

Caithness Area Place Plan Plana Àite Sgìre Ghallaibh

<https://engagehighland.co.uk/caithness-place-plan>

<https://highlandcpp.org.uk/community-partnerships/caithness-community-partnership>



Executive Summary

Geàrr-chunntas Gnìomhach

The Caithness Area Place Plan (APP) has been developed in conjunction with various services, organisations and most importantly the communities within the area. It aims to capture priorities, strengths, challenges, opportunities and community aspirations within one overarching Plan which should be used or referred to by services, groups and organisations operating in Caithness. This will help to ensure service provision, funding and developments reflect collective community wants, needs and priorities.

Through the process of producing the APP, it became clear that many community priorities and aspirations reflect those which have been voiced for some time, but also that new upcoming ideas and opportunities were being identified.

In order to make the APP easier to utilise, the aspirations have been categorised under the primary headings of People, Place and Prosperity to reflect the groupings being used by many of the major organisations such as Highland Council, NHS Highland and the Community Partnership.

These are summarised as follows:

People

Health and Wellbeing
Public Transport
Air Links
Sport and Recreation

Place

Active Travel
Roads
Town Centres
Waste and Recycling
Housing
Community Wardens

Prosperity

Diverse economy
Renewable Energy Development
Population Decline and Youth migration
Tourism

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Introduction

Ro-ràdh

Caithness

In 2021, Highland Council made a commitment to develop Area Place Plans (APPs) mainly based on Area Committee boundaries. The Plans are being developed and facilitated in various ways across Highland, as each area is different.

Area Place Plans set out the vision, ambition and priorities for people and place in that particular area.

This will support targeting resources, service delivery and provide a clear vision for attracting external investment.



The APPs inter-relate with a number of other plans, including Local Place Plans (LPPs), the Highland Local Development Plan (HLDP), the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan (HOIP), the Highland Investment Plan (HIP), the Highland Delivery Plan (HDP) and the Community Partnership Plans.

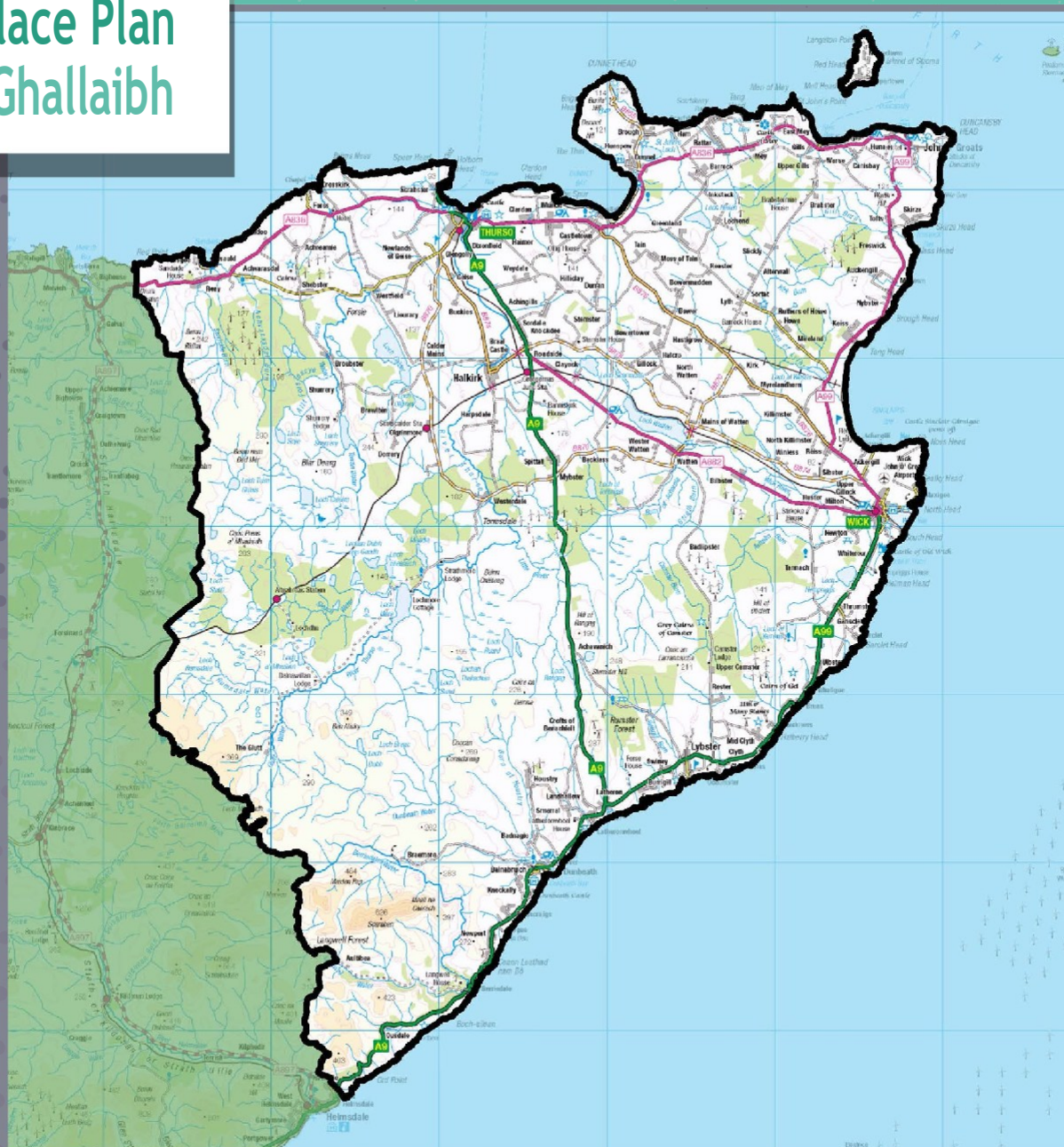
This Area Place Plan focuses on Caithness, and will help the Highland Council, partners and communities secure funding for the Area by evidencing the impact of every pound spent here. The associated actions will provide clarity and manage expectations around how and where resources are prioritised. The APP will also provide a stronger framework for communities within our Area to prepare more local plans (should they wish to) empowering them to drive and deliver change in our towns, villages, communities and settlements.

The Caithness Area Place Plan is ambitious but realistic, covering the aspirations within our communities and focusing on outcomes for the whole Area. It will help inform local and regional decision making about public services, budgeting and policy areas, as well as informing those wider statutory plans. It recognises the good work already taking place in our Area and supports community action to make the most of opportunities.



Background photo of River Fishing at Westerdale by Caithness Collection

Caithness Area Place Plan Plana Àite Sgìre Ghallaibh



How the Plan was developed

Mar a chaidh am Plana a leasachadh

The production of this plan was facilitated by The Highland Council and involved a wide group of stakeholders throughout the process. This included input from Elected Members (Councillors) as well as a wide range of Council services; Community Councils; Community Development Companies; High Life Highland; Highlands & Islands Enterprise (HIE); Highland Third Sector Interface (HTSI); Caithness Community Partnership; Whole Family Wellbeing Team; NHS Highland as well as consulting with other specialist groups and colleagues where required.

Initially, the focus was on gathering existing plans, strategies and documentation together, finding the common themes through these and their accompanying consultations and undertaking desktop analysis. Findings from the Place Standard Survey, carried out in 2024, were also referenced.

Following this, the Engagement Strategy for the Plan was devised and approved by the Stakeholder Group. The strategy consisted of surveys and ideas boards available electronically and hosted on the Council's Engagement HQ portal, as well as public drop-in sessions held in Thurso, Wick and Lybster, supported by semi-structured interviews with selected individuals representing marginalised groups, followed by a stakeholder workshop. The findings from these have been built into the Area Place Plan, as well as fed across (where appropriate) to relevant partners for consideration in their plans and action where possible.



About Caithness

Mu Ghallaibh

Caithness at a glance

Caithness spans over 600 square miles and is often referred to as the “lowlands beyond the Highlands”. Renowned for its expansive skies, this County is proud of its rich heritage while also being forward-thinking, seizing new opportunities as they come. The people of Caithness are friendly, independent, and justifiably proud of their County, which offers much to residents, visitors, and potential investors alike.

ENVIRONMENT

Land Area



677
sq. miles

Coastline



184
miles

Approximately

30%

Land Area

of Caithness has
Environmental Designations



Designations

2

Marine
Protection Areas

5

Special
Protected Areas

7

Special Areas of
Conservation

63

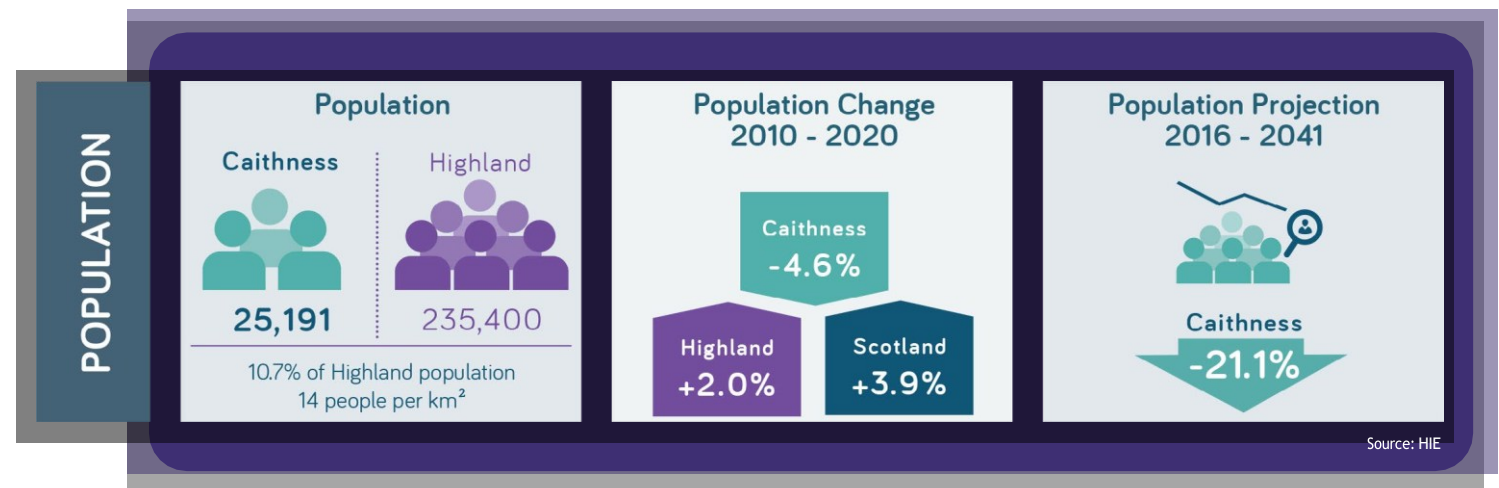
Special Sites of
Scientific Interest

Source: HIE

The landscape of Caithness, a blend of coastal and farmland, rural and urban areas, is always impressive. The county's remarkable environment is recognised through various designations, including Dunnet Head, the northernmost point of the British mainland, the Flow Country (a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2024), and the protected East Caithness cliffs. This vibrant area is rich in community spirit, with the main towns of Thurso and Wick offering essential amenities such as leisure centres, libraries, parks, hospitals, GPs, and dentists. Caithness benefits from a strong voluntary sector driving change, offering support and bringing people together.

Background photo of Dunnet beach waves by Emma Gunn

The County is divided into two Highland Council wards: Thurso and Northwest Caithness; and Wick and East Caithness, each with four elected Highland Councillors. There are 12 Community Councils in Caithness, with one each covering Wick and Thurso towns and the remainder covering larger rural areas. The Caithness population of 25,210 (Census 2022) makes up 10.7% of the total Highland population. Of this, 12,301 live in the Thurso and Northwest Caithness Ward and 12,909 in the Wick and East Caithness ward. Overall, the population fell by 5.0% between 2011 and 2022, with the greatest fall in Thurso and Northwest Caithness. Over half of the population live within the towns of Wick and Thurso with the remainder of the population living in areas classified as very remote rural. Further information on population statistics and trends can be found in the Appendices.



The recent Place Standard and Local Living exercises carried out by Highland Council's Development Plans Team record public perceptions of the physical and social aspects of place in Caithness and highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the County. Nature, feeling safe, and identify and belonging all scored highly, whereas lower scores were achieved for public transport, walking, wheeling and cycling, and influence and control. Further detail can be found in the Appendices.

Challenges and Opportunities

Dùbhlain is Cothroman

The key messages heard

Some of the key overarching findings from the community engagement activity were:

Addressing depopulation - Caithness has a projected population decline of 21% by 2041. Addressing this requires a collaborative approach to deliver a range of measures and interventions with a particular focus on boosting local employment through a variety of well-paid jobs. Increasing access to apprenticeships and training will help keep young people in the area and enhancing childcare and family support will make it easier for families to stay or move into the County.

Lack of investment - There was a strong feeling within the community about Caithness being overlooked and ignored with many saying they believed key decisions about local service design and delivery were being made outwith the County.

Access to Services - Concerns were raised about accessing services locally, with many highlighting significant challenges with healthcare resulting in people having to leave the County for appointments and procedures. The distance, condition of the roads and limited public transport all add to this pressure. People called for improvements to be made to health and social care services and recognised an opportunity through the NHS Highland Redesign to achieve this.

Poverty and inequality - Many recognised that there continues to be a divide between “those that have and those that have not” with specific references to food and fuel poverty being made. People asked for fair allocation of resources and investment and for the unique challenges Caithness faces to be recognised.

Community empowerment and local decision-making - There was a push for more local decision-making powers with fewer decisions being made centrally. Capacity-building support for community groups was noted as a priority to ensure communities were able to deliver local solutions.

Strengthened partnership working between third and public sector agencies was also wanted. Some people spoke about a disconnect between decision makers and the community, and felt important decisions about Caithness services were often being made centrally outwith the County.

The Plan is organised around three key themes:

People | Place | Prosperity

Each representing an area of focus to support improved outcomes. We held drop in events in Wick, Thurso and Lybster, and asked local people what it was like living in Caithness - we asked them what they liked about living in Caithness, but also what the challenges are.

People

Health and Wellbeing

Access to health services was a recurring theme. Concerns were raised regarding access to maternity services, with the need to travel to Inverness, limited access to GP practice lists and limited access to dentists. It was however noted that it is possible to get GP appointments promptly in some areas. The need for good quality accommodation to be available for health professionals was also noted. More local care delivery was seen as important, along with the potential to bring consultancy services to Caithness. The importance of access to mental health and drug and alcohol services was highlighted along with concerns around the mental health of young people, including the need for a personalised approach. Greater investment in care at home services was also seen as important for the support of more vulnerable residents. The importance of identifying young carers at the earliest opportunity was stressed as this would maximise the chances of affecting positive interventions and outcomes. The creation of a partnership between relevant third sector organisations and The Highland Council was suggested as being necessary to facilitate referrals and more quickly identify vulnerable young people.

People also highlighted the importance of accessing the coast and countryside to improve mental health and wellbeing. In relation to poverty there were comments about how the gap between “haves” and “have nots” affects wellbeing. There was widespread concern about funding cuts affecting public services, especially libraries, schools and healthcare, with calls for increased investment. There is widespread appreciation for library services across Caithness. Many highlighted demand for more accessible community spaces, such as sports facilities, libraries, and community halls, with some comments pointing to the need for new or better-used spaces and longer weekend opening hours to improve. The cost of hiring community spaces was also cited as a barrier, even preventing some groups continuing with their activities. A need for more support for neurodiverse young people with, for example, autism, dyslexia or ADHD, was also noted.

People

Public Transport

The need for improved public transport resonated across different groups and for different uses. Transport within and between towns, linking Caithness to Inverness and on to the central belt were all seen as inadequate, disadvantaging those without access to private transport. In particular, reference was made to the difficulty experienced by disabled people without private transport, with some local buses having few seats suitable for disabled people, with additional issues created by able bodied people, often taking these designated seats. Disabled access was also highlighted on coach services to Inverness. Public transport was highlighted as being important for work and study, accessing services, including those in Inverness and for socialising - more evening and weekend services are needed so people can go to events or visit friends and family. Possible community and local authority solutions were suggested with people asking what the potential impact might be of Highland Council's investment in bus services.

The importance of transport to allow people access to the natural environment was also referenced, as without such transport it is more difficult for people to enjoy the health and wellbeing benefits access to nature can bring. The need to check bus times online was also seen as a barrier for some. Local transport to rural areas and circular routes in the towns were felt to be lacking. Connections between modes of transport were felt to be disjointed, for example bus and train and bus and ferry timetables. Cancellation of services and poor reliability is a major frustration for users. Community Transport is viewed as a potential solution for local rural and urban routes.

Air Links

With regards to air links from Wick John O'Groats airport, there was a feeling that there should be more flights from Caithness including reinstating flights to the Central Belt. There was some dissatisfaction with the reliability of the existing services.

Sport and Recreation

Affordable access to sport and recreation facilities was seen as important, particularly for young people. With a focus on young people, it was also suggested that an art project focusing on empty town centre buildings would improve both the local environment and access to activities for young people and could provide them with a dedicated town centre-based youth space.

Young people themselves were also keen to have more staff support to supervise under 16s wanting to hire facilities. A call was made for close engagement with young people to ensure spaces are designed and delivered to meet their needs.

Place

Roads

The County's roads and pavements proved to be a prominent issue. Among the issues highlighted are potholes, road condition in general, white lining, drainage and street lighting. The impact caused by damage to vehicles as well as perceived dangers to cyclists and pedestrians were mentioned. The need for better gritting and snow clearance in rural areas to enable access to the main roads was referred to. Good roads were identified as being important to connect the county's settlements and to connect Caithness with the rest of Highland and so supporting the economy.

Town Centres

People felt that attention needs to be paid to town centres, and Wick in particular was mentioned. Both Wick and Thurso suffer from empty shops and neglected buildings. The closure of banks was highlighted, although the plans for a new banking hub for Wick and further opportunities for bank services to be included in the proposed Points of Delivery (PODs) was acknowledged. People questioned why the Council cannot do more to encourage owners to invest in their buildings. Council legacy buildings should also be addressed by the Council's property rationalisation programme.

Others suggested the need for more grants and other incentives to repurpose empty buildings for different uses such as housing or community uses. There were comments about the need for maintenance and investment in the town centre environments to attract visitors and shoppers and to instil a sense of pride. Parking in town centres has proved to be a prominent issue, particularly in Thurso where recent community engagement gathered feedback from residents and visitors about the current traffic management arrangements, particularly parking and waiting restrictions. A key finding was the need to support town centre businesses by extending parking times on town centre streets and in particular on Princes Street.

Active Travel

When asked about transport and getting about, active travel was raised as a key issue. The need for footpaths on the A9, A99, NC500 and sections of the John O' Groats trail was mentioned. Walking and cycling links between villages were highlighted not only to connect communities but also to provide safe and attractive opportunities for accessing work, exercise, tourism and safer routes to school. There was recognition of the great walking opportunities in the county and the role of voluntary effort in maintaining routes. Some specific opportunities were identified including adding footpaths when roads are improved; repurposing the dismantled railway line between Wick and Lybster as an active travel route; creating a path to connect Wick High and Newton Primary Schools in Wick; and safer routes in Keiss.

Place

Waste and Recycling

People highlighted issues around litter, rubbish and dog fouling. It was felt that cheaper bulky uplifts would discourage fly-tipping. Recycling centres need to be open more, including at weekends, and better information on opening hours is required. People highlighted the need for better promotion and information about the new bins. Another suggestion was more education on composting.

Housing

Housing generated a significant number of comments. People highlighted the poor state of some housing in Caithness and felt that the maintenance of social housing should be better. Improvements such as better insulation and the expansion of district heating schemes were mentioned. People were keen to explore the repurposing of empty retail premises and other buildings into housing. People mentioned shortage of housing for single people and accessible housing for elderly and disabled households, with nearby services being crucial. Second homes purchased for short term lets were identified as a cause of housing shortage, particularly for first time buyers.

Community Wardens

The discussion around housing also generated comments about community wardens, who, alongside the Police and the Council, are seen as central to keeping neighbourhoods safe and tidy. Elderly and vulnerable residents in particular would find their presence reassuring. Wardens could also assist residents to organise community tidy ups and other schemes to improve the local environment.

Prosperity

Diverse Economy

Comments highlighted a perceived historic reliance on Dounreay, although the decommissioning programme continues to offer attractive opportunities. It was felt there is a need to attract investment, large organisations and government agencies to the north. This would provide a variety of well-paid roles to attract and retain families in the area, including returning natives who have worked and/or studied out with the area. It was also noted that a high proportion of jobs within the construction industry provide short-term contracts which can lead to financial instability. People also recognised supports such as flexible working and childcare provision were also important to have in place for families. Likewise, reference was made to the need for clearer pathways from school and college in to work. Attracting energy investment was highlighted as an opportunity but there were some misgivings about the impact of windfarms on the landscape. Self-employment also plays an important role, with a diverse range of businesses being supported by Business Gateway. In 2024/25 almost 400 businesses have started up in Highland, with around 15% from Caithness.

Renewable Energy Development

Both positive and negative comments were received about renewable energy with some noting the renewable energy sector having the potential for transformational change to the local and regional economy. Others, however, asked for the landscape to be protected from further development, with particular mention being made of wind and battery storage. People also highlighted that not all communities have access to community benefit funding through renewables and called for a general fund to be established for county and Highland-wide initiatives to ensure equitable distribution of benefit, with some specifically requesting community benefit be used to target child poverty. Opportunities were also sought for developers to create the legacy of a skilled workforce of local workers, particularly young people, and invest in community training programs with suggestions being made of developing a Caithness based training centre for sustainable energy, recognising the important role Caithness has to play in the wind and tidal energy sector. The Council's Social Value Charter sets out the community benefit expectations Highland has for companies wishing to invest in renewables in this area.

Prosperity

Population Decline and Youth Migration

The shrinking and ageing population, coupled with young people moving away for better opportunities was highlighted by many as a key challenge that could affect the area's future workforce. Many reflected that young people were leaving the County for better opportunities. Limitations in subject offerings in schools and difficulties around teacher recruitment and retention (particularly specialist teachers) were cited as challenges. The need to strengthen pathways between schools and major employers was emphasised as well as expanding vocational education and apprenticeships in public and private sectors. Better promotion of the courses available through UHI was called for as well as providing more accessible online courses. It is noted that the Prince's Trust has recently withdrawn support services and funding from rural areas which is likely to have an impact.

Tourism

Many people highlighted Caithness as being a great place to visit. They mentioned attractions such as the NC500, Flow Country and John O'Groats Trail, brochs and castles, and the diversity and natural beauty of the coast and countryside. However, it was also felt that there are unrealised opportunities - suggestions included the need for more tourism information, better promotion of the county and its attractions, Caithness branding, learning from Orkney's tourism success, and the need to develop more attractions for locals and tourists and ensure the County is seen as a destination. There were few negative comments about the impact of tourism, however the pressure on housing from short-term lets was mentioned. Town centres were felt to be unattractive and require investment to make them more appealing to visitors and locals alike.

What young people told us

Access

Young people recognised there are things to do, particularly sport, but affordability and access to community facilities, services and activities continues to be an issue.

They called for service providers to be more aware of the barriers facing young people and families and to respond to improve inclusion. They asked for more support for communities to build capacity to run services and activities for themselves, for example provide more supervision to enable young people to use sports halls and courts. There was a specific focus on access to health and wellbeing services locally, including mental health.

Place

Making the most of what Caithness has to offer through promoting attractions like Old Wick Castle & Heritage Centre and making sure the information is accessible to all was seen as important. Young people were concerned about how the town centres looked and felt. In particular they highlighted the number of vacant premises, litter and dog fouling and the need for improved street lighting to help people feel safer when they move about their communities. Young people also commented on the condition of the roads noting potholes as a significant issue. Concern was raised about unhealthy fast-food outlets in Wick. Young people also expressed a clear interest in support for healthy options including whether a healthy fast-food outlet could be encouraged.

Opportunities

Young people commented that they liked how some classes were interactive, and would like to see this extended to more lessons as well as additional support for young people with difficulties like dyslexia or ADHD. Young people also stated that having access to a youth worker to talk to was important along with a call for more youth facilities such as skateparks, climbing walls, and indoor sports facilities which are open for longer hours. Young people also asked for more investment in local job opportunities, including access to employment support and public transport, particularly from the outlying villages into Wick and Thurso. Some young people also expressed an interest in learning to grow their own veg.

Appendices Eàrr-ràdhan

There are a number of appendices / associated documents linked to the Sutherland Area Place Plan. These are listed below for reference, although not included as part of this document for ease of printing. They can be found on the Area Place Plan website:

<https://engagehighland.co.uk/caithness-place-plan>

Appendix A: Wider Plan Landscape

**Appendix B: Population Statistics & Area Information
(including Caithness Area Profile)**

Appendix C: Place Standard

Appendix D: Local Living Outcomes

