



Highland Early Years Strategy 2025-2028



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Vision

To ensure high-quality, inclusive, and sustainable early learning and childcare (ELC) provision across Highland, where every child thrives through play, relationships, and meaningful learning experiences. Provided in partnership between Local Authority and PVI partners.

It is appreciated that for any strategy to be effectively implemented it must be built upon use of evidence and data, involvement of stakeholders and clearly defined impact measures. The Early Years' Service is committed to ensuring these key elements play a significant part in the success of this strategy.

Data Analysis

The ELC sector is subject to inspections from the Care Inspectorate and Education Scotland and can experience joint inspections where both scrutiny bodies evaluate the quality of the provision. The sector experiences higher levels of scrutiny.

Following the publication of Funding follows the child and the national standard for early learning and childcare providers: principles and practice, all ELC settings are expected to gain evaluations of good or better.

Currently the majority of settings meet the national standard with 76% of the 188 Local Authority and PVI settings gain good or better through external scrutiny conducted by the Care Inspectorate.

Each ELC setting tracks and monitors children's progress through structured observations and assessments across seven developmental areas: movement, coordination, routines, social development, play, language understanding, and language expression.

Our data shows that there is a gender and poverty related gap in our child developmental overviews. There is sustained recovery from the pandemic, and this is likely due to the persisting positive effects of structural interventions put in place in preceding years. However, the recovery is not evenly spread and does not reach all populations.

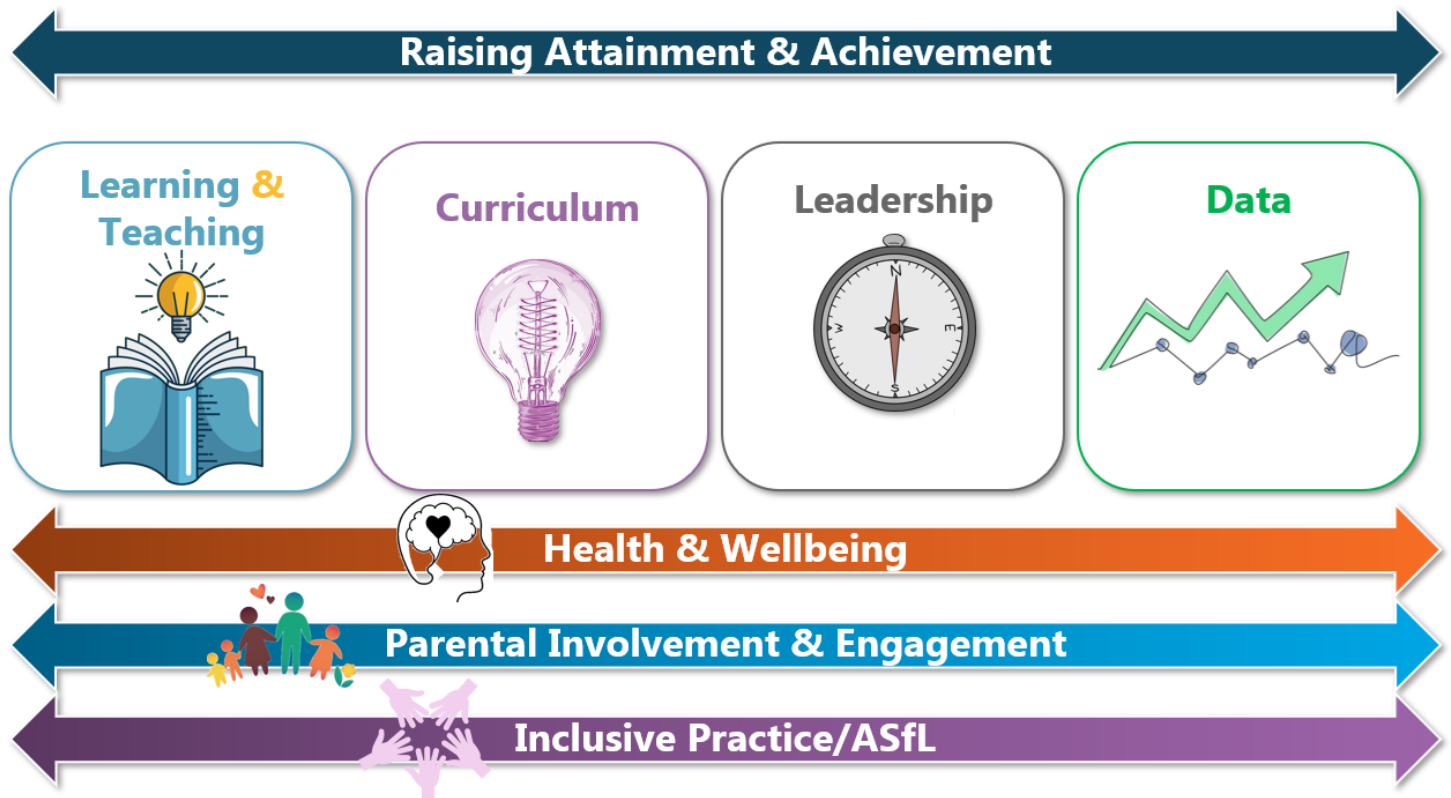
Addressing these issues is likely to require;

- a joined-up, data-led approach, where teachers and specialist services (including allied health professionals) work together and share information to support children and families with a detailed approach-up, data-led approach
 - a focus on high-quality interactions and positive relationships in settings, including continuing to use effective approaches for supporting children and behaviour for supporting children with quality interactions and positive relationships in settings

ELC Strategy

This strategy sits as part of the Highland Council's Raising Attainment and Achievement Strategy and aligns improvement outcomes detailed within the Education and Learning Improvement Plan.

The four themes and three foundation principles for focused improvement work are detailed in the visual below.



Over the next 3 years, the Early Years Service will focus on the following improvement outcomes that sit as subsets of the 7 areas above. Each year the Education and Learning Improvement Plan and the Early Years Service Plan will detail the actions that will be undertaken to ensure progress towards these outcomes.

Research shows that high quality experiences in the Early Years are crucial for lifelong health, learning, and wellbeing, forming the foundation for future success and reducing inequalities, especially for children in poverty. Therefore, it is important that the Early Years Service undertakes focused work specific to the sector through a strategy to guide and highlight the importance of setting a solid foundational level of learning and development for our youngest children.

The Quality Improvement Team, Early Years Team, PVI Managers and Practitioners across all settings as well as Partners have key responsibilities in delivering the ambitions set within this strategy. Collaboration and partnership work will be essential in the strategy's success.

Strategic Priorities

This strategy aims to strengthen practice across the Highland Council ELC sector by focussing on the following three high level strategic priorities:



1. Strengthen Leadership and Management Capacity

A Skilled and Collaborative Highland: Strengthening Leadership, Systems and Workforce.

We will work together to build strong leadership and management across our services, improve the systems that enable effective communication and collaboration, and invest in high-quality professional learning so that our workforce is confident, capable, and equipped to deliver improved outcomes for children, families, and communities.

2. Systems that support effective Collaboration and Communication

We will strengthen the systems and processes that assist clear, consistent, and timely communication across Early Years services. By improving how we share information, plan together and work in partnership with families, communities, and specialist services, we will support more coordinated and effective delivery of Early Learning and Childcare across Highland.

3. Workforce Development and Professional Learning Opportunities

We will strengthen Workforce Development and Professional Learning across Early Years by investing in a confident, highly skilled, and well supported workforce. Our approach will focus on ensuring staff have access to high-quality professional learning, opportunities for continuous development, and the tools they need to deliver nurturing, inclusive and high-quality Early Years experiences.

By working collaboratively across services, partners, and communities, we will build capacity, promote consistent practice, and support improved outcomes for children and families across Highland. Our approach will focus on ensuring staff have access to high-quality professional learning, opportunities for continuous development, and the tools they need to deliver nurturing, inclusive and high-quality Early Years experiences.

Workstreams arising from Outcomes and Actions

The following areas of work will be necessary to achieve our high-level strategic priorities:



Internal Governance

An Education & Learning, Early Learning and Children Strategy Steering Group has been created to ensure appropriate monitoring and evaluation of the strategy. This group meets termly to review progress, adjust workstreams, and scope future priorities.

Membership and Roles:

Role	Responsibilities
Chief Officer (Primary & Early Years)	Chair the group; ensure alignment with wider council priorities and strategic plans.
ELC Strategic Lead	Chair the group; Lead strategic planning and policy development for ELC.
Senior Manager Early Years	Operational leadership; oversee quality assurance and workforce development.
Early Years Educational Psychologist	Provide psychological expertise; support inclusion and wellbeing strategies.
Early Years Education Support Officer	Support curriculum delivery and pedagogy across settings.
Childcare Manager	Represent childcare providers; contribute to service delivery planning, operational focus
ELC Commissioner	Lead commissioning and contracting of PVI services; ensure value for money and service quality
Head Teacher	Represent school-based ELC settings; ensure integration with school improvement.
PVI Representative	Represent partner ELC settings

It is wholly accepted that partners play a key role in delivering the outcomes within this strategy. It will be crucial to work with partner agencies in support of children and families in the early years and so as the Strategic Steering group develops partners (such as CALA and Allied Health Professional) will be invited to participate as each outcome requires.

In year 1 of this strategy, it is anticipated that the focus will be on ELC settings and play across early level including P1. However, agendas running in parallel with this strategy will such as child poverty, employability and economy, childcare including breakfast clubs and School Aged Childcare will also be important to consider as they develop nationally.

Budget and Resources

- Existing funding streams
- Community grants
- Scottish Government funding streams when available such as Child Poverty Action Fund (CPAF)

Monitoring and Evaluation

- Termly Steering Group reviews
- Quality Improvement Activity
- Data-informed decision-making using tracking tools and inspection feedback
- Stakeholder feedback loops via surveys and consultations
- The Highland Early Years Strategy will be reported to Education & Learning Committee annually.

Legislative and Policy Context

Early Years, and specifically Early Learning and Childcare (ELC), are governed by a comprehensive suite of legislation, national policies, and statutory guidance. These frameworks establish the legal duties and expectations that shape high-quality ELC provision across Scotland. Key legislation and policy documents include:

Primary Legislation

- **Education (Scotland) Act 1980**
[Education 1980](#)
- **Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 – Part 6 (ELC)**
[C&YP2014](#)
- **Eligible Children – Specified Children Orders (2014, 2020, 2021)**
2014 Order (PDF):
[Eligible children](#)
- **Amendment Order 2020 (PDF):**
[Amendment](#)
- **Deferred Entry – 2020 Amendment Order**
(Automatic ELC funding for deferred children)
[Deferral](#)

- **Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000 – Statutory Guidance**
[Standards in Schools](#)
- **Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 – Section 96 (GIRFEC Wellbeing)**
[GIRFEC](#)
- **Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010**
[Consultation](#)

National Policy and Guidance

- **Funding Follows the Child & The National Standard for ELC Providers (2025 Guidance)**
[National Standard](#)
- **Funding Follows the Child – Principles and Practice (2018)**
[Funding Follows the Child](#)
- **Early Learning and Childcare Statutory Guidance (2014)**
[Statutory Guidance](#)
- **Child Poverty Strategy**
[Child Poverty](#)



The Highland Council
Comhairle na Gàidhealtachd