

**NHS Highland**



**Meeting:** Board Meeting  
**Meeting date:** 25<sup>th</sup> March 2025  
**Title:** Employability Strategy  
**Responsible Executive/Non-Executive:** Gareth Adkins, Director of People and Culture  
**Report Author:** Megan Glass, Employability Lead

**Report Recommendation:**

The Board is asked to

- **Approve** the strategy document for publication.

**1 Purpose**

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

- Approval

**This report relates to a:**

- NHS Board/Integration Joint Board Strategy or Direction

**This report will align to the following NHS Scotland 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	X
Grow Well	Listen Well	X	Nurture Well	X	Plan Well	
Care Well	Live Well		Respond Well		Treat Well	
Journey Well	Age Well		End Well		Value Well	
Perform well	Progress well		<b>All Well Themes</b>			

**2 Report summary**

**2.1 Situation**

The Employability Strategy is now at final stage (appendix 1) following an organisational wide consultation. It is being presented to Board for approval prior to launch.

The Strategy commits to widening access and delivering employability support to enhance social mobility and life chances of our local communities while addressing workforce gaps and needs.

Our Employability & Widening Access Strategy sets out our ambition: “We aspire to be an exemplar employer that increases community wealth by creating opportunities for all and especially those experiencing barriers to entering into the labour market”

## **2.2 Background**

This strategy was developed collaboratively with representatives from across the organisation. We also engaged with colleagues nationally to develop the strategy taking account of Government strategic initiatives including our role as an anchor institution to help reduce inequalities for the population we serve.

We engaged with a wide range of external stakeholders and internal colleagues in order to develop the strategy and consider our three year plan. Examples were sourced from other Boards across Scotland. We also referred to Government initiatives such as Tackling Child Poverty and No-one Left Behind, workforce and labour market data and reports relevant to health and employment inequalities.

## **2.3 Assessment**

At present there is no specific Employability Strategy outlining NHS Highland’s aims, commitments and activities.

This strategy is a long-term commitment to delivering on our obligations as an Anchor institution and to support the development of our workforce so it is representative of the communities we serve. Realising the ambitions will require collaboration and effort from everyone in the organisation and our external partners. We are experiencing significant staffing and financial challenges, however, we need to act now to address the inequalities facing our population and support our future workforce.

The consultation period opened on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2024 and closed on 16<sup>th</sup> January 2025 and feedback has been incorporated into the revised strategy document. Some of the positive comments received:

*“I found it both inspiring and forward-thinking. I particularly appreciate seeing the third sector integrated into the plans—it’s a fantastic recognition of the vital role they play”.*

*“This is an excellent commitment to supporting Employability within our region and an excellent platform to allow staff, partners and public the opportunity to share ideas and solutions on how we attract people to an NHS career and the range of training opportunities on offer”.*

We have set out our ambition to create pathways and employment opportunities for all with a focus on supporting key groups who experience barriers to employment; and young people are part of that. We have agreed one of our key aims in year 1 is school engagement, promoting pathways, develop apprenticeship strategy and review delivery of work experience.

The aim of this work is to harness the potential of individuals and help them to build brighter futures while strengthening our workforce of the future. Currently 3.6% of our workforce is under 25 and 45% of our workforce are over 50, therefore we need to work with schools and further education providers to raise awareness on the varying careers in NHS Highland and the pathways available.

We recognise our role as an anchor organisation and through engagement with young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds who may have limited opportunities we can have a role in providing accessible work experiences to inspire their future choices.

**2.4 Proposed level of Assurance**

Substantial	X	Moderate	
Limited		None	

**Comment on the level of assurance**

The assurance is substantial due to the reach of the consultation, the incorporation of feedback and the governance routes followed

**3 Impact Analysis**

**3.1 Quality/ Patient Care**

Having a pipeline of opportunities into roles will support workforce planning to secure our future workforce to care for our patients/service users, whilst creating an inclusive environment that will strengthen NHS Highland’s reputation as an employer of choice.

**3.2 Workforce**

The Strategy will support development of our workforce and succession planning. It will create more opportunities for people to earn while they learn and may support younger people to remain in the area and reduce depopulation.

**3.3 Financial**

If we can create employability opportunities and address some of our difficult to recruit to areas, this may result in less supplementary staffing costs. We will also work with local employability partnerships and 3<sup>rd</sup> sector organisations to support the development of placements and employability support so funding bids will be progressed as plans develop.

**3.4 Risk Assessment/Management**

We have had the risk of an ageing workforce for some time and with the focus on employability and developing a strategy around this we can start to encourage the younger generation into roles available in NHS Highland in a variety of ways. Due to some of the current staffing pressures there is also a risk that some areas will struggle to support employability initiatives. Risks will be identified for the actions contained within the strategy and documented and managed through the Employability Oversight Group

**3.5 Data Protection**

No personally identifiable information was collected during the formation of the draft strategy. Personal information such as names and email addresses may be captured during the consultation phase. Advice has been sought from the data protection team and they consider this information to be low risk as it is employment information that has already been processed and is already available.

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

An EQIA on the strategy has been developed by the Employability Oversight Group, the final EQIA has also included all feedback from the consultation to ensure that potential impacts and mitigations have been considered.

**3.7 Other impacts**

None

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

A consultation period ran from 9<sup>th</sup> December 2024 until January 15<sup>th</sup> 2025 for the purpose of receiving feedback on the strategy from colleagues across the organisation. Information about the consultation was included in the weekly round-up on 5<sup>th</sup> December 2024 and 9<sup>th</sup> January 2025 and was also promoted on the Employability Intranet home page and through HEP and LEPs and through the Youth Academy Huddle. Presentations were made online to the following groups and feedback recorded as below.

Name/s of person or group	Date
Employability Oversight Group	26/11/24 & 07/01/25
People Portfolio Board	25/11/24
Corporate LPF	27/11/24
Medical & Dental Bargaining	03/12/24
Finance Directorate Meeting	03/12/24
EDG	09/12/24
Public Health SLT	12/12/24
Area Partnership Forum	13/12/24
e-Health SLT	16/12/24
Community LPF	17/12/24
Strategy & Transformation SLT	18/12/24
Acute SLT	18/12/24
Community SLT	18/12/24
Acute LPF	19/12/24
Argyll & Bute JPF	13/01/25
Staff Governance Committee	14/01/25
Highland Employability Partnership	22/01/25
Youth Academy Huddle	21/01/25
Argyll & Bute LEP	04/12/25

The draft strategy was also shared on the NHS Highland Engagement HQ platform as a pilot project from 9<sup>th</sup> December – 15<sup>th</sup> January. The platform allows for internal and external engagement, with enhanced monitoring and data collation to analyse reach and impact. There were a total of 185 visits to the page and 3 people left feedback/comments.

### 3.9 Route to the Meeting

This strategy has been previously considered by the following groups as part of its development. The groups have either supported the content, or their feedback has informed the development of the content presented in this report.

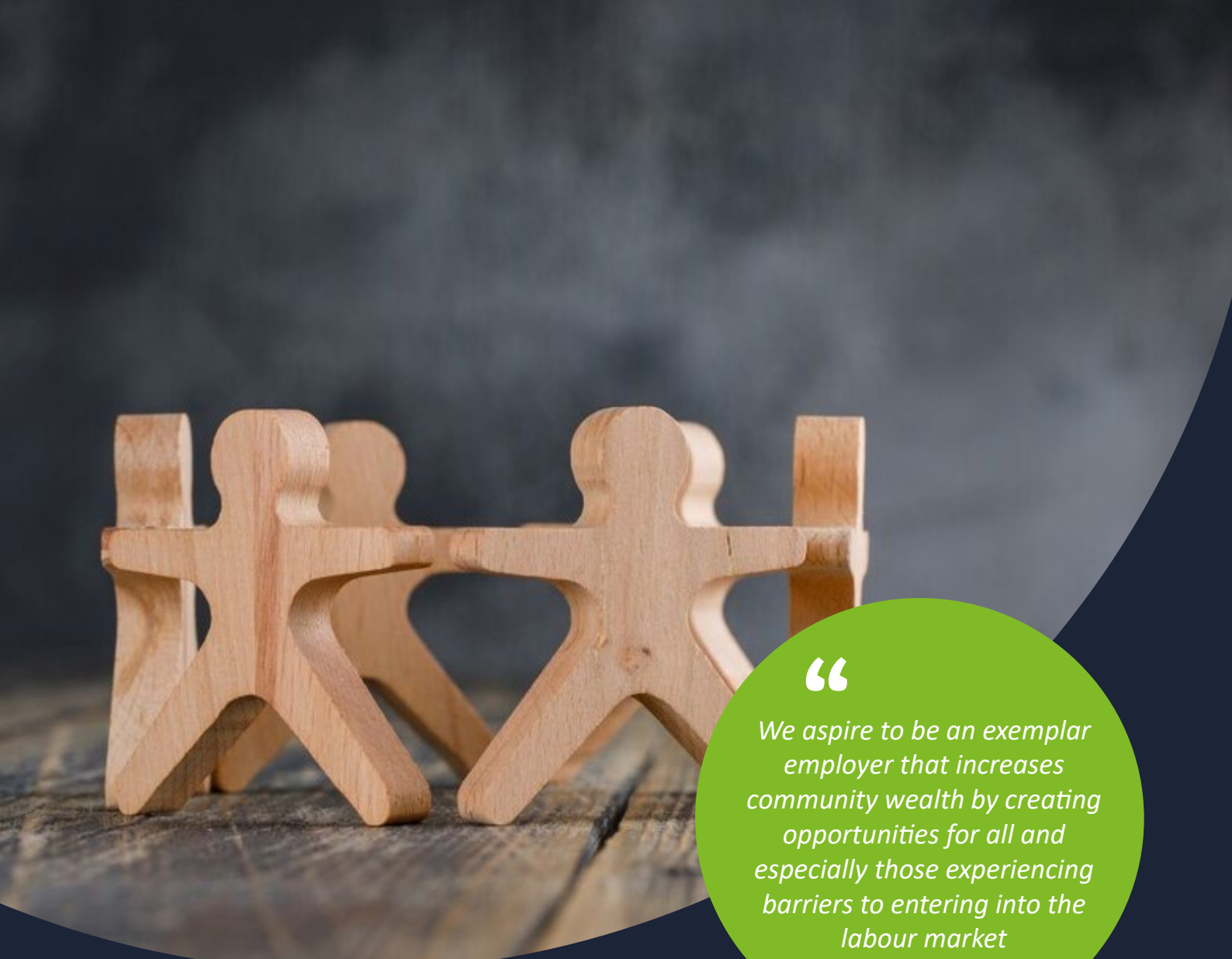
- Employability Oversight Group 26<sup>th</sup> November 2024 & 28<sup>th</sup> January 2025
- People and Culture Portfolio Board 25<sup>th</sup> November 2024 & 27<sup>th</sup> January 2025
- Executive Directors Group 9<sup>th</sup> December 2024
- Area Partnership Forum 13<sup>th</sup> December 2024
- Staff Governance 14<sup>th</sup> January 2025
- Area Partnership Forum 14<sup>th</sup> February 2025
- Staff Governance Committee 4<sup>th</sup> March 2025

### 4.1 List of appendices

The following appendices are included with this report:

OFFICIAL

- Appendix 1, Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Workforce Strategy 2025 - 2028



“  
*We aspire to be an exemplar employer that increases community wealth by creating opportunities for all and especially those experiencing barriers to entering into the labour market*  
”

# Employability & Widening Access Strategy 2025-2028

TOGETHER WE CARE - WITH YOU, FOR YOU



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## Foreword

We recognise the importance of developing our current workforce and the workforce for the future. To sustain and enhance our vital services, we must widen access to employability opportunities and programmes to our communities.

As the largest employer across Highland and Argyll & Bute we hold a unique position of influence. By leveraging our role as an anchor organisation, we can contribute to the health of our communities and their economic resilience and social mobility. This will be achieved by working with partners and targeted initiatives such as apprenticeships, employability programmes and enhanced activity with schools.

This Strategy sets out our ambition and commitment to create employment opportunities for all with a focus on supporting key groups who experience barriers to employment; young people, lone parents, those currently in the benefit system and others.

Our commitment is to create pathways for individuals to develop skills, secure meaningful employment and build sustainable careers, irrespective of background and circumstances. This is built on the core principles of equity, inclusion and opportunity. This strategy has been developed alongside our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy to ensure we are aligned.

This reflects our commitment to reduce barriers to employment and create opportunities to harness the potential of individuals and help them to build brighter futures while strengthening our workforce of the future

This is a collective endeavour; collaboration with education providers, local authorities, community organisations and other partners is essential in realising the vision.

We look forward to working with our partners and communities in supporting this work and creating employment opportunities within our Board area and reducing health inequalities for our communities.



**Gareth Adkins**

**Director of People and Culture**

NHS Highland

April 2025

# 1.0 Introduction

NHS Highland recognises, as an anchor organisation and exemplar employer, the reciprocal link between health and work, and by widening access and employability programmes, we can enhance social mobility and life chances of our local communities, while addressing workforce gaps and needs. The right career with fair pay and conditions can improve people’s overall physical and mental health, support their quality of life leading to a reduction in health inequalities. A fair income from employment can also prevent and reduce child poverty which can underpin poorer health outcomes throughout the life course.

NHS Highland is committed to having a health and social care workforce that is representative of the communities we serve, with particular focus on widening access for those who are underrepresented within our existing workforce. We want the reputation of being an exemplar employer that attracts people who share our ambitions and values and gain their commitment to working with us by ensuring that their experience is a positive one.



# 2.0 Context



This requires us to provide additional opportunities, targeted at disadvantaged individuals to gain access to roles within health and social care, to affirm their interest in working within our organisation and give them confidence to apply for jobs. This will be provided as a mixture of work experience, volunteering, paid work placements and apprenticeship opportunities, working alongside partner agencies to support these programmes.

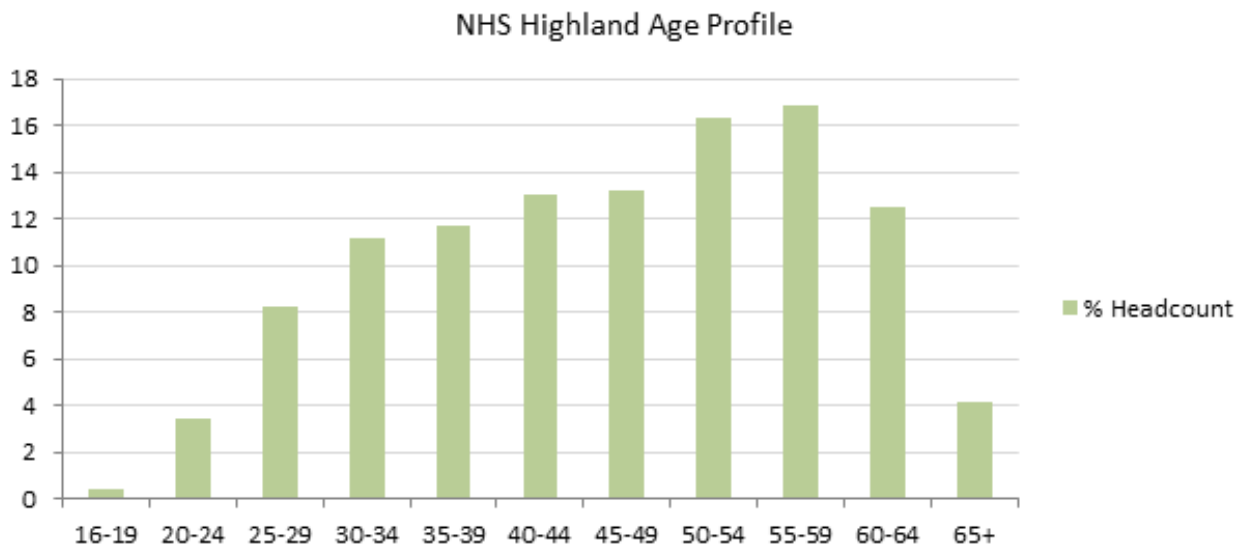
- Long term unemployed
- Unemployed/low income parents
- 16-19 year olds without a positive destination
- Care experienced individuals
- Veterans
- Those involved in the criminal justice system
- Ethnic minorities/refugees
- People with additional support needs

***We will support those from disadvantaged backgrounds or those from underrepresented groups to create more pathways into employment and reduce the barriers they currently face. We aim to create inclusive employability support which will result in a wider and more diverse talent pool within our organisation.***

This work links with our Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Strategy in order to deliver our strategic objectives from the Together we Care Strategy and the annual delivery plan (ADP). Ensuring we have inclusive job opportunities with a focus on reducing barriers for groups underrepresented in healthcare, such as young people, those with disabilities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. There will also be a focus on mental health support, flexible working arrangements, and a safe working environment to enhance retention and job satisfaction.

### 3.0 Labour and Workforce data

NHS Highland has an ageing workforce and we are currently facing challenges in recruiting to key posts within our workforce. Currently 3.6% of our workforce is under 25 and 45% of our workforce are over 50 which is higher than the national average (NHS Scotland data).



*The Highland population is growing below the national average and we have less younger people (16%) and the proportion of people aged 65 and above (23.7%) in Highland was higher than the national average.*

**Table 3.1: Population by age and local authority in 2021**

Age	Highland	Highland %	Scotland %
0-15	38,130	16%	17%
16-64	144,706	61%	64%
65+	55,224	23%	20%
All ages	<b>238,060</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: NRS Small Area Population Estimates

Over the period 2018 to 2028, Highland’s percentage change in population aged 75 and over is forecast to increase by 34%. This highlights an ageing population and potentially indicates that more young people are forecast to leave Highland whilst older people are staying. (ref: Supporting Evidence for the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport Skills Plan May 2024).

Depopulation is a significant challenge for the Highlands & Islands region. The decline in the numbers of working age has decreased more rapidly between 2011 and 2022 in the area (-5.3%) than Scotland (-1.1%) and almost a quarter (24.2%) of the population in the region were of retirement age (65+), (20.1% in Scotland).

There is an overriding need to improve the issue of depopulation and increase access to labour to make the region a more attractive place to live alongside a regional effort to support talent attraction, upskilling and reskilling, and reducing economic inactivity.

## 4.0 Our Key Drivers

NHS Highland wants to ensure we enhance visibility of careers by increasing visibility amongst all areas of our community of the variety of roles and career pathways within our organisation and routes into employment. NHS is the largest single employer in Scotland and NHS Highland is the largest employer in the Highlands with over 300 different types of job roles available.

We also want to widen access to NHS Highland job opportunities for those experiencing actual, or perceived, barriers to employment.

Our drivers are derived from Scottish and UK Government priorities and our responsibilities as an Anchor organisation (outlined below). We have also outlined our commitment in our Together we Care Strategy in terms of being an employer of choice and Tackling Child Poverty Action Plan.

Scottish and UK Government priorities	Anchor Organisation Ambitions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No-one left behind (NOLB)</li> <li>• Fair Start Scotland</li> <li>• Parental Employment Support</li> <li>• Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan</li> <li>• Developing the Young Workforce</li> <li>• Young Persons Guarantee</li> <li>• Shared Prosperity Fund</li> <li>• Keeping The Promise</li> <li>• Corporate Parent</li> <li>• Disability Confident</li> <li>• Improving Scotland’s Health - Drugs &amp; Alcohol Workforce Action Plan 2023-2026</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating supply in our labour market - enabling access and reducing gaps and barriers to employment</li> <li>• Targeting young people, career changers and inward migration</li> <li>• Contributing to inclusive growth</li> </ul>

We recognise some of the best talent comes from some of the most overlooked and socially excluded groups, and this is something we are passionate about changing. We value the lived experience of people that may have used our services and recognise that this can be harnessed through employability programmes to improve our responsiveness and the experience of others.

Employability support provides the opportunity to learn new skills and gain valuable work experience. They aim to support people into jobs within the NHS through the delivery of structured programmes that support barriers to employment and often include education awards.

Our programmes will be more than just about clinical skills or getting a job, they are about quality personalised learning experiences, equipping individuals for lifelong employability and learning.

## 5.0 Routes into NHS



[Routes into NHS Highland careers | NHS Highland \(scot.nhs.uk\)](https://www.scot.nhs.uk)

Apprenticeships offer an exciting career path and offer the opportunity to earn while you learn and can be a stepping stone into a future career whilst gaining practical experience.

Volunteering or doing a work placement can provide valuable healthcare experience that could help when applying to college, university, or a new job in the NHS. Or to help build confidence or get an insight into working in the NHS.

Qualified healthcare professionals, including nurses and allied health professionals, can use the return to practice process to update their skills through placement-based learning and study. It leads to readmission to a professional register.

### ***NHS Highland was among almost 200 organisations awarded the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) Gold Award for 2023***

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) can help veterans understand their qualifications, and map qualifications and experience to NHS pathways and roles.

## **6.0 Working with Key Stakeholders**

We will be working collaboratively with our key stakeholders across Highland and Argyll & Bute Council areas. We will maintain and build on our already good relationships with our external providers, as well as our local service leads and managers to widen the scope of Apprenticeships, work experience and other employability support within the organisation. Through robust engagement with our key stakeholders we will form a powerful alliance to deliver a shared vision in support of employability. **Our key external partners are noted in the table below:**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Skills Development Scotland (SDS)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Job Centres (DWP)</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Developing the Young Workforce (DYW)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Education Establishments (Schools, UHI, independent learning providers)</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• National Education Scotland (NES)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Highland Council</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Argyll &amp; Bute Council</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Armed Forces &amp; Veterans</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Highland Third Sector Interface</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Highland Youth Academy</li></ul>

## 7.0 Our Commitments

Our commitment is to deliver a suite of options to support employability and widening access opportunities within NHS Highland.

### 7.1 We Commit to - Working with Stakeholders:

- To identify, develop, and deliver employability support working with providers
- To identify training availability and gaps for development
- Identify and gain access to key groups most in need of support to enter the labour market
- Continue to link with national and regional employability networks
- To deliver a careers awareness programme across schools
- Develop infrastructure to support placements within NHS Highland including mentorship for those placed and training for local placement supervisors

#### Which will result in:

- Coordinated approach to working with partners to increase community wealth and increase employment and skills in the labour market
- Development of employability support that meet the need of those from underrepresented groups
- Work together to plan national and local events, sharing best practice

### 7.2 We Commit to - Improving Our Data

- Tracking all employability schemes across the organisation
- Analyse and utilise data from schools on pupil aspirations
- Developing KPIs to measure progress on employability programmes and inform future focus
- Utilise workforce and local labour market data to develop employability plans

#### Which will result in:

- The ability to forecast future needs by using trends to predict workforce demands
- Monitoring progress – regular analysis of data will help track progress against our goals



## 7.3 We Commit to - Providing placements and Widening Access

- Paid public sector placements
- Senior phase school work experience programme
- Junior Phase school NHS careers awareness programme
- Support the curriculum for My World of Work
- Broaden volunteering approach to align with employability
- Work Experience
- Working with 3rd sector organisations to develop placement opportunities
- Creating networks to support those on placements
- Providing support for applications and navigating our recruitment systems

### Which will result in:

- Create opportunities for those with little or no experience and/or skills to gain some experience and skills to enable access to the labour market
- The opportunity to gain insights and skills into health and social care careers

## 7.4 We Commit to - Developing Career pathways

- Expand “grow your own” opportunities
- Develop Apprenticeships using full range of available frameworks at Foundation, Modern and Graduate levels as entry routes to the organisation
- Work with training providers to develop associated learning pathways
- Working with partners to ensure we are targeting groups who may not be attending school so they are aware of opportunities available

### Which will result in:

- Increased number of entry routes for young people #nowrongpath
- Creating a more inclusive environment and increased representation of diverse groups in NHS Highland
- Increased opportunities for development and career change within NHS Highland

## 8.0 Monitoring and Reviewing the Strategy

It is proposed that an Employability group will plan and co-ordinate delivery of the strategy and report into the People & Culture portfolio board. In addition, we will be working with and reporting progress through the Highland Employability Partnership and Argyll & Bute Employability Partnership.

Progress on the work will be provided to the Area Partnership Forum, Local Partnership Forum, Staff Governance Committee, and other relevant forums. To succeed this Strategy requires senior leadership sponsorship and buy-in and commitment from local service leads.

## 9.0 Implementing the Plan

**This strategy sets out the plans for the next 3 years (2024-2027), mirroring the Together we Care plans.**

The tables below illustrates the implementation plan for the next 3 years This will be supported by a more detailed action plan with short medium and long term priorities:

Year	Theme	Actions
1.	Establish foundation	<p>Employability Group and team creation, develop programmes &amp; protocols, raise awareness across the organisation and with partners. Focus for year 1 will be around school engagement, promoting pathways, develop apprenticeship strategy and review delivery of work experience.</p> <p>School engagement - Capture the views of children and young people to inform future developments.</p>
2.	Expand initiatives	<p>Develop and build upon employability and widening access programmes, create NHS Highland career events, create employability networks to support individuals e.g. Apprenticeship network.</p>
3.	Evaluate and review	<p>Consolidate employability programmes, Review strategy effectiveness, make necessary adjustments, and reinforce successful initiatives, apply for relevant accreditation e.g. Investors in Young People</p>



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