

CARE AND LEARNING ALLIANCE - REPORT OF THE TRUSTEES

for the year ended 31 March 2025

Principal Activities and Objectives

The activities of CALA are to promote, maintain, improve and advance the educational and social development of children and their families working with settings providing early learning and childcare (ELC) and or school age childcare and through family services support to parents and communities.

The Charity's values guide our work:

- Play is the right of every child and we ensure respect and integrity in all that we do;
- Inter professional practice - effective partnerships;
- Individual accomplishment; supporting all stakeholders to realise their full potential;
- Accessible and responsive services for all;
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a commitment to quality.

Our Strategic Plan for 2022-2026, which has an overarching Vision and 4 key aims, continued to be a key focus over the year as we sought to balance supporting current vital work with developing new services in response to increase demands. We continued to streamline systems and processes to ensure CALA works smarter and more effectively while monitoring the improvements and outcomes achieved.

Vision

- We deliver high quality services that nurture and support children and families.
- Children, families and our team are at the heart of all we do.

4 key aims

- We will provide high quality services for children and families.
- Children and families have access to inclusive services.
- Our workforce are professional, skilled and valued.
- We are a dynamic, responsive, and sustainable organisation.

Our work continues to focus on outcomes that benefit the children and families of the Highlands as well as supporting our vitally important staff. We continue to develop our Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for 2024-25, ensuring we are fully capturing how our work is joined up, evaluated and evidencing our improvement and outcomes. The KPI's ensure our board has full scrutiny and oversight of our work and has the required assurance.

STATEMENT OF TRUSTEES RESPONSIBILITIES

The trustees (who are also Directors of Care and Learning Alliance for the purposes of company law) are responsible for preparing the Report of the Trustees and financial statements in accordance with applicable law and United Kingdom Accounting Standards (U.K. Generally Accepted Accounting Practice). Company law requires the trustees to prepare financial statements for each financial year which give a true and fair view of the state of affairs of the charitable company and of the incoming resources and application of resources, including the income and expenditure, of the charitable company for that period.

In preparing those financial statements, the trustees are required to

- select suitable accounting policies and then apply them consistently;
- observe the methods and principles in the Charity SORP;
- make judgements and estimates that are reasonable and prudent;
- prepare the financial statements on the going concern basis unless it is inappropriate to presume that the charitable company will continue in business.

The trustees are responsible for keeping proper accounting records which disclose with reasonable accuracy at any time the financial position of the charitable company and to enable them to ensure that the financial statements comply with the Companies Act 2006. They are also responsible for safeguarding the assets of the charitable company and hence for taking reasonable steps for the prevention and detection of fraud and other irregularities.

In so far as the trustees are aware:

- there is no relevant audit information of which the charitable company's auditors are unaware.
- the trustees have taken all steps that they ought to have taken to make themselves aware of any relevant audit information and to establish that the auditors are aware of that information

Auditors

Mackenzie Kerr were appointed as auditors after the Finance and Audit Meeting on 3rd March 2023.

Solicitors

Macleod & MacCallum
28 Queensgate
Inverness IV1 1YN

Banker

The Royal Bank of Scotland plc
29 Harbour Road
Inverness IV1 1NS

Registered charity name: **Care and Learning Alliance**

Charity registration number: **SC009292**

Company registration number: **SC115681**

Registered office

40 Longman Drive
Inverness
IV1 1SU

Company Secretary

Jaci Douglas

Independent examiner

MacKenzie Kerr Limited
Redwood,
19 Culduthel Road
Inverness IV2 4AA

Trustees

Graham Watson (Chair)

Scott Hay

Jane Litster

Marie J F Mackintosh

Chloe Sinclair (resigned March 2025)

Heather Keyes (resigned February 2025)

Lindsay McCallum

Lynn Bauermeister (joined February 2024)

The following sections demonstrate our achievements, performance and finance against our 4 Aims from the strategic report of the charity. Here are a few examples of how we are meeting each aim:

Aim 1 - We will provide high quality services for children and families.

Childcare settings

CALA prides itself in offering flexible, inclusive and quality childcare services across Highland. In 2024/25 reporting period we provide care to an average of 305 children across 20 childcare settings every day - from full daycare to early learning and childcare, school aged childcare and holiday clubs. Continuous improvement and self reflection are key to ensuring we provide the best for the children in our care every day - we are especially proud of the strong partnerships and relationships we have with parents and carers so together we can ensure children have the best start in life.

"The staff are fantastic. They're kind and thoughtful, they take the time to really know the children and help them develop in ways that suit their personalities" Parent, Fortrose ELC

Active Play

With funding from Inspiring Scotland we delivered an Active Play programme within primary schools and associated ELC in Highland and Moray. We also deliver active play in partnership with NHS Highland in targeted areas in Highland. The Active Play model is 30 minutes of social games followed by 30 minutes of free play. During the free play component, practitioners have adopted a child-centred approach— designing activities in response to children's interests and play patterns observed during sessions. To enhance the impact of the programme and ensure its long-term sustainability - particularly in promoting child-led play - practitioners played an active role during break and lunchtime periods. They supported older pupils in taking the lead on social games and worked collaboratively with playground staff to review and expand the variety of available play resources. Additionally, pop-up play sessions were delivered within the communities associated with each school, giving families an opportunity to engage with the key messages of Active Play and encouraging a shared enthusiasm for active, outdoor play. After the sessions, 88% of school staff felt there was a high level of impact on the children's social and emotional development, with 12% reporting a medium level of impact .

"Initially I was sceptical – an hour in curriculum time seemed a lot. However, [CALA] have been inspirational with their ideas for engaging the children in play linked to their learning. I am already using a lot of what I have seen in practice." Primary 3 teacher

Play sessions

The Play team continue to provide valued and well attended community-based sessions across Highland from Play and Learning groups to baby massage. These regular community-based groups offer the opportunity for parents to meet with peers to access support and advice in a relaxed and informal atmosphere. Our skilled play practitioners can also signpost onto other support and services while role modelling positive child development strategies. Children have the opportunity to enjoy a wide range of quality play opportunities and experiences while socialising with other children.

"Love everything about the group!!! There is something different at every session and we love coming. Thank you" Parent, Raigmore

"This has been super – such a lovely calm atmosphere – it has really helped my confidence getting out with my baby and meeting other Mums." Parent, baby massage

Aim 2 - Children and families have access to inclusive services

Children's Rights

The provisions within the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 came into effect in July 2024. Scotland is the first country in the UK to make this commitment to children and young people. The Act says that people like teachers, police, community planners and public services amongst others as 'duty bearers' must act compatibly with the 54 children's rights articles based on four principles: non-discrimination, in the best interest of the child, children's views and their right to survival and development.

In CALA, Children's Rights have underpinned our work in childcare and learning for many years featuring significantly in our organisational policies, guidance, inspection frameworks, professional learning, practice support, quality assurance and in our interactions with and on behalf of children on a daily basis.

Family links Project

The Family Links (FL) Project is a collaboration of three charities - the Care and Learning Alliance (CALA), Home Start East Highland and Thriving Families - funded and supported by the Highland Whole Family Wellbeing Programme to work alongside families in a holistic way. The FL workers help with positive solutions to promote children and young people's learning and development by enhancing family well-being and supporting positive engagement with school. Once evaluated it is hoped to roll out this test of change project across Highland. CALA is currently supporting 11 Families in a variety of ways, including small group sessions with children to work on social skills, going to the family home to support morning routines, working with parents on managing behaviours along with sign posting to support with housing/wellbeing and managing money etc.

"I very much love it when you come and see me . . it makes me feel like more people care about me . ."

Child supported by CALA FL worker

"I have seen my child is happier going to school and her behaviour has also changed – she has not been so angry over the last few weeks." Parent

Rural service support and innovation

CALA continue to emphasise and advocate for recognition of the vital role childcare plays in ensuring sustainable and thriving rural and island communities, while highlighting the unique challenges there are delivering quality accessible childcare in these areas. CALA's expertise and experience as both a representative body and a direct provider means we understand uniquely what the challenges, and possible solutions are. For instance, we have highlighted where current regulations, such as Nappy Changing, may be more suited for urban based settings and are actually barriers to provision in rural areas. We are delighted the Care Inspectorate is now developing new guidance that is more proportionate, pragmatic and appropriate while also keeping children safe. Working closely with Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), Highland Council and Scottish Government, as well as the regulators, we have contributed and supported an Evidence Report which highlights not just challenges but solutions to the key issues of childcare delivery on rural and islands areas, developing new models that could better meet these specific communities needs as well as offering practical advice to communities seeking to develop their own childcare. Our innovative multi agency integrated Single Care Model (SCM) is gaining a huge amount of interest regionally and nationally and forms a key element of the Evidence Report, Highland Councils Delivery Plan for service design and the Highland Community Planning Partnership actions.

Our participation on a wide range of national advisory groups and forums allows us to input into policies, procedures and guidance using our lived experience and expertise in a solution focussed collaborative way.

"Thanks for work you completed on the Island – I don't think the Trust would be where they are and ensuring childcare is a priority without the support of CALA."

3 - Our workforce are professional, skilled and valued.

Hub Community Foundation - Building Brighter Futures Fund

Building on our workforce development strategy and with funding from Hub Community Foundation and working with Inspiring Scotland, we secured two years of funding to implement the 'Building Brighter Futures' program. This initiative is designed to assist the most disadvantaged young people who are furthest from the labour market by offering them opportunities to develop the skills and confidence needed to thrive through education, training, and employment across Scotland.

Working across a rural area, we provide advice, guidance and opportunities for learning about a career in childcare as well as 1:1 mentoring sessions and interactions with as many members of childcare staff, as well the children, as possible. This helps increase knowledge acquisition, confidence and communication skills. Supported placements within childcare settings, parent, baby and toddler groups, play and learn sessions, active play sessions and pop-up community events allow mentees to develop and enhance their communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills as well as affirming their goal of working with children and ascertaining that it is achievable.

"The support received from CALA has been invaluable for preparing X for her first steps into a career in childcare. . . Particularly when the childcare sector in the Highlands is in acute need of new people entering the profession, these sessions are vital in building the resilience not only of individuals and the sector itself, but of rural areas more generally." DYW West Highland

Staff survey and Fair Work

We continue to value and recognise our staff as our greatest resources and so undertook a thorough anonymous survey of all our staff in June 2024. 97% of respondents were very satisfied or quite satisfied with their current job and 95% find their role meaningful. Positive comments from staff included recognising that *"my manager listens and takes our issues further"* and *"happy the way everything is!"* However, some staff also highlighted that they wished the pay could be higher recognising the valuable work they do. Therefore, in June 2024 we were proud to receive our accreditation as a Living Wage employer as well as being committed to ensuring Fair Work practices for all our staff.

Professional learning and development

Our online 'ELZ' e module platform has a Scotland-wide reach and continues to provide high quality and valued support and training to a wide range of practitioners, other professionals and parents. Its development is based on feedback gathered from both face-to-face sessions and the e-learning platform. Currently, we have over 12,836 registered users across all 32 authorities in Scotland, with 52% of our users located outside the Highland region. Over past year, 21% of ELZ users were as childminders, 19% SAC providers, and 39% as ELC practitioners, along with participation from students, parents and a range of professionals such as social work, teachers, children's services workers etc.

Moreover, our platform also supports tailored staff induction programs in line with the National Induction Resource for ELC, customized Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) for CALA staff, and the facilitation of online delivery for aspects of our Foundation Apprenticeship courses. This approach enables our small team to effectively accommodate two cohorts simultaneously, maximizing our reach and impact within the childcare sector.

CALA Staffbank

Our CALA Staffbank is a hugely valued and much used resource to support high quality childcare provision across Highland. Over past year, we had 67 on our staffbank - 27 new Relief Childcare Practitioners (RCPs) joined us while the majority of the 38 RCP leavers went onto permanent posts with CALA or the wider sector which demonstrates the value of Staffbank as a pathway into a career in childcare.

4 - We are a dynamic, responsive, and sustainable organisation.

Membership support - training

We have been focussing on engaging with our members in ways and at times that suits their busy schedules and responding to their needs and concerns. In feedback from recent contact with members, 100% of members spoken to have stated they are happy with the member's services provided by CALA. 55% of our members particularly enjoy benefits such as access to MemberZone with 22% saying our flexible adaptable policies are a key benefit. In response to demand, face to face training on Children's Rights in Practice was delivered in Highland and Moray in the evenings to meet sector requests and fit with staff's work patterns. The course was attended by 52 practitioners, with 98.7% rating the training as 'very good' or 'excellent', highlighting its strong relevance and impact. Learner evaluations found the opportunity for face to face discussion, sharing practice ideas and experiences highly beneficial. Quality Assurance visits to some of our CALA settings post delivery has demonstrated the implementation of learning gained in practice and increased awareness by children and parents.

Membership support - payroll

Over the 24/25 tax year we processed 1855 payslips for 15 member clubs as part of our payroll service, a much used membership offer. Our bespoke and individualised service based on years of sector experience means we are highly valued by our members due to going above and beyond with our advice and support.

You are amazing - can't tell you how much I appreciate that! ... Thanks for all your support again this year - lucky to have you! 3rd sector member after we gave some advice on their pension scheme.

Membership support – Parent, baby and toddler groups

Our Family Services team have been supporting our parent, baby and toddler group members throughout the year with bespoke support and advice on a wide range of topics from childcare guidance to training as well as termly visits to the toddler groups to provide play sessions and provide hands on advice and support. Throughout the year, we made 97 visits to 35 of these vitally important community based and run groups, supporting over 1536 children and 1302 families.

"We had a visit from CALA this morning – it was so nice we had the whole session outdoors"
CALA member toddler group

Reducing child poverty

CALA are committed to working in partnership to reduce child poverty and so our CEO is a 3rd sector representative on the Reducing Poverty sub group of the Highland LOIP and is chairing the sub committee looking at the needs of very young children and their families and the key role childcare plays in supporting a reduction in child poverty. This is now a key action across the Community Planning Partnership (CPP) and the CEO will be presenting on that topic at the upcoming CPP Conference. A recent visit by the Improvement Service to Highland saw their officer spend time with the CEO to understand the role of childcare and the barriers to access within a rural context.

Collaboration and strategic working

CALA have always worked in partnership and have been looking at how to increased collaborative funding bids in partnership with public and third sector organisations, aiming to maximise outcomes for our service users while ensuring optimal use of public resources, supporting our strategic goals. By fostering these relationships, we are better positioned to leverage collective expertise and funding opportunities that can lead to more impactful programs. Currently, we are working in partnership with NHS Highland's Infant Feeding program, Calman Trust, a local care home, HALO, Mikeyline, Thriving Families and Homestart East Highland with more in planning stages. By working together, we aim to create comprehensive support systems that enhance the quality of care and resources available to our service users, ultimately contributing to healthier and more resilient communities and supporting holistic whole family wellbeing.

FUTURE PLANS

As we move into 2025/26 and beyond, CALA will continue to champion and provide solutions in a holistic and collaborative way, working across different agencies, communities and organisations to reflect the realities and challenges in rural areas as well as in the sector and country as a whole.

As always, our strength relies on our collaborative and trusted relationships with families and communities as well as key stakeholders Highland Council, NHS Highland, Highland Third Sector Interface (TSI), Inspiring Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and Scottish Government, members and wider sector.

Our focus will be on growing these partnerships to effect real change especially in remote and rural communities. We will continue to work with families, communities and partners to develop place based integrated and intergenerational solutions, offering new ways of delivery that meet our socially responsible objectives. We will continue to evaluate our services including our communications and seek to pivot as needed to reflect new platforms and medias. We will continue to explore and develop our understanding of new and emerging technologies balancing innovation with risk and quality.

The ongoing challenges with recruitment and retention, expectations on regulated services, and the expansion of the unregulated School aged childcare sector are all contributing to concerns about ongoing viability of the sector especially in rural areas, although we welcome the upcoming proposed changes to the school aged childcare definitions and regulations and will monitor these closely.

The decrease in time allowed to achieve qualifications by SSSC is also a factor in the increasingly fragile childcare sectors, and again we will be watching closely to understand the impact. However, it must also be recognised that quality childcare services are not just be about qualifications, but also about having the essential time, mentoring and the opportunity for self-reflection, peer dialogue and learning for our staff. Therefore, we must build a new system of childcare that has the child, families and staff at the centre.

Play is at heart of UNCRC as well as at the heart of all we do and we will continue to raise its profile through development of a Highland Play Strategy, as well as the continuation and development of projects such as Active Play, our growing Pop Up Play offer and Play and Learn sessions.

CALA will continue to meet the diverse needs of children, families and communities in a Children's Rights Whole Family Wellbeing based way, ensuring the wellbeing and empowerment of the child, family and communities remains at the heart of all of our work. We remain passionate that services must be connected in a child and family centred way to maximise support and minimise duplications or gaps, supporting the reduction in child poverty and rural inequalities. We also know that quality, trusted relationships, early support and intervention for parents and children is key to ensuring both the child and the whole families thrives. We will work to develop these relationships, services and resources in partnership across Highland and beyond.

We will continue to innovate and develop new income streams and more business-like ways of working with a range of stakeholders and partners while keeping our charitable purpose at heart of all we do.

Ensuring our staff are valued and their professionalism and skills recognised and fairly rewarded is key to our future sustainability and growth. Our dedicated staff are our greatest asset and resource, and we will continue to find ways to show how much we value them and continue to develop benefits that allow us to recognise their hard work and commitment.

CALA are extremely fortunate to have a hugely supportive, expert volunteer Board who provide leadership, strong governance and accountability. We have a truly dedicated and professional staff team, without whom we could not deliver to the high standards we do day in day out. Our TeamCALA ethos is what gives the charity its strength, integrity and authenticity to ensure all children have the best start in life.

Care and Learning Alliance

Company Limited by Guarantee Trustees' Annual Report (Incorporating the Director's Report) Year ended 31 March 2025

The trustees, who are also the directors, of the charity for the purposes of the Companies Act 2006, present their report with the financial statements of the charity for the year ended 31 March 2025. The trustees have adopted the provisions of the Statement of Recommended Practice applicable to charities preparing their accounts in accordance with the Financial Reporting Standard for Smaller Entities (the FRSSE) (effective 1 January 2015).

Financial review

Close monitoring and review of the ongoing financial situation against budget has remained steady throughout 2024/25 despite a very challenging financial climate and the continued uncertainty of public sector funding. Forecasted budget planning is in place for 2025 onwards linked to our plans to develop a new Strategic Plan for 2026 onwards. Our current Strategic Plan has a key strand of which is to diversify income streams to continue to provide a quality service that is sustainable and reduce our reliance on more traditional forms of grant funding which must continue into the future.

Financially, there were a number of opportunities but also challenges over the year including a long running employment tribunal case, of which the final settlement figure is reflected in these accounts.

CALA continues to work closely with the Highland Council (THC) as a major funding partner, ensuring that shared key outcomes are met in relation to the outcomes identified. Any changes in funding from the Highland Council are closely monitored to ensure any impact of these is mitigated. Previous losses to our Highland Council SLA have been well managed however continual cuts or 'flat cash' is not a sustainable option into the future. Therefore, we are continuing to seek early discussions with Highland Council as well as develop new funding partners and streams of income for a sustainable future for CALA.

Investment policy

The company received shares on the flotation of the Alliance and Leicester Building Society (now Santander) and it is the company's policy to retain these shares.

Reserves policy

It is the policy of the charity to maintain unrestricted funds, which are the free reserves of the charity, at an appropriate level.

Structure, Governance and Management

CALA trustees are elected annually and the company benefits from a breadth of experience and skills. Throughout the year training and development opportunities are made available to the Board of Trustees. The Board meets quarterly with Chief Executive, Jaci Douglas, to review the strategic work of Care and Learning Alliance including financial scrutiny. The Finance and Audit sub-committee ensures greater scrutiny over finances and risks and is helping support the senior team to develop new ways of working and identify possible solutions and strategies to cope with the ever changing fiscal and policy landscapes. The day to day running of the company is devolved to the Chief Executive.

CARE AND LEARNING ALLIANCE - REPORT OF THE TRUSTEES
for the year ended 31st March 2025

This report has been prepared in accordance with the special provisions of Part 15 of the Companies Act 2006 relating to small companies.

Approved by order of the board of trustees on _____ 2025 and signed on its behalf by:

Dr. Graham Watson
Chair of the Board of Directors

Ms. Jaci Douglas
Company secretary