

Social Care

A Remote and Rural Perspective on Joint Strategic Needs Assessment

Highland Health and Social Care Partnership and NHS Highland

Background

Highland Health and Social Care Partnership has developed its first joint strategic needs assessment for adult social care to provide a clearer evidence base for understanding current and future health and social care needs across Highland. The work was intended to support planning and commissioning by setting out the wider context for physical and mental health, wellbeing and service demand.

The assessment was designed to complement Highland HSCP's adult social care Joint Strategic Plan, which had already been shaped by local knowledge and engagement, but was not yet supported by a formal joint strategic needs assessment. The HSCP therefore used this work to strengthen the strategic evidence base in a way that was transparent and publicly accessible.

A population health approach was central to the assessment. It looked beyond services alone to include the wider building blocks of health and wellbeing, with a focus on adults and older people, inequalities, and the particular implications of Highland's remote and rural geography. The evidence highlighted an ageing population, a declining working-age population and significant access challenges, all of which are highly relevant to future planning.

Key Activities

1. Establishing the overall scope

Highland HSCP developed the assessment to align with the main themes of its adult social care Joint Strategic Plan while also creating a broader and more formal understanding of need. The scope covered population trends, social determinants of health, housing, health and wellbeing, unpaid care, and patterns in health and care services. This gave the work a clear structure and ensured it addressed both current pressures and longer-term planning considerations.

2. Using published evidence and data

A deliberate decision was taken to base the assessment mainly on published data sources, published literature and established evidence. This supported transparency and accessibility, while also creating a shared evidence base that could be used confidently across planning and commissioning processes. The emphasis on published information helped make the assessment a public and open resource for Highland HSCP and NHS Highland.

3. Analysing population and place

The work examined settlement patterns, rurality, access, population change and demographic structure across Highland. It identified a pattern of population growth around Inverness and the Inner Moray Firth, alongside population decline in more remote areas, particularly parts of the north and west. It also highlighted that a high proportion of the Highland population lives in remote, rural or very remote areas, and that older age dependency is higher in those communities.

4. Reviewing future health and care need

The assessment explored health status, multimorbidity, mental health and wellbeing, prevention opportunities and health behaviours. It also drew on national evidence about projected increases in common conditions such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and dementia. This enabled the HSCP to consider not only present need, but also the expected growth in complexity and future pressure on services.

5. Connecting housing, care and community support

Housing was treated as an important part of future planning, including housing need, specialist housing provision, homelessness, and the relationship between housing and poverty. The assessment also considered unpaid care, drawing on Census 2022 data to look at changes in caring and what these might mean for support to carers and communities. Alongside this, it reviewed care at home, care homes, hospital stays and end of life care to understand how support is changing and what may be required in the future.

Benefits and impact

Stronger evidence for planning

A major benefit of the work was that it gave Highland HSCP a stronger and more detailed understanding of the factors shaping future adult social care need. Rather than focusing only on immediate service pressures, it brought together demographic change, geography, inequalities, housing, unpaid care and future disease prevalence into one overall picture. This has helped create a firmer basis for planning by linking long-term trends with practical decisions about service design and commissioning.

This is especially important in Highland because the demographic trend is clear: the proportion of older people is increasing, the working-age population is reducing, and future prevalence of a range of conditions is expected to rise. Taken together, these changes point to increasing complexity of need and growing demand on health and care services. By setting this out clearly, the assessment supports more realistic planning for the years ahead.

Greater focus on inequalities and prevention

The work also strengthened the focus on health inequalities, prevention and the wider building blocks of health. This is a significant benefit because it shifts attention from services alone to the wider conditions that shape health and wellbeing, such as access, deprivation, housing and community support. In Highland, where rural deprivation can be less visible but still deeply felt, this broader approach helps ensure that patterns of disadvantage are better understood within strategic planning.

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Assessment

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Local
Government
Benchmarking
Framework



The assessment therefore supports a more preventative view of adult social care. It shows that future pressures cannot be understood solely through hospital use or formal care provision, but also through the wider social and economic factors that affect people's health over time. This provides a stronger rationale for prevention and early intervention as part of future service planning in Highland HSCP and NHS Highland.

Clearer understanding of the remote and rural context

One of the most important impacts of the work is that it makes Highland's remote and rural context more visible in planning. The assessment recognises the strengths of Highland's communities, but also the practical implications of geography, distance and uneven population change. These factors affect access to services, the ability to deliver specialist care locally, and the sustainability of different models of support across the area.

By identifying where population is growing and where it is declining, and by linking this with ageing, access deprivation and rural inequality, the work gives a more nuanced picture of place. This supports a more informed understanding of local variation and helps ensure that future planning is not based on a single model for the whole area. In this sense, the assessment strengthens not only the evidence base, but also the confidence and clarity underpinning future planning.

Better alignment with strategy development

The assessment is also having a practical impact by informing wider strategic work. It is contributing to the adult social care commissioning strategy, the refresh of the Joint Strategic Plan, and broader strategy development within NHS Highland, particularly in relation to prevention and reducing health inequalities. This suggests that the work has become part of the strategic foundation for future decision-making rather than sitting separately from it.

That alignment is valuable because it allows different strands of planning to draw on the same core evidence. It can support greater consistency across commissioning, partnership planning and organisational strategy, while also helping to keep future priorities grounded in a shared understanding of need. For Highland HSCP, this gives the assessment an influence that goes beyond description and into practical use.

Learning and reflections

Value of collaboration

A clear learning point from the work is the importance of a collaborative approach to joint strategic needs assessment. The assessment was developed in a way that connected with wider planning activity, and the reflections indicate a strong interest in building this further over time. This indicates that importance is attached not only to the final document, but also to the process through which it is developed. The approach demonstrates that a collaborative approach can strengthen shared ownership of the findings and improve how evidence is used across organisations.

It also reflects the reality that understanding need in a large and varied area such as Highland depends on bringing together different forms of knowledge. Published evidence and data are essential, but they are most useful when interpreted alongside local insight and service understanding. The work therefore points towards a model of needs assessment that is both evidence-based and partnership-led.

Need for an iterative approach

Another important reflection is the challenge of keeping a joint strategic needs assessment current. The work highlighted active discussion about how to keep the assessment relevant and up to date, especially as priorities change and new evidence becomes available. This is a practical issue rather than a minor technical point, because demographic change, housing pressure and service demand all continue to evolve.

There was also recognition that producing large pieces of work can be demanding in workforce terms. The suggestion of a more iterative approach, focusing on themes over time, is therefore a constructive lesson from the experience. It retains the value of a strategic overview while recognising the importance of a process that can be sustained and refreshed more easily.

Balancing national and local perspectives

The work also showed the value of linking with national activity on joint strategic needs assessment. Highland HSCP and NHS Highland are connected to wider work on national approaches and refreshed guidance, which offers opportunities for greater consistency and shared learning. This can strengthen the overall quality of needs assessments and support more comparable approaches across Scotland.

At the same time, the experience in Highland reinforces the importance of local intelligence. Remote and rural geographies, hidden deprivation, changing settlement patterns and local housing issues all require careful interpretation that goes beyond national patterns alone. The key reflection is therefore that national consistency is useful, but it must still leave room for local evidence and local context to shape the final understanding of need.

Taken together, Highland HSCP's joint strategic needs assessment has provided a strong foundation for future adult social care planning. By bringing together evidence on population change, inequalities, housing, unpaid care and the remote and rural context, it has helped create a clearer and more joined-up understanding of need. The work has already shown value in informing strategy and offers a positive basis for continued collaboration, improvement and more evidence-informed planning across Highland.

Contact for enquiries

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