The Highland Council

Agenda Item	**6**
Report No	**CC/26/26**

Committee: **Caithness**

Date: **2 November 2026**

Report Title: **Caithness Area Place Plan Progress**

Report By: **Assistant Chief Executive - Place**

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 Highland Council approved a Highland Place Based Framework for community planning and investment in December 2021. This approach was endorsed by the Community Planning Partnership and recognises 'Place' as central to service delivery and partnership working.

1.2 Area Place Plans form a key part of the framework. Area Place Plans coordinate objectives across Local Place Plans, Local Development Plans, the Regional Spatial Strategy, and Community Partnership Plans, supporting place-based funding and services.

1.3 Area Place Plans deliver on the Council's strategic priority of Resilient and Sustainable Communities, support the implementation of the Operational Delivery Plan, and highlight priority areas for investment opportunities, such as those linked to the Social Value Charter's Highland Wealth Fund and Community Regeneration Funds.

1.4 The Caithness Area Place Plan was adopted by Caithness Committee on 28 April 2025. This report provides an update on progress since the Plan was adopted.

2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:-

i. Consider and **note** this annual report, recognising the progress made; and
ii. **Agree** to support the targeting of service programmes and external funding to meet the Area Place Plan priorities when appropriate.

3 Implications

3.1 **Resource** – While the Area Place Plan contains priority projects for delivery, these are each subject to discussion and the development of specific funding packages, therefore, there are no direct resource implications.

3.2 **Legal** – There are no specific legal implications.

3.3 **Risk** – There are no specific risk implications.

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

3.5 **Gaelic** – There are no specific Gaelic implications.

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 an update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5 Background

5.1 In 2021 Highland Council made a commitment to develop Area Place Plans, primarily based on Area Committee boundaries, to provide a framework for identifying and progressing local priorities. Recognising the distinct characteristics, needs and opportunities of Highland communities, the approach to developing and facilitating Area Place Plans has varied across each area to reflect local circumstances and partnership arrangements.

5.2 The Caithness Area Place Plan was developed through engagement with communities and partners using a Place Based approach and presents the common themes and priorities aiming to serve as a comprehensive document that not only reflects the aspirations of the local community but also aligns with existing strategic and localised plans, ensuring that Caithness thrives as a prosperous area where individuals and families want to live, work and visit. The Caithness Area Place Plan was adopted by Caithness Committee on 28 April 2025.

6 Caithness Area Place Plan

6.1 The Caithness Area Place Plan, available on the Highland Community Planning Partnership website, provides a shared framework for organisations, services and communities with an interest in Caithness. It is used to develop a shared understanding of local needs, priorities and opportunities; inform service planning and delivery; provide an evidence base for funding applications, project development and Community Asset Transfer requests; and support coordinated partnership working. This is progressed through Highland Council services, including: Employability, Roads, CRF and Integrated Transport teams; through established forums and partnerships, including: Caithness Community Partnership, Focus North, Caithness Transport Forum, Thurso Transformation Delivery Group (TTDG), Wick Delivery Group, and through NHS Highland, HIE, North Highland Chamber of Commerce and Community Councils. This collaborative approach enables partners to share knowledge and resources, align activity and plan for future opportunities, while strengthening the link between local priorities and wider decisions on public services, investment and resource allocation.

6.2 The Caithness Area Place Plan is structured around the three overarching themes of People, Place and Prosperity, reflecting the key issues, priorities and opportunities identified through engagement with communities and partners across Caithness. Within each theme, several priority areas have been identified to provide a focus for partnership working and future activity. The key priorities are summarised below:

People

- Health and Wellbeing: Improve access to health, wellbeing and community services.
- Public Transport: Improve reliable and accessible transport connections.
- Air Links: Maintain and strengthen air connectivity.
- Sport and Recreation: Improve access to affordable opportunities and facilities, particularly for young people.

Place

- Active Travel: Improve safe walking, wheeling and cycling connections.
- Roads: Improve road infrastructure, maintenance and connectivity.
- Town Centres: Support the regeneration of Wick and Thurso, including the reuse of vacant properties.
- Waste and Recycling: Improve local environmental standards and access to recycling.
- Housing: Increase access to good quality, energy-efficient and affordable housing.
- Community Wardens: Support safe, tidy and well-maintained communities.

Prosperity

- Diverse Economy: Support investment, economic diversification and quality employment.
- Renewable Energy: Maximise local economic, skills and community benefits.
- Population and Young People: Retain and attract young people and families. through education, training and employment opportunities.
- Tourism: Strengthen Caithness as a destination and maximise the local benefits of tourism.

7 Progress and Achievements

7.1 Since the Caithness Area Place Plan was approved by Committee in April 2025, significant work has been undertaken with partners to embed the Area Place Plan and its priorities in their own strategies, services and delivery programmes. Engagement has taken place with Council services and key partners, particularly through the Caithness Community Partnership, to consider how the Plan can be implemented, monitored and further developed. Over the 18 months since approval, progress has been made against a number of the Plan's priorities. Some of the key achievements and highlights are outlined in the following section.

7.2 People

7.2.1 Health and Wellbeing

- Caithness Community Partnership have led initial meetings to discuss the establishment of a new Caithness Poverty Forum to align with the Highland Poverty and Equality Commission's recommendations. There is a workshop organised for 11 November to map services, identify gaps and next steps.
- Caithness Community Partnership has organised discussions to relaunch the Caithness Alcohol & Drug Partnership.
- Following the closure of National Autistic Society (NAS) Highland, Thriving Families is providing online information, advice and guidance for families of children and young people with Additional Support Needs up to age 25. Resources include regional directories covering benefits, funding, grants, specialised equipment and other support services, ensuring accessible assistance for families across the Highlands. Thriving Families - Disability Information Scotland
- Children Young People Mental Health & Wellbeing Being Fund 2025/26 - Six successful funding applications to organisations in Caithness were awarded funding toward their projects.

7.2.2 Public Transport

- Ember E6 service between Scrabster and Inverness has increased service provision, including additional stops.
- Highland Council have taken over the Caithness Stagecoach services from 19 October 2026, securing local services.
- Ongoing support for rural transport and community transport, including, for example, Caithness Rural Transport's successful funding application to CRF towards a new minibus.

7.2.3 Air Travel

- Wick Public Service Obligation (PSO) secured funding to secure lifeline air services connecting Wick, Aberdeen and Glasgow. The service has been in operation since 17 August 2026. Passenger numbers are improving across both the Aberdeen and Glasgow routes with forward bookings looking positive.

7.2.4 **Sport and Recreation**

- Thurso Pont of Delivery (PoD) /HIP – good progress has been made in engaging the community on the Community PoD proposal, including sports and performance consultations, the statutory education consultation, pre-consultation activity in Thurso and online engagement. Feedback and next steps have been communicated through online and social media channels, alongside ongoing engagement with the TTDG, Members and Thurso Community Council.
- Highland Council has supported several Council and community led recreation projects including the Grizzly play park, Wick, Halkirk play park and John O Groats destination play park.

7.3 **Place**

7.3.1 **Active Travel and Roads**

- Thurso Lover's Lane Project - delivering junction upgrade/narrowing and improved uncontrolled crossing points from the train station across Lover's Lane to Princes Street in Thurso, to improve pedestrian access to the train station.
- A footpath improvement programme has been developed, with 15 schemes identified throughout Caithness. Works have commenced at Miller Academy.
- Caithness surface dressing works have now been successfully completed for the year.
- Caithness Committee has continued to oversee investment in the local road network through the Area Roads Capital Programme, including prioritised structural resurfacing (overlay/inlay) and surface dressing schemes across Caithness. These works, supported by associated improvements such as drainage and road markings where required, aim to improve road condition, safety and network resilience within available budgets.

7.3.2 **Town Centres**

- Wick Street Design Project has transformed Wick town centre into a more welcoming, attractive, and pedestrian friendly space. Developed in partnership with Sustrans Scotland, The Royal Burgh of Wick Community Council, and Caithness Community Partnership, the project saw significant improvements to the Bridge Street and High Street area, including widened footpaths, enhanced cycling infrastructure, new public spaces, planters, refurbished street lighting, urban tree planning, accessible parking within the pedestrian square, wayfinding signage, and artwork inspired by local heritage.
- Wick Delivery Group is working together to find solutions to the empty shops and buildings on the High Street.
- Wick Ancillary Works Programme – A successful partnership between Royal Burgh of Wick Community Council and The Highland Council, combining the expertise and commitment of Community Council volunteers with Council support to deliver environmental improvements and enhancement works across the Burgh of Wick.
- Thurso Beach and Town Initiative (TBTI) - has made a positive impact on the community through the professionalism, commitment and enthusiasm of its volunteers. Working in partnership with Highland Council services, NRS Dounreay graduates and local organisations, TBTI has delivered environmental improvements across the beach, esplanade, riverside and town centre, enhancing the appearance, accessibility and enjoyment of public spaces. This collaborative approach has strengthened community pride and encouraged wider community participation.
- Caithness Village Officer Scheme – administered by Association of Caithness Community Councils (ACCC) working in partnership with Highland Council services, supports community councils to maintain and enhance villages through grass cutting, minor repairs and environmental improvements. The scheme helps promote community pride, attractive local environments and community-led stewardship of public spaces across Caithness.

7.3.3 **Housing**

- Significant investment has been made in housing across Caithness through planned maintenance, energy-efficiency improvements and property adaptations, helping to improve the quality, sustainability and accessibility of homes in line with Area Place Plan priorities.
- Partnership working has secured additional investment in local housing stock including the SSEN worker accommodation project, which has refurbished 18 Council properties, which will provide a legacy when the properties return to Council use.
- Future housing investment priorities are being considered through development of the 2027–2032 Housing Capital Programme.

7.4 Prosperity

7.4.1 Economic Development, Growth and Talent Attraction

- Public, private and third sector partners have continued to work collaboratively through Focus North to strengthen the local economy, support business growth and maximise opportunities arising from major energy sector investment. Progress has included:
  - Completion of the Thurso Lifelong Learning and Innovation District prospectus.
  - Development of the North Highland Innovation Centre business case.
  - Workforce planning activity linked to future industry demand.
- Initiatives such as the Live North campaign, enhanced work experience opportunities and the emerging Caithness STEM Forum are helping to attract and retain talent, strengthen skills pathways and connect local people with future employment opportunities.
- Partners continue to address housing and accommodation challenges and support local businesses, ensuring Caithness remains an attractive place to live, work, invest and supporting business growth.

7.4.2 Employability

Highland Council Employability Team have supported local recruitment and workforce development by:

- Promoting vacancies, engaging with employers, delivering recruitment events, and helping individuals access training, qualifications, apprenticeships and work experience opportunities.
- Partnership working with schools, UHI, Skills Development Scotland and Developing the Young Workforce helped support young people into education, training and employment.
- Promoting opportunities within renewable energy, construction and other growth sectors, while supporting individuals interested in self-employment through advice, funding and business support services.
- Recognising wider barriers to employment, by providing support to address challenges such as transport, childcare and housing through financial assistance and holistic employability support.

7.4.3 Tourism

- The Welcome to Wick Initiative, led by Wick Development Trust, aims to encourage visitors to stay longer in the area. The steering group is making progress including logo, branding, website and publication of the Thomas Telford trail leaflets. An official launch is planned for spring 2027
- The opening of the John O'Groats Mill
- Venture North continues to support the delivery of the Area Place Plan through the promotion of Caithness as a visitor destination, in collaboration with local businesses and communities.

8 Next Steps

8.1 In addition to consolidating current delivery and developing new activity, the focus over the next 12 months will be on strengthening existing engagement with Highland Council services and partner organisations, while continuing to identify and develop existing and emerging workstreams that align with the Area Place Plan priorities. This will aim to:-

- Increase awareness and ownership of the Area Place Plan across partner organisations and communities.
- Strengthen collaboration and coordination between services and partners.
- Identify and support projects that contribute to the priorities and outcomes set out in the Plan.
- Align funding and investment opportunities with Place Plan priorities where possible.

It is important to manage expectations; not all priorities will be achievable in the short to medium term. However, priorities within this plan have the widest community support which can be used to evidence and inform developments and funding decisions.

Designation:	Assistant Chief Executive - Place
Date:	5 October 2026
Author:	Cai MacIver Community Development Manager
Background Papers:	CC/12/25 Caithness Area Place Plan
Appendices:	None