Agenda Item	4
Report No	JMC/17/26

The Highland Council

Committee: **Joint Monitoring Committee**

Date: **03 December 2026**

Report Title: **Supporting Unpaid Carers and Update on Strategy.**

Report By: **Ayasha Wood, Carers Service Development Officer (Interim)**

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides an update on unpaid carer activity and service development across the HSCP during the 2025–2028 strategy period and seeks formal endorsement of the NHS Highland Carers Strategy. The report summarises key activity, evidence of impact and areas of ongoing development.

2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

i. agree the continued use of the NHS Highland Carers Strategy 2025-2028 as the strategic framework for carers services development and delivery. **(Appendix 1)**
ii. Note the activity over the past 12 months and the benefits for unpaid carers.

3 Implications

3.1 **Resource** - Delivery of the strategy continues through existing staffing resources, commissioned services and partnership arrangements.

3.2 **Legal** - The strategy, and activity aligned to this, supports both the HSCP duties in relation to unpaid carers under the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 and aligns with the National Carers Strategy 2022.

3.3 **Risk** - No immediate risks to existing unpaid carer service delivery have been identified. Ongoing service development will continue through established commissioning, governance and partnership arrangements. Some funded services are commissioned to include support for young carers. Stronger links are needed between this Strategy and Highland Council's young carer arrangements. This is a joint area for development between Highland Council and the HSCP, including clearer coordination of provision, transitions and future strategic planning.

3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – No direct health and safety implications have been identified through this report.

3.5 **Gaelic** - No specific Gaelic implications have been identified through this report.

4 Impacts

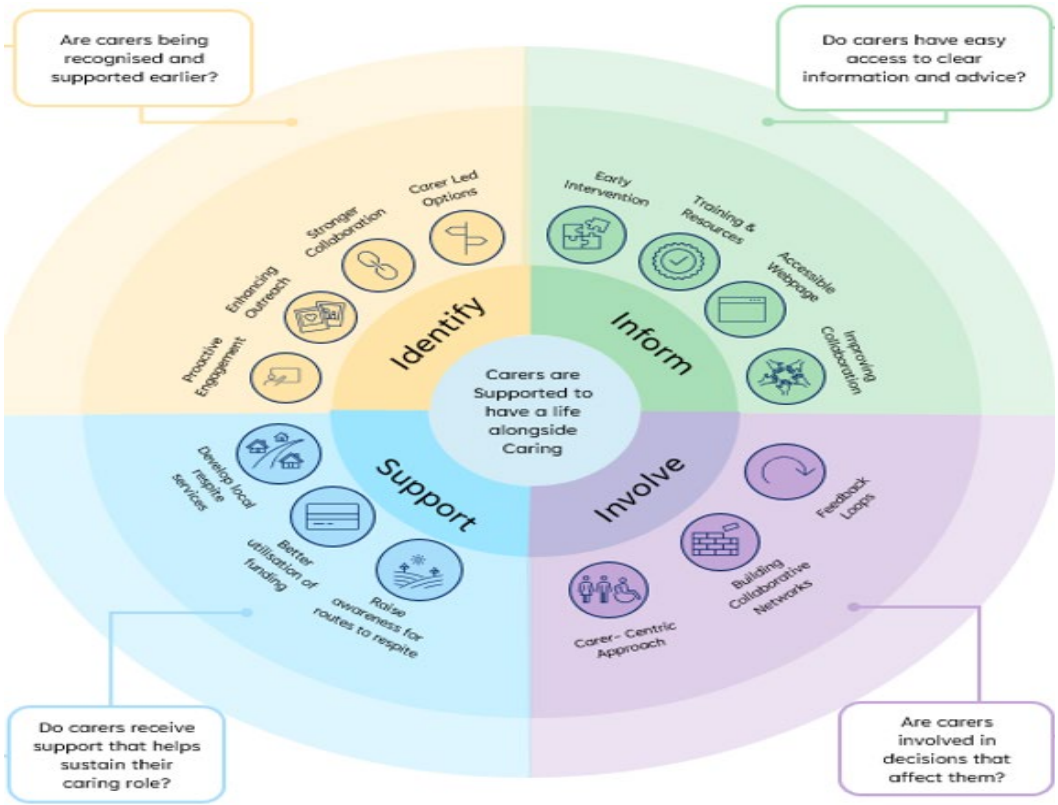
4.1 All policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment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

4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process.

4.3 This is a monitoring and update report on the implementation of the Highland Carers Strategy 2025-2028 and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5 NHS Highland Carers Strategy 2025–2028

5.1 The NHS Highland Carers Strategy 2025–2028, attached at **Appendix 1**, provides the framework for unpaid carer service development and delivery. Its priorities are reflected in the four areas covered by this report: identifying unpaid carers; providing information, advice and support; involving carers in service development; and improving the variety and choice of support and breaks available.



5.2 The activity set out in sections 6–9 demonstrates delivery against these priorities and identifies areas requiring further development. Early feedback from the current carer

engagement programme indicates that the priorities remain relevant, although responses are limited at this stage. The Committee is therefore asked to agree the continued use of the Strategy as the framework for service development and delivery for the remainder of the 2025–2028 period. Findings from the engagement programme and service reviews will inform implementation and future commissioning.

6 Identify: Carer Awareness

6.1 Activity delivered

Progress during the reporting period has included establishing a weekly presence of our local carers centre within Raigmore Hospital to support unpaid carers in both ward and public settings, launching the Care to Connect Project in Lochaber to provide in-person support to unpaid carers in the community and developing the " Wee Unpaid Carers Book of Support" to help support staff to engage with families of patients and service users to help identify unpaid caring. Work has also been undertaken to embed carer awareness more consistently across the workforce, including a formal application for Equal Partners in Care (EPiC) to become mandatory learning within NHS Highland. Although this has not progressed to mandatory status, voluntary participation has continued to increase significantly.

6.2 Evidence and impact

There are positive indications that this activity is having an impact. Carer awareness training completions across NHS Highland have increased from 17 in June 2025 to 252 by October 2026, nearly 15 times higher, with a further 123 modules currently in progress. This increased workforce awareness is also reflected in referrals into carer support, with 124 formal NHS referrals made to Connecting Carers between April and September 2026 by 74 different NHS professionals across Highland. More than 120 professionals across a wide range of NHS Highland services requested the Unpaid Carers Toolkit, resulting in at least 2,670 toolkits being distributed through recorded requests[1] with an estimated further 2,000 distributed directly through training, events and wider engagement activity.

6.3 Current priorities

While progress has been made, embedding carer identification consistently across Highland remains an area for continued development. Further work is required to increase awareness across the wider partnership workforce and ensure that identifying someone as an unpaid carer translates into appropriate information, referral and access to support. This includes continuing to work with services and departments to consider how unpaid carers are recognised within existing pathways, including hospital discharge, and how identification can be better embedded within local processes and standard operating procedures.

The Care to Connect Project in Lochaber has since ended following formal notice from the provider. Carers supported by the project have been supported to transition to alternative support through our carers centre. The project showed the value of in-person community-based support in identifying unpaid carers. Learning from the project will inform future consideration of how community organisations can contribute sustainably to local carer support.

7 Inform: Information, Advice and Support

7.1 Activity delivered

Activity has focused on improving both the information available to unpaid carers and the ability of staff to connect carers into appropriate support. This has included developing dedicated external[2] and unpaid carer webpages, bringing accessible information, guidance, professional referral routes and available support into more accessible formats and locations. We have also piloted the Dynamic Carers Assessment, an AI-guided telephone assessment designed to provide unpaid carers with a more flexible route to begin an Adult Carer Support Plan at a time convenient to them. Alongside this, unpaid carer services have contributed to the wider NHS Highland social prescribing framework, embedding carer awareness within training and encouraging professionals to consider the wider range of community, third sector and commissioned support available to carers.

7.2 Evidence and impact

There are positive indications that the development of different information and support routes is extending access for unpaid carers. Since the launch of NHS Highland's dedicated unpaid carers webpages, 891 active users have accessed the resource, generating 1,644 page views between November 2025 and August 2026. Alongside this, Mobilise has engaged 3,079 carers across Highland, with 77% reporting that they had not previously accessed support.

7.3 Current priorities

While access to information has improved, further work is required to strengthen the pathways between information, advice and practical support. Clear operational ownership, data-sharing arrangements and consistent follow-up pathways are also required to ensure carers are supported through the process rather than simply directed to another service. Further work with commissioned providers, third sector partners and statutory services will therefore focus on improving navigation, referral pathways and consistency of information across the wider carer support system.

8 Involve: Participation and Collaboration

8.1 Activity delivered

Activity has focused on creating more regular and accessible opportunities for unpaid carers to share their experiences and influence how support develops. Feedback routes have been built into our external and internal webpages, email signatures and service information. Alongside this, we have established the NHS Highland Unpaid Carers Staff Network, creating a space for staff with caring responsibilities to share their experiences and help inform how carer support develops. Work has also supported the inclusion of unpaid carers within NHS Highland's Integrated Impact Assessment process, helping to ensure that the potential impact of policies, strategies and service changes on unpaid carers is considered within wider organisational decision-making.

Carer feedback has also been used to shape activity such as the Carers Scotland Highland Roadshow. In response to feedback, the Roadshow included evening opening, access to the Care Response Team to support carers attending with the person they care for, and community transport to reduce barriers to attendance.

The Roadshow brought together 168 unpaid carers and received an average feedback rating of 4.5 out of 5. The Unpaid Carers Engagement Hub has since been launched to gather wider views on what is working, where the gaps are and what carers need from future services, with both digital and written options available to support participation. This engagement is now being used to inform future commissioning and service development, rather than consulting on a service model that has already been decided.

8.2 **Evidence and impact**

Early feedback indicates that the priorities identified when the strategy was developed remain relevant to unpaid carers. Although the current Engagement Hub is still at an early stage, carers continue to describe difficulties navigating services, balancing caring with work and family life, accessing support locally and finding support at times that fit around their caring role. Of the 16 responses received to date, the most commonly identified priorities include carers' health and wellbeing, easier-to-find information, local access and better coordination between health, social care and community services.

8.3 **Current priorities**

The Unpaid Carers Engagement Hub will continue through a phased programme of engagement until March 2027. The initial listening phase will close at the end of November, followed by analysis of feedback during December and January to identify common themes, gaps and locality differences. During February, unpaid carers and partners will be invited to explore and test potential future approaches, with findings and next steps published by the end of March 2027.

9 Support: Variety and Choice Services

9.1 **Activity delivered**

The carers wellbeing fund is a proportion of the overall carers budget that is dedicated to provide flexible financial resource to enable unpaid carers to have their individuals needs met flexibly. This fund was first created during the Covid-19 pandemic when physical resources were limited, however the principles behind the fund remain relevant so it continues to be in place. There is currently £600,000 allocated to the fund from the overall £2.6m budget.

NHS Highland operates 16 Care Homes for older adults, 3 of which are nursing homes. It is essential to offer a suite of resources, and this includes traditional residential respite. NHS Highland is currently reviewing the demand for care home placements that are available for respite to ensure that this is proportionate and available throughout Highland

Activity has focused on improving existing routes into breaks and support while exploring more flexible and community-based alternatives. A wider review of the Carers Wellbeing Fund has been undertaken following evidence of geographical variation in access, repeat applications and limitations in the Fund's ability to demonstrate outcomes. A multi-agency Short-Life Working Group involving Social Work, Finance, commissioned and third sector partners developed options for a more equitable and outcome-focused approach to carers' breaks, including greater use of community-based provision, replacement care, day services and personalised support.[3] While the proposed model has not progressed to implementation, the work

has provided important evidence to inform future commissioning and the development of more sustainable and equitable break options across Highland.

The Carers Wellbeing Fund has been further reviewed in its current state to improve access, and we have opened to a wider range of NHS Highland and Highland Council lead professionals, supported by updated guidance and training to help referrers focus on individual carer outcomes and meaningful breaks. This work has focused on increasing awareness of the wider range of break opportunities available, including funding, commissioned carer services and national charities, recognising that respite does not always mean residential care. Work has also been undertaken to improve the residential respite placements process, while continued investment in Community Hubs and projects such as North Coast Connections is supporting the development of more local and community-based options.

9.2 **Evidence and impact**

Wellbeing Fund activity indicates a change in how meaningful breaks are being considered. Following changes to the application process, wider access for NHS Highland professionals and additional guidance and training, we are seeing greater engagement from NHS professionals and a shift in the types of support being requested. Rather than predominantly one-off or higher-value requests, more recent applications show increased interest in support that can provide a more sustainable benefit throughout the year, including health and wellbeing, support services, leisure and recreational activities. Changes in the applications form have reduced applications from third sector partners, feedback suggested the new applications form created additional administrative burden. The form has since been adjusted to streamline data capture while still supporting governance.

The Wellbeing Fund is open to all adult carers, including those who care for children. To date the Wellbeing Fund has supported approximately 2,700 unpaid carers and distributed more than £5 million since its inception. This year the Wellbeing Fund has received 86 applications, 52 have been approved with £89,184.66 being awarded. Outcomes are explored and agreed with each carer by the referrer at the point of application, focusing on reducing stress, helping the carer to have a life alongside caring as well as giving time for hobbies, social connection or personal health. The panel reviews each request against these outcomes. Referrers are expected to follow up with the carer afterwards to check whether their outcomes were met, but this follow up is not recorded. Repeat applications provide insight if previous funding did support carers' outcomes. On average 35% of applications come from returning carers.

9.3 **Current priorities**

Current priorities are to widen the range of local, community-based breaks and support available to unpaid carers and make effective use of existing carers funding. Learning from the Carers Wellbeing Fund review will inform the development of community-led provision and future commissioning, with a focus on the benefits for unpaid carers and the sustainability of support.

Priorities for respite provision are to increase the number of care homes offering respite and bring more provision within the Placements Service, to give Social Work clearer oversight of availability across Highland. This includes assessing opportunities to purchase additional capacity, particularly in areas where nursing respite is limited.

9.4 **Children's Services and Young Carers**

NHS Highland's investment in unpaid carer services also provides support to parent carers and families alongside wider Children's Services provision. Funded services include Thriving Families, which has a specific focus on parent carers of children, alongside Partners in Advocacy and Connecting Carers, which provide advice, advocacy and support to adult parent carers. Parent carers can also access wider unpaid carer provision, including the Carers Wellbeing Fund, to support their own wellbeing and access meaningful breaks.

Partners in Advocacy monitoring shows that support around school, Child Plan and other children's meetings is consistently one of the main areas of advocacy provided to adult carers. Between October 2024 and March 2025, 23 of the 60 advocacy issues progressed related to school or Child Plan meetings, making this the largest recorded issue category. More recent monitoring continues to show parent carers seeking help with Child Plans, education, Additional Support for Learning, transition, SDS and communication with schools and Children's Services.[4]

Residential short-break services are a key component of the support available to parent carers of children and young people with disabilities and additional support needs. Highland 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. 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, recent completion of the Skye Short Break Service and continued development of the Thor House Service will strengthen Highland wide provision, improve outcomes for children and families and reduce reliance on high-cost external care arrangements where needs can be met safely within Highland.

Current activity will continue to support parent carers through commissioned and funded services, while strengthening links with Children's Services around transition, whole-family support and clearer routes between children's and adult carer provision.

9.5 Current Position and Next Steps

Good progress has been made across unpaid carer services during the 2025–2028 strategy period. Activity has included increased workforce awareness and identification of unpaid carers, development of new information and referral routes, wider engagement with carers, review and development of the Carers Wellbeing Fund, and continued work to expand community-based and respite options.

Some areas remain in development, particularly around respite capacity, Self-Directed Support, community-led provision and strengthening pathways between information, referral and practical support. Progress has also been influenced by available capacity within the Unpaid Carers Service, requiring activity to be prioritised across operational delivery and service development.

The current Engagement Hub consultation, learning from commissioned services and ongoing review of funding and support models will inform the next phase of activity and future commissioning. Overall, work continues to progress in line with the direction of the NHS Highland Carers Strategy 2025–2028.

Designation:	Carer Service Development Officer (Interim)
Date:	17 November 2026
Author:	Ayasha Wood, Carer Service Development Officer (Interim)
Appendices:	NHS Highland Carers Strategy

APPENDIX 1

NHS HIGHLAND CARERS STRATEGY

2025 - 2028

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1. Strategy Overview

This refreshed Highland Carers Strategy 2025-28 sets out the vision, priorities and outcomes for health and social care planning partners to make the Highlands an area that "Cares for Carers". It outlines how planning partners will expand support for unpaid carers in alignment with:

- The Scottish Government's commitments set out in the Carers (Scotland Act 2016)
- The vision for improved health and social care support, set out in the Independent Review of Adult Social Care
- The revised National Carers Strategy 2023-2026
- The Highland Health and Social Care Partnerships commitments set out in the Highland HSCP Strategic Plan of Adult Services 2024 - 2027

Vision



To ensure all unpaid carers in the Highlands are **supported to have a life** alongside caring, with resources used effectively to bridge gaps in service provision.

Objectives



1. Increase carer awareness and access to support services.
2. Expand the provision of respite care.
3. Enhance partnerships to create tailored support for carers.

This strategy will continue to progress and build upon the actions from the Highland Carers Strategy 2020-2023, while reflecting on significant events of the previous 3 years, like the impact of COVID-19 and the cost- of-living crisis on unpaid carers.

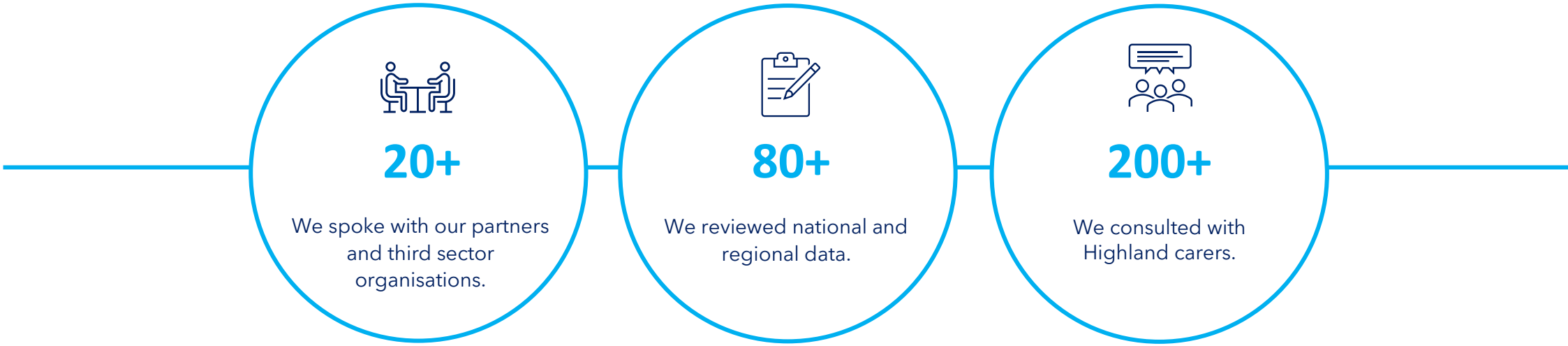
Shaped by carers, their families, service users, and Third and Independent Sector organisations, it commits to ongoing monitoring and an annual review process until 2028.

Why Do We Need a Strategy?

The support carers give is immeasurable and unsurpassable. Throughout the COVID pandemic, carers have continued in their caring role. After the onset of the pandemic there were many new carers undertaking this role for the first time, and others taking on new roles and additional responsibilities in response to the crisis. This constantly evolving social care landscape presents an opportunity to re-evaluate and enhance existing services.

In shaping this strategy, we listened to what carers told us, continued or new gaps in service provision, ideas for improvements and what works well for them to ensure that this strategy is relevant and useful. In Chapter 4 of this strategy, we outline the feedback we received and set out both our commitments and the outcomes we will deliver in response to that feedback.

*Note: This Carers' Strategy focusses primarily on services specifically for adult carers in the Highlands. However, awareness that services for the cared-for person can and frequently does have a significant impact on the carer's quality of life. **



* Highland Council have developed a separate Young Carers Strategy

The Impact of Carers

In the Highlands, unpaid carers provide vital support, which if costed, it would be an estimated **£694.5 million annually**[1]. Supporting unpaid carers to maintain a life alongside their caregiving responsibilities is a sustainable approach of safeguarding our health and social care services. However, carers face increasing challenges:

The Challenges:	1 Ageing population	2 Access to services	3 Emotional & physical strain of caregiving
The needs: Recent statistics show...[2]	**49%** require access to respite care.	**66%** of carers need advice and information.	**29%** of carers need emotional support.

The new strategy addresses these gaps by prioritising tailored support, proactive identification, and greater awareness of carers' rights.

[1] Carers Scotland. (2022). Valuing Carers 2022: Scotland. Retrieved from https://www.carersuk.org/media/l5sa1sq4/valuing_carers_scotland_web.pdf.
Highland Council. (2021). Highland Profile - Key Facts and Figures. Retrieved from https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/695/council_information_performance_and_statistics/165/highland_profile_-_key_facts_and_figures/2.
National Records of Scotland. (2021). Mid-2021 Population Estimates for Scotland. Retrieved from https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/latest-news/mid-year-population-estimates-for-scotland-in-2022/

2. Background

Building on the successes of the 2020-2023 strategy, this updated approach incorporates:

1. Improved **early identification** of unpaid carers.
2. A focus on **meaningful breaks** for unpaid carers.
3. Co-production with carers to ensure **meaningful changes.**

While the previous strategy offered a broad range of services, we are now able to provide a targeted approach to engaging with unpaid carers, particularly those who had not yet accessed support.

Listening to their experiences, identifying gaps in support, and understanding their priorities have shaped a vision that seeks to empower carers, celebrate their contributions, and deliver meaningful changes to improve their lives.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the current landscape, a SWOT analysis was conducted. This highlights the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats shaping the strategy and its implementation.

Building on these insights, we examined the demographics and circumstances of adult carers living in the Highlands to ensure the strategy reflects their unique challenges and opportunities. By understanding the landscape they navigate, we can tailor specific priorities and actions to address their needs, ensuring the strategy remains relevant, effective, and centred on the lived experiences of unpaid carers.

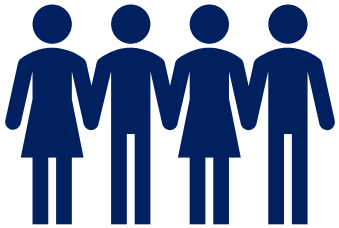


3. Adult Carers living in Highland

What does the data show?

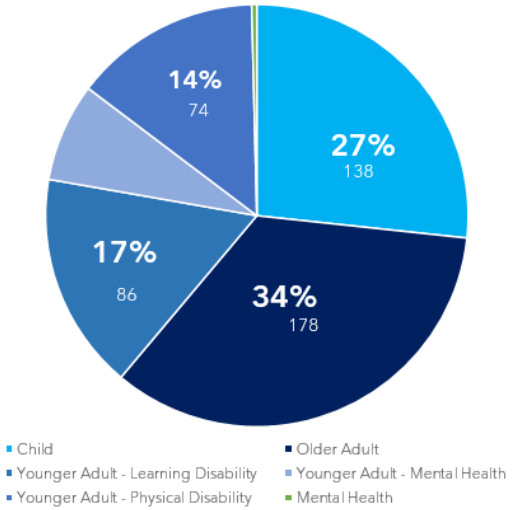
The exact number of unpaid adult carers in the Highlands remains uncertain due to variations in data collection methods and reporting standards[2] but recent figures from Scotland's Census database suggest the figure to be around **26,179**[3]. It's important to consider the demographic factors that can help us estimate the impact on carers in the Highlands. Insights from the 2023-24 Carers Census suggests that a significant proportion of adult carers in the Highlands are likely supporting older adults.[4] Nationally, 40% of those being cared for are aged 65 and older, which reflects the region's aging population. [7]

Key Demographic



- **40%** of cared-for individuals are aged 65+.[5]
- **38%** of carers fall within the 45-59 age range.
- **31%** of carers support their partner.[6]

Figure 1: Proportion of Carers Supporting Children, Younger Adults, and Older Adults, The Wellbeing Fund 2024 Data [7]



[2] Scottish Government, 2023. Carers Census, Scotland, 2023-24. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/carers-census-scotland-2023-24/> [Accessed 29 December 2024].
[3] Scotland's Census (n.d.) Highland unpaid carers population. Available at: https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/webapi/jsf/dataCatalogueExplorer.xhtml [Accessed: 6 January 2025]
[4] Scottish Government, 2023. Carers Census, Scotland, 2023-24. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/carers-census-scotland-2023-24/> [Accessed 29 December 2024].
[5] Scottish Government, 2023. Carers Census, Scotland, 2023-24. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/carers-census-scotland-2023-24/> [Accessed 29 December 2024]
[6] Mobilise, 2024. *Mobilise Digital Carers Insight Report Highland, December 2024*. [online] Available at: <Highlands Mobilise Report - December 2024.pdf> [Accessed 3 January 2025].
[7] Wellbeing Fund Database 2024, NHS Highland, Unpublished Dataset

This demographic trend places additional pressure on adult carers, many of whom themselves are older adults.[8] The NHS Highland Wellbeing Fund 2023-24, shows that 34% of carers in the Highlands provide care for older adults (see Figure 1) with the majority of carers falling within the 45-59 age range, making up 54% of all carers who applied for the fund.[9] Our partners see this also; Mobilise, a digital platform for carer resources reports that 31.3% of carers provide care for their partner, and more than 31% of adult carers in the Highlands are considered retired.

This highlights the need for tailored support, such as breaks from caring and financial assistance, especially for these "sandwich carers" balancing multiple responsibilities. Flexible solutions, like streamlined Adult Carer Support Plans, community signposting, and respite service options, are essential to meeting these carers' needs.

"I need a break, but a care home is not an option for my wife and that is all that is offered…"

The census also revealed that adult carers in Scotland most need advice, information, and respite care.[10] Over half of carers also reported not understanding their rights or the terminology in the caregiving landscape[11], signalling the need for clearer communication and targeted engagement. Breaks from caring is a key priority[12], as carers seek opportunities for rest to manage the physical and emotional demands of caregiving. The Carers Wellbeing Fund mirror these needs with 50% of carers requested holidays and 19% have sought a garden shed or summer house for a short-term 'escape' or personal space when it is not possible to step away from their caring responsibilities (see Figure 3). Currently, there is a gap between the demand (49%) and available services (37%) as shown in figure 2.

These insights, which mirror data from commissioned partners[13], help shape the strategy, which focuses on improving support access, raising awareness, and expanding respite care services.

The Carer Census also shows a relatively low national demand for peer support and group activities.[14] However, this may not fully reflect the unique challenges faced in the Highlands, where access to services is more restricted. Feedback from carers in the region emphasises the vital continual role of peer support.[15] To address these challenges effectively, further community initiatives can support carer awareness and increase engagement in harder to reach areas.

"It's hard asking for help—we've never done this before. We didn't even know this hub existed until a few months ago"

[8] Scottish Government, 2023. Carers Census, Scotland, 2023-24. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/carers-census-scotland-2023-24/> [Accessed 29 December 2024].
[9] Wellbeing Fund Database 2024, NHS Highland, Unpublished Dataset
[10] Scottish Government, 2023. Carers Census, Scotland, 2023-24. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/carers-census-scotland-2023-24/> [Accessed 29 December 2024].
[11] Mobilise, 2024. *Mobilise Digital Carers Insight Report Highland, December 2024*. [online] Available at: <Highlands Mobilise Report - December 2024.pdf> [Accessed 3 January 2025].
[12] Carers Census Highland, *Table 3.2: Number and percentage of unpaid carers by support needs in Highlands 2022-23*, Carers Census Highland 2022-23, [2023], [page 13]
[13] Connecting Carers, Annual Review 2023-2024, [page 4]
[14] Carers Census Highland, *Table 3.2: Number and percentage of unpaid carers by support needs in Highlands 2022-23*, Carers Census Highland 2022-23, [2023], [page 13]
[15] Michelle Keir, personal communication with unpaid carers, 2024

Figure 2: Adult carers support needs (adapted from Figure 6, Carers Census 2024)

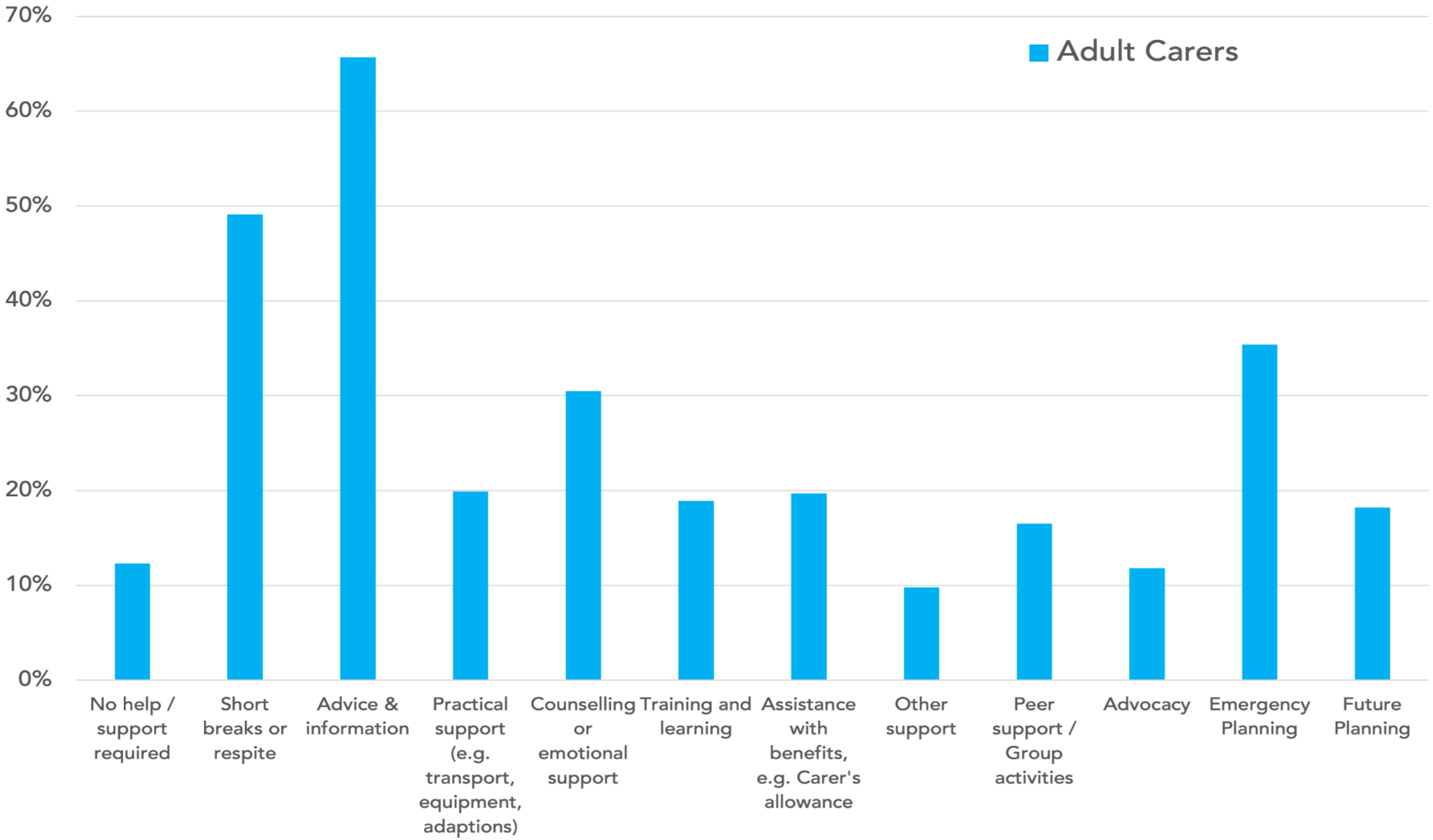
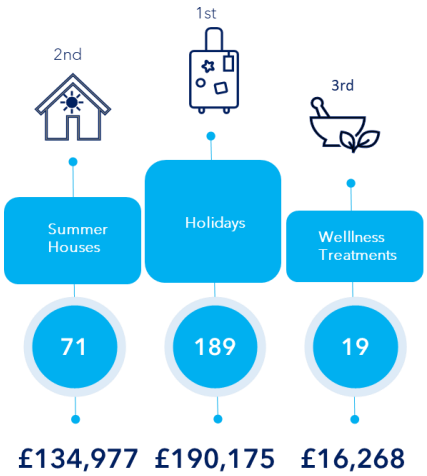


Figure 3: The three most requested uses of funding (The Wellbeing Fund, 2024)



In addition to the need for respite care, the emotional and physical impact of caregiving also highlights the importance of targeted support for carers' well-being. Reflected in both the Census and the Mobilise report, was on carers' emotional well-being, with 86% of adult carers experiencing challenges in this area[16]. 39.7% of carers reported struggles with their physical and mental health, and 29.4% requested emotional support or someone to talk to[17] with 44.3% reporting experiencing boredom regularly in their caring role.[18]

These findings underscore the critical need for initiatives like the Carers Wellbeing Fund, which addresses these challenges through support for respite and self-care. Every application to the Carers Wellbeing fund is a request for a break from caring.

"Just being able to meet my friend for a coffee and not feeling guilty has made the biggest difference..."

Given the importance of respite care, it stands out as one of the most effective solutions to address carers' well-being. Respite allows carers to take breaks from their caregiving responsibilities, providing them with much-needed rest, recovery, and the ability to prioritise their own health. These breaks are not a luxury but a necessity, as they empower carers to sustain their vital role in the long term. Investing in these services is a direct pathway to improving carers' emotional and physical well-being and strengthening their capacity to fulfil their caregiving roles.

Our vision is to ensure that these resources are used effectively to meet the gaps identified above in support provision whilst ensuring that all unpaid carers in the Highlands are supported to have a life alongside caring.

To translate these insights into action, we turned to the feedback shared by carers. Their voices have guided the development of key themes, each addressing a critical aspect of the carer experience. The following section outlines how this feedback has shaped specific priorities and actions, ensuring that the strategy remains relevant, effective, and centred on the needs of unpaid carers.

[16] Scottish Government, 2023. Carers Census, Scotland, 2023-24. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/carers-census-scotland-2023-24/> [Accessed 3 January 2025].
[17] Mobilise, 2024. *Mobilise Digital Carers Insight Report Highland, December 2024*. [online] Available at: <Highlands Mobilise Report - December 2024.pdf> [Accessed 3 January 2025].
[18] Mobilise, 2024. *Mobilise Digital Carers Insight Report Highland, December 2024*. [online] Available at: <Highlands Mobilise Report - December 2024.pdf> [Accessed 3 January 2025].

4. Progressing the New Strategy

1. Carer Awareness

1

What We Heard[19]

"I didn't know I was a carer" – Unpaid carer 1

"Where does being a wife end and being a carer begin?"- Unpaid carer 2

"Google told me I was a carer!" – Unpaid carer 3

"Very few people other than my close friends know I am a carer. I don't want judgement"
- Unpaid carer 4

2

Where We Are Now

1. **Demographic misalignment:** Carer Centres primarily supports parent carers, with insufficient focus on adult carers for older relatives.

2. **Limited outreach and engagement:** Only a small percentage of carers are being engaged,[20] highlighting a need for more targeted outreach and signposting to services.

3. **Collaboration challenges:** There are significant barriers to collaboration between commissioned parties, which hampers support for carers.

3

Where We Want To Be

- **Early identification of carers:**

- Ensure all carers including those who are digitally excluded are identified early.

- Use proactive outreach to identify carers in their communities.

- **Raise community awareness:**

- Promote understanding of carers needs within the community alongside community support services.

- **Empower carers to access services:**

- Enable carers to have choice and control over services and support that aligns with their wellbeing needs.

4

How We Plan To Get there

Identify

Proactive Engagement

Through events and piloting projects throughout the region. Targeting marketing and information.

Enhancing Outreach

Develop campaigns to identify and engage with underrepresented groups, leveraging digital and community-based channels.

Stronger Collaboration

Working more effectively amongst partners, organisations, employers, and communities for carers.

Carer led options

Improved referral process based on needs and preferences that support the carer in living their life as well as caring.

"The information given to me by my employer helped me realise that I was a carer." – Unpaid Carer 5

[19] Michelle Keir, personal communication with unpaid carers, 2024
[20] Connecting Carers, Annual Report 2023-2024

2. Information, Advice & Support

1

What We Heard [21]

"Clear and easy to understand information is needed." – Unpaid carer 6

"I didn't have time to contact this one, that one and the next one so I gave up."- Unpaid carer 7

"Help at the outset helped me cope."- Unpaid carer 8

"It would be useful to know where to turn to without having to spend hours trying to find answers" - Unpaid carer 9

2

Where We Are Now

1. **Service gaps**: Carer services are heavily online, working predominantly in silos, making in-person streamlined support less accessible to carers.
2. **Engagement Levels:** Recent data shows that current carers centres have low engagement. [22]
3. **Disconnect with respite services:** The limited number of applications for respite care to the Wellbeing Fund by carers highlights a gap between information provision and service access compared to Care Home placements requests for respite.[23]

3

Where We Want To Be

- **Clear and concise information:** Ensure carers can easily access accurate, clear, and consistent information about available services, including respite care and financial assistance.
- **Integrated service delivery:** Strengthen collaboration between commissioned partners to provide seamless and holistic support for carers.
- **Empowerment Through Awareness:** Increase carers' awareness of their rights and support options, ensuring they feel informed and equipped to navigate the caregiving landscape.

4

How We Plan To Get there

Inform

Early intervention

Improving collaboration with healthcare professionals to enhance the role of carers in social prescribing.

Training and Resources

Provide training for staff at support centres to ensure consistent, high-quality information and advice are available across all touchpoints.

Accessible Webpage

Simple, easy to navigate one-stop-shop webpage signposting for all carer services within the highlands.

Improving Collaboration

Better collaboration and communication between commissioned partners to support a better service.

[21] Michelle Keir, personal communication with unpaid carers, 2024
[22] Connecting Carers, Annual Report 2023-2024 compared with Scottish Government, 2023. Carers Census, Scotland, 2023-24
[23] Placement data compared to Wellbeing Fund Data, 2025

3. Participation & Collaboration

1

What We Heard [24]

"I should be included – I know my wife better than anyone" – Unpaid carer 10

"Services are designed around my mum, and I don't matter."-Unpaid carer 11

"Carers that are parents don't matter."- Unpaid carer 12

"I am never involved in decisions made even though they affect me" - Unpaid carer 13

2

Where We Are Now

1. **Limited Carer Participation in Decision-Making:** Carers' voices are not consistently included in service planning and development, leading to services that may not fully align with their needs.
2. **Fragmented Collaboration:** Existing collaboration between key stakeholders, lacks cohesion and integration.
3. **Digital and Accessibility Barriers:** Many carers face challenges in participating due to digital exclusion, geographic isolation, or lack of awareness of engagement opportunities.

3

Where We Want To Be

- **Inclusive Participation Opportunities:** Provide accessible and diverse opportunities for carers to participate.
- **Streamlined Collaboration:** Foster a unified approach among stakeholders, including commissioned services, health boards, local authorities, and community projects.
- **Carers as Equal Partners:** Ensure carers are recognised as equal partners in care and actively involved in decision-making processes at both local and strategic levels.

4

How We Plan To Get there

Involve

Carer-Centric Approach

Use regular feedback from carers to refine support services, to meet diverse needs and priorities.

Building collaborative networks

Strengthening uniformity in the information and advice cross-sector, to better communicate, support, fund and improve carer wellbeing.

Feedback Loops

Conduct regular consultations with carers through surveys, focus groups, and community forums to gather diverse perspectives and insights.

[24] Michelle Keir, personal communication with unpaid carers, 2024

4. Variety & Choice Services

1

What We Heard[25]

"I should be included – I know my wife better than anyone" – Unpaid carer 14

"A list of services in my area for me to choose would be good "- Unpaid carer 15

"There are few choices where I live."- Unpaid carer 16

"I need a break, but a care home is not an option for my wife and that is all that is offered"- Unpaid carer 17

2

Where We Are Now

1. **Limited Respite Options for Carers:** Currently, there are no dedicated respite services exclusively for unpaid carers. Existing respite services are primarily focused on providing care home placements, which are geographically scattered and inaccessible for many carers.
2. **Under-utilisation of Self-Directed Support (SDS):** While SDS Option 1 payments could offer carers greater flexibility in accessing tailored support, this option is underutilised due to low awareness and limited allocation of resources.

3

Where We Want To Be

- **Empowered Choice Through SDS:** Supporting carers to understand and navigate SDS options that work for them, enabling carers to access services that meet their unique requirements.
- **Diverse and Accessible Offerings:** Develop respite services, including community-based options, in-home support, and short-term breaks, ensuring services are available across the Highlands.
- **Improved Awareness and Reach:** Increase awareness of available respite options and SDS funding through targeted communication campaigns.

4

How We Plan To Get there

Support

Develop local respite services

Work with local providers and PAs to implement respite services, focusing on accessible and flexible options within their local communities.

Better utilisation of funding

More holistic approach to funding avenues that empower carers to access personalised and flexible respite solutions.

Raise awareness for routes to respite

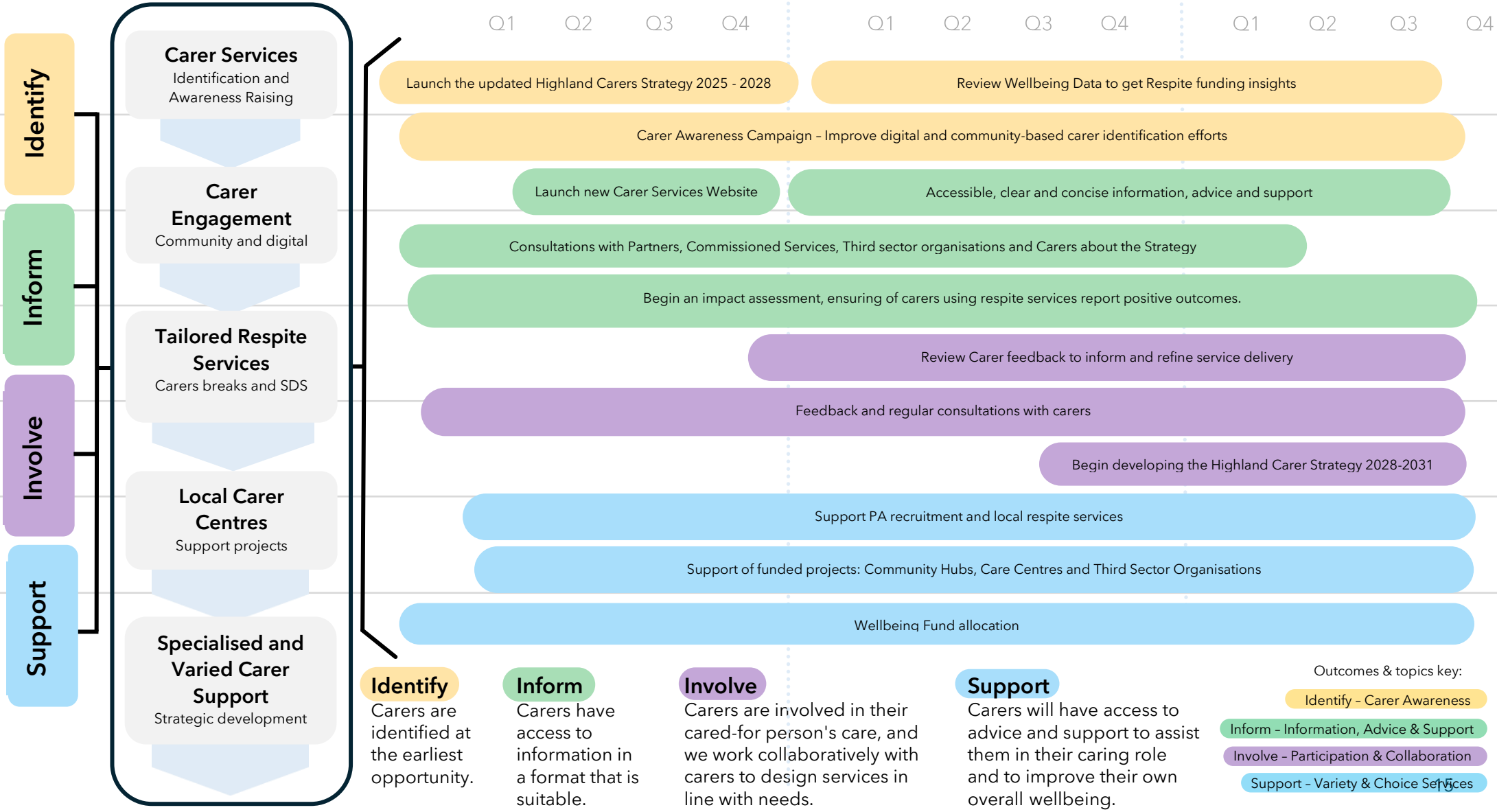
Empower carers about their rights, services, and how to access funding. Provide clear signposting to ensure carers understand their options in making informed choices.

[25] Michelle Keir, personal communication with unpaid carers, 2024

6. The Highland Carers Strategic Roadmap

Our goal is to ensure unpaid carers in the Highlands are supported to have a life, alongside caring.

Agile Framework for Achieving Strategic Goals



Identify
Carers are identified at the earliest opportunity.

Inform
Carers have access to information in a format that is suitable.

Involve
Carers are involved in their cared-for person's care, and we work collaboratively with carers to design services in line with needs.

Support
Carers will have access to advice and support to assist them in their caring role and to improve their own overall wellbeing.

Outcomes & topics key:

- Identify – Carer Awareness
- Inform – Information, Advice & Support
- Involve – Participation & Collaboration
- Support – Variety & Choice Services

7. Our Shared Commitments

Highland Strategy 2022-27

Our population — **Our people** — **In partnership**

CARE WELL | ANCHOR WELL | STAY WELL

Identification & Awareness Raising

Ensuring carers are identified at the earliest opportunity and promoting awareness of their contributions and needs.

Statutory Support

Strengthening carers' rights and ensuring they have the legislative support needed to make informed decisions.

Community Supports & Signposting

Enhancing community-based support for carers to access information, support, and services.

Breaks & Wellbeing Initiatives

Involving carers in the design and development of policies and services. Acknowledging the importance of breaks.

National Carers Strategy 2022

1. Recognising, valuing, and involving carers
2. Health and social care support
3. Social and financial inclusion