



ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Highland Poverty Commission Lived Experience Workshops

The Highland Poverty and Equality Commission
and Involve

COMPANION REPORT FOR THE HIGHLAND POVERTY AND EQUALITY COMMISSION



Highland Poverty Commission Lived Experience workshops

April - June 2026

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Executive summary

Between March and June 2026, The Highland Poverty and Equality Commission (the Commission) and Involve collaborated to run 6 workshops to support the Commission's research in identifying causes, consequences and solutions to poverty. A panel of 17 people with lived experience of financial insecurity was recruited in March and members joined three or more workshops of their choice on; access to services, housing, fair work, early years and education, financial security and working across public services.

Workshops involved speaker presentations followed by discussions between panel members. These discussions focussed on exploring panel members ideas, related to their own lived experience, and then developing calls to action for the Highland Council. Calls to action presented in this report have been only lightly edited to ensure we represent the calls as generated by panel members.

Across the workshops, in particular when exploring council services such as the idea of a mobile unit and housing services, it became clear that there is a difference between the Highland Councils view of their delivery of services, and the experience that residents have of those services.

- In session 1 members made calls under the following themes; a joined up database across services, hubs, information awareness and transparency, partnership working, a Mobile Service delivery unit, wider community transport, accountability and transparency.
- In session 2 members made calls under the following themes; affordability and tenancy sustainment, improving council customer service and support, location of and access to support and amenities, availability of and access to information, choice in housing, temporary accommodation provision, changes to the points system, modular homes.
- In session 3 members made calls under the following themes; holistic, longer term employment support, person-centred routes into work, clearer benefits and financial guidance, continuity of care and joined up support, local people benefitting from major investment.
- In session 4 members made calls under the following themes; widened learning environments, inclusive and welcoming schools, accessible childcare.
- In session 5 members made calls under the following themes; improved and flexible systems, energy pricing and support, energy companies, easy access to and understanding of support available in all areas.

These calls to action will be incorporated into the Commission's final report to Highland Council, published in June 2026. The Commission is asking Highland Council to coordinate partner responses in a single progress report by June 2027 with an interim response expected later this year. The Commission has said it wants to 'pass the baton' to people and places with direct experience of the issues covered. It encourages third sector partners to support a network of people in order to track progress, improve accountability and continue in the spirit of this Experience Panel.

Involve has two recommendations for next steps. Firstly a prioritisation process that the Commission or the Highland Council could use to implement these calls to action, looking at feasibility and timeline for actions. Secondly, further public participation should be completed at the local and regional level, to co-design and/or conduct public/user involvement around the governance of implementation.

Introduction

Highland Council established the independent Highland Poverty and Equality Commission (the Commission) in 2025 with a view to identifying causes, consequences and solutions to poverty – much of which is hidden and undocumented within the region’s diverse communities.

The Commission is conducting an evidence gathering process running from August 2025 to June 2026. In the work up to March 2026, the Commission identified six topics that they felt needed further exploration. These are; access, housing, working across public services, fair work, early years and education, and financial security.

Involve were asked to run a series of participatory workshops on each of these topics with residents in Highland to recruit a panel of people from across Highland with current or previous lived experience of financial insecurity. This report presents an overview of the discussions in the workshops and the calls to action developed by panel members.

Involve is the UK’s leading public participation charity, with a mission to put people at the heart of decision-making. Everything we do is driven by our values of collaboration, equality, independence, purpose and quality. Since our foundation in 2003, we have worked with the public and governments, parliaments, civil society organisations, businesses, and academics across the UK to support a vibrant democracy where people can shape the decisions that affect their lives.

Purpose of the overall project

Involve’s work brought together people with a range of experiences of financial insecurity in Highland to explore the causes and consequences of financial insecurity, examine ideas and to recommend practical, locally and experientially informed calls to action.

The calls to action will inform the Commission’s final report to Highland Council, helping to shape future action to address poverty and improve support for people experiencing financial insecurity.

Recruitment

Involve recruited 17 members to the panel from across the Highland Council area. This was achieved through a combination of online advertising, and recruitment through relevant partner organisations. 45 people expressed interest to take part in the panel. Involve completed quota based sampling to ensure that the panel reflected a broad range of people across, geography, age, gender, ethnicity, and experience of financial insecurity in and out of work. [Appendix two](#) summarises the panel demographics profile.

Onboarding and introductory workshop

Before the first workshop all panel members had a phone call with Involve colleagues. This was to ensure they had everything they needed to fully take part. We answered any questions about the workshops and where required, sent laptops and internet dongles and provided additional tech support.

We also ran a welcome evening workshop to introduce all members to the Panel. This involved:

- An introduction from the Commission Co-Chairs on the work to date, and an opportunity to ask questions about the purpose and scope of this project.
- Space for members to reflect with each other on how they feel to be part of the panel, and to share with one another their reasons for signing up. We supported members to explore both positive feelings and any worries.
- Co-developing conversation guidelines and expectations of one another during the discussions, and practicing how to productively have conversations including where there may be disagreement.

The Workshops

Workshops were held on Saturdays throughout May and early June. Six workshops were delivered, one for each of the themes. Panel members were asked to sign up to three workshops that felt most relevant to them to ensure a sharp focus on the topics.

Each workshop had a morning and afternoon session¹. The panel members heard from speakers from Highland Council, Commission members and wider organisations such as those involved in supporting people with energy, and access to employment.

Each session had a presentation from a speaker, followed by question and answer with the panel. The panel then spent time in facilitated discussions, focussed on developing their ideas and calls to action for the Highland Council. Calls to action were themes within the workshops and this theming was tested with members to ensure it accurately reflected what is important to them. Calls to action presented in this report have been only lightly edited to ensure we represent the calls as generated by panel members.

¹ The exception was meeting four on early years and education which only had a morning session

Workshop 1 - Access - Transport, Digital connectivity, Provision of public services

Purpose and inputs

Workshop 1 focused on access. This means access to public transport, availability and accessibility of public services such as healthcare, education, and digital connectivity.

Members heard from two speakers and had time for reflection and questions.

- Paul Reid, Chief Officer Facilities, Fleet & Transport, at Highland Council spoke about community transport and mobile service delivery.
- Jim McCormick Co-chair of the Highlands Poverty and Equality Commission spoke about the Poverty Commission's findings so far on the theme of access. With a focus on transport, access to digital services and access to wider public services.

Members then explored the following discussion areas and developed calls to action:

1. Trusted information sources.
2. How community transport and mobile units work for everyone in the Highlands and best reduce poverty?
3. How well panel members find services working now and what are their experiences around service access?
4. Access to employment and service support for employment.

Discussion themes

The overarching themes in this sessions' discussions was that effective collaboration is vital to deliver services that meet the needs of the rural area.

Members discussed the **need for joined up databases across all relevant services**. Most important was transparency, data confidentiality, security and a respect for privacy. Joined up databases were seen as the starting point within services towards a consistent and transparent user experience. Further, consistency and transparency were deemed important features of services in the general as well as in connections between elements of service provision.

In discussing support service hubs, members felt it was important for hubs to be located in areas that are accessible for people to get to, and that service continuity & liaison was prioritised to ensure a joined up experience for the user. They emphasised the importance of ensuring that multiple needs are addressed, and that conflicting needs can co-exist and be well managed in the same space.

The most trustworthy sources of information for many members were felt to be information delivered face to face. Members called for more in-person support to be available in part because

in person communication was felt to be strongly supportive of trust. When using online platforms to communicate information, members explained that they feel it is important to have strong security safeguards, and for information to be clear, with in-person support still available for those who may need it.

The idea of mobile units was supported in principle with a number of concerns and caveats.

Members felt that the proposals did not take into account the rural scale of the highlands. They called for a realistic assessment of what it would take to make this work in regards to deliverability, scale and additional requirements needed (such as transport to the mobile units), and realistic success criteria being set, to manage expectations during a pilot phase.

When discussing wider community transport, members highlighted the importance of availability and access across wide-ranging needs. Members once again raised the importance of joined up and reliable services. In particular to ensure that remote villages (often the most underserved) are included in transport plans, and stronger communication and coordination between transport providers and public services and clear signage and digital information. Members also called for transparency of plans, and local consultation with those affected by poor transport, at the planning stage.

Calls to action & recommendations session 1

These calls to action were developed by members in the session, they were themed in the session with participants and have only been lightly edited for reporting purposes. Where a point of interest is noted by Involve that did not come from the participants we have italicised the text.

Calls for - a joined up database across services

- **Ensure transparency** - This is key if you're going to do this. It needs absolute transparency over what you're sharing and who with, what you're consenting to and how it will be used. To ensure informed consent and prevent mistreatment or abuse of data.
- **Ensure confidential data sharing** - Create spaces where people can confidentially share experiences and data. Needs may vary for different people, for example a private room or quiet section. This was emphasised because some panel members had experiences of sharing data at the CAB or bank where it doesn't feel confidential, as it's often an open-plan space and people can hear you speaking.
- **Ensure data security** - There should be safeguards in place if lots of third party groups are accessing the same main database. There would need to be a mechanism for the person whose data it is to give consent to share each time there is a request. Otherwise it is not confidential. For example you wouldn't want someone in the housing department looking at your medical records. *It is notable that members suggested regular consent points rather than a one-time consent across all relevant services.*

Calls for - Hubs

- **Ensure continuity & liaison** - Make sure there's cooperation & communication between the different organisations working together to make sure it's a smooth and joined up service for the end user. For example: Having more things in one place is theoretically great, (and hubs should learn from existing good examples of this). However, the council will need to think about how to make sure that appointments are all booked on one day so that hubs are not just requiring people to travel back and forth to the same hub on separate days.
- **Make sure you're addressing multiple needs** - it's important to think about what clashing needs may be at play and make sure that these can exist in the same space. Members called for thought to be given to who's accessing the service and when, and where services will be located - e.g. thinking about accessibility and having private spaces available.
- **Make sure it's an accessible location** - that people are able to reach easily by public transport, with parking available, and in places where most people go. For example, GP surgeries, libraries and schools. Having more things in one place is theoretically great, there are already good examples of this such as libraries and financial advice being in the same building, but the location itself needs to be accessible.

Calls for - Information

- **Build more awareness** - Building more awareness about what is working and what's not working. If the council doesn't know what works for its residents they can't take action effectively.
- **Be transparent** - Let people know what is working. *This was emphasised for both council officers and the wider public.*
- **Bring back options for in-person information & support services** - these feel like more trustworthy sources and more accessible than online services. Members further suggested considering options for home visits for people who are housebound.
- **For online sources, make sure there are information safeguards in place, that things are clear and support is available** - e.g. making sure that information comes through a trusted secure link from e.g. a GP council. Or being able to go into the council office to use their facilities for people who have difficulties accessing things online.

Calls for - Partnership working

- **Start by partnership working within a service** - NHS connections were raised as an example to avoid where different parts of a system do not communicate together well.

- **Ensure continuity of care** - where services relate to care needs continuous care from the same practitioner as far as possible was seen as supportive. Especially when accessing mental health and related services where it can be difficult to open up.

Calls for - a Mobile Service delivery unit

- **Have realistic success criteria and development time** - Members questioned the criteria and timeframe for the service to be considered a success. They recommended that The Council needs to be realistic about what success looks like so that a pilot isn't seen as a failure because unrealistic expectations were set.
- **Realistic place based design** - members called for the Council to use what exists in each place already, and be realistic about the scale and complexity of the challenge with accessing services in general. They emphasised the importance that a mobile service takes into account hundreds of small villages and how difficult it is to get to central places like Wick and Inverness. Some members suggested a potential suitable design where there are designated days for villages/remote areas to access the hub and that co-ordinated transport is organised across that area on its designated day.
- **Think about the things outside the bus** - Members felt it was important that design considered how people get to the bus, where they will wait for appointments, and how people with physical limitations will be accommodated.

Calls for - wider community transport

- **A sustainable service** - there should be a long term commitment and regular funding to make sure it's a stable service.
- **Joined up public transport infrastructure**- Bus companies should co-ordinate to ensure services link across the different locations. Members described a good service as not needing to think about who the bus company is, you would just get on a bus and it works smoothly.
- **Design for people with varied needs** - e.g people who work shift patterns. Ordinarily community transport runs during daytime hours. In planning, community transport members asked that you think about different needs including; people who work early / late / weekend shifts; people with disabilities including adults, children, and pensioners. Strong communication should be prioritised so that people with diverse needs understand how the service can work for them. There should also be engagement so that community transport is designed with awareness of the diverse needs of current and future users.,
- **Include the most underserved remote villages** - ensuring that people who live in remote or scattered areas aren't left behind. For example with the mobile unit. Will it just be for Inverness?
- **Stronger communication and coordination between transport providers and public services** - share information - especially on service disruptions, to prevent people being

penalised for missing appointments, especially Universal Credit. Ensure service disruption does not penalise residents travelling to access public services.

- **Use clear signage and digital information** - follow the example of the central belt where digital signage at bus stops makes it clear when services are expected.
- **Include consultation with those affected by poor transport at the planning stage** - be transparent about plans and consult with people who are actually affected by these things. Members felt that a lot of the time bus companies make plans or arrangements directly with the Highland Council but not with the needs of the public or people who use the services.

Calls for - Accountability and transparency

- **Learn from failure, take accountability, and improve based on learnings.** Make sure that this is measurable, visible, communicated about, and meaningful - e.g. having audits to make sure that the calls to action are actually happening.

Workshop 2 - Housing - Affordable, Secure and Accessible homes

Purpose and inputs

Workshop 2 focused on Housing. This covered the affordability of housing, the long term security of housing, and housing that is accessible and appropriate for people's needs.

Members heard from two speakers and had time for reflection and questions.

- Alison Clark, Chief Officer Housing and Communities at Highland Council, spoke about housing in the Highlands and the challenges Highland Council are facing.
- Maureen Ross, Councillor for Tain and Easter Ross, spoke about the Poverty Commission's findings so far on housing, with a particular focus on housing supply, collaboration between housing providers, and key challenges emerging from the Commission's work.

Members then explored the following discussion areas and developed calls to action:

1. Affordability - what affordable housing means in relation to rent or mortgage costs, utilities, taxes, transport and access to services.
2. Tenancy sustainment - what helps people feel secure in their homes, including rent, energy costs, maintenance, job security and changes in personal or family circumstances.
3. Housing supply and access to support - what support and information is available for people trying to access housing, and where there may be information gaps.
4. Home energy - experiences of accessing locally relevant energy efficiency support, and the barriers to retrofit or other works being completed.
5. Housing security for people experiencing poverty - what support would help people experiencing poverty to have secure housing in the Highlands.
6. Modular homes - views on modular or container homes, including who might benefit, who might be left out, and how this would need to be adapted to work equitably.

Discussion themes

The overarching theme in this session's discussions was that housing security depends on affordability, choice, and support that reflects people's real circumstances.

Members discussed the need for **more affordable housing to be available all year round.**

Affordability was understood as more than rent or mortgage costs. Members also connected it to utilities, transport, access to services and the wider cost of living. Members highlighted the need for more affordable social housing, including for people in work, and raised concerns about the impact of holiday homes on the availability of housing during the summer.

In discussing **tenancy sustainment**, members felt it was important that people are supported to stay in their homes once housing has been secured. Members called for timely and equal access to repairs and upgrades for people in council housing. They also discussed the importance of making homes more energy efficient, so that people are better able to manage bills. Follow up support and ongoing maintenance were seen as important to make sure energy efficiency measures benefit residents in practice.

Members discussed **council customer service and housing support**, highlighting the importance of person-centred assessment. Members felt that people should be assessed based on their personal circumstances, rather than assumptions about their housing situation. They also called for more training for Housing Officers in empathy, communication and listening skills, and for pressure around quotas or numbers to be reduced so that support can focus on the resident.

Members discussed **location, access to support and amenities**, and highlighted the importance of making sure housing is connected to work, services, transport and local support. Rural and less connected areas were seen as particularly important to prioritise, as these are often places where there is less support and fewer housing options available.

Across **housing, home energy and tenancy sustainment**, members felt there should be more public information about what support exists, and that this should not only be available online. Members also discussed the need for support for people in council housing to understand what is available, how the system works and what timeframes apply.

Members discussed the need for **more choice in housing**. This included more options for single income households, people experiencing homelessness, and people who need to remain close to work, family or local support. Members also raised choice around energy suppliers in council housing, the ability to have pets in private rental accommodation, and removing the block on doing maintenance within six months of a mutual exchange.

Members highlighted **gaps in the housing points system**. They discussed the need for preventative support before people become homeless, and for the system to better recognise people who are working in an area and contributing to the local economy but are still unable to access housing there.

There was **mixed support for modular homes**. Some members were opposed, while others agreed in principle but wanted more detail on how and why this would work. If modular homes are taken forward, members highlighted the importance of local infrastructure, adequate storage, clear boundaries around homes and housing types that reflect the geography and climate of the Highlands.

Calls to action & recommendations workshop 2

These calls to action were developed by members in the session, they were themed in the session with participants and have only been lightly edited for reporting purposes. Where a point of interest is noted by Involve that did not come from the participants we have italicised the text.

Calls for - affordability and tenancy sustainment

- **Increase affordable social housing and support with housing costs for people in work -** Members highlighted that rent can be very high, particularly for the accommodation provided. This can create situations where people in work are worse off, because housing costs are less supported.

- **Provide affordable housing that is available all year round** - Housing availability should not be affected by properties being used as holiday homes in the summer.
- **Give subsidies or incentives for private landlords** - Incentivise private landlords to keep accommodation available for people who need housing during the summer period, rather than switching to holiday lets.
- **Provide timely and equal opportunities for repairs and upgrades in council housing** - Repairs and upgrades should not depend on where someone lives. Members felt access to repairs and improvements needs to be more consistent and fair.
- **Make homes more energy efficient** - Improve energy efficiency in council properties to reduce bills and help people stay in their homes. This could include measures such as solar panels, where unused energy could go back into the grid for the Council to use.
- **Make maintenance and support available for energy efficient homes** - Follow-up support and ongoing maintenance are needed to make sure energy efficiency measures work in practice and benefit residents over time.

Calls for - improving council customer service and support

- **Focus on the resident, not the number of houses or calls** - Support should be centred on the person and their circumstances, rather than targets or quotas. Members suggested independent auditing to help hold the Council to account in this area. Reducing number based pressures so that Housing Officers can focus on providing supportive, resident-centred help.
- **Assess people based on personal circumstances, not assumptions about their housing situation** - People should not be denied support because assumptions are made about what they can access or manage while in temporary accommodation.
- **Provide more training for Housing Officers** - Training should focus on empathy, communication, listening skills and continuous personal development. Members described feeling unheard when raising concerns and felt support should be more responsive.

Calls for - location, access to support and amenities

- **Make sure areas are connected between work, home and amenities** - Housing should be planned with access to work, services, transport and everyday amenities in mind.
- **Focus on rural areas first** - Rural areas often have the least support and need more social housing. Lack of housing in rural areas can affect mental health, access to work and people's ability to stay in their communities.

Calls for - availability of and access to information

- **Have more public information available on support that exists, not just online** - Information on home energy, housing supply and tenancy sustainment should be available in accessible places, such as high streets, open days, community hubs and mobile services.
- **Make sure online information and services work, with support available when they do not** - Online systems should not create dead ends. Where services are online, people

need support to use them, especially in areas with poor internet or phone signal.

- **Support staff in the Council's housing team to understand what information is available** - People need help to understand the system, what support exists and what timeframes apply, so they do not miss opportunities.

Calls for - choice in housing

- **Allow for more than one (social) housing option** - People should have two or three options where possible, so they can make decisions based on work, family and personal circumstances. People should be able to live in the place where they grew up, work, and have friends and family, rather than being forced to move away because housing is unavailable or unaffordable.
- **Provide more housing choice for people experiencing homelessness** - People should not have to leave their local area to access housing, as this can affect mental health, work and support networks.
- **Provide more accommodation for single income households** - Single people often need a one-bedroom property, but may only be offered larger properties because that is what is available.
- **Remove the block on doing maintenance within six months of a mutual exchange** - Members felt this rule does not make sense and should be removed.
- **Allow more choice over energy suppliers in council housing** - People in council housing should have more choice over who supplies their energy, as the Council rate is not always the cheapest option.
- **Allow options for pets in private rental accommodation** - Not being able to have a pet can severely limit choice and availability for people who need to rent privately.

Calls for - temporary accommodation provision

- **Expand council temporary accommodation, such as council owned B&Bs** - More council owned temporary accommodation would help people while they are waiting for permanent accommodation. Members noted that shortages in temporary accommodation are adding to the wider housing crisis.

Calls for - change to the points system

- **Address gaps in the points system** - The current points system can leave people unable to access housing if they are working and do not have illness or disability-related points.
- **Consider whether someone is working in and contributing to an area** - The housing points system should recognise whether someone works in an area and contributes to the local economy, so they can access housing where they work.
- **Put preventative support and systems in place before people become homeless** - Support should be available before crisis point. There should be a separate points system for people who are close to homelessness or already homeless, so they are prioritised.

Calls for - modular homes

- **Provide more detail on how and why modular homes would work** - Members wanted more information before being able to support this approach.
- **Make sure infrastructure is in place** - Modular or container homes should not be introduced without amenities, schools, doctors, shops, support services and transport. Without this, they could increase inequality.
- **Design housing for the geography of the Highlands** - Housing should not be based on assumptions from other parts of the UK. The Highlands has different geography, latitude and climate, which should be considered in housing design.
- **Make sure there is enough storage** - Modular homes should include essential storage, such as wardrobes and cupboards.
- **Ensure proper boundaries around each home** - Each home should have clear and appropriate boundaries.

Workshop 3 - Fair work

Purpose and inputs

Workshop 3 focused on Fair Work. This means opportunities to get work, the security and stability of work, and the reward of work.

Members heard from two speakers and had time for reflection and questions.

- Calum MacPherson, Commission member and Chief Executive Officer of Inverness & Cromarty Firth Green Freeport, spoke about the Poverty Commission's findings so far on Fair Work. This included barriers to accessing work, opportunities to get work, job security, wages and in-work benefits.
- James Dunbar, Chief Executive of New Start Highland, spoke about the support currently available for people in work or looking to get into work, and the challenges around this in the Highlands.

Members had time for reflection and questions with speakers. Then panel members discussed questions related to each presentation and developed calls to action.

Members then explored the following discussion areas and developed calls to action:

1. How to connect employers who need staff with people who cannot find work
2. What stepping stones can support people who are out of work to move back into jobs
3. How well the benefits system is understood when people stop support and restart work
4. The challenges people experience when they are in work, including job security and the impact of work on their financial situation

Discussion themes

The overarching theme in this session was that fair work depends on the ability to access the right support, at the right time, and in a way that reflects individual needs and circumstances.

Members discussed the need for **more holistic, longer term employment support**. Support was felt to be needed from the Jobcentre and the Council, rather than relying too heavily on the third sector. Members highlighted the importance of in-person support, better signposting, and person-centred help that responds to specific and individual needs.

In discussing **routes into work**, members felt that support needs to be tailored and people may need different stepping stones before moving into employment. Confidence, skills, experience, health, location, digital skills, caring responsibilities and the type of work being sought can all affect support needs. Members discussed the importance of career advice, confidence-building and training that reflects the needs of parents, carers, older workers and people with health conditions.

The benefits system is a major factor in whether work feels financially worthwhile. Members highlighted the need for clearer guidance on how work, hours and earnings affect Universal Credit

and other support. They also raised concerns about people being worse off when moving into work because of transport, childcare, housing, energy costs and benefit reductions.

Continuity of support is important. This includes access to longer term one-to-one support, being able to stay with the same caseworker, and having support available between appointments. Members also felt that support workers should sit within multidisciplinary teams, so that people are not passed between different services and continuity is maintained if a worker is unavailable.

Members discussed **the role of the third sector in providing employment support.** While members recognised that the third sector provides valuable support, they also raised concerns about short-term funding and a lack of continuity. Members felt that if the third sector is expected to provide support in this area, longer term funding is needed.

Members also discussed how **local people can benefit from major investment in the area.** They felt that local jobs should be more visible and better advertised through places people already use, such as job centres, community hubs, local groups and service points. Members also discussed the need for training routes for local people, requirements for new employers to hire locally, and the impact that new jobs and incoming workers can have on housing availability and affordability.

Calls to action & recommendations workshop 3

These calls to action were developed by members in the session, they were themed in the session with participants and have only been lightly edited for reporting purposes. Where a point of interest is noted by Involve that did not come from the participants we have italicised the text.

Calls for - holistic, longer term employment support

- **Provide more holistic, longer term support from the Jobcentre and Council** - Support for people accessing employment support should not rely too heavily on the third sector. People need support that is joined up, person-centred and available for long enough to help them move into, and stay in, work.
- **Improve signposting to wider employment support services** - Signposting should not only be to Citizens Advice. People should also be directed to organisations that can provide employment support, training and practical help, such as APEX, Triage, Skills Development Scotland and local support hubs.
- **Provide more in-person support** - Information should not only be available online. Support should be visible and accessible in places people already use, including clear signposting in Jobcentres.
- **Improve training for people working in the Jobcentre** - Training should support staff to understand complex needs, listen well, treat people with respect, keep people updated and direct them to the right support. This would help prevent people being passed back and forth between the Jobcentre and external organisations.

Calls for - person-centred routes into work

- **Provide person-centred support that reflects individual needs** - Support should recognise that different people need different stepping stones into work, depending on confidence, skills, experience, health, location, digital skills, caring responsibilities and the type of work being sought.
- **Personalise support around interests as well as need** - Employment support should not only focus on what jobs are available, but also what someone is interested in and what kind of work they may be able to build towards.
- **Provide confidence-building support** - Being out of work for a while can increase anxiety and reduce confidence. Employment support should include help to rebuild confidence as part of the route back into work.
- **Provide more careers advice for people changing careers** - Careers advice should be available for people of all ages, including people over 60 who may need support to transition in their career.
- **Provide tailored routes into work for parents, carers, older workers and people with health conditions** - Support should reflect people's circumstances and the barriers they may face when trying to access or remain in work.
- **Support single parents and single income households with the costs of working** - Support should help with costs such as bus passes, canteen vouchers and childcare. These costs can make starting work more expensive and can leave people worse off financially.

Calls for - clearer benefits and financial guidance

- **Improve guidance and support on the benefits system** - People need clearer information about how work, hours and earnings affect Universal Credit and other support. This should include follow-up support, not just one-off advice.
- **Make self-employment easier to navigate** - Provide clearer information on Universal Credit, HMRC, expenses, income rules and the risks of unstable earnings for people who are self-employed or considering self-employment.
- **Make work financially worthwhile** - Address the combined impact of low pay, insecure hours, short shifts, transport costs, childcare, housing, energy costs and benefit reductions, so that people are not worse off when they move into work.

Calls for - continuity of care and joined up support

- **Place support workers within multidisciplinary teams** - This would improve connections across different specialisms and help maintain continuity of care if a support worker is on leave or unavailable.
- **Provide longer term funding for third sector support** - If the third sector is relied on to provide employment support, funding needs to be longer term. Short-term funding can make support feel temporary, inconsistent or like a tick-box exercise rather than individualised help.
- **Increase access to long term one-to-one support** - People should be able to stay with the same caseworker where possible, rather than being passed between different people. Support should stay in place until people are in employment and feeling

confident at work.

- **Make support available between appointments** - Caseworkers should be available for ad hoc support between scheduled appointments, so people can get help when issues come up.

Calls for - local people to benefit from major investment

- **Require new employers in the area to hire locally** - New employers, including those linked to Green Freeport jobs, should be expected to create opportunities for local people.
- **Create training opportunities for local people** - Provide training routes so people in the area can gain the qualifications needed for new jobs and progress into better-paid work.
- **Protect local housing from pressure linked to new jobs and tourism** - New jobs, incoming workers, contractor accommodation, holiday lets and North Coast 500 tourism can increase pressure on already limited housing. Stronger controls on non-local rents, contractor housing and short-term lets would help local people access housing and remain in the area.
- **Make local jobs more visible** - Advertise jobs through Jobcentres, community hubs, local groups, Facebook groups, service points and other places people already use. Make better use of job platforms where people can upload a CV and receive alerts about suitable vacancies.

Workshop 4 - Early Years and Education

Purpose and inputs

Workshop 4 focused on Early Years and Education. This theme covers early learning and childcare, the cost of the school day, family and community learning, and positive destinations after education.

Members heard from one speaker and had time for reflection and questions.

- James Cook, Head Teacher at Cawdor Primary School, spoke about the Poverty Commission's findings so far on Early Years and Education. This included current challenges faced by people in the Highlands, and possible future solutions around childcare and family learning.

After the presentation, members had time for reflection and questions. Panel members then discussed questions related to the presentation and developed calls to action.

Members then explored the following discussion areas and developed calls to action:

1. **Childcare that meets community needs** - including distance from home, hours available, cost, and other barriers or needs.
2. **Experiences of schools and educational environments** - including whether these feel welcoming, easy, challenging, smooth or frustrating.
3. **Family learning that meets community needs** - including format, content, providers of family learning, and how support can work for different families.

Discussion themes

The overarching theme in this session's discussions was that early years and education support needs to better reflect the needs of children, families and local communities.

There was significant focus on a need for a **more bespoke approach to individuals in education**. This included discussion about children with Additional Support Needs (ASN), children who struggle in mainstream settings, and the need for more funding, experienced staff and earlier intervention. Members recognised that for those whose children 'fit in' to the system and have no additional support needs, school can work well, but when they do not, schools are not well equipped to meet diverse needs. One member had several children and described each as a different journey through education in the same school. Several members discussed difficulties in accessing supportive diagnostic processes for their children which further exacerbated issues within schools.

Members discussed **family learning and community support**, including the need for learning to be more flexible and accessible to different families. Members also highlighted the importance of investing in local community spaces where family learning, children's activities and informal support can happen.

Schools should be, but are not, always welcoming spaces, according to discussions. This can be influenced by how schools communicate with parents and guardians, how parents can be supported to understand and access activities, and how parents can come together to support children's learning. Members also raised points around life skills, school food, incentives for young people and links between schools and youth clubs. Some members had personal experiences of being treated in an unwelcoming way by a school, including while trying to advocate for their child's needs. For several members this was felt as being linked to assumptions made about them based on class indicators such as the area where they live.

Members discussed **childcare**, with a focus on availability, affordability and access, particularly in rural areas. Members raised concerns about whether free childcare hours can be used in practice where there is not enough childcare available.

The childcare workforce and wider infrastructure was seen as centrally important to good childcare provision. This included fair pay, contracts and progression for childcare and support workers. In the dispersed rural communities of the region, better transport to childcare locations, local childcare hubs, and financial support from the Council to increase access to additional activity clubs was seen as essential. One member explained that her son is eligible to access an after school club but that it is a 70 mile round trip, and the transport infrastructure does not enable this.

Calls to action & recommendations workshop 4

These calls to action were developed by members in the session, they were themed in the session with participants and have only been lightly edited for reporting purposes. Where a point of interest is noted by Involve that did not come from the participants we have italicised the text.

Calls for - widened learning environments

- **Invest in local communities** - Invest in community spaces where family learning, children's activities and informal support can happen. Community-led groups need long-term funding, not just short-term projects. Family learning needs community buy-in and spaces where people feel they belong and want to take part.
- **Make family learning more bespoke and longer term** - Provide a range of family learning styles and activities, and consider how family learning can reach people who do not feel comfortable in groups. Family learning needs to be long term, especially where families are dealing with intergenerational poverty, trauma, addiction or negative experiences of school.
- **Consider the individual needs of children in wider learning environments** - Move away from one-size-fits-all approaches and create more flexible learning environments for children who struggle in mainstream settings. This could include quiet spaces, active spaces and support for neurodivergent children. Children should be involved appropriately in conversations about their needs, diagnosis and support.

Calls for - inclusive and welcoming schools

- **Tackle breakfast club stigma** - Normalise breakfast clubs by making them open to all children, so families are not judged and children are not singled out.

- **Explore longer school-day models that include practical support** - Longer school days should not just extend classroom learning, but could include breakfast, dinner and practical food learning. *One member raised this in their group explaining how the longer school day focused on learning had been a rejected idea but that they thought it should be a longer school day that provided non academic space. This included provision of meals and was seen by members as a key way to remove the stigma seen in accessing breakfast clubs by integrating it within the standard day that everyone attends.*
- **Increase learning on life skills in school** - Teach children practical life skills that can help prevent poverty continuing for future generations, for example cooking skills.
- **Improve food in schools** - Improve the quality of school food, with more focus on nutrition, care and enjoyment. Members suggested bringing back school chefs and cooks so children can have home-cooked meals made with care.
- **Create spaces for parents to get together to support and advocate for learning** - Provide more regular opportunities for parents to understand what children are learning, discuss how children can progress, and support learning beyond the curriculum.
- **Support parents to understand and access activities available** - Provide more support for parents to navigate local activities. For example, schools could share lists of local activities and talk to parents about what is available.
- **Support schools to work with youth clubs** - Primary schools and academies should work with youth clubs, which can provide important opportunities and experiences for young people.
- **Increase positive incentives for young people to work towards achievements and manage behaviour** - Create more positive incentives for children and young people to work towards, alongside better options for teachers to manage disruptive behaviour.
- **Provide more funding and experienced staff for Additional Support Needs** - Make sure schools have enough skilled staff and infrastructure to support children with Additional Support Needs, including neurodivergent children. Schools should also draw on local expertise from parents and others where appropriate.
- **Improve understanding of Additional Support Needs and behaviour** - Make sure children with additional needs are not simply labelled as “naughty”, as this can affect the support they receive.
- **Provide earlier intervention for children with Additional Support Needs** - Delayed diagnosis or lack of early support can have long-term effects on children and families. Schools need to work better with parents and children so children understand their own needs and are included in conversations about support.

Calls for - accessible childcare

- **Increase incentives for more people to work in the childcare sector** - Improve pay, contracts and progression for childcare and support workers. Incentivise more people to become qualified in childcare, including people who may want to provide smaller-scale childcare locally.

- **Provide financial support to increase access to additional activity clubs** - Support additional clubs and activities that can help with childcare and reduce reliance on schools. This could include volunteer-run hubs focused on sports, arts and crafts. The Council could support this by providing training to volunteers for this so that they can gain skills needed for example - supporting PVGs and essential training such as safeguarding, health and hygiene, and working with autistic children.
- **Increase availability of childcare so free hours can actually be used** - Increase childcare availability, especially in rural areas, so that families can use the free childcare hours they are entitled to.
- **Increase local hubs for childcare** - Use local hubs as places where childcare and related support can happen.
- **Invest in better, more affordable transport to support rural childcare** - Make it easier and more affordable for children to travel to and from childcare locations, school clubs and activities.

Workshop 5 - Financial Security

Purpose and inputs

Workshop 5 focused on financial security. This means income maximisation, cost of living pressures, debt reduction, emergency financial support, transitions between benefits and employment, savings and credit, and energy costs. Energy was a key focus of the workshop at the request of The Commission having noticed this is a key element of financial security in the region.

Members heard from two speakers and had time for reflection and questions.

- Richard Gale, Commission member and Councillor for East Sutherland and Edderton, spoke about income maximisation, access to entitlements, Universal Credit, gaps in support and wider cost of living challenges.
- Natalie Bird, Affordable Warmth Advisor at ALI Energy, spoke about fuel poverty, energy costs, energy tariffs, and the specific challenges facing households in rural and off-gas areas.

Members then explored the following discussion areas and developed calls to action:

1. Experiences of unexpected costs and emergency financial support
2. What support is needed when moving between benefits and employment
3. Whether savings and credit through a credit union would be useful
4. Experiences of energy tariffs and support to access the right tariff
5. How Highland Council could support people with energy bills
6. What a successful off-gas tariff could look like for households not connected to the gas network

Discussion themes

The overarching theme in this session's discussions was that financial security depends on support being clear, accessible and flexible enough to meet people's real circumstances.

Members discussed **unexpected bills and emergency costs**, including situations where people just manage their monthly expenditure and then face a sudden cost, such as replacing or repairing an essential household item. Some members shared personal experiences of this. It was described as incredibly stressful and members explained that they had accessed credit, or found a second hand seller eventually but had struggled significantly. Members noted that support does exist for these situations but described experiences with this kind of support as difficult. Application processes were complicated and slow, which was a source of frustration when help is needed urgently. Members also raised concerns that some people can be disqualified from emergency financial help by financial position, even where they still cannot afford the emergency cost.

Universal Credit was seen as both a source of support and a source of financial insecurity.

Concerns were raised about deductions, changing payments, uncertainty around entitlement, and the amount of evidence or explanation people are asked to provide. Members also discussed the financial risk of moving from benefits into employment. Starting work can involve costs before

wages are received, including transport, equipment and childcare. Members felt that there is not enough support between a person's last benefit payment and their first wage, and that people can be worse off when they start work, especially where hours or wages are uncertain. The five week wait upon moving onto Universal Credit was unanimously viewed as a source of financial insecurity and one that some members had experienced.

Credit unions and savings were seen as potentially useful, but not straightforward for everyone. Credit unions were seen as a possible alternative to high-cost borrowing, but members felt more information is needed about how they work, who can join, how to apply and how repayments work. Savings were discussed with some caution. Some members felt credit unions could help people save, even in small amounts, while others noted that saving is not realistic for people already struggling to cover food, heating or other essential costs. One member had experience with a credit union in The Republic of Ireland and described this as a positive experience. However they explained that they needed to be introduced to the scheme by someone who was already a member and to borrow money they would need a guarantor. Many members reflected that these conditions would make a credit union inaccessible to them.

Energy tariffs and energy costs were broadly seen as confusing. Some stayed on the tariff they are on because they felt there is too much effort in changing tariffs, and uncertainty about whether cheaper tariffs will remain so in the future. One member had been told they could not access certain tariffs because they required a smart meter, and smart meters do not always work well in Highland areas. Others raised concerns about smart cards/key cards not updating balances as expected or unexpectedly dropping a balance.

Access to unbiased energy advice was viewed as a vital step to overcome these challenges.

In discussing **off-gas households and local energy**, members highlighted the higher costs faced by people who are not connected to the gas network, and the lack of clarity about how off-gas tariffs work. Members also reflected on local renewable energy generation and fuel poverty. They questioned why communities in areas producing renewable energy do not always see lower costs or more direct benefits for example when a wind farm is built in the local area 'to reduce energy costs' but that is not realised locally. Some members had direct or indirect (through friends) experience of social housing being fitted with solar panels that are then not connected. One member had direct experience of this and said they had asked many times for advice on how to connect the panels but this had not been received. It was notable that although a high percentage of households in the region are off-gas, this was not the case with panel members in this session with most being connected to the gas network.

Calls to action & recommendations session 5

These calls to action were developed by members in the session, they were themed in the session with participants and have only been lightly edited for reporting purposes. Where a point of interest is noted by Involve that did not come from the participants we have italicised the text.

Calls for - improved and flexible systems

- **Keep records up to date** - Keep clear records of who has already received support and when, so support can be better coordinated and people do not have to repeatedly explain their situation.
- **Simplify the application process for emergency and financial support** - Reduce waiting times for decisions and provide plain language guidance throughout the process, so people can understand what is happening and access support more easily.
- **Make Universal Credit more flexible when people move into work** - Develop a graded or tapered system, rather than a fixed threshold, so people can increase their working hours without immediately losing a large amount of support. Include a longer transition period, so people have time to settle into work and understand whether the job is sustainable before support is reduced or removed.
- **Provide practical and financial support for people moving into work** - Provide help with upfront and ongoing costs linked to getting work, such as bus passes, work clothes, equipment, courses and confidence-building. This should also recognise that people who are working can still be struggling financially, especially where wages are low, hours are uncertain or essential costs are high.
- **Increase investment in skills training and apprenticeships** - Invest in skills training and apprenticeships to help people move into better-paid work and improve longer-term financial security.

Calls for - energy pricing and support

- **Explore whether renewable electricity prices can be separated from gas-linked pricing** - Consider whether renewable electricity could be priced differently, so that areas generating renewable energy can benefit from lower electricity costs.
- **Develop ways for Highland communities to benefit more directly from local renewable energy generation** - Work with wind farm developers and community benefit funds to increase direct financial benefit for local communities. This should not only be available to support local community projects but could be governed locally with the option for profits to reduce bills in the community.
- **Reduce costs for off-gas households** - Match or reduce prices for off-gas areas, so households not connected to the gas network are not facing higher energy costs. *Although members broadly supported this idea they also felt they needed more information on this.*
- **Work with energy suppliers to reduce tariffs in areas with known fuel poverty** - Secure reduced-price tariffs for areas where fuel poverty is known to be high.

- **Expand Emergency Fuel Vouchers and Crisis Grants** - Increase support to reflect the higher cost of living and the number of people needing help with fuel and wider crisis costs.

Calls for - energy companies

- **Make sure energy installations are future-proofed and genuinely benefit people** - Ensure solar panels, air source heating and other installations are properly planned, maintained and designed so residents benefit from them over time.
- **Create a local energy support team or company** - Develop a team or local company that provides energy advice and support, helps make energy systems more affordable, and gives communities more control over how local energy works.
- **Work with energy companies to improve communication and support** - Encourage energy companies to communicate more directly with residents and provide support through routes such as workshops or local advice sessions.
- **Review the impact of smart meters and smart cards on people in Highland areas** - Examine how well smart meters and smart cards work for residents, and whether they are creating additional issues for people managing energy costs.

Calls for - easy access to and understanding of support available in all areas

- **Provide mobile information hubs in areas with limited access to advice** - Bring information and support into places where there is no Citizens Advice, library or other local advice point.
- **Build wider awareness of financial and energy support in general** - Create a basic information pack with advice and resources, alongside wider promotion through billboards, social media, leaflets/newsletters, Citizens Advice, community spaces and high street locations.
- **Make information on emergency financial support clearer and easier to find** - Set out what emergency support is available, who can access it, how to apply, what information people need to provide and how long decisions are likely to take. This should be written in plain language and shared through trusted local routes.
- **Provide clearer guidance for people moving from benefits into work** - Explain income gaps, debt, first wage timing and how work affects Universal Credit. People need to understand what will happen financially before and during the transition into work.
- **Improve information and awareness around credit unions** - Explain how credit unions work, who can join, how to apply, how repayments work and how savings interact with Universal Credit rules. Promote this information through trusted local routes, including Council newsletters, community spaces and Citizens Advice.
- **Improve communication around energy tariffs** - Provide clear information from Highland Council and energy suppliers about tariffs, including the difference between

gas and off-gas tariffs. This should help people understand what tariff they are on, what other options are available and where to go for advice.

- **Create or support schemes for refurbished household items** - Support access to essential domestic items and furniture, such as cookers, fridge freezers and washing machines, either through a new scheme or by supporting existing schemes.

Workshop 6 - Ways of Working

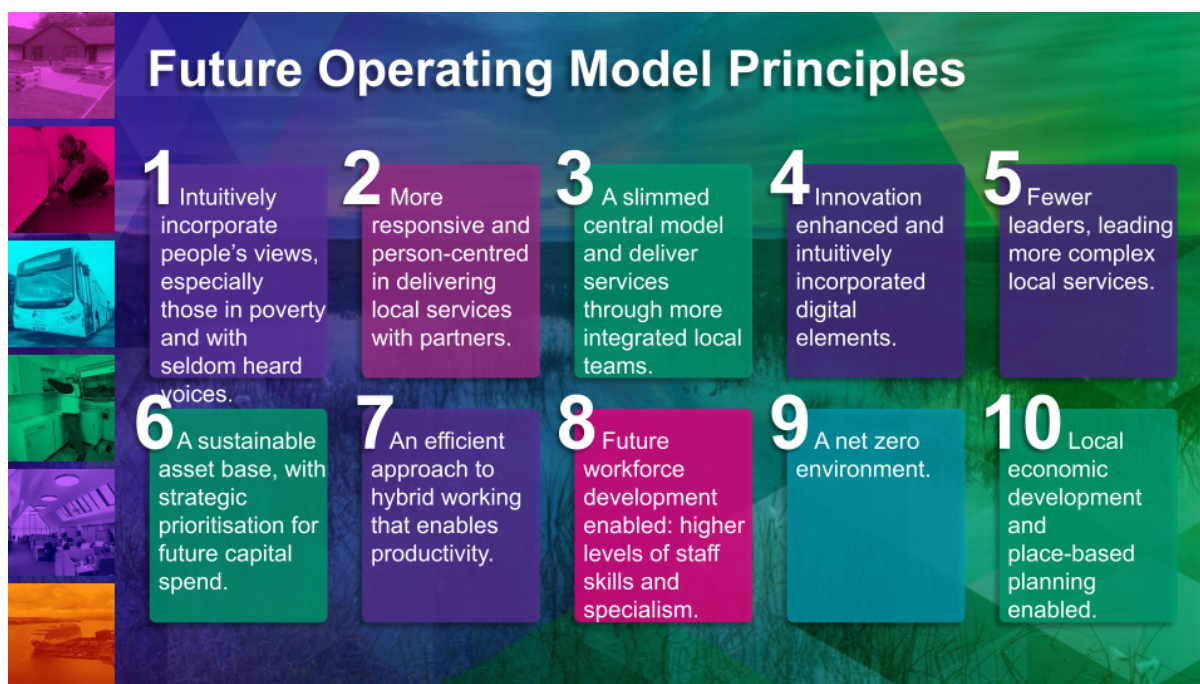
Purpose and inputs

After scheduling the initial five workshops on access to services, housing, fair work, early years and education, financial security and working across public services; The Commission asked Involve to deliver a further sixth workshop on ways of working with The Council. We were able to provide this additional workshop on 6 June and due to reporting timelines this is a separate report specifically for this session.

Workshop 6 took a slightly different approach to the initial five topic focused workshops. At the request of Highland Council we used the morning of the workshop to think about The Council's 10 'ways of working' principles. These principles were introduced by Derek Brown, CEO of Highland Council. Participants then worked into small groups to explore:

1. How well these principles work in general for the public i.e., are they clear and accessible for a public audience
2. What might these principles mean for The Council's work on poverty and equality
3. Applying these principles to a project example - the mobile delivery unit (a project that is currently in development to provide a single point of service bus that travels to rural communities).

Figure 1; the 10 principles introduced to the panel



In the afternoon Maggie Cunningham, co-chair of The Commission introduced some ‘bright spots’ - examples seen in the wider work of the commission which they feel are working well to tackle issues of poverty and equality. Bright spots covered were;

- Skye and Lochalsh Council for Voluntary Organisations (SLCVO) monthly drop-in events
- The Easter Ross Health Group support team of charity and public sector professionals providing support in the area
- The Flip The Coin support service led by a local GP and community researcher providing social prescribing activities

The panel reflected on these examples in general before discussing which they would choose to roll out, why, what needs to be considered in rolling out these kinds of projects more widely, thoughts on the public/ charity partnership model, and how potential service users can be more involved.

This workshop additionally incorporated warm up reflections on what good communication from the council would look like, and closing reflections on what it is meant to members to be part of the panel.

This report will present the discussions from each part of the day. While calls to action were not codeveloped with members in this session in the same way as the previous five meetings, clear actions or ideas that came out of discussions are highlighted in bold within their respective sections below.

Insights in summary

Panel members’ reflections highlight two clear priorities: a need for consistently respectful, plain-language communication (with reliable follow-up and easy ways to reach the Council), and for services to be designed around what people in different places actually need—especially in rural and lower-income communities, so that support is accessible, joined-up, and locally responsive.

Insights from the check-in; what does good communication from Highland Council mean to you

As a warmup exercise members were asked to reflect on what good communication from the Highland Council looks like, they said that it is;

- Clear, consistent and honest
- Plenty of information available
- Not in business jargon
- With options available for when English is not the first language
- Information on funding and spending on council services
- Receiving update brochures for their tenants. Albion housing was given as an example who provides a yearly brochure with updates on what they are doing in plain language and with engaging elements like an activity page for children.
- Face-to-face communication available because it feels more personalised
- Follow-ups to any issue are initiated by the council for example - where housing repairs are passed on to a third party contractor, The Council should follow up to make sure works have been completed satisfactorily.

They also reflected some issues that they have seen in communication from Highland Council which include:

- Getting hold of people to speak to in the council is very difficult - major improvement
- Not being told when they're going to empty bins on a bank holiday
- Phoning them is a challenge - e.g. phone > put on hold > goes through to the wrong line > goes back on hold
- Contacting them feels confusing and trying to get through on the phone is 'hellish'
- Difficult to get hold of to fix issues with a new build property

Despite more of a focus on problematic communication one member did share a positive experience with the housing emergency repairs team, where someone was out to help them with an issue within 20 minutes of reporting.

Reflections on the Principles

Members reflected on the principles that stood out to them. The discussions were led by what stood out to members so some principles have more extensive reflections than others.

Principle 1: Intuitively incorporate people's views, especially those in poverty and with seldom heard voices

Clarity of the principle itself

Members were unclear what this principle means. They felt it should be reworded to 'layman's terms'. They particularly questioned what it means to "intuitively incorporate people's views" - some people felt this was a way of The Council saying they will guess what people want. "Seldom heard voices" was also questioned. Participants were unsure whether this meant people are not speaking up, or that they are speaking but are not being listened to.

For the purpose of further discussion facilitators summarised this principle as being about 'listening better to people'.

Reflections on what this principle means to Panel Members

Equal opportunities to be listened to

People in poverty need to be heard properly, not treated as less important than people who are seen as easier to deal with or more financially secure. Many members recounted experiences of not being listened to as council tenants. It was also noted that people in rural communities often feel less heard and have fewer opportunities to influence decisions.

Calls to action:

Good incorporation of people's views means:

- Everyone is heard
- There are more opportunities to be included in decision making with The Council.

Principle 2: More responsive and person centred in delivering local services with partners

Reflections on what this principle means to Panel Members

To provide more responsive delivery, services should have flexible opening hours to fit different work patterns.

The 'local' part of this principle was important to members who were keen to understand what "local" means in practice here. For many people, especially those without a car, local services can still be difficult to reach because of limited public transport, and therefore the closer services can be to communities the better.

Principle 3: A slimmed central model and deliver services through more integrated local teams

None of the groups chose to reflect generally on this principle.

Principle 4: Innovation enhanced and intuitively incorporated digital elements

Reflections on what this principle means to Panel Members

Some members expressed caution around digital elements. They explained that currently, The Council website can be difficult to navigate, with examples of incorrect phone numbers, broken links and outdated information.

Calls to action:

Video calls are one way to improve access where travelling to services is difficult. This was described as a better level of service than a phone call.

Principle 5: Fewer leaders, leading more complex local services

Reflections on what this principle means to Panel Members

Panel Members were positive about the potential for this to enable a shift of resources away from senior management and towards frontline services. There was a general consensus that there are currently too many senior roles compared to frontline staff. Increasing frontline staff would also be felt to enable better understanding of service demand, waiting times, and who is accessing what. However, it was also noted that it is important that accountability and oversight are maintained. Fewer leaders was seen as a route to better communication between teams. One participant reflected that lack of coordination between services had led to them being housed in an area that was unsafe for them at that time which had a directly harmful impact on their well-being.

Calls to action

- When funding is available, recruit more staff into frontline roles.
- The Council and housing associations should work more closely together, sharing what works and improving communication between services.
- The Council and other support services should work more closely together to coordinate support.

Principle 6: A sustainable asset base, with strategic prioritisation for future capital spend

Clarity of principle itself

One group looked at this principle and none of them were sure what the wording meant. However at another point in the discussion they started to discuss issues of assets and resources and were therefore steered to reflect on this principle. It is noteworthy that although members had a lot to say about assets and resources, the wording of this principle meant that they were unable to see the relationship between this principle and the things that matter to them.

Reflections on what this principle means to Panel Members

There was a strong theme of optimising the assets that the council have now in order to provide better services to tackle poverty and equality. Providing services in central hubs in community owned buildings was seen as both financially sensible for The Council and helpful to communities.

Calls to action

Reduce duplication across buildings and services, with more joined-up use of public spaces to save money and make help easier to access. This could include for example finding ways to open school gyms and libraries for broader public use. This should be particularly considered when the opportunity arises to design spaces from the start – this would allow the possibility to build in entrance systems that allow for mixed access.

Principle 7 - An efficient approach to hybrid working that enables productivity

Most participants prefer face to face interactions. However overall the nature of the interaction (whether in person or remote) did not seem to matter as much as Being treated with respect and compassion. The potential for zoom meetings to replace some face-to-face meetings was

therefore not dismissed outright as long as the overall interaction was respectful. Zoom was seen as preferable to phone calls.

Principle 8: Future workforce development enabled: higher levels of staff skills and specialism.

Clarity of principle itself

Some members felt the principle was clearer than others in the way it was written, while others still felt that it was unclear.

Reflections on what this principle means to Panel Members

Employment opportunities and barriers in general were discussed in response to this principle with members stating there is a need for more accessible and flexible employment opportunities, and a stronger focus on creating fair work, with more opportunities for young people.

Rural transport was raised as a major barrier to employment, with limited bus services making it difficult for people to get to work, particularly at weekends.

Members reflected that skilled staff in Council roles should be an expected minimum but many highlighted a skills gap they have noticed in communication. One member of the panel described an experience where staff in the housing team had spoken to them in a rude and dismissive way. Other members of the group agreed with the overall theme of being spoken to poorly by staff in the housing team. It was raised that this is not all of the staff but notable that it is so many that this was recognised by most Panel Members.

Calls to action

- Tenants should receive respectful communication and staff should receive communications skills training. Frontline staff need the right skills to listen, communicate respectfully and respond properly to people's circumstances.
- Communication between Council teams and partner organisations also needs to improve, as support and Council liaison from social workers, NHS staff or other professionals does not always lead to action.

Principle 9: A net zero environment

Some Panel Members felt less clear about what this principle means in practice and what actions the Council is taking. However some felt it should be given greater priority and made more visible within the overall approach.

Principle 10: Local economic development and place-based planning enabled

Panel Members felt the wording of principle 10 is complex and struggled to apply this to the things that are important to them.

Example - Applying the principles to the mobile delivery unit project

Before applying each principle to the project, members reflected in general on what they like, concerns or limitations, and developed calls to action for this mobile hub service to work well in practice. It should be noted that some but not all members had attended the previous workshop (workshop one) where this project was first introduced and some of the ideas here are a development of that discussion. However some members were not part of meeting one and were able to bring new perspectives.

How can this project be delivered well in the Highlands to overcome challenges of poverty and inequality?

Panel members are in agreement that this is a good idea and one that will work especially well for areas that do not have access to services or have poor services. E.g. poor public transport, weak phone signal, poor internet, or limited access to service points.

There were however concerns that one bus will not be enough to cover such a large geographical area and meet the level of demand. To overcome this Panel Members suggested that:

Calls to action

- **Expand other existing mobile delivery units to include other services - e.g. library and mammogram mobile units.**
- **Have a clear repeating rota so people know when the unit will be in their community and carefully plan the route to minimise time travelling.**
- **The service should be tested properly over time, and with adequate resourcing, and not stopped too early because of issues that arise from having only one mobile delivery unit.**

Principle 1: Intuitively incorporate people's views, especially those in poverty and with seldom heard voices

The services the bus delivers needs to be designed for what people actually need. This should be

achieved with ongoing conversations with communities to understand which services are needed most and where the bus should be prioritised. This is particularly important for rural and remote communities whose needs may otherwise be overlooked. By working with local community facilities (e.g. schools) as the bus moves around, the service can incorporate resident engagement.

Principle 2: More responsive and person centred in delivering local services with partners

The service should be flexible and designed around the needs of different communities. There should be clear communication about available support and follow-up arrangements so people know what happens next if their issue cannot be resolved during the visit.

Calls to action:

- Respond to the needs of communities.
- Have consistent staffing where possible - the same staff in the same communities.

Principle 3: A slimmed central model and deliver services through more integrated local teams

The mobile delivery unit was seen as a great example of this principle - bringing services directly into communities where access is currently limited. It responds directly to concerns around long journeys to access support especially where services

Principle 4: Innovation enhanced and intuitively incorporated digital elements

Onboard Wi-Fi could help people access online services and information. Staff could support people with navigating The Councils' online systems and understanding how to access services digitally.

Principle 5: Fewer leaders, leading more complex local services

Resources should be focused on frontline delivery and services that have a direct impact on communities and senior roles should focus on adding value and delivering results.

Calls to action:

Consider how to maximise the skills of high performing staff to benefit delivery of the service.

Principle 6: A sustainable asset base, with strategic prioritisation for future capital spend

Village halls were highlighted as an important community asset that could support this project with the mobile delivery unit working alongside the services provided within village halls.

This principle also prompted members to question how the long-term funding of the unit was being secured.

Principle 7 - An efficient approach to hybrid working that enables productivity

This principle was seen as less relevant to the mobile delivery unit, and although some members of the panel had previously said that some services could be delivered through zoom, most participants prefer face to face interactions rather than remote.

Principle 8: Future workforce development enabled: higher levels of staff skills and specialism.

Panel members saw this principle linking the to the mobile delivery unit in two ways; firstly to coordinate with work and skill support for residents; and secondly to link with employment, skills and training opportunities for Highland Council staff in the areas covered.

In respect of staff skills within the mobile delivery unit, members emphasised that the most important thing is that the staff are skilled in what they do and that they have good communication skills and act compassionately towards all users.

Principle 9: A net zero environment

Members suggested that environmental impact should be considered from the outset, and that there should be transparency about environmental benefits and trade-offs rather than just a tick-box exercise.

It was suggested that the money saved by providing the mobile delivery unit can be used to provide flood defence solutions to areas that are prone to flooding. However one member suggested that those who live in flood prone areas should be moved.

Some participants felt frustrated to discuss net zero targets when thinking about the mobile delivery unit, they felt it should be electric or hybrid but that net zero targets should not matter so much in the design of the bus when its contribution towards net zero targets would be so low.

Principle 10: Local economic development and place-based planning enabled

The local focus of this principle prompted members to express some concern around the limited number of buses and how that will impact the quality of services that is provided to communities across the highlands. It was also noted that the needs of different communities across the Highlands varies, and the services provided in one location may not be the same as those provided in another.

One group struggled to see this principle as relevant to the role of the mobile delivery unit at first. Derek Brown was asked by the facilitator to explain options for how this could work e.g. with local business support integrated into service support. One member explained that they had viewed the mobile delivery unit as primarily for delivering health services - members agreed in general that local economic support could be a benefit of the bus but did not feel equipped to discuss that in further detail.

Bright spots

Members reflected on the 'bright spots' - examples where projects are working well to tackle issues of poverty and equality:

- Skye and Lochalsh Council for Voluntary Organisations (SLCVO) monthly drop-in events
- The Easter Ross Health Group support team of charity and public sector professionals providing support in the area
- Flip of The Coin support service led by a local GP and community researcher providing social prescribing activities

What stands out about these examples?

Discussions began by reflecting on what stands out about these examples, members highlighted:

- **Social prescribing** feels like a really positive approach and there are significant opportunities to build on this locally - engaging with people rather than taking the route of using medication.
- Bringing **services together in one place** stands out as a simple way of making support easier to access and navigate rather than having to approach multiple organisations separately.
- **Intergenerational activities** stood out as particularly valuable and something that feels increasingly important going forward.
- The value of creating **welcoming, informal spaces where people can connect** with support and with each other. The Flip the Coin example highlighted the benefits of creative and community-led approaches to wellbeing, although there was recognition that not all areas have access to facilities such as outdoor spaces next to GP practices.
- Strong **partnership working** between the NHS, council and third sector organisations was seen as a real strength. There was recognition that the third sector plays a hugely important role, but also some caution about over-reliance on a small number of organisations or individuals. There can be a risk that services reflect the priorities of organisational leaders rather than a broader range of lived experiences.

One Panel Member has experience of the Flip the Coin service and explained how it has benefited them. They attend having been referred by their GP and benefit from the social inclusion and wellness activities which are easy to engage with. They also explained that by receiving bespoke support while at a general service that supports a range of people, stigma is reduced as nobody needs to know exactly why any one person is attending. However despite one Panel Member having such a positive experience with this service, another Member from the same area mentioned never having heard of it despite potential benefits to them. This highlights the importance of multiple channels of access and awareness amongst support services in the area in general. Another member reflected that these are good examples but they have had poor experiences of services delivered by charities so expressed apprehension. They explained that they were receiving support from a charity at one point and then didn't hear from them again after a while. They felt let down and neglected

What would you choose to roll out and why?

The panel was asked to discuss which of these examples they would choose to roll out, Why, and what would they want to consider in rolling these examples out more broadly. One small group focused on community hubs in general and another small group focused on the Flip of the Coin model.

Community hubs - why

Community hubs were the strongest area of interest for one group because multiple services and organisations available in one place would make support simpler and easier to access.

Community hubs - how

Members discussed the elements that they felt made up a successful community hub:

- **Citizens Advice** should be included within community hubs, alongside **health, wellbeing and practical support services**.
- **Consistent and regular** provision rather than a one-off intervention.
- Addresses the needs for **young people** to access advice, develop skills and connect with employment opportunities.
- **Food banks** within community hubs, particularly in rural communities where support options can be limited.
- **Transport support** to help people access services and opportunities.

Members described existing community-led initiatives, such as breakfast clubs that have continued despite funding ending, demonstrate both the demand for these types of projects and the commitment of local people to sustain them.

Supportive services (similar to Flip the Coin) - why

In one group there was a strong focus on this option because of the member who had positive experience of this service which provided useful insight to discuss this service further.

Supportive services (similar to Flip the Coin) - how

Members discussed the elements that they felt made up a successful community hub:

- **Confidentiality** is a major concern, especially in small communities where gossip or being recognised can stop people seeking help. One member explained how they would not feel able to use a service like this or seek help in their community because of concerns confidentiality could be breached in a small community. They said that for them to have confidence in the confidentiality of the service they would require someone independent (i.e. not from a service they are currently receiving support from) who could be trusted to have their personal details and circumstances kept fully confidential. They would require assurances around confidentiality.
- Provide shared spaces where a **wide range of activities and services** are delivered, so people can access support without stigma or anxiety.
- Increase access to **one-to-one support**, especially for sensitive situations where people need privacy and confidentiality around their identity, circumstances or support needs.
- Be aware that **some multi-user spaces can be triggering**. This was particularly noted that for people in recovery or dealing with addiction seeing other addicts can be problematic for them especially if they are at different points of their recovery.
- **Highland council to engage more third sector** parties to provide more support services to their residents.
- The location where support services are delivered must be a safe space that is fully **accessible with compassionate and friendly staff**.
- **Wide promotion of the service**. Individual support services should also take ownership of advertising their services to create more awareness in communities. Highland council should roll out a monthly / weekly newsletter, with a section dedicated to local services, groups and support available in each area. Communication should be broad and repeated, because people may miss information even when it is available.. Most locations within the local

community are welcoming to supporting the advertisement of local support services. The services should therefore take advantage of these opportunities.

Developing similar services with residents

The panel concluded the bright spots conversation by reflecting on the role of service users and people with lived experience to develop such services. There was strong support for this to make sure that service support aligns with the needs of the people who would use it.

Calls to action:

People with lived experience should help shape and deliver services, alongside trained professionals to be able to deliver holistic support to the support recipients.

There was also a feeling that many people want to create, lead or participate in community hubs and local initiatives but do not know where to start. This is already happening and could be built upon with established groups sharing experience and advice. More practical guidance would be helpful on how to establish community hubs, secure funding and sustain activity over time would be helpful.

Call to action:

Have a dedicated outreach team that could travel across the Highlands to support volunteers and communities with setting up and managing hubs.

Check out reflections on having been part of the panel

As the final workshop of the panel members checked out by reflecting on what has worked well, what could be done better, and what they are going to take away from having been part of the panel.

Member reflections on what worked well are summarised here in their own words:

- The way information was presented (slides etc), concise information and easy (to a certain extent) to understand, things that felt less clear were broken down to layman's terms
- Everyone had a fair chance to speak and engage with quieter ones of the panel
- Wide demographic of people
- Everyone has been respectful to each other
- Couldn't pick a better team
- Thought the amount of people in workshops didn't feel overwhelming but did have a good mix of opinions
- Facilitators allowed us to engage (I am introverted and everyone has allowed me room to speak)

Member reflections on what they are taking away from having been part of the panel are summarised here in their own words;

- Enjoyed the Saturdays and learnt new things - hope we get some feedback and see how things develop going forward!

- I felt listened to and learnt stuff! I hope to chat with everyone again one day.
- I learned a lot and has been an eye-opener! New to the highlands and discussed the housing issues - found it informative
- A good experience and have enjoyed it - a lot to take away. Insightful and looking forward to seeing what is discussed and what changes are going to be implemented (hope it's worthwhile)
- Nice to meet different people and to know you feel heard and included in a project like this
- Really good experience and really enjoyed it - getting point across and speaking about subjects
- Want to see outcomes of these workshops
- Having been part of this panel has been an experience. As a young adult, I don't have much of an experience in these things, but have gained lots of information and will learn a lot from it!

Many members reflected that they're going to have to find something new to do on Saturdays.

Next steps

This report will be shared with the Highland Poverty and Equality Commission. The Commission will be publishing its report to the Highland Council in June 2026. The Commission is asking Highland Council to coordinate partner responses in a single progress report by June 2027 with an interim response expected later this year. The Commission has said it wants to 'pass the baton' to people and places with direct experience of the issues covered. It encourages third sector partners to support a network of people in order to track progress, improve accountability and continue in the spirit of this Experience Panel.

If you would like to find out more information about the progress of these calls to action you can contact: Alison.Clark@Highland.gov.uk

Finally, Involve recommends that two additional steps are needed following this series of workshops:

Firstly, Involve would recommend a prioritisation process that the Commission or the Highland Council could use to implement these calls to action. This would involve two parts. Assessing the calls to action for things that the Council can act on, or can't act on. If they are for others to act on then the Commission or Council would share this report with those others. Secondly an assessment of if Calls to action are quick wins or longer term? For quick wins the Council would look at feasibility and quick implementation, and for the longer-term calls to action, the council would look at planning for this.

Secondly, Involve would recommend that there is further public participation at the local and regional level. This would be to co-design and/or public/user involvement around the governance of

implementation at the scale of both local projects and potentially the further work of the commission overall.

Appendix 1 - Place based insights arising through the panel

The following are written down directly from workshop members' comments.

Place based transport insights

- It feels that all areas around Inverness struggle for transport. A lot of the funding is given to Inverness the main city but not further out.
- Some places like Wick only have 2 trains per day.
- It's a challenge for parents with kids who can only rely on community transport. People can't rely on public transport in Alness.
- We need volunteers around Alness, there are no community bus services.
- Near Stornoway, 9 times out of 10 only 2 buses per day. The further north the worse it gets.
- The A9 is increasingly closed. Maybe 20 times per year, which affects the reliability of buses.

Mobile service bus insights

- The bus could be in Wick all day but that is no use without improved public transport to get to Wick. There are people in around 28 villages within a 5 mile radius who wouldn't be able to get to Wick.
- Looking at Caithness & Sutherland, maybe 200 villages have huge problems. Even 20 mobile service buses are going to be a drop in the ocean.

Third sector support

- **Intermittent funding and support leads to reduced trust in 3rd sector organisations** - A lot of support is covered by the 3rd sector. People are often highly paid at the top, and then people on the ground are temporary staff. But it's short term support, with very little continuation and it feels like it's run like a business. Panel members gave examples of organisations receiving lottery money, and lots of support started. It felt like this support wasn't able to continue because of a lack of funding or resources to run the services.

Employment

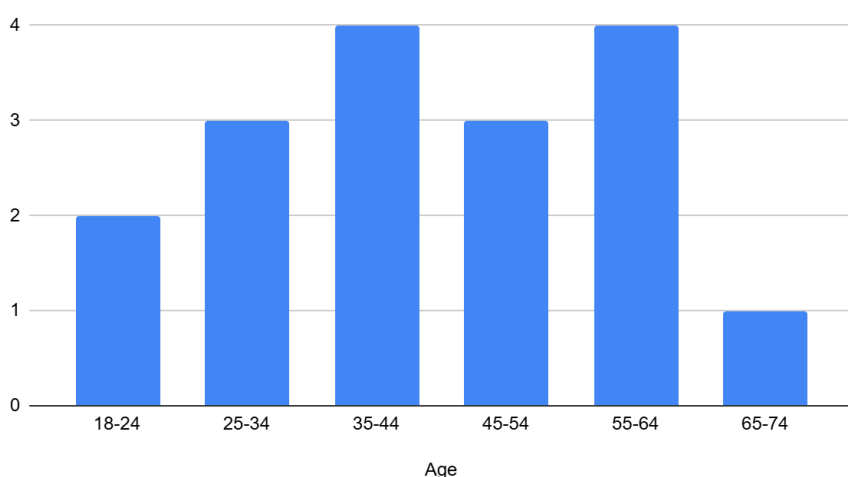
- In **Caithness**, poor public transport and poor roads in winter means companies won't take employees unless they are very local to the work place, as Wick to Thurso and vice versa is often impassable.

Schools

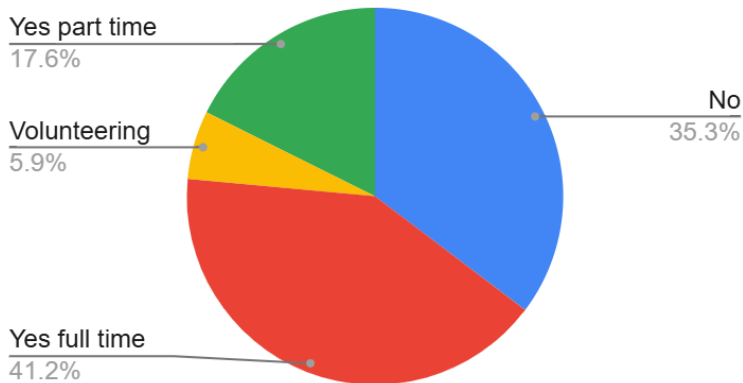
- Members commented that at some primary schools they feel that teachers have lost some of the tools that they used to incentivise good behaviour, such as school trips, other valuable and fun educational activities. Members are concerned about what this means for incentivising good behaviour.

Appendix 2 - Panel member demographics

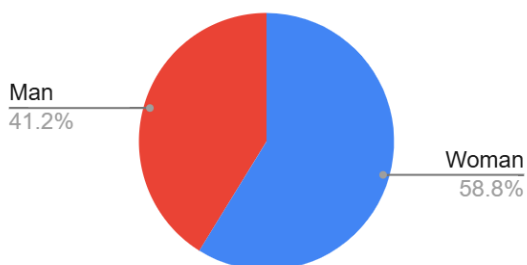
Age



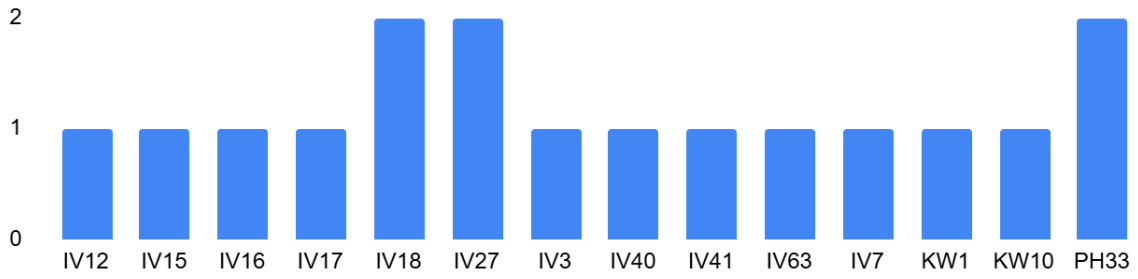
Employment



Gender



Postcode



Ethnic background

