

**Meeting:** NHS Highland Board

**Meeting date:** 29<sup>th</sup> September 2026

**Title:** NHSH response to National Flow Plan 2026-2031

**Responsible Executive/Non-Executive:** Louise Bussell, Board Nurse Director & Executive Lead Urgent & Unscheduled Care

**Report Author:** Grace Turner, Senior Programme Manager

## 1 Purpose

**This is presented to the Board for:**

- Assurance

**This report relates to a:**

- Government policy/directive

**This report will align to the following NHSScotland quality ambition(s):**

Safe, Effective and Person Centred

**This report relates to the following Strategic Outcome(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 | x | Progress well |  |              |   |             |   |

## 2 Report summary

### 2.1 Situation

The Scottish Government published the Health and Care Improving Flow Plan 2026-2031 on 31 August 2026, setting out a national ambition for "one connected system"

with simpler routes to care, greater delivery of care at home and in communities, reduced delays in hospital, and improved navigation across health and care services.

This report provides assurance to Board members that NHS Highland has already established a significant programme of work aligned to the national direction and is actively progressing a range of initiatives intended to improve flow, reduce delays, strengthen community alternatives to admission, and improve the experience of people moving through health and social care services.

The Board is asked to note NHS Highland's alignment with the national plan and the actions underway to accelerate delivery.

## **2.2 Background**

Improving flow has been a longstanding strategic priority for NHS Highland and is reflected within the Operational Improvement Plan, Urgent and Unscheduled Care portfolio, Home First approach, Discharge Without Delay programme and wider system transformation agenda.

The national Flow Plan identifies five key themes:

1. Better navigation and simpler access routes.
2. More care delivered at home.
3. Enhanced community-based support.
4. Improved hospital flow and discharge.
5. Stronger leadership, accountability and whole-system working.

Many of the reforms described within the national plan are already established or in development within NHS Highland. The publication of the Flow Plan therefore provides strategic validation of the direction already agreed through local improvement programmes and governance structures.

## **2.3 Assessment**

The national plan provides strong external validation of the strategic direction already being pursued by NHS Highland. Many of the reforms described within the national plan are either operational, in development, or being expanded locally.

### **2.3.1 Navigation and Access to Care**

The national Flow Plan identifies improved navigation and simpler routes to care as a key enabler of better system flow. NHS Highland has already established a number of initiatives aligned to this ambition, including the development of the Flow Navigation Centre and ongoing work to develop a Community Urgent Care Hub model. These developments are intended to support consistent clinical navigation, reduce unnecessary attendance at Emergency Departments, improve access to same-day

alternatives and provide a more coordinated route through urgent and unscheduled care services. Further work is required to maximise the benefits of these models and ensure they are embedded consistently across pathways and localities.

### **2.3.2 Care at Home**

The national plan sets a clear expectation that more care should be delivered in people's homes wherever clinically appropriate. NHS Highland has made progress in this area through the adoption of Home First principles (including Discharge to Assess) and the continued development of Hospital at Home services. These approaches support admission avoidance, facilitate earlier discharge and seek to improve patient experience by providing care closer to home. Whilst progress has been made, the pace of future expansion will be dependent upon the availability of sustainable workforce models and sufficient community capacity to support increasing levels of demand.

### **2.3.3 Community-Based Care and Capacity**

Strengthening community capacity is central to the national ambition of reducing reliance on hospital-based care. NHS Highland has established a range of programmes to support this objective, including Integrated Discharge Teams, Discharge to Assess and locality-based discharge improvement initiatives. These programmes are intended to improve flow through the system by ensuring people can access the right support at the right time and avoid unnecessary delays in hospital. However, community capacity remains variable across the system and continued work is required to align workforce, capacity planning and service delivery arrangements to support sustainable improvement.

### **2.3.4 Hospital Flow and Discharge**

Improving hospital flow and reducing delays in discharge remain critical priorities both nationally and locally. NHS Highland has implemented a range of flow improvement initiatives, including Discharge Without Delay, district-led discharge improvement programmes and strengthened escalation arrangements. These initiatives have established a stronger foundation for managing flow across acute, community and social care pathways. Nevertheless, delayed discharge, length of stay and hospital occupancy continue to represent significant operational challenges. Early signs of improvement are being demonstrated in some areas including delayed discharges and length of stay, however further sustained improvement will be required to achieve the ambitions set out within the national Flow Plan.

### **2.3.5 Leadership, Accountability and System Oversight**

The national plan highlights the importance of strong leadership, accountability and whole-system governance. NHS Highland has continued to strengthen leadership and governance arrangements through the Urgent and Unscheduled Care Portfolio, Interface Flow governance structures, continued development of a whole-system Flow and Escalation Framework, and work to establish consistent performance reporting and

KPI frameworks. These arrangements provide greater oversight of system performance and support a more coordinated approach to improvement. Continued focus will be required to ensure that governance arrangements translate into measurable improvements in flow outcomes and deliver sustained benefits for patients, staff and services.

### Areas Requiring Ongoing Focus

Whilst strategy alignment is strong, NHS Highland continues to experience significant operational pressures, including delayed discharge, high occupancy, length of stay challenges and pressures across urgent and unscheduled care pathways. Continued focus will be required on:

- Understanding community demand and available levels of capacity.
- Reducing delayed hospital discharge.
- Embedding Home First principles consistently across services.
- Accelerating implementation of flow navigation arrangements.
- Strengthening whole-system performance management.
- Delivering sustainable workforce models supporting care closer to home.
- Working with CFSD, national and west colleagues

## 2.4 Proposed level of Assurance

|             |                          |          |                                     |
|-------------|--------------------------|----------|-------------------------------------|
| Substantial | <input type="checkbox"/> | Moderate | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Limited     | <input type="checkbox"/> | None     | <input type="checkbox"/>            |

### Comment on the level of assurance

NHS Highland can provide moderate assurance that substantial work is already underway which aligns closely with the ambitions of the national Improving Flow Plan.

Alignment is strongest in relation to urgent care redesign ambitions, care navigation and whole-system governance. However, significant system pressures remain and many programmes are still in implementation or scaling phases. Assurance will increase as benefits become embedded and improvements are consistently demonstrated across flow, delayed discharge, length of stay and additional urgent care performance measures.

## 3 Impact Analysis

### 3.1 Quality/ Patient Care

The programme supports safer, more person-centred care through reducing delays, improving navigation, increasing access to community alternatives and supporting people to remain at home whenever clinically appropriate.

### **3.2 Workforce**

Delivery requires multidisciplinary working across acute, community, primary care, social care and unscheduled care services. Continued workforce recruitment, redesign and development will be required to support delivery at scale.

### **3.3 Financial**

A number of programmes have received Scottish Government improvement funding and are being considered as part of ongoing investment and sustainability discussions. Continued focus is required to ensure investment is directed toward interventions demonstrating measurable impact on flow outcomes.

### **3.4 Risk Assessment/Management**

Failure to deliver against national flow ambitions may result in:

- Continued operational pressure and reduced resilience.
- A failure to reduce or increase in delayed discharge and length of stay.
- Reduced confidence from Scottish Government and national partners.
- Missed opportunities to shift care closer to home.

These risks are being managed through NHS Highland's UUC programme governance and whole-system flow operational arrangements.

### **3.5 Data Protection**

No personal data issues arise directly from this report.

### **3.6 Equality and Diversity, including health inequalities**

The national plan seeks to improve equitable access to care and reduce variation in service access across Scotland. NHS Highland's focus on community-based services, Home First and enhanced navigation supports these objectives.

### **3.7 Other impacts**

The plan supports NHS Highland's strategic transformation agenda and wider system sustainability objectives.

### **3.8 Communication, involvement, engagement and consultation**

Development of NHS Highland's response has involved:

- Acute Services.
- Highland Health and Social Care Partnership.
- Argyll & Bute HSCP.
- Scottish Government and CfSD engagement activity.

### **3.9 Route to the Meeting**

The themes and programmes described in this report have been subject to regular review through:

- Acute Urgent & Unscheduled Care Improvement Programme Board.
- UUC Portfolio governance arrangements.
- Executive Directors Group.
- HHSCP leadership forums.
- Interface Flow governance structures

## **4 Recommendation**

The Board is asked to:

Note the publication of the Scottish Government Health and Care Improving Flow Plan 2026-2031 and take assurance that NHS Highland has established a substantial programme of work aligned to the national direction, whilst recognising further improvement is required to achieve sustained improvements in flow, discharge performance and community-based care delivery

### **4.1 List of appendices**

Appendix 1 – [Health and Care Improving Flow Plan 2026-2031](#)