

Meeting: NHS Highland Board Meeting

Meeting date: 29 September 2026

Title: Winter Preparedness Planning Approach 2026/27

Responsible Executive/Non-Executive: Louise Bussell, Board Nurse Director; Arlene Johnstone, Chief Officer, Highland HSCP; Katherine Sutton, Chief Officer, Acute; Evan Beswick, Chief Officer, Argyll & Bute HSCP.

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1 Purpose

This is presented to the Board for:

- Assurance

This report relates to a:

- Legal requirement

This aligns to the following NHS Scotland quality ambition(s):

- Safe
- Effective
- Person Centred

This report relates to the following Corporate Objective(s)

Start Well		Thrive Well		Stay Well		Anchor Well	
Grow Well		Listen Well		Nurture Well		Plan Well	
Care Well	X	Live Well		Respond Well	X	Treat Well	X
Journey Well		Age Well		End Well		Value Well	
Perform Well		Progress Well		All Well Themes			

2 Report summary

NHS Highland is undertaking its winter preparedness planning for 2026/27. This paper outlines the proposed approach, aligned to Scottish Government planning expectations and NHS Highland's Urgent and Unscheduled Care priorities within the Operational Improvement Plan 2026/27

2.1 Situation

NHS Highland enters the winter period with sustained pressured across acute, primary, community, and social care services, demonstrated by continuing high demand for unscheduled health and care services.

While NHS Highland always has peak of unscheduled care attendances at A&E and Minor Injury Units through the summer months, the winter provides complex challenges often impacted by workforce availability, infection control, staff vaccination requirements, and demand for space availability within health care settings. The issues in winter impact our front door services through the complexity of meeting demand for winter-related challenges such as flu and norovirus.

NHS Highland has started planning activities and development of a winter preparedness plan of the season where the system is expected to experience peaks in emergency attendances, delayed discharges, and potential seasonal outbreaks of influenza, COVID-19, and norovirus. Resilience in remote and rural services, where capacity to flex or escalate is limited will require agile and responsive leadership.

NHS Highland is already experiencing sustained operational pressures in relation to the high number of Delayed Discharges, through which the Operational Improvement Plan priorities of our Urgent & Unscheduled Care strategic transformation plan are in year two of delivery. This plan takes a multi-focus approach to planning the health and care system to respond to the needs of our population.

To supplement this, development of a comprehensive winter preparedness plan has been initiated in line with Scottish Government guidance, to help operational services with the management of demand and capacity for unscheduled services, which requires a whole system approach to delivery.

2.2 Background

Winter preparedness planning is a board-level responsibility as outlined in the national framework [Health and social care - surge and winter preparedness: national planning priorities and principles - gov.scot](#). (Appendix 1)

The framework is updated each year to help guide boards with planning activities in relation to sustained pressures ordinarily observed in the period from late October to early March. Operational feedback in relation to the framework

was provided through the Scotland West sub-national planning route in early September to help guide this year's planning assumptions.

No plan is required to be submitted to Scottish Government, however assurance on winter preparedness activities is usually requested, but so far has not been requested.

In recent years, internally in NHS Highland, we have provided assurance through the completion of a winter preparedness template for each HSCP area, and progressed through FRPC and board.

The proposal is to mirror this approach this year to winter preparedness plan to again assess our actions in each HSCP area, with cognisance to the national principles. This will include preventative actions such as promotion of staff vaccination availability and reiterating key messages in relation to access to health care. We will utilise the checklist tool from 2025/26 as our basis until such a replacement tool is provided.

2.3 Assessment

An assessment of each HSCP area will be developed and reviewed, ensuring the utilisation of the Scottish Government winter preparedness checklist to identify what is in place, what is partially in place, and any ongoing risks. The assessment is being facilitated by the Urgent & Unscheduled Care Programme Management, working directly with service managers and professional leads to undertake the assessment of actions underway in each area.

Cross-cutting issues such as workforce pressures, out-of-hours support, and integration between health and social care will be considered throughout.

Furthermore, NHS Highland has responded to a request from Scotland West planning group to contribute to a briefing for the Cabinet Secretary for Health on our winter preparedness plans, with a summary of plans being prepared in both sub-national areas for presentation.

Assurance on operational winter preparedness plans will be assured through the Urgent & Unscheduled Care portfolio board and its business-as-usual sub-groups for Highland HSCP, Acute Services and Argyll & Bute HSCTs.

We will then progress assurance through FRPC and then NHS Highland board by November 2026.

Concurrent to the winter preparedness planning exercise, NHS Highland will continue to progress its strategic Urgent & Unscheduled Care plan that is part of the Operational Improvement Plan, with a focus on shifting the balance of care from acute to community care with initiatives including FNC maximisation, the roll-out of Hospital at Home and embedding the Discharge without Delay principles across NHS Highland.

This includes working with Centre for Sustainable Delivery including the quarterly review of current performance trajectories and the improvement actions underway to meet the requirement for shifting the balance of care from acute to community services.

2.4 Proposed level of Assurance

This report proposes the following level of assurance:

Substantial	☐	Moderate	☒
Limited	☐	None	☐

Proposed level of assurance is Moderate. Progression of winter preparedness planning is a core requirement, but planning will only be able to mitigate the anticipated seasonal pressures. The full delivery of our strategic transformation programmes may be impacted through the winter period due to the focus on responding to operational pressures.

3 Impact Analysis

3.1 Quality/ Patient Care

Safety and quality processes are maintained, and timely care and patient experience will continue to be monitored from ward to Board throughout the winter period.

3.2 Workforce

Ongoing vacancies, hard-to-fill posts and seasonal pressures risk workforce resilience across health and social care.

3.3 Financial

Additional resources may be required to support extended OOH care, surge capacity, and recruitment initiatives, potentially impacting budget allocation.

3.4 Risk Assessment/Management

Risks actively managed by services during winter peaks as business-as-usual.

3.5 Data Protection

No significant impact identified; existing systems for patient data and escalation processes remain compliant.

3.6 Equality and Diversity, including health inequalities

Access to services during times of peak pressure may disproportionately affect vulnerable or isolated populations, requiring targeted mitigation.

3.7 Other impacts

No relevant impacts.

3.8 Communication, involvement, engagement, and consultation

Heads of service were consulted as part of the audit against 25/26 winter preparation.

3.9 Route to the Meeting

EDG – 24/09/26

4 Recommendation

NHS Highland board are asked to take moderate assurance on winter preparedness planning activities that have commenced in board. A further update will be provided for assurance on our plans by November 2026.

4.1 List of appendices

Appendix 1 – Scottish Government Winter Surge Planning framework 2025/26
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-planning-priorities-principles-surge-winter-preparedness-health-social-care/>

Appendix 2 – Winter Planning Checklist 2025/26

[Appendix A - HHSCP NHSH Winter Preparedness Checklist Template 25-26 audit\[1\].xlsx](#)