The Highland Council

Agenda Item	**5**
Report No	**SCC/31/26**

Committee: **Sutherland County Committee**

Date: **30 November 2026**

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

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 Sutherland Area Place Plan was adopted by the Sutherland County Committee on 2 June 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 by the Sutherland Community Partnership and its wider Partners; and
ii. **Agree** to support the targeting of service programmes and local committee 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 development of specific funding packages, therefore, there is no direct resource implication.

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

5 Background

5.1 In 2021, The 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 the Plans has varied across each area to reflect local circumstances and partnership arrangements.

5.2 The Sutherland Area Place Plan (SAPP) was developed through engagement with communities and partners using a Place Based approach and presents common themes and priorities. It aims 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 Sutherland thrives as a prosperous area where individuals and families want to live, work and visit. The SAPP was adopted by the Sutherland County Committee on 2 June 2025.

6 What is the Area Place Plan?

6.1 The Sutherland Area Place Plan provides a shared framework for organisations, services and communities with an interest in Sutherland. 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 established forums, including the Sutherland Community Partnership, Whole Family Wellbeing, Focus North, North Employability Partnership, NW2045, Sutherland Community Anchor Network, Flow Country Partnership, alongside HIE, Community Councils, Development Trusts, and Highland Council services. 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 SAPP 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 Sutherland. 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: Focuses on access to healthcare, health and wellbeing, addressing depopulation and community capacity and resilience.
- Place: Focuses on environment and climate, housing, infrastructure and connectivity, roads and pavements, public transport and digital connectivity.
- Prosperity: Focuses on employment and economic opportunities, support for local businesses, education and childcare, tourism and seasonal work, young people's priorities.

7 How the Plan is delivered?

7.1 Delivery of the SAPP aspirations is supported through a range of existing partnerships and networks, bringing together communities, public services, third sector organisations, and other stakeholders to achieve shared outcomes. This approach utilises and strengthens existing partnerships and networks rather than creating new structures. New groups will only be established where clear gaps exist and additional coordination is required to deliver identified priorities.

The Sutherland Community Partnership (SCP) provides oversight of the Area Place Plan to ensure it remains a live document and continues to progress. This is supported through a standing agenda item at Partnership meetings, allowing partners to regularly review progress and coordinate delivery of priorities.

8 Progress and Achievements over the past year

8.1 The following is a summary of selected activity being undertaken to address the priorities identified within the Area Place Plan. It is not intended to be a comprehensive record of all activity taking place across the area, but rather to highlight key areas of progress and delivery under the three thematic headings of People, Place and Prosperity.

9 People

9.1 What people told us

Communities told us that they are proud of where they live but increasingly concerned about the long-term sustainability of services and communities. The People theme focusses on improving access to healthcare and care services, supporting mental health and wellbeing, tackling depopulation and ensuring communities have the resources, facilities and local influence needed to thrive.

9.2 Addressing inequalities - Sutherland Community Partnership

During 2025/26, the Sutherland Community Partnership refreshed its priorities and delivery arrangements, focusing on Housing, Employment and Poverty. New thematic groups covering Poverty Reduction, Community Wealth Building, Climate Adaptation, and Transport and Resilience have strengthened partnership working and improved coordination across local services and organisations. Community Regeneration Funding was secured to support a Community Support Officer post hosted by Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust, helping strengthen community engagement and delivery of local priorities.

9.3 Supporting children, young people and families - Whole Family Wellbeing Programme

The Whole Family Wellbeing Programme continues to support earlier intervention and improved family support across Sutherland. Funding has supported a range of community projects focused on wellbeing, confidence building, physical activity and mental health, while partners are progressing initiatives including improved childcare provision and support for young carers. Future activity will focus on improving awareness of services, increasing accessibility and strengthening support in rural communities.

9.4 Community-Based Learning - Adult Learning and Youth Work

Highland Council's Adult Learning and Youth Work teams continue to deliver learning opportunities and support for young people across Sutherland. Activities include youth work, school engagement, employability support, adult learning opportunities and community-based learning programmes. Recruitment to vacant Youth Development Officer posts is underway.

9.5 Sutherland Community Anchor Network (SCAN)

The Sutherland Community Anchor Network continues to support development trusts and community organisations across the county through networking, information sharing and capacity-building opportunities. A key achievement has been the continued success of the Caithness and Sutherland Development Trust Learning Events, helping strengthen collaboration and links with funders and support agencies. Challenges remain around sustainable funding, volunteer capacity and rising project costs.

9.6 Community led action - Northwest 2045

NorthWest2045, a partnership of community organisations, public bodies and other stakeholders, continues to develop a coordinated response to depopulation across the North West Highlands. Building on its community-led vision , the partnership has undertaken further stakeholder engagement and evidence gathering to inform future action. In June 2025, NW2045 published its Call to Action report, which led to the development of a five-year delivery plan.

Key activity during the past year has included fortnightly partner meetings to share learning and coordinate action; the establishment of a steering group to strengthen community representation; securing funding for a Development Officer post; completing a governance and operating model review; and contributing to regional and national discussions to ensure the North West Highlands is represented. This work has strengthened the region's collective voice and further positioned the area as a national exemplar of community-led approaches to depopulation, rural resilience and sustainable land use.

9.7 Enabling community led activity – Community Regeneration Funding

Community Regeneration Funding continues to support community-led regeneration across Sutherland. During the year, £923,528 was awarded to 25 projects, leveraging approximately £1.9 million of investment when match funding is included. Funded projects supported community resilience, climate action, housing, visitor infrastructure, transport and opportunities for young people, demonstrating strong alignment with Area Place Plan priorities. Eight organisations also benefited from the Development Officer Support Scheme, helping strengthen local delivery capacity. The BeConnected platform was launched in December 2025, designed to support community groups in developing and delivering projects that align with local priorities through area place plans. There are currently 38 Sutherland proposals listed on BeConnected.

10 Place

10.1 What people told us

The Place theme highlights the importance people place on the places where they live, work and spend their time. Communities identified the need to sustain and improve local facilities, strengthen town and village centres, protect and enhance the natural and built environment, and ensure infrastructure keeps pace with local needs. The plan sets out the importance of quality housing, accessible transport, digital connectivity, community spaces and well-maintained public assets in creating attractive, resilient and sustainable places where people want to live, work and visit.

10.2 **Community Resilience – Climate**

The Highlands and Islands Climate Hub, via the Community Development Officer for Caithness and Sutherland, continues to support communities across Sutherland through advice, funding, training and climate action initiatives. Significant projects over the past year have included launching of the H&I Climate Collective – supporting young people 16-30 to take Climate Action; groups from the North Coast have been supported on the Sustainable Spaces programme; delivering climate events including 'National Emergency Briefing' event in Brora; and establishment of Sutherland Climate Adaptation Group. The Hub has represented the interests of Sutherland on various partnerships and groups including Far North Line Community Rail Partnership, NW2045, Flow Country strengthening links with wider regional climate and environmental partnerships.

10.3 **Housing**

The Caithness and Sutherland Housing Stakeholders Group was established in 2025 to bring together key partners to identify barriers to housing delivery and support collaborative solutions to increase housing availability across the area.

10.4 **Road improvements**

During 2025/26, Highland Council invested approximately £2.3 million in road infrastructure improvements across Sutherland. Works included structural road resurfacing, surface dressing to extend the life of the carriageway network, bridge and structure maintenance, and footpath improvements.

10.5 **Community Transport Solutions**

Nine community transport organisations operate across Sutherland, providing vital access to healthcare, employment, education and social opportunities. Community transport remains an important part of the area's transport network, although challenges remain in North West Sutherland following the closure of the North West Community Bus Association.

10.6 **Enhancing Tourism Infrastructure - Smoo Cave Unique Visitor Experience Project**

Following approval of the Full Business Case, development work continues on the Smoo Cave Unique Visitor Experience Project. Funding opportunities are being explored, community engagement is underway and environmental assessments have identified no significant constraints. The project aims to improve visitor facilities, accessibility and the long-term sustainability of the site.

10.7 **Enhancing Tourism Infrastructure - The Sandwood Bay Visitor Infrastructure Project**

The Sandwood Bay Visitor Infrastructure Project continues to progress through the design phase with support from VisitScotland's Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund. The project aims to improve visitor facilities, manage increasing visitor numbers and protect the area's natural environment. A planning-ready design is expected by the end of 2026, with funding applications for delivery planned during 2027.

10.8 Protecting Our Natural Assets - Flow Country Partnership

The Flow Country Partnership continues to protect and enhance the Flow Country World Heritage Site through peatland restoration, sustainable tourism and community benefit initiatives. During the year, the Partnership progressed restoration projects in Achentoul and Armadale and progressing in Borgie, expanded its programme of work and developed proposals to maximise the economic, environmental and community benefits arising from World Heritage Site (WHS) designation. The Partnership has updated and launched the WHS Management Plan and developed a new Sustainable Tourism Strategy and Setting Guidance all of which was informed by stakeholder engagement.

10.9 Helping people work together on land issues – NW2045 Regional Land Use Partnership

The NorthWest 2045 Regional Land Use Partnership continues to bring together communities, landowners, crofters and public agencies to promote collaborative approaches to land use. Through its Land+ approach, the partnership supports dialogue, builds understanding and helps identify solutions that deliver benefits for both communities and the environment.

11 Prosperity

11.1 What people told us

The prosperity theme focusses on the importance of creating a prosperous and sustainable future for Sutherland, with communities identifying employment, business growth, skills development and infrastructure as key priorities. People emphasised the need for a diverse local economy that provides quality jobs, supports entrepreneurship and enables young people and working-age residents to live and work locally. Feedback also highlighted the importance of improving digital connectivity, transport links, housing availability and workforce capacity to support economic growth, attract investment and help communities benefit from the opportunities arising from the region’s natural, cultural and environmental assets.

11.2 Focus North

Focus North continues to support economic development, workforce growth and population retention across the North Highlands. Key activity has included the Live North campaign, employer engagement, workforce planning and skills development initiatives, helping align local opportunities with future investment and employment demand.

11.3 Pride in Place

A significant development during the year was the successful inclusion of Sutherland within the UK Government's Pride in Place programme. This creates an opportunity to attract substantial long-term investment into community-led regeneration projects, with up to £20M over 10 years, enabling communities to shape improvements that support economic growth, strengthen local infrastructure, enhance community assets, and improve quality of life across Sutherland.

11.4 **Addressing depopulation**

Through the Scottish Government's Addressing Depopulation Fund, partners have continued to develop evidence, strengthen community engagement and progress activity focused on housing, childcare, employment, connectivity and community resilience. This work has informed the development of a five-year delivery plan through NorthWest 2045 and continues to be supported by the Community Settlement Officer role.

11.5 **Supporting people into work**

The Highland Council Employability Service continues to support individuals across Sutherland into employment, training and education through partnership working, skills development and employer engagement. The service provides tailored support to address barriers to employment, including transport, childcare and training needs, while helping employers respond to workforce challenges. In addition, the team has organised and supported a wide range of events across Sutherland over the past year including a Family Craft Workshop in Brora in February; a Community Career and Networking Event in Lairg in March; Personal Care Assistant recruitment events in Tongue; Kinlochbervie and Lochinver in April; a Parkdean recruitment event in Golspie in June; and attendance at the Durness Games in July.

11.6 **Developing new models of childcare - Work & Play Club and Childcare Support Fund**

Care and Learning Alliance (CALA) is working with partners to explore how innovative childcare models – work and play clubs - can be adapted to meet the needs of families in Caithness and Sutherland. Through Scottish Government Adopt and Adapt Funding, test and learn approaches, engaging families, communities and partners will be taken to provide new community learning and wellbeing activities in the County. In addition, CALA administers the Scottish Government Childcare Support Fund, helping families overcome childcare barriers that affect access to employment, training and education while building evidence of childcare demand across rural communities.

11.7 **Invest Kinlochbervie**

An investment prospectus for Kinlochbervie is under development which aims to set out a comprehensive vision to:-

- identify opportunities;
- attract investors;
- support economic growth;
- showcase investable projects and community ambitions; and
- enable public and private sector collaboration.

The vision has been supported by cross-departmental collaboration and stakeholder engagement.

12 Next Steps

12.1 Building on the engagement and partnership work already undertaken, the next phase of the Area Place Plan will focus on reviewing progress, broadening participation and ensuring the Plan continues to reflect the current needs and aspirations of communities across Sutherland. Key priorities include:-

- Delivering collaborative projects, including progressing initiatives funded through the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund and Adopt and Adapt Funding supporting innovative childcare provision;
- Supporting community capacity building and resilience planning through continuing to facilitate regular SCAN network meetings, themed learning sessions and through the support of the Climate Hub, deliver carbon literacy training and launch Community Resilience Connect and Highland Repair Network;
- Continuing the peatland restoration projects in central and northern Sutherland, and submit funding applications to support a further two projects;
- Securing funding to progressing initiatives to support sustainable tourism and enhance facilities;
- Identifying gaps and mapping out unmet need to inform future partnership activity
- Continuing to seek alignment between Council and Partner activity with Area Place Plan priorities;
- Strengthening whole-system working by improving alignment between local priorities, funding opportunities and service delivery; and
- Further developing the Sutherland Community Partnership working groups, particularly those focused on Climate Adaptation and Poverty Reduction, by broadening membership, strengthening partnership working and progressing priority actions to support delivery of the Sutherland Area Place Plan and wider community priorities.

Designation:	Assistant Chief Executive - Place
Date:	9 November 2026
Author:	Fiona Richardson, Community Development Manager
Background Papers:	SCC/14/25 Agenda item 6 Sutherland Area Place Plan
Appendices:	None