



Meeting	Highland Health & Social Care Committee
Meeting Date	14 January 2026
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 Health and Social Care Partnership.

2. Hospital at Home (H@H) – Inverness Update

NHS Highland continues to make significant progress in developing a Hospital at Home (H@H) service in Inverness, supported by Scottish Government funding as part of a wider allocation for 2025/26. This initiative aligns with the national ambition to deliver 2,000 H@H beds by December 2026, with Inverness expected to provide 30 beds.

The service aims to deliver acute-level care in patients' homes, led by secondary care specialists, with same-day response and access to hospital-level diagnostics and interventions. Since funding was confirmed in June 2025, the Inverness team has established operational foundations, including standard operating procedures, pharmacy and diagnostic arrangements, TrakCare ward setup, and data collection systems.

Recruitment has been a key challenge but is progressing: a Consultant Clinical Lead started in December 2025, recruitment for a GP with Special Interest is underway, an Advanced Nurse Practitioner is in post with another advertised, and additional clinical and administrative posts are in process. A soft launch was planned for December, focusing on admission avoidance, particularly from care homes.

The service is expected to improve patient experience by providing acute care in a homely setting, reduce hospital admissions, and support wider system resilience. Risks are managed through a dedicated register, and data protection protocols are in place. Assurance will move to 'Substantial' once recruitment and onboarding are complete. The next phase will focus on consolidating the service in Inverness and planning for future expansion across NHS Highland.

3. Carer's Strategy Update

Since the last HHSCC update, the Unpaid Carers Service has focused on improving the Carer Wellbeing Fund, staff engagement, and commissioned projects.

- The Carer Wellbeing Fund has been redesigned, with a new application process, clearer guidance, and a working group overseeing changes. The revised model now includes multiple support options and new eligibility criteria to ensure fair access.
- The Carers Roadshow has increased staff awareness across NHS Highland, and 2,000

Carers Toolkits have been distributed.

- New projects have launched, including North Coast Connections and “Care to Connect” in Lochaber. The Quarterly Carer Partnership Forum is helping to identify service gaps and improve referrals.
- Demand for residential respite remains high, with referrals up 56% on last year. Work continues to find alternative respite options.

Priorities for the coming months are to complete the Carer Wellbeing Fund reforms, expand staff engagement, and support the implementation of the Carers Strategy 2025–28.

4. Adult Social Care

Implementation of the Adult Strategic Plan 2024–2027 continues, with the Partnership focused on improving outcomes and monitoring performance. Recent work has centred on:

Financial sustainability:

Actions are underway, particularly those relating to grip and control, to achieve cost containment. However, the financial gap remains significant, and early exploration of emergency or substantial measures is ongoing. Discussions with NHS Highland and Highland Council are focused on agreeing savings targets and cost containment plans for the forthcoming years. The budget remains under considerable pressure, with efforts to maximise the impact of the Transformation Fund to ensure rapid transformation. Despite these measures, the scale of the challenge means that further, more radical options may need to be considered to ensure long-term sustainability.

Service redesign:

The draft Commissioning Strategy has been delivered and is currently under review. Engagement with locality hubs has commenced, and additional funding from the Transformation Fund has been allocated to support innovation and improvement. The focus remains on developing integrated, person-centred models of care that are responsive to local needs and support people to live well at home or in their community.

Priorities for the coming months include finalising financial plans, embedding the Highland Care Model, and supporting the implementation of the Commissioning Strategy. The Partnership will continue to monitor progress and address challenges to ensure sustainable, high-quality adult social care across Highland.

4. Staffing Updates

Caithness Nurse Honoured with Queen’s Nurse Award

Lesley Campbell, Advanced Practice/Professional Lead within the Drug and Alcohol Recovery Service, has received the Queen’s Nurse title after completing a nine-month development programme with the Queen’s Nursing Institute Scotland. The award, presented in Edinburgh on 28 November, recognises outstanding community nurses who show leadership and commitment to improving health and social care.

QNIS Chief Executive Dr Sarah Doyle praised the awardees for their work supporting vulnerable groups and tackling complex health challenges.

Celebrating Two Years of International Nurses at NHS Highland

This month marks two years since international nurses joined NHS Highland, highlighting the organisation’s commitment to diversity and global collaboration.

One nurse shared their journey from Nigeria to Scotland, describing the challenges of adapting to a new culture and climate, and the invaluable support from the International Recruitment Team. Through training in Aberdeen and work in a Mental Health and Learning Disabilities Unit, they embraced new opportunities and felt welcomed by colleagues.

Reflecting on their experience, they encouraged others to “make the bold decision and come to Scotland.” International nurses continue to bring vital skills and enrich care across NHS Highland

5. North Coast Redesign

The North (Sutherland) Coast Redesign is progressing. The project will replace Caladh Sona (Melness) and Melvich Community Care Unit with a new purpose-built care home, which will also house a GP surgery and Integrated Team Base. Updated plans have been received, and a business case for the lease of the medical centre and team accommodation will be submitted locally and to the Capital Asset Management Group by the end of January. Highland Council has approved the lease, and it is hoped an Agreement for Lease will be signed by the end of the financial year, allowing Wildland to move to the next stage and begin work on site. It is currently anticipated that construction will commence in Summer 2027, completing in early 2029.

Staffing will be phased: experienced staff from Melvich will transfer to the new building (which will open initially with eight beds), and recruitment for vacant Caladh Sona posts will align with the phased opening. NHS Highland is also developing a more flexible workforce, exploring registration options and expanding roles such as Modern Apprenticeships.

7. Models of Integration (MOI) – Progress Update

The Senior Officers Group met on 28 November 2025 to review the Models of Integration options appraisal and confirm next steps. Revised strategic objectives and indicators were endorsed, with a focus on governance, financial sustainability, and tackling inequalities. These will be signed off by the Joint Chief Executives Group and shared with the Steering Group.

The appraisal is progressing with four options, aligned to the updated objectives. Initial scoring was completed ahead of a workshop on 10 December, which aimed to reach consensus and identify a preferred option. The Steering Group will review scoring and select a preferred model at its meeting on 16 January 2026, with final recommendations to be presented to the Council and NHS Board in March 2026.

Immediate priorities are to circulate the revised objectives, complete preparatory scoring, and confirm meeting dates for 2026. The group emphasised the need to maintain momentum to meet agreed deadlines.

8. Implementation of the Joint Strategic Plan – Update

The Joint Strategic Plan 2024-2027 is now approaching the end of the second year of implementation. The 9 District Planning Groups have continued to meet on a three monthly basis and have been the primary engagement forums for implementation locally.

As the final year of the plan approaches, the Strategic Planning Group has reviewed the content of the plan and completed a comparative analysis of the current plan with the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment now available. The group will oversee and inform the next Joint Strategic Plan, with the agenda for the group including current national health and social care strategy overview and discussion, as well as ongoing monitoring of the implementation of the current plan.

With the progression of the Models Of Integration work and the beginning of the development of the new Joint Strategic Plan, it is intended that the District Planning Groups structure and Terms of Reference will be reviewed to ensure meaningful, ongoing engagement with communities regarding the current and future plans.