

North (Sutherland) Coast Redesign: Communication & Engagement Stakeholder Group

Thursday 29th May 2025
Armada Village Hall

Present: Fiona Thomas (FT)	District Manager, Sutherland (Chairperson)
Joe Dunn (JD)	Wildland
Cllr Marianne Hutchison (MH)	Highland Councillor
Gemma Mackenzie (GM)	Manager, Melvich Care Home
Andrea Madden (AMdm)	North Coast Connection / Hubs United
Marion Milligan (MMgn)	North Coast Connection
Ngaire Mingham (NM)	Caladh Sona Action Group
Cllr Hugh Morrison (HM)	Highland councillor
Patricia Munro (PM)	Bettyhill, Strathnaver & Altnaharra CC
Christian Nicolson (CN)	Interim Area Manager; North, East Ross & Nairn
Michael Simpson (MS)	Tongue, Melness & Skerray CC
Audrey Sutherland (AS)	Depute Manager, Melvich Community Care Unit

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1. Welcome & Apologies

Apologies were received from:

Amanda Beveridge (AB)	NHS Highland
Julie Beveridge (JB)	Scourie Community Council
Don Campbell (DC)	Durness Community Council
Lynn Garret (LG)	Primary Care Manager, NHS Highland
Frances Gunn (FG)	Up North!
Fiona Malcolm (FM)	Highland Council
Lesley Martin (LM)	NHS Highland (Service Improvement)
Stephen McCabe (SM)	Clinical Director, North Highland HSPC
Jenny Peasley (JP)	ITM, North & West Sutherland/West
	Caithness
Harry Tedstone (HT)	HTSI

2. Notes of the Previous Meeting

The notes of the previous meeting were approved.

3. Matters Arising/Actions from Previous Meeting

- **Melvich Community Care Unit:** GM provided an update on the staffing vacancies that she had mentioned at the last meeting. She noted that three posts have been appointed to in the last weeks. She is hoping to have these staff in post in June or July. There remains one vacancy, but this is being advertised.

GM also provided an update regarding the recent inspection of Melvich by the Care Inspectorate. The following grades were achieved:

- Key question 1: How well do we support people's wellbeing? 1.3. People's health benefits from their care and support **Grade 5**
- Key question 2: How good is our leadership? 2.2. Quality assurance and improvement is led well **Grade 4**

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- Key question 3: How good is our staff team? 3.3. Staffing levels are right, and staff work well together **Grade 4**
- Key question 4: How good is our setting? 4.1. People experience high quality facilities **Grade 4**
- Key question 5: How well is our care and support planned? 5.1. Assessment and care planning reflects people's outcomes and wishes **Grade 3**

Those present offered their congratulations to Gemma, Audrey and the team at Melvich.

- **Comms & Engagement:** CN noted no update.
- **Centre Remote and Rural Healthcare:** FT noted that she has again reached out but has not yet had a response.

4. North Sutherland Health & Care Hub Workstream(s): Updates

- **Health & Wellbeing Hub (incl. timescales/programme):**
 - **NHS Highland:** FT said that at the meeting in February it had been stated that NHS Highland's Executive Directors Group (EDG) met on 10th Feb '25. EDG had noted the need for care facilities in the area, in the context of successful retention and reopening of care homes elsewhere in Highland. In terms of NHS Highland nothing has changed since then. That said, it was noted that there has been a request of local managers to provide some additional information re the fit with the Strategic Priorities and Workforce from colleagues at Highland Council.
 - **Wildland:** JD said that in terms of an update from Wildland there is not much more to add. He noted that he has met recently with the Chief Executive and Depute Chief Executives of the Highland Council. At that meeting they had referenced their request of NHS Highland in terms of that additional information. It is good to hear that that work is being completed he said. In terms of next steps JD noted that he is meeting with both Findlay MacDonald and Fiona Malcolm regarding a paper which is to be submitted to the next "full council" (26th June 2025) which will update on the project and seek approval to continue. With that date in mind he said that the project would be looking at an October 2027 completion date. JD added that the team at Wildlands are fully committed to the project and are working away in the background to keep things moving. Cllrs HM and MH said that they would link with Fiona Malcolm re the paper ahead of the meeting. Should there be any questions or queries for NHSH as a result they would contact FT or CN directly.

AMdn expressed her concern regarding the different way in which the "West" is treated in respect of ASC compared to the "North". She has expressed this to constituency MSP, Maree Todd, she said. She highlighted the differing responses to the temporary closure of Strathburn House in Gairloch to that of Caladh Sona and the purchase of both Moss Park and Home Farm by Highland Council (operated by NHS Highland). Why 10 years on from the approval by the Board of NHS Highland and from Highland Council of the North Coast Well Being Hub are we still waiting on works to begin? There was agreement from those present at the meeting representing community and community organisations in AMdn's comments.

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JD also provided an update in relation to the development of housing on the site adjacent to the Hub location. He noted that two of the houses would be available for key workers.

- **Highland Council:** It was noted that HC update was covered in the updates from NHH and Wildland.
- **Communications & Engagement:** CN said that there has been little by way for formal communications and engagement since the last meeting. She expected that this would be taken forward following the meeting of the council on 26th June '25.
- **Community Care & Support:** FT noted that this would be covered under AOCB.
- **Primary Care:** LG had sent her apologies for the meeting but had provided the following update:
 - **Armadale Medical Practice:** It was noted that there is a locum in post with interviews are scheduled to take place w/c 02/06/25 for substantive GP. LG will provide an update post interview. In terms of the lease, she noted this work was ongoing. She has asked for an update in terms of timeline and will share with the group when available.
 - **Tongue Medical Practice:** In terms of practice staffing there is a substantive GP in post as well as HCA and Admin Team lead. Trial of support from Practice Manager at Armadale to be reviewed in June.
 - **Scourie, KLB & Durness Medical Practice:** There have been no changes at the practice recently. The admin team is stable and have been in post for some time. In terms of GP cover adverts will go out later this year for substantive GPs meantime the practice continues to operate with a regular cohort of GPs.
- **Workforce Plan:**
 - FT noted that as part of the work of the district and safer staffing legislation that work continues, albeit in different for formats.

5. Community Concerns

- **Health & Wellbeing Hubs:** AMdn provided an update on the Hubs communication with NHS Highland. Representatives of the Hubs met with Michelle Johnstone and David Park in Brora a couple of weeks ago she said and while there was no agreement there was progress. There will be meetings with each of the Hubs individually over the next month.

There followed a discussion with regards to the issues affecting each of the Hubs, it being noted that NHH has been informed that there is a risk of closure for some depending on the outcome of the meetings. The value of the Hubs to their communities, the wider community and system was discussed including the support they can offer to not only in terms of NHS Highland and Highland Council's joint strategic aims but also the wider public sector in times of challenge. All are working to the agreed aims and outcomes and could be doing more to support their communities and the wider system.

AMdn noted the lack of a strategic direction for adult social care in Sutherland, that could be argued across all of Highland but particularly she said for Sutherland. In the meantime, she said there needs to be an agreement re sustainable funding for the Hubs.

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It was noted that there will be more information available following the one-to-one meetings to be held in June.

- **Unpaid Carers:** AMdn and MMgn updated to noting that since the last meeting there has been successful recruitment to the project and that the person has now started.

6. AOCB

- **Care at Home (Sutherland):** A number of those present had seen and had read the recent report from the Care Inspectorate into the Sutherland Care at Home Services. FT provided an update to all on the inspection and subsequent improvement action. She noted that this was an un-announced visit which took place in early April.

Those present at the meeting in February will recall that FT and LM had told the meeting that there were concerns regarding the service and that a recovery plan was in development. FT had warned at the time that it would not be a quick fix. That said the inspection identified further issues and concerns which as noted resulted in the Improvement Notice.

In relation to the Improvement Notice it was noted that it was issued on 14th April 2025 with a deadline of 25th May 2025. FT went on to explain in some detail the requirements associated, and the work being undertaken as a result. In terms follow-up it was noted that the CI have been back in the service and have re-inspected this week. It has not been confirmed when the feedback will be, but it will w/c 2nd June '25.

In response to a query re staffing, particularly vacancies FT provided an update on the "Rapid Recruitment" events which were held last week. There were three events, the first in Golspie (20/05/25), Lochinver (21/05/25) and Bettyhill (22/05/25). These were very positively received in the community and were successful with seven permanent appointments and eight appointments to the staff bank. It was noted that there had been some anxiety about the events, particularly considering comments made to NHSH staff in the community about the service on the reporting of the inspection outcome and the issuing of the Improvement Notice but as noted above the events were very well received. In response to questions from those present FT confirmed that there are plans to undertake similar events in other locations soon. There were also questions about the overall staffing numbers and if these are appropriate to deliver the service required. FT talked about the "Safer Staffing Legislation" and how that will be taken forward with ASC teams as well as with AHPs and community nursing.

The concerns regard the lack of out of hours support locally to the carers was highlighted. It was noted that the CI report highlights that an attempt had been made to rectify this situation, but that progress had not been made due to failure to fund a Business Case. CN explained that because of the report and the highlighting of this issue there is work at an NHS Highland level to make changes and to ensure that there is support via the Care at Home Service for Carers. The significance of this support in terms of lone working and Health & Safety was

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noted by all.

FT explained that the Sutherland Service is in Large Scale Investigation (LSI) at present and that consequently there is an embargo on new packages of care. All present expressed their concern at this. AMdn noted the role the Hubs could play at this time to support service users not able to get a service i.e. provision of hot meals, safety checks etc. FT and CN noted this.

NM highlighted discussions at previous meetings re the workforce requirements for the area and the need for new models of care, more joined up posts, integration of teams etc. She said that taking the positives from this experience now is the time to look at this. FT and CN acknowledged this.

- **Facilitated Meeting:** It was noted that there is to be a community concern meeting regarding the Care Hub and Hubs on 23rd June 2025. It will be independently facilitated by John Sturrock KC.

Next Steps/Actions

- **Communication & Engagement:** CN and AMdn to link with HT re the proposed event in Summer 2025.
- **Centre for Remote and Rural Healthcare:** FT to invite a representative to a future meeting of the group.

7. Close / Date of next meeting

The next meeting will take place on 28th August **2025 at 6:30pm** at Kyle Centre, Tongue.