The Highland Council

Agenda Item	**4**
Report No	**HCW/22/26**

Committee: **Health, Social Care and Wellbeing**

Date: **11 November 2026**

Report Title: **Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children in Highland**

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

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This paper details Highland's humanitarian response to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, transferred to Highland via the Home Office National Transfer Scheme (NTS). The paper refers to unaccompanied children as separated children and young people, placing emphasis on the recognition of the trauma they have faced and continue to face being separated from their families.

1.2 The paper sets out recent changes made by the Home Office in terms of how it calculates the number UASC to be dispersed per local authority area across Scotland. In July 2026, Highland Council were contacted by COSLA Migration, Population & Diversity Team, who highlighted the new distribution projections, which will result in a significant increase in the number of UASC dispersed to Highland.

1.3 The Home Office factsheet states that allocations are designed to achieve an equitable distribution of children across local authorities, based on factors including child population, looked after children, existing UASC numbers, former UASC care leavers, and supported asylum-seeking populations.

The UASC Steering Group continues to meet on a regular basis. It has a broad representation of partners from Education, Health, Housing, Social Work, Police, High Life Highland, and a 3rd Sector Alliance of partners from Aberlour, Barnardo's and Action for Children (Right There). This partnership working has been critical to meet the holistic needs of each young person from arrival and throughout their care experience journey. Young people are arriving at a higher frequency than ever before, and this high volume requires intensive activity at pace from key members across the partnership. The Steering Group continue to meet monthly working together reporting actions and accountabilities. This work has resulted in Highland now having in place a 3-stage model of support that is tailored to the individual needs of each young person:

- Feeling Safe & Settling In;
- Support & Integration and
- Through Care & After Care. Despite the excellent work, which incidentally has received national recognition, the reality is that the demand on the services that provide support to UASC is such that different approaches to meeting need, particularly accommodation needs, are under review.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

i. **Note** the context, background, and action taken in developing an urgent response to the forecasted increase in UASC and the aligned increase in support needs, including accommodation support to provide for the holistic needs of separated children in Highland.
ii. **Note** the accommodation and wider placement pressures given the lack of availability of suitable supported accommodation and 'moving on' tenancies for all Aftercare service users and the need to develop a revised UASC accommodation and aligned supports strategy.
iii. **Note** the interplay between UASC dispersal numbers and wider asylum-seeking dispersal numbers.
iv. **Note t**he excellent partnership working in supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people in Highland.

3. Implications

3.1 **Resource –** The Home Office funds local authorities for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) through a combination of per-child nightly contributions, mandatory transfer systems, and time-limited speed incentives detailed in the UASC Funding Instructions 2026 to 2027.

To date, the level of funding has been sufficient to meet the needs as a result of the close partnership working between Social Work and Housing, where best value housing options have been directly or indirectly sourced. The reality is that the accumulative pressure on accommodation options, due in part to Highland's success in UASC remaining in Highland on achieving right to remain status, is requiring a review of service provision given the diminishing public sector and private sector rental options.

3.2 **Legal** – Under Section 25 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, local authorities are legally obliged to provide separated children with accommodation and safeguarding, at which point they become looked after children and sit within the broader statutory and regulatory care system.

Under Part 11 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, eligible young people looked after in foster, kinship or residential care can remain in their placement up to age 21. Aftercare (to 26). Under the same Act, care leavers can request and receive Aftercare support up to their 26th birthday where eligible needs are assessed. Scottish homelessness legislation no longer applies a priority-need test, so young adults moving on from care have strong rights to housing assistance, adding to local housing demand.

3.3 **Risk -** This report details the significant risks of not having suitable accommodation for UASC when they arrive in Highland and likewise for when moving to more permanent accommodation having attained right to remain status. This risk must also be seen alongside competing legal duties for accommodation including homeless presentations and out of authority placements. This is in addition to the risks on other areas of support needs which are dependent on having the right level of workforce in place.

3.3.1 Some separated young people do not agree with being placed in some of the more rural local authorities such as Highland. This has resulted in some young people going missing, as they gravitate towards the bigger urban cities e.g., London. In Highland's case, almost all UASC choose to remain in Highland.

3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plan, equipment, process or people) –** No implications for this report.

3.5 **Gaelic –** No implications for this report.

4. Impacts

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

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

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

5. Background

5.1 Separated children and young people on the move are defined as children up to the age of 18, who have arrived in the UK without a parent or legal guardian, seeking safety and asylum, having been separated from their families. They are often fleeing political and religious persecution, violence, war, famine and abuse. There are additional risks to children moving through travel routes. This includes an increased risk of child trafficking and criminal/sexual exploitation.

5.2 The National Transfer Scheme (NTS) distributes responsibility for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) between local authorities across the UK.

5.3 The determining factors with their weighting are:

- General child population
- Looked after children
- UASC population
- Former UASC care leaver population
- Adult supported asylum population

5.4 For this analysis, Highland's current threshold is taken as 41 young people. The number 41 is the maximum number of UASC without leave to remain at any point in time.

A young person transferred to Highland at 16 may leave the NTS threshold count after Leave to Remain is granted or after two years. These young people remain within the scope of Highland's Continuing Care or Aftercare duties for up to a further eight years (currently 72).

5.5 During July 2026, COSLA contacted Highland Council to report that a revised rota allocation formula has been introduced by the Home Office and for Highland, this presents significant challenges with a startling difference between allocations to Highland compared to any other local authority in Scotland or indeed the whole of the UK.

5.6 The Home Office algorithm by itself is not an adequate tool without some understanding of local conditions. For example, the fact that Highland has significant housing challenges, both in terms of housing availability and cost, coupled with a lack of available workforce, means Highland is not an attractive option for asylum support providers.

The Home Office has to date not placed any adult asylum seekers in Highland and the placement of adult asylum seekers can only be commissioned by the Home Office. This lack of adult asylum seekers in Highland has had the effect of increasing the number of UASC in 2026 (see table below)

Period	Average number of UASC per cycle
Initial period	1.00
First increase (May 2026)	4.42
Further increase (July 2026)	5.13

5.7 The defining feature of the table above is the increase in UASC allocations. The rate has increased by more than five times the original rate. The timing of the cycle is determined by the number of UASC entering the UK and can be between 2 weeks and several months.

5.8 The sharp rise in allocations for Highland began in May 2026 – rising from 1 allocation per cycle to 4 or 5. To date, Children's Social Work has been able to manage the increased demand, but with difficulty. The increased allocation to between 5 and 6 per cycle has yet to take effect, although should there be a mild winter we do expect the increase to begin.

6. Funding

6.1 As of the October 2026, the core funding for under 18s is £143 per child, per day. Over 18s is £270 per week until leave to remain is granted. At which point funding ceases.

6.2 The funding from the NTS has been a complex and changing area in response to increasing numbers and pressures on national infrastructure.

7. Pressures/Challenges

7.1 Highland’s financial and housing modelling has highlighted that the funding and available housing stock, does not actually cover the full costs or accommodation needs of our UASC or other Throughcare or Aftercare population. The situation was extremely challenging without any additional UASC being placed in Highland. The anticipated increase in the number of UASC dispersed to Highland will place additional challenges for Social Work and Housing in particular, at a time of multiple

competing pressures and levels of need. A joint 5-year strategy is currently under development and will be taken to a future Committee.

The 72 young people currently supported are supported across six communities, with 61% placed outside Inverness:

Area	Locations	Young people
Inverness	Community placements (22) and UHI halls, Inverness Campus (6)	28
Mid Ross	Muir of Ord, Dingwall	9
Easter Ross	Alness, Invergordon, Tain	35
Caithness & Sutherland	Wick: up to 5 beds proposed, not yet active	0
West	No locations have yet been identified in the West	0

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive – People

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Background Papers: N/A
Appendix: N/A