Item 3.6

NHS Highland

Meeting	**Highland Health & Social Care Committee**
Meeting Date	**05 November 2025**
Title	**Chief Officer Assurance Report**
Responsible Exec/Non-Exec	**Arlene Johnstone, Chief Officer**
Report Author	**Arlene Johnstone, Chief Officer**

1. Purpose

To provide assurance and updates on key areas of Adult Health and Social Care in Highland

2. Access to NHS Dental Services in Highland

At the Primary Care Dental Services Planning Group meeting held on 14 August, concerns were raised regarding access to NHS dental services across Highland. The group noted that the closure of General Dental Practitioner (GDP) practices, such as the one in Gairloch in January 2024, reflects a wider challenge in recruiting and retaining dentists throughout the region. This issue is also evident within the Public Dental Service, which continues to experience persistent vacancies across its network of clinics.

These workforce shortages are significantly impacting the availability and sustainability of NHS dental care, particularly in rural and remote communities.

The Scottish Government has acknowledged the urgency of this issue in the NHS Scotland Operational Improvement Plan 2025–26. The plan commits to reviewing dental workforce capacity to support equitable access to services across Scotland. It was confirmed that existing financial incentives and eligibility criteria will be refreshed and more strategically targeted, with recommendations expected following the conclusion of work by the Board Chief Executives' Dental Services Reference Group by the end of December 2025.

It is anticipated that these measures will help strengthen the sustainability of NHS dental services and improve access for communities across Highland. NHS Highland will continue to engage with national developments and advocate for solutions that support dental service provision throughout the region.

3. Care Home Collaborative Team – Strategic Update

The Care Home Collaborative Team continues to strengthen support for care home residents across Highland through a coordinated, multi-professional approach. Initially supported by non-recurrent funding, the programme focused on training, wellbeing, and targeted improvement work, including:

- Enhancing meaningful activity
- Reducing hospital admissions linked to stress and distress

- Improving admission and discharge experiences
- Establishing peer support networks and access to Turas
- Providing wellbeing funding for resident-led initiatives

With funding now baselined, the Collaborative is transitioning to a permanent hub-and-spoke model. The core hub team will include occupational therapy, physiotherapy, and nursing, supported by linked professions such as pharmacy, speech and language therapy, health protection, social work, and stress and distress specialists.

This work is fully aligned with national policy, particularly the *Healthcare Framework for Adults Living in Care Homes* and the Scottish Government's guidance on enhanced collaborative support. The approach reflects national priorities around integrated, person-centred care, multidisciplinary working, and prevention.

The next phase will focus on embedding governance, assurance, and quality improvement frameworks, with a continued emphasis on reducing risk and adult protection concerns. This will ensure robust support for care home providers and improved outcomes for residents.

4. Adult Social Care

The Care Inspectorate improvement notice for Sutherland Care at Home has now been formally concluded, with all required actions met. This reflects the significant progress made in service quality and compliance. While the notice has been removed, improvement work will continue to ensure sustained standards and ongoing development.

The Adult Social Care Finance Plan, endorsed by both Chief Executives, sets out a two-track approach to achieving financial sustainability:

- Track 1 – Financial Recovery: Concentrating on immediate measures to manage in-year financial pressures and stabilise budgets. This includes tighter vacancy management, review of high-cost care packages, improved use of commissioned capacity, and ensuring that care is delivered in the most appropriate and cost-effective setting.

- Track 2 – Service Redesign and Sustainability: A medium- to longer-term transformation programme aimed at creating a more efficient and sustainable model of care. This includes redesigning in-house Care at Home and Care Home services to improve efficiency, exploring new delivery approaches to increase capacity, and aligning investment towards prevention and early intervention.

This work is being approached collaboratively and with a clear focus on sustainability, recognising the ongoing pressures on workforce and demand. Assurance mechanisms are being increased to monitor progress and ensure that service improvements are embedded and responsive to local needs.

In parallel, I am working with the Chief Social Work Officer and the Director of Nursing to review the governance and assurance arrangements for quality in care homes. This review will consider current structures, reporting lines, and escalation processes to ensure a coherent and robust approach to quality assurance across both in-house and commissioned provision.

5. Vaccination Service Update

The Autumn/Winter 2025 COVID-19 and Influenza vaccination campaign began on 15 September across Highland HSCP. Vaccinations are being delivered to school-aged children in schools, and to eligible adults through community clinics, care homes, and home visits. The campaign aims to vaccinate approximately 72% of the estimated 100,000 eligible adults by 20 December 2025, with full campaign windows extending to 31 January 2026 for COVID-19 and 31 March 2026 for flu.

The delivery model integrates seasonal vaccinations with routine childhood and non-routine immunisations. While operational progress is steady, the campaign faces challenges including workforce shortages, logistical complexity, and competing service priorities. October to December remains the peak pressure period, with risks around staff availability, adverse weather, and rural delivery logistics.

Mitigations include active recruitment of bank staff, partnership support from the Scottish Ambulance Service, and prioritised scheduling for the most clinically vulnerable groups. Weekly operational reviews are in place to monitor progress and trigger contingency actions where needed.

Risks to delivery remain, particularly if additional staffing cannot be secured or if external factors disrupt clinic operations. These risks are being actively managed to maintain momentum and ensure coverage targets are met.

Work is ongoing to develop the new Hybrid Vaccination Delivery Model, which will support long-term sustainability and flexibility. Negotiations with the Local Medical Committee (LMC) regarding the childhood vaccination specification are on track for completion in early November. The senior team remains in regular contact with both Public Health Scotland and the Scottish Government.

It is anticipated that full rollout of the hybrid model will be phased throughout 2026. This phased approach is intended to ensure safe implementation, allow for workforce and infrastructure adjustments, and minimise disruption to existing services during transition.

6. Staffing Updates

Primary Care

- Dr Stephen McCabe, Clinical Director for Primary & Community Care, will retire at the end of October following a distinguished career serving the population of Skye and the wider Highlands. Over the past three years, Steve has been a valued member of the HHSCP leadership team. We extend our thanks and best wishes for a happy and healthy retirement.
- Emma Rollo, Primary Care Manager, will leave the Primary Care Management Team in early November. Emma has been part of the team since its establishment in late 2019 and will be relocating to Lancashire to continue her career in General Practice. We wish her every success in her new role.

Mental Health & Learning Disabilities

- Carol Spratt has moved into the role of Interim Associate Nurse Director, having previously served as Service Manager for Adult Mental Health.
- Naomi MacKay has taken up the role of Interim Service Manager for Adult Mental Health, transitioning from her previous position as East and Mid Ross Team Lead.
- The Unscheduled Care Lead position has now been appointed, with the new postholder commencing on 27 October.

Communities

- On 29 September, two new staff members joined the Sutherland team: a Senior Charge Nurse (SCN) at Cambusavie Ward, Lawson Memorial Hospital, and the Registered Manager for Care at Home (C@H) Sutherland.