right to relax and play	91.86%	90.85%	91.05%	92.61%
Your right to have a view and have it listened to	90.93%	90.63%	91.38%	91.52%
Your right to be safe from violence	93.47%	92.69%	92.71%	92.65%
Your right to the best possible health	94.38%	93.33%	94.71%	94.91%
Are you familiar with the term 'wellbeing'?				
Yes	85.76%	90.25%	90.72%	92.35%
No	5.37%	3.21%	2.61%	2.22%
Don't Know	8.87%	6.54%	6.68%	5.43%
Does anyone in school talk to you about your wellbeing?				
Yes	55.89%	59.94%	63.61%	66.40%
No	21.02%	19.22%	17.02%	14.24%
Don't Know	23.09%	20.85%	19.37%	19.36%
So far during this school year, have you been involved in any lessons about wellbeing?				
Never	29.17%	21.12%	14.80%	14.96%
Once	29.32%	25.38%	27.47%	25.32%
Twice	14.18%	15.09%	17.52%	18.09%
More than twice	27.34%	38.41%	40.22%	41.64%
Do you generally feel:				
Safe	83.30%	81.51%	77.61%	79.92%
Healthy	76.78%	76.81%	77.77%	80.11%
Active	78.56%	78.68%	81.07%	83.35%
Nurtured	73.38%	74.62%	74.89%	80.07%
Achieving	71.23%	66.58%	67.21%	68.54%
Respected	64.79%	67.38%	64.08%	66.92%
Responsible	69.89%	66.90%	68.32%	71.63%
Included	71.24%	72.14%	69.40%	72.34%

Appendix 2 – Highland Lifestyle Survey Data (2025) relating to Care Experienced Children

Questions	Currently CExp		Previously CExp		Highland
	Number	%	Number	%	%
Your right to relax and play is fully/partly met	49	83	177	88.5	92.6
Your right to have a view listened to is fully/partly met	50	85	172	86	91.5
Your right to be safe from violence is fully/partly met	52	88	177	88.5	92.7
Your right to the best possible health is fully/partly met	48	81.4	179	89.5	95
Are you familiar with the term “Wellbeing”? Yes	49	83	168	84	92.4
Does anyone talk to you about Wellbeing?	31	52.5	116	58	66.4
Have you had more than 2 lessons this year on Wellbeing?	22	37.3	74	37	41.6
Do you generally feel safe?	37	62.7	143	71.5	80
Do you generally feel healthy?	46	78	142	71.5	80
Do you generally feel active?	46	78	150	75	83.4
Do you generally feel nurtured?	40	68	144	72	80
Do you generally feel you are achieving?	29	49	111	55.5	68.5
Do you generally feel respected?	29	49	113	56.5	67
Do you generally feel responsible?	32	54	115	57.5	71.6
Do you generally feel included?	34	57.6	119	59.5	72.3

Appendix 3 – Actions planned to secure better or further effect to children’s rights - Areas for improvement

What are the key issues or challenges?	What do we need to do to address this?	What actions are required to be taken (by whom and by when)?	What evidence will we have of completion/impact?
Services/organisations need to more consistently understand the implications of the UNCRC and be confident working with this framework	Regular training/workshops and information on children rights and equalities will be available.	Online training developed for all managers. The Psychological Service provides additional training to groups across Highland centrally 4 times a year, plus bespoke sessions.	Increasing numbers of participants in training reporting an increased level of knowledge.
	Our children/young people friendly complaints process will be enhanced through the input of children/young people.	Working with children, the CRM Team will create a better public facing and more accessible (to children) child friendly complaints process by March 2027.	Number of complaints raised and resolved for children with feedback from children regards their satisfaction.
	Encourage all staff to increase their knowledge of children rights and how they can use this to positively impact their practice.	- On an annual basis (in March each year), ask services/teams to provide examples of how they are considering children’s rights in their service delivery. - Psychological Services will offer training to all staff in relation to children’s rights and participation.	Feedback from services will demonstrate increased knowledge and engagement with children and young people over time.
	Children rights and well-being Impact Assessments will be used to shape all new policies/services across Highland.	Highland Council has had a process of using CRWIA for all committee reports since July 2024. The Children’s Rights and Participation Improvement Group will undertake an audit of how this process is working on the ground and support changes in practice that may be identified.	Increase in the number of CRWIAs completed for service changes, budget decisions and planned improvements.

	Ensure children/young people are not discriminated against due to any protected characteristic.	• Service leads will review Council policies and practice guidance to ensure it is rights based and non-discriminatory. • Further promote inclusive practice within the Education and Learning Service through attendance and engagement with training and programmes to support professional development in this area. • Additional resources are about to be brought in through new teams being appointed for inclusion and ASN/PSA preferred practice.	• Attendance at training courses with positive feedback about impact on practice from staff. • Young people/children will report greater levels of inclusion through the Lifestyle Survey in 2027 and 2029.
There is variability in the engagement with children and young people across Highland.	Wider services will engage more consistently with children, young people and those who support them to ensure early engagement with them on matters that affect them. This engagement will be at the earliest stage, so that children can reflect their own views and influence the process and next steps from the outset.	• The Highland CPP will strengthen engagement with children and young people by embedding their voices more consistently across Community Planning processes and local partnership work during 2026-27. • The Children's Rights and Participation Improvement Group will track and monitor the activity of sub-groups of the Children's Community Planning Partnership to ensure rights are kept in mind and met through their actions.	• Children's views will be reflected in the work of the CPP. • Children's voices will be more prominent in advising and guiding service decision making. • The CPP will provide feedback to children on how their views have influenced decision making. • More examples of consultation will be included on the Library of Voices.

Children who are furthest from their rights tend to have poorer outcomes in relation to education, care and inclusive practices.	The gap between our care experienced children and young people and the wider Highland cohort of children should reduce over time.	• The Promise Board will identify actions that can be taken to improve the wellbeing and outcomes for care experienced children on an ongoing basis through the Promise Plan. • The established team in Social Work will continue to focus on keeping children in Highland and close to their families and siblings. Kinship and Highland-based fostering placements will increase by summer 2027. • The Learning Without Boundaries workstream and the appointment of a Virtual Head Teacher for LAC will be prioritised.	• Track progress/data through the Highland Lifestyle Survey every 2 years (baseline data available). • The number of children supported to stay at home or in kinship placements will increase. • The number of residential placements out-with Highland will reduce over time.
	A strategic approach will be taken to reduce exclusion, seclusion and pupil-staff incidents.	• The Education and Learning Service will review policy and practice on physical intervention and promoting positive relationships, supporting staff to develop more skill and confidence to address the needs of children with significant ASN (including children who are neurodiverse).	• The numbers of pupil-staff incidents will reduce over time. • The number of reported incidents of physical intervention and seclusion will reduce over time. • Staff will report greater confidence and skill in supporting children with significant ASN.

	The gap between our children living in significant deprivation and the wider Highland cohort of children should reduce over time.	• The recommendations from the Highland Poverty Commission will be considered by the Community Planning Partnership and planned for and acted upon through the Child Poverty Action Plan. • Children who live in SIMD 1+2 will make greater progress in ELC and school, through targeted interventions, narrowing the Poverty Related Attainment Gap.	• The numbers of children living in poverty will reduce. • Schools and Services will reduce costs involved in engagement with wider achievements to ensure access for ALL children. • The outcomes for children in SIMD 1+2 will be tracked through the Developmental Overviews and school attainment data.
Ensure active and meaningful engagement with children/young people	Ensure children of all ages and abilities are involved in giving their views and impacting decision making, including the provision of feedback when their views are sought.	• Provide tools to support reflection on capacity and consent to further enable children of all ages and abilities to be involved in decisions that affect them. • Provide access to child friendly complaints and ways to influence at the highest levels. • Maintain the engagement with Youth Groups and the Highland Youth Parliament as part of the formal process for engaging with older children. • Establish a Youth Forum for engaging at Chief Executive/Senior Management level to inform strategic planning and delivery.	• Number of consultations and engagement sessions with children and young people will increase as recorded on The Library of Voices, showing broad engagement re age, ability and different groups. • Number of queries and questions that come through The Voice Process will increase. • Children and young people will report feedback being provided when their views are sought. • Increase in engagement demonstrated through responses in the Lifestyle Survey.

Ensure we take a holistic view of supporting families and children within families.	Review the Housing Allocations Policy and expand our housing supply. The Council is committed to increasing housing supply across all tenures to meet growing demand, especially for vulnerable families	A stakeholder-led review is underway to better understand and address the specific housing needs of children and families. This will be completed and reported on by 2027.	- Increase in housing supply. - Number of families housed within a reasonable timescale will increase. - Tenant surveys/engagement will include the voices of children and young people.
	Social housing will meet the needs of adults and children who require adaptive living to ensure their living space is suitable and appropriate to their needs.	Recommendations from independent reviews are being implemented to strengthen early intervention and reduce reliance on residential care	More children and families will be able to live in their local communities in adapted or accessibly built housing.
	Budget spend through the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund will be supported by plans to engage directly with families and children to establish need, evaluate impact and provide feedback on impact and outcomes to children and families.	The Whole Family Wellbeing Team will ensure funding bids are based on a needs assessment that has involved children and families within our communities. This will be reported regularly to the Integrated Children's Services Board.	Impact and outcomes for activities and services funded by the WFW Fund will provide evidence of children's rights-based decision making and outcomes demonstrate an increase in how rights are realised for children and young people.