The Highland Council

Agenda Item	**5**
Report No	**HCW/23/26**

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

Date: **11 November 2026**

Report Title: **Short Breaks Update**

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

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides Members with an update on the provision of current and planned overnight residential short breaks services.

1.2 Residential short breaks provide essential support to children and young people with disabilities and additional support needs whilst enabling families and carers to sustain caring arrangements and improve wellbeing outcomes. Residential short-break services remain a key element of Highland Council's preventative approach, supporting positive outcomes for children and young people, strengthening family resilience and helping to reduce pressure on wider social work and family support services.

1.3 Highland currently delivers residential short-break provision through a combination of Highland Council services and commissioned providers. Demand is expected to continue to increase, reflecting growing levels of need and pressure on family support networks. Residential short-break services play a critical role in supporting family resilience and preventing the escalation of need.

1.4 The report highlights strategic risks, including increasing demand, workforce recruitment and retention challenges, within rural and remote communities, and future capacity pressures.

2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

i. **Note** the current provision and utilisation of residential short-break services across Highland between April and September 2026, and the increase in planned provision across all three Council units, set out in paragraph 7.4;

ii. **Note** the planned refurbishment of Orchard House and the anticipated increase of approximately 1000 additional short-break nights per annum;

iii. **Note** the challenges associated with increasing demand, workforce recruitment and future capacity pressures; and
iv. **Agree** that progress updates continue to be reported to Committee.

3 Implications

3.1 **Resource** – Residential short-break services are a key component of the support available to children and young people with disabilities and additional support needs, and their families. The Council currently invests in a range of accommodation-based, community-based and Self-Directed Support short-break options. Continued service delivery and future development will require ongoing consideration of demand pressures, workforce capacity, service sustainability and the effective use of available resources to meet assessed need.

Further detailed financial information is provided in Section 8.

3.2 **Legal** - The provision of short-break services contributes to the Council's duties to support the wellbeing, inclusion and participation of children and young people with disabilities and additional support needs. Access to appropriate short-break provision assists the Council in meeting its statutory responsibilities towards children and families and promoting improved outcomes.

3.3 **Risk** – Current demand is being met across all units. However, there is a risk that the demand for residential short-break services in some areas could grow beyond current service capacity, which may impact the services ability to meet assessed need. Workforce recruitment and retention challenges in rural and remote areas, may affect the sustainability and availability of services. Delays in planned service developments could further limit capacity. The review and redesign of residential short-break provision, including the development of revised eligibility criteria, aims to mitigate these risks by ensuring resources are targeted transparently, equitably and in line with assessed need. In addition, the review will support the Council in assessing whether current provision remains sufficient to meet both current and future demand and identifying opportunities to improve service resilience and capacity

3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – There are no specific health and safety implications arising directly from the recommendations contained within this report.

3.5 **Gaelic** - There are no specific Gaelic implications arising from 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 The consistent application of SDS eligibility criteria in line with Council policy is expected to ensure support is aligned to assessed eligible need. This may have an impact on future support arrangements and expenditure levels. An Integrated Impact Assessment has been completed to identify and mitigate any potential adverse impacts on children, young people and their families. **(See appendix 1)**

4.4 The Screening process has concluded there are no potential detrimental impacts. The positive and no impact areas are highlighted below and Members are asked to consider the summary in **appendix 1** to support the decision-making process.

Impact Assessment Area	Conclusion of Screening/Full Assessment (to be deleted as appropriate)
Equality	Disability – Positive
Socio - economic	• Prospects and opportunities: Positive • Places: Positive • Financial: Positive
Human Rights	Human rights impact details: Positive right to family life.
Children's Rights and Wellbeing	Positive
Climate Change	No Impact
Data Rights	No impact

5 Background

5.1 Residential short breaks provide children and young people with disabilities and additional support needs opportunities to participate in positive experiences whilst providing support and respite to parents, carers and families.

Between April and September 2026, Highland's accommodation-based short-break services delivered 102 short-break nights and 51 introduction visits, with further growth anticipated as service capacity increases. The planned refurbishment of Orchard House and continued development of the Thor House Service will strengthen local provision, improve outcomes for children and families and reduce reliance on high-cost external care arrangements where needs can be met safely within Highland.

The current eligibility criteria remains appropriate in ensuring that available resources are directed towards children and families with the highest levels of assessed need. Due to current financial pressures and capacity constraints, there is limited scope to extend short-break provision to those assessed within the Moderate category at this time. This position will be kept under review as part of future service and budget planning arrangements.

5.2 Across the Highlands short breaks are delivered through a combination of accommodation-based services, community-based supports, commissioned provision and Self-Directed Support (SDS) arrangements.

These services play an important preventative role in supporting family resilience, reducing the likelihood of crisis intervention and helping children and young people remain within their families and communities wherever possible. This report focuses on the residential element of short break services.

5.3 The delivery of effective residential short-break services is subject to a number of strategic risks:

- Increasing demand for services may exceed current capacity.
- Recruitment and retention challenges continue across a number of locations, particularly within Skye and other rural communities.
- Delays to planned capital developments may impact future capacity expansion.
- Financial pressures may affect the long-term sustainability of provision.
- The implementation of the existing eligibility criteria is required to be applied consistently to ensure equitable and transparent access to services.
- Future capacity constraints may affect the ability to meet assessed need.

6 Current Provision

6.1 Residential Short-break provision across Highland is delivered through a range of arrangements including:

- Highland Council accommodation-based services;
- Commissioned respite and short-break services;

6.2 **Analysis**

The current delivery indicates consistent utilisation of The Orchard service during the first quarter of the reporting period, with a temporary reduction in overnight stays during the summer months. By contrast, Thor House has demonstrated progressive growth in both introduction visits and overnight provision, indicating increased demand and successful transition of young people into residential short break support. The high number of introduction visits between April and July has translated into increased overnight stays from June onwards.

6.3 Currently, there is no overnight short break provision on Skye, whilst we await the Scottish Fire and Rescue Services report sign off. There are currently day support opportunities and, whilst this provides valuable support to children, young people and their families, the intention is to introduce overnight short breaks as soon as the fire certification has been confirmed so a full complement of staff can be recruited.

It should also be noted that daytime short-break services are currently sustained through staff travelling from the North Caithness creating additional costs and presenting challenges to the longer-term sustainability of the model.

6.4 Despite these challenges, the service continued to respond flexibly to the needs of children, young people and families across Skye, providing targeted support and interventions to promote wellbeing and family resilience. As staffing arrangements stabilise and management capacity is strengthened, activity levels will increase, enabling more families to access support in a timely manner.

7 Service Update

7.1 Current Position

The residential short-break service continues to provide support to children, young people and families across Highland, through a range of flexible and individualised support arrangements. Demand for short breaks services does and will fluctuate overtime, however currently the service is experiencing a period of stability in terms of demand.

7.2 Highland Eligibility Criteria and Short Breaks

Residential short-break services remain a vital component of Highland's overall offer to children, young people and families. These services provide structured overnight support for children and young people with complex care and support requirements and continue to achieve high levels of utilisation.

Access to Highland's residential short-break services is determined through the Highland Self-Directed Support (SDS) Eligibility Criteria, which provides a consistent and transparent framework for assessing need and allocating resources.

The criteria are based on four levels of assessed need:

- Critical – where there is an immediate or significant risk to a child's wellbeing, safety, family stability or care arrangements.
- Substantial – where there is a significant risk of deterioration, family stress, placement breakdown or escalation of need without intervention.
- Moderate – where needs are evident and targeted support may prevent deterioration or escalation.
- Low – where needs can generally be met through universal, community or naturally occurring support networks.

7.3 While all Scottish local authorities operate within the same legislative framework, there is no nationally prescribed eligibility model for residential short-break services. Current residential short-break provision is targeted towards children and families assessed within the Critical and Substantial categories, where the risk of family breakdown, deterioration in wellbeing or the child requiring accommodation is greatest.

It is not proposed to change the current eligibility criteria. However, given financial and capacity pressures, and the importance of providing equitable provision, there is a need to ensure the criteria is consistently applied when determining eligibility to access residential short breaks.

This position will be kept under review as part of ongoing service planning and budget-setting processes, with any future changes considered in line with available capacity and resources whilst maintaining a fair and consistent approach to resource

allocation to ensure that available capacity remains focused on children and families with the greatest assessed need. Should any substantive change in the eligibility criteria be considered necessary at some point in the future, it would be subject to an Integrated Impact Assessment and brought back for committee consideration.

7.4 **Table 1: Annual Short-Break Capacity**
The current and projected short-break capacity is summarised below:

Provision	Nights
Short break nights delivered across Thor and Orchard accommodation services from April to September 2026	102
Orchard House total nights capacity following refurbishment*	1,000
Thor House total capacity for short break nights*	250 - 280
Skye community support-based support sessions	64

*Actual nights delivered will be based on assessed need.

In addition to accommodation-based services, families access a range of flexible support arrangements through commissioned providers and Self-Directed Support, including provision delivered through organisations such as The Haven and Aberlour.

8 Finance

8.1 Residential short-break services continue to be delivered within approved budget allocations. The annual budget for Short Break Services is £0.960m**,** comprising £0.344m for Orchard House (Inverness)**,** £0.401m for Thor House (Caithness) and £0.214 million for Skye**.**

The current cost of a short-break night is estimated at between £1,300 and £2,000 per night**,** dependant on the service user's level of need, with unit costs expected to remain higher during 2026/2027 while occupancy levels increase and staffing arrangements become fully established. As utilisation grows and staffing reaches its planned establishment, unit costs are expected to reduce and stabilise.

8.2 Investment in increasing Highland's overnight residential short-break capacity has both financial and non-financial benefits. It reduces reliance on high-cost external placements and commissioned services, which are currently placing significant financial pressures on the service budget. Supporting more children closer to home and creating opportunities to reduce the number of children in 52-week placements will also reduce costs.

9 Strategic Benefits

9.1 Short-break services deliver a range of positive outcomes and support Highland Council's strategic priorities by:

- Improving outcomes for children and young people.
- Enhancing wellbeing and resilience for families and carers.
- Supporting early intervention and prevention.
- Reducing reliance on higher-cost statutory interventions.
- Enabling children and young people to remain within their communities wherever possible.

Supporting effective partnership working across statutory and third-sector services.

9.2 Strengthening short-break provision provides earlier and more targeted support to families, helping them sustain caring arrangements during periods of increased pressure and reducing the risk of family breakdown. Increased access to short breaks can prevent escalation of need, reduce emergency admissions to care, improve placement stability, maintain children's connections with their families, schools and communities, and reduce the need for residential and out-of-area placements.

9.3 The expansion of in-house residential and short-break provision aims to increase Highland's ability to safely support children within their families and communities, reduce reliance on externally commissioned services and minimise the need for out-of-area placements wherever this is in the best interests of the child.

9.4 The impact of the service will be monitored through trends in residential and out-of-area placements, including placement avoidance, placement stability and associated cost avoidance achieved where children are able to remain safely at home with the support of short-break services.

10 Future Considerations

10.1 Demand for short-break and shared-care services is expected to continue increasing. Workforce recruitment, retention and skills development will remain critical to sustaining and expanding provision.

10.2 Consistent application of the SDS assessment process will ensure Short Break Services Eligibility Criteria is applied in line with policy. By doing so we will ensure the policy is applied equitably and make best use of limited resources to target where they are needed most.

10.3 Ongoing monitoring of demand, service utilisation and workforce capacity will be required to ensure services remain sustainable and responsive to need. Short-break provision remains a vital component of Highland Council's preventative approach, helping reduce pressure on wider family support, social work and crisis intervention services.

11 Performance Framework

11.1 Performance information will continue to be monitored through established governance arrangements and reported to Committee.

Key measures will include:

- Delivery of planned increases in short-break capacity.
- Occupancy and utilisation rates.
- Demand and waiting-time trends.
- Workforce recruitment and retention.
- Service user and family feedback.
- Quality assurance and inspection outcomes.

12 Conclusion

12.1 Residential Short breaks remain a vital element of Highland's support to children, young people and families.

Continued attention to workforce capacity, service demand and long-term sustainability will be required to ensure Highland maintains an effective, accessible and responsive short-break service for the future.

Designation:	Assistant Chief Executive – Place
Date:	30 October 2026
Author:	Linda Grant, Strategic Lead, Early Intervention and Prevention
Appendices:	Appendix 1 - Impact Assessment

Integrated Impact Assessment Screening

About proposal

What does this proposal relate to? Strategy

Proposal name: As part of shifting the balance of care and budget recovery strategy

High level summary of the proposal: Increasing the number of residential short break nights for children affected by disability , across highland and by Highland Council .

Who may be affected by the proposal? Children and families affected by a child's disability .

Start date of proposal: 11/12/2025

End date of proposal: 11/12/2030

Does this proposal result in a change or impact to one or more Council service? Yes

Which Council services will be impacted by this proposal? People

Does this relate to an existing proposal? Yes

Provide details of the existing proposal: Shifting the Balance of care and budget recovery strategy , increasing the number of residential short breaks nights across highland .

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Service: People

Responsible officer details

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Sign off date: 2026-10-30

Equalities, poverty, and human rights

Protected characteristics

Select what impact the proposal will have on the following protected characteristics:

Sex: No impact

Age: No impact

Disability: Positive

Religion or belief: No impact

Race: No impact

Sexual orientation: No impact

Gender reassignment: No impact

Pregnancy and maternity: No impact

Marriage and civil partnership: No impact

Protected characteristics impact details:

Poverty and socio-economic

What impact is the proposal likely to have on the following?

Prospects and opportunities: Positive

Places: Positive

Financial: Positive

Poverty and socio-economic impact details: By carers receiving residential short breaks this could be the difference between them being able to access education , training or employment , or not .

Human rights

Which of the below human rights will be affected by this proposal?

What impact do you consider this proposal to have on the human rights of people? Positive

Human rights impact details: Positive right to family life .

Equalities, poverty and human rights screening assessment

What impact do you think there will be to equalities, poverty and human rights? Positive impact

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No

Children's rights and wellbeing

What likely impact will the proposal have on children and young people? Increases residential short breaks , which enables children to remain within their family homes . Whilst providing breaks to their carers .

Which of the below children's rights will be affected by the proposal? You are working in the best interests of the child (Article 3)

Explain how the children's rights selected above will be affected: Increases residential short breaks , which enables children to remain within their family homes . Whilst providing breaks to their carers .

Children's rights and wellbeing screening assessment

What impact do you think there will be to children's rights and wellbeing? Positive impact

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No

Data protection

Will your proposal involve processing personal data? Yes

Is any of this data already processed by the Highland Council? Yes

What is the purpose of the personal data being processed? To assess and plan for childrens needs .

Is there an up-to-date privacy notice available on the Highland Council website? Yes

Data protection screening assessment

What change will there be to the way personal data is processed? No significant change to current processing

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No

Island and mainland rural communities

Does your proposal impact island and mainland rural communities? No

Island and mainland rural communities screening assessment

What impact do you think there will be to island and mainland rural communities? No difference

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No

Climate change

Does the proposal involve activities that could impact on greenhouse gas emissions (CO2e)? No

Does the proposal have the potential to affect the environment, wildlife or biodiversity? No

Does the proposal have the potential to influence resilience to extreme weather or changing climate? No

Provide information regarding your selection above: Due to the expansion of the existing residentials short break overnight service a full impact assessment is not necessary .

Climate change screening assessment

Have you identified potential impact for any of the areas above or marked any as not known? No

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No