The Highland Council

Agenda Item	**9**
Report No	**HCW/27/26**

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

Date: **11 November 2026**

Report Title: **Integrated Children's Services Annual Report 2025/2026**

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

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 The purpose of this report is to present the Annual Report for the Highland Integrated Children's Services Partnership Board and provide Members with an overview of progress made during 2025/2026 in delivering the priorities of the Highland Integrated Children's Services Plan 2023/2026.

This report represents the final annual update against the 2023/2026 Plan and provides an assessment of the cumulative progress achieved over the lifetime of the Plan. The successor Highland Integrated Children's Services Plan 2026/2029 has previously been considered by Committee and subsequently approved through the governance arrangements of the Children's Services Partnership, culminating in endorsement by the Community Planning Partnership Board. This report therefore formally closes the 2023/2026 planning cycle and provides assurance regarding delivery and impact achieved during the period.

1.2 The report demonstrates the impact of collaborative partnership activity across statutory and third-sector partners in improving outcomes for children, young people and families across Highland. Progress has been delivered through seven thematic delivery groups covering:

Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)
Whole Family Wellbeing
Poverty Reduction
Child Protection
The Promise
Rights and Participation
Mental Health and Wellbeing
Alcohol and Drugs Prevention and Support

The annual report highlights significant achievements in strengthening early intervention, supporting families, improving child protection practice, embedding children's rights and increasing access to wellbeing support

2. Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

i. **Note** the content of the Annual Report 2025/2026.
ii. **Note** the progress made by partners in delivering the priorities of the Highland Integrated Children's Service Plan 2023/2026.
iii. **Note** the continued commitment of partners to prevention, early intervention, rights-based practice and reducing inequalities for children and families across Highland.

3. Implications

3.1 **Resource** -The delivery of the Children's Services Plan is achieved through collective partnership working and the alignment of resources across statutory and third-sector partners. During 2025/2026 significant investment continued through programmes including the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund and community-based mental health and wellbeing initiatives, supporting a shift towards prevention and early intervention.

3.2 **Legal** - The report supports the duties placed upon children's services planning partners under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 to jointly plan, deliver and report on services that improve outcomes for children, young people and families. The work described also contributes to implementation of wider national policy drivers including GIRFEC, UNCRC incorporation and The Promise.

3.3 **Risk** - Progress has depended upon effective partnership working, workforce capacity and sustainable funding arrangements. Demand for children's services remains significant, with ongoing pressures relating to poverty, mental health, family support and care services.

3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – No specific health and safety implications arise directly from this report.

3.5 **Gaelic** - The activities described within the annual report support improved outcomes for all children and families across Highland, including Gaelic-speaking children, young people and their families. The rights-based approaches outlined within the report are consistent with promoting inclusion, participation and equal access to services.

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. Progress in Delivering the Children's Services Plan

5.1 The Children's Services Partnership has continued to make strong progress during 2025/2026 in delivering the ambitions of the Highland Integrated Children's Service Plan. Partnership work has remained focused on improving outcomes, reducing inequalities and strengthening preventative approaches across services.

6. Key Areas of Impact

6.1 **Supporting children earlier through GIRFEC**
Over 140 practitioners participated in multi-agency GIRFEC training, with 92% reporting increased confidence in applying GIRFEC principles. New guidance and locality forums have strengthened collaborative planning and improved consistency in support arrangements for children and families.

6.2 **Strengthening whole family support**
More than £3.9 million was invested through the Whole Family Wellbeing Programme, supporting both local projects and transformational change activity. Evidence demonstrates improved wellbeing, school attendance, parenting confidence and family relationships among participating families.

6.3 **Reducing the impact of poverty**
Partnership activity supported hundreds of parents through employability services, expanded financial inclusion activity and improved access to practical assistance for families experiencing hardship. This work continues to mitigate some of the harmful effects of poverty on children's outcomes.

6.4 **Improving protection and safety**
Quality assurance activity demonstrates measurable improvements across child protection practice, including assessment quality, review processes and evidence of children's views influencing decision making. Funding was also secured to progress implementation of Bairns' Hoose.

6.5 **Embedding children's rights**
Participation opportunities have expanded significantly, and children's voices are increasingly informing policies, planning and service design. A total of 495 Integrated Impact Assessments were completed, including 118 directly relating to children's services.

6.6 **Improving mental health and wellbeing**
Partnership investment of £390,022 supported 46 community-based projects, helping increase access to preventative wellbeing support and strengthening local provision for children, young people and families.

6.7 **Preventing harm from drugs and alcohol**
The expansion of Planet Youth and other prevention initiatives has increased engagement with young people and families, strengthening resilience and supporting earlier intervention where concerns arise.

7. Overall assessment

7.1 The Annual Report demonstrates that partners have made substantial progress in delivering the ambitions and priorities of the Highland Integrated Children's Services Plan 2023/2026. Across the three-year planning period, significant advances have been made in strengthening early intervention, improving support for families, embedding children's rights, progressing The Promise, reducing the impacts of poverty and enhancing partnership working.

7.2 While challenges remain, the report provides assurance that the Partnership has delivered meaningful improvements in outcomes for children, young people and families across Highland. The completion of this final annual report also marks the conclusion of the 2023/2026 planning cycle, with priorities now being taken forward through the approved Children's Services Partnership Plan 2026/2029 under the oversight of the Children's Services Partnership Board and Community Planning Partnership Board.

8. Transition to the 2026/2029 Plan

8.1 During 2025/2026 partners completed the development of the Highland Integrated Children's Services Plan 2026/2029. The new Plan was informed by an extensive strategic needs assessment, performance information, stakeholder engagement and the learning arising from delivery of the 2023/2026 Plan.

8.2 The draft Plan was considered through the established governance arrangements of the Children's Services Partnership and was subsequently presented to Committee. Following Committee scrutiny, the Plan was approved by the Community Planning Partnership Board as the accountable strategic body for community planning in Highland.

8.3 This Annual Report should therefore be viewed as both a final account of delivery against the 2023/2026 Plan and a bridge to the next phase of improvement activity set out within the 2026/2029 Plan.

Designation:	Assistant Chief Executive - People
Date:	01 October 2026
Author:	Ian Kyle – Chair, Children's Services Partnership Board
Background Papers:	None
Appendices:	Appendix 1 – Highland Integrated Children's Services Plan Annual Report 2025/2026

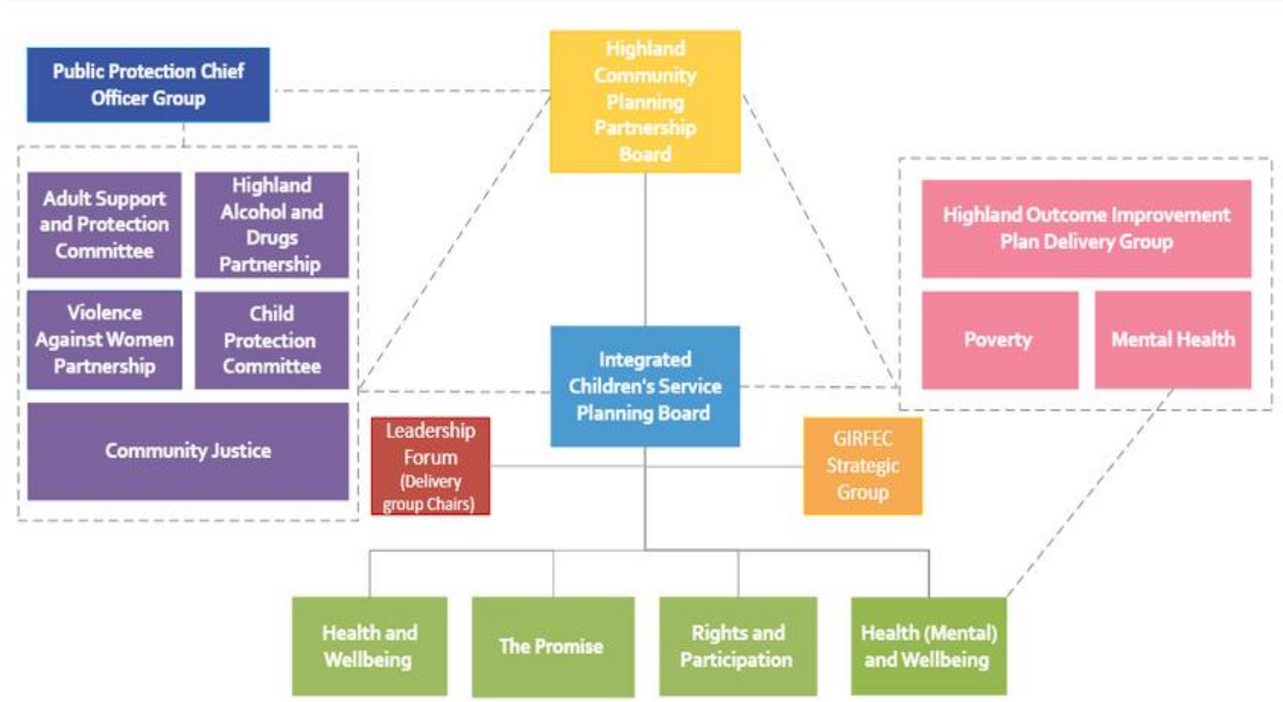
Highland Community Planning Partnership | Com-pàirteachas Dealbhadh Coimhearsnachd na Gàidhealtachd

Highland Integrated Children's Service Plan 2023-2026 Annual Report 2025/26



Integrated Children’s Service Board

Highland Children’s Service Plan sits within a context of the Community Planning Partnership and the Integrated Children’s Service Planning Board, strategically leads the improvement of outcomes for all Highland’s Children and Families.
The Plan articulates how partners work together to provide services which are organised, equipped to deliver high-quality, joined-up, trauma-informed, responsive and preventative support to children and families. Find full plan here
The annual report represents the work undertaken during 2025/26 and outcomes achieved in the delivery of the Integrated children's service plan 2023-2026. The change ideas and priorities are implemented through each of the delivery groups.



DELIVERY GROUPS

The Child Protection Committee

The Promise Board

Health and Wellbeing

Drugs and Alcohol

Rights and Participation

Poverty Reduction

Health and Wellbeing (Mental Health)

The delivery groups are partnership groups made up of statutory and 3rd Sector representatives. The groups take a life course approach to their improvement work of the Integrated Children's Service Plan

Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)

What We Achieved

The GIRFEC Strategic Group has continued to strengthen the implementation of Highland's GIRFEC approach, supporting greater consistency in assessment, planning and multi-agency working. Throughout 2025/26, partners focused on workforce development, improving guidance and documentation, and creating stronger mechanisms for local collaboration and shared decision making.
Training and development activity helped build practitioner confidence, while work on a revised Child's Plan and enhanced chronology guidance has supported a more joined-up approach to meeting children's needs.

Impact for Children and Families

Children and families benefit when services work together effectively around a shared understanding of need. Improvements to GIRFEC practice are helping ensure that children receive coordinated support earlier, reducing duplication, improving communication between services and strengthening planning around individual outcomes.

Key Achievements

- 141 practitioners attended multi-agency GIRFEC workshops.
- 92% of participants reported increased confidence in applying GIRFEC principles.
- New multi-agency chronology guidance developed and implemented.
- Child's Plan redesign progressed through testing and practitioner feedback.
- GIRFEC Locality Forums established to strengthen local problem-solving and partnership working.
- Strategic collaboration strengthened across education, health, social work and third-sector partners.

Overall Impact

Highland continues to strengthen a shared GIRFEC culture, supporting more consistent, coordinated and child-centred practice across services.

Whole Family Wellbeing Programme

What We Achieved

The Whole Family Wellbeing Programme has continued to support Highland's shift towards prevention and early intervention by investing in community-based support, family-led approaches and system transformation. Funding has enabled both local projects and larger-scale service redesign activity aimed at improving the support available to families before needs escalate.
Alongside direct investment, the programme has strengthened opportunities for children, young people and families to influence decisions about how resources are allocated and services are developed.

Impact for Children and Families

Families are increasingly able to access practical support within their local communities. Evidence from funded projects shows improvements in wellbeing, school engagement, parenting confidence and family relationships. Increased opportunities for early support are helping prevent difficulties from reaching crisis point.

Key Achievements

- £516,809 invested across 56 community-led family support projects.
- £3.4 million invested in 19 transformational programmes.
- Family Links supported 74 families, 97 children and 73 adults.
- Around 65% of participating families reported improvements in attendance and engagement with education.
- Up to 90% of children and young people involved reported improved wellbeing.
- Over 400 young people participated in shaping investment priorities.
- Workforce development expanded through Parents Under Pressure training.

Overall Impact

The programme is supporting long-term system change while improving access to practical help, strengthening family resilience and enhancing wellbeing outcomes for children and young people.

Poverty



What We Achieved

Partners continued to work collectively to reduce the impact of poverty on children and families through a combination of employability support, financial inclusion activity, childcare initiatives and targeted interventions for vulnerable households.
Efforts focused not only on providing immediate assistance but also on helping families improve financial security and access opportunities that support longer-term wellbeing.

Impact for Children and Families

More families have been supported to maximise income, access advice and practical assistance, and connect with local services. This contributes to reducing financial stress, improving family stability and creating better opportunities for children to thrive.

Key Achievements

- 370 parents engaged with employability support.
- 13 breakfast club initiatives supported across Highland communities.
- 3,338 financial support guides distributed.
- Over 12,000 period products provided through community and educational settings.
- More than 100 practitioners and community members completed Money Counts training.
- WorkLife Highland resources attracted over 24,000 visits.
- Infant formula pathway pilot supported vulnerable families in accessing essential support.

Overall Impact

Partnership action continues to reduce barriers to support, strengthen family finances and mitigate some of the impacts of poverty on children and young people.

Child Protection

What We Achieved

The Child Protection Committee continued its improvement programme through audit activity, quality assurance, workforce development and service improvement. Strong partnership working has supported a greater focus on the voice of the child, quality of assessment and effectiveness of intervention. Significant progress has been made in addressing areas identified through previous audit and inspection activity.

Impact for Children and Families

Children at risk of harm are increasingly receiving a more timely, coordinated and effective response. Improved assessment, planning and review processes are helping ensure that children's needs remain central to professional decision making.

Key Achievements

- Significant improvements recorded across all audited practice measures.
- Greater evidence of children's views being incorporated into assessment and planning.
- More than 40 practitioners involved in multi-agency quality assurance activity.
- Funding secured to support implementation of Bairns' Hoose.
- Contextual Safeguarding developments progressed.
- Further improvements made to neglect and pre-birth pathways.

Area	Previous	Current
Initial response	82%	89%
Follow-up action	71%	91%
Assessment quality	57%	75%
Review quality	50%	81%
Child's voice evidenced	54%	73%

Overall Impact

Evidence demonstrates a strengthening child protection system that is increasingly child-centred, collaborative and focused on achieving positive outcomes.

The Promise

What We Achieved

The Promise Board has continued to drive implementation of The Promise across Highland through strengthened governance, workforce development and practice improvement. During 2025/26, partners focused on embedding trauma-informed approaches, improving family support and increasing opportunities for participation.
New structures and delivery plans have provided greater clarity and accountability across partner organisations.

Impact for Children and Families

Care experienced children, young people and families are beginning to see a more relationship-based approach to support. Increased emphasis on family-led decision making and trauma-informed practice is helping services better understand and respond to individual circumstances.

Key Achievements

- Two Promise delivery plans established.
- More than 40 staff completed trauma-informed training.
- 28 Promise Ambassadors recruited.
- Family Group Decision Making supported 135 children from 92 families.
- 67% of referrals involved children on the edge of care.
- Infant Mental Health Pilot progressed within Lochaber.
- "Doing Data Differently" outcomes framework developed.

Overall Impact

The Promise is increasingly influencing service design and practice, strengthening relationships, participation and family-led support.

Rights and Participation

What We Achieved

Partners continued to strengthen implementation of children's rights across policy development, service planning and operational delivery. Significant progress has been made in embedding Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessments and creating meaningful opportunities for children and young people to influence decisions.
Participation activity has expanded across education, health and community settings.

Impact for Children and Families

Children and young people are increasingly able to influence decisions that affect their lives. Their views are helping shape services, strategies and local priorities, supporting a more rights-respecting and inclusive system.

Key Achievements

- 495 Integrated Impact Assessments completed.
- 118 directly related to children's services.
- Young people contributed to NHS Highland's long-term strategic planning.
- Participation programmes delivered across several secondary school communities.
- 15 teachers completed inclusive practice training.
- Learning and development opportunities on rights and participation expanded.
- New child-friendly resources introduced.

Overall Impact

Children's rights are becoming more firmly embedded across the planning and delivery of services throughout Highland.

Health and wellbeing (Mental Health)

What We Achieved

The Mental Health and Wellbeing Delivery Group focused on strengthening strategic planning, understanding existing service provision and investing in preventative community-based support. The development of a shared delivery plan has provided a stronger framework for coordinated action across agencies.
Investment funding has helped expand local support opportunities while improving understanding of gaps and future priorities.

Impact for Children and Families

Children, young people and families are benefiting from increased access to local wellbeing support. Strengthened partnership planning is helping create clearer pathways and a more coordinated approach to mental health support across Highland.

Key Achievements

- Multi-agency Mental Health and Wellbeing Delivery Plan developed.
- Comprehensive mapping of services completed.
- Waiting Well approaches progressed.
- £390,022 invested in community-based support.
- 46 projects funded from 119 applications.
- Priority themes identified through strategic analysis of local need.

Overall Impact

Highland continues to strengthen early intervention and prevention approaches, enabling children and young people to access support before difficulties escalate.

Drugs and Alcohol

What We Achieved

The Alcohol and Drugs Partnership continued to prioritise prevention, early intervention and support for families affected by substance use. Work has focused on understanding local trends, strengthening evidence-based prevention activity and improving coordinated responses for vulnerable children and young people.
Particular progress has been made through expansion of the Planet Youth model and targeted support services.

Impact for Children and Families

Young people have benefited from increased prevention activity and greater awareness of risk. Families affected by alcohol and drug use have received earlier support, while professionals are better equipped to identify potential harm and intervene appropriately.

Key Achievements

- 13 schools participated in Planet Youth.
- 2,260 young people completed surveys informing local prevention activity.
- More than 1,500 young people participated in prevention initiatives.
- Eight additional schools committed to future participation.
- Eight DDAYP training sessions delivered.
- Family First supported 21 families and 35 children.
- Criminal Exploitation Service supported 21 young people and 15 families.
- Prevention governance and performance reporting strengthened.

Overall Impact

A stronger focus on prevention and early intervention is helping build resilience, reduce risk factors and improve outcomes for children and young people.

What Children and Young people told us.....

"Make everything affordable for everyone"

"People seeing young people as bad in our community"

"We need more skilled and trusted adults locally to support us when we have problems"

"not enough money for us and our family".

"Want more sports resources, safe spaces in schools"

"Not everyone has external support after school"

"Direct and indirect discrimination towards care experienced young people"

"Making friends when you have health issues or disabilities"

"Decision makers unwilling to share power with the younger generation"

" children may be affected by social anxiety which can hamper their ability to speak out"

CHILDREN'S SERVICES PARTNERSHIP BOARD MEMBERSHIP

Director of Public Health, NHS Highland

Board Nurse Director, NHS Highland, Head of Health Improvement, NHS Highland

Head of Education, The Highland Council

Head of Children's Social work, The Highland Council

Executive Chief Officer Health and Social Care & Chief Social Work Officer, The Highland Council

Child Health Lead, The Highland Council

Head of Operations, Women and Children's Directorate, NHS Highland

Head of community support and engagement, The Highland Council

Police Scotland, Partnership Superintendent

Child Health Commissioner – NHS Highland

Chief Executive, Care and Learning Alliance (Third sector)

Director of Children and Families (Aberlour Trust) Third sector

Principal Educational Psychologist, The Highland Council

Lead Officer, Highland Child Protection Committee

HADP Co-Ordinator, Highland Alcohol and Drugs Partnership

Chief Executive, Thriving Families (Third Sector)

Chair of the Promise Board, Inverness UHI

Highland Children's Service Partnership Plan 2026-29 - Link

