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THE NATIONAL SCHOOLS PROGRAMME



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NSP Annual Report 2025-26



Scottish Funding Council
Comhairle Maoineachaidh na h-Alba



THE NATIONAL
SCHOOLS
PROGRAMME

NSP Annual Report 2025-26

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Summary: This report provides an overview of progress made during the first year of implementing the recommendations of the 2024 National Schools Programme (NSP) Review. It sets out key developments across priority workstreams in academic year 2025-26 and outlines the next phase of activity to strengthen national consistency, evidence and impact.

FAO: Principals, Chairs, Finance Directors and Board Secretaries of Scotland's colleges, universities, and the general public.

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Executive Summary

1. Since September 2024, the National Schools Programme (NSP) has continued to play a central role in Scotland’s ambition for fair access to higher education. Delivered through regional university-led partnerships and supported by in-kind institutional contributions, the NSP provides a coordinated national offer that strengthens opportunities for young people across Scotland.
2. Each year, thousands of pupils take part in NSP activities, benefiting from impartial information, advice, guidance and support; opportunities to visit a campus or experience a residential programme; recognised higher-education or top-up-type skills development courses; and specialist guidance for accessing professions with additional access requirements. This national support is underpinned by continued investment that enables delivery across all regions and supports the implementation of the 2024 NSP Review recommendations.
3. Significant progress has been made in strengthening national infrastructure, including establishing the NSP Evaluation and Monitoring Framework, and Core Eligibility, Targeting and Selection Taskforces, advancing research on regional needs, developing options for future pupil-outcome tracking, and beginning the review of Access to High Demand Professions (AHDP).
4. The NSP is now well-positioned for its next phase of work. This progress has been made possible by the commitment and resilience of NSP Regional Partners and practitioners who continue to support pupils across Scotland.

How is the NSP Supporting Young People to Succeed?

5. Since September 2024, the National Schools Programme (NSP) has continued to play a central role in supporting Scotland’s ambition for fair access to higher education. According to the Commissioner for Fair Access in Scotland, the NSP is

“a cornerstone of work in Scotland to achieve fair access to higher education [...] the most tangible form of fair access as a collective endeavour” (Scottish Government, 2026, p. 19).

6. This reflects the programme’s unique contribution: a coordinated national approach delivered through regional university-led partnerships, supported by in-kind contributions from institutions and local authorities, and focused on improving outcomes for Scotland’s young people.
7. Across Scotland, the National Schools Programme supported an estimated 52,000 pupil engagements in 2024-25 reflecting the continuing scale and national reach of NSP provision
8. In the North region, partners supported 2,575 pupils across SHEP and AHDP activity and worked with 82 secondary schools, demonstrating strong coverage across a large and

often rural geography. In Fife and Tayside, 1,186 pupils engaged with LIFT OFF, Reach and ACES activity, underlining sustained demand despite recent structural shifts in local delivery partnerships. In the South-East region, 11,113 pupils participated in LEAPS, Reach and ACES programmes, including more than 10,700 supported through SHEP alone, showcasing one of the largest regional cohorts nationally. Meanwhile, in the West region, pupil engagement reached 37,273, reflecting the scale of FOCUS West’s multi-stream delivery and its wide reach across 98 secondary schools.

9. This reach is made possible through sustained national investment. For academic year 2026-27, the NSP is funded at £3,177,955, supporting delivery across all regions and resourcing the ongoing implementation of the 2024 NSP Review recommendations. This investment in the delivery of the review recommendations allows the programme to expand evidence-based practice, strengthen national tracking and evaluation, and ensure greater consistency in the support pupils receive wherever they live.
10. The NSP directly advances two core aims of the Scottish Funding Council’s Strategic Plan 2022-27: “Enabling people to learn and flourish” and “Building a responsive, coherent, sustainable system” and NSP delivers its support through four key pillars:
 - Impartial information, advice, guidance and support: helping pupils understand their options and make informed decisions about their next steps.
 - A visit to a campus or residential experience: giving young people the chance to experience higher-education environments first-hand and build confidence through meaningful exposure.
 - A recognised higher-education or top-up-type skills development course: strengthening pupils’ preparedness for future study through structured learning and accredited opportunities.
 - Specialist support regarding access to high-demand professions: providing targeted guidance for competitive subject areas such as medicine, law, veterinary medicine, dentistry, architecture and the creative industries.
11. This report reflects on a year of significant progress and outlines the next steps in strengthening the NSP, with sincere thanks to the NSP Regional Partners and practitioners whose consistent dedication continues to shape opportunities for pupils across Scotland.

NSP Review Implementation: A year of progress

Establishing Our Priorities for 2025-26: Evidence, Timing and Purpose

12. In planning for academic year 2025-26, we began by mapping the full set of recommendations emerging from the 2024 NSP Review and establishing a clear, phased approach to implementation. This planning marked the first stage in a collective journey to translate review findings into meaningful, sustainable change.
13. A key early step was the establishment of the NSP Strategic Advisory Group (StAG),

created in direct response to one of the 2024 Review's recommendations. Formed earlier in 2025, StAG brings together colleagues from across Scotland to help steer progress, provide sector insight and ensure transparency in the implementation of the Review's programme of work.

14. At its May meeting, StAG explored the opportunities and challenges shaping implementation. Members highlighted the diverse pathways taken by NSP pupils, the pressures of demographic and financial change, and the importance of maintaining momentum while avoiding duplication of the Review's work. Their reflections shaped the rationale for the recommendations prioritised for 2025-26.
15. Guided by StAG's advice, priority was given to actions with the greatest early strategic value: laying strong foundations through the Evaluation and Monitoring Taskforce; improving communication and targeting for schools and pupils; and ensuring progress can be meaningfully reviewed in 2028-29. Members also advised on timing considerations, including careful scoping, realistic pacing, and the anticipated constraints on some activity during the 2026 election period.
16. StAG's collective insight ensured a clear, well-reasoned basis for the recommendations selected for implementation in 2025-26.

1. Taskforce 1: Evaluation and Monitoring Framework

17. (Recommendation 8a: SFC will establish a collaborative short life taskforce by Spring 2025 to develop a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework for the NSP. This group will report to the Strategic Advisory Group. Recommendation 8b: Better measure, monitor and report on SFC's investment and the outputs and impact of the programme.)
18. Taskforce 1 has now been established as the **NSP Evaluation and Monitoring Framework Taskforce**. A call for expressions of interest was issued in September 2025. The final membership reflects regional balance and includes practitioners, delivery leads and experienced evaluators. A new Impact and Evaluation Officer has now been recruited on secondment for nine months to lead the work of the taskforce.

2. Taskforce 2: National Eligibility Targeting and Selection Methodology

19. (Recommendation 6b: Agree core eligibility criteria, targeting and selection methodology to ensure consistency and fairness across the programme.)
20. Recruitment for the NSP Core Eligibility, Targeting and Selection Taskforce concluded in March 2026 following a high level of interest from sector colleagues; the first meeting is planned for May 2026. This sequencing allows early learning from the Evaluation and Monitoring Framework Taskforce and findings from the commissioned research project to inform the remit and approach.
21. This taskforce will develop a national set of eligibility criteria, a consistent targeting approach and a shared selection methodology. Initial outputs are anticipated for Summer 2026

3. Commissioned research on regional needs and gaps

22. (Recommendation 6a: Better understand regional needs and differences, including eligible pupil population size, distribution and rurality and geography. Recommendation 8e Part 1: Identify and address gaps in coverage of the NSP, including HEIs, schools and pupils not currently directly involved in the programme.)
23. In collaboration with the SFC Evaluation and Impact team, new research has been commissioned to examine variation in regional contexts and to identify gaps in participation and provision. By January 2026, the appointed provider The Charity Spark had commenced work, with interim findings reported to the NSP Strategic Advisory Group (StAG) in April 2026. Final reporting is scheduled for June 2026.

4. Review of the Access to High Demand Professions offer

24. (Recommendation 6g: Reviewing and if required refreshing the definitions of and subject offer under the Access to High Demand Professions provision of the NSP.)
25. Internal scoping of the AHDP offer began in late 2025 and will continue into Spring 2026. Feedback at the November 2025 Strategic Advisory Group meeting indicated strongest support for an approach focused on subjects with additional barriers to entry. Work is underway to refine how these barriers should be defined and how this will shape the national subject offer.
26. The Strategic Advisory Group advised that the AHDP review should take place during academic year 2025-26 as part of the planning phase, enabling its outcomes to inform the development of the Baseline Offer for academic year 2026-27. Scoping and early development activity began in early 2026, with sector engagement built into the project plan
27. An interim update was provided to the Strategic Advisory Group in April 2026, with final proposals expected for phased implementation from academic year 27-28.

5. Pupil tracking and data development

28. (Recommendation 9: SFC should investigate how to identify or flag NSP pupils in existing datasets and work with NSP partners to enhance data sharing agreements across the programme.)
29. Early exploratory work has begun to understand how NSP pupil information might be used to build a clearer national picture of outcomes. Initial discussions with SFC's Data Analytics team are helping to shape what may be possible and what a future approach to national tracking could look like.
30. As this work progresses, colleagues from Corporate Services and Information Governance are advising on the data protection requirements that would need to be in place. This includes completing a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) and mapping how information currently flows between NSP partners and SFC. These early steps will help ensure any future approach to collecting or linking pupil data is safe,

appropriate and compliant.

31. SFC's Data Analytics team will continue to support the technical aspects of this work as options develop. These preparatory activities will guide decisions on what is feasible and proportionate, and further updates will be shared with the StAG as the project evolves.

6. Communications and publication

32. Communications activity has continued throughout late 2025 and early 2026, including a [blog update](#) and regular updates to NSP partners at quarterly meetings.
33. This report provides a public overview of progress made during the first year of implementation and brings together information on achievements, developments and planned next steps.
34. SFC will continue to communicate with partners and the wider sector as work progresses, ensuring transparency around decision making and opportunities for engagement.

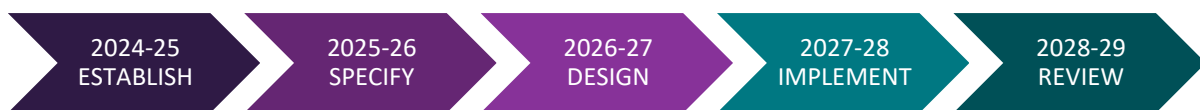
7. Table 1: Summary table of progress

Implementation stream	Recommendation Addressed	Status April 2026	Notes
Taskforce 1: Evaluation and Monitoring Framework	8a, 8b	Established and meeting	Membership confirmed and framework development underway.
Taskforce 2: Core Eligibility, Targeting and Selection	6b	Recruitment concluded March 2026. First meeting to be held by May 2026.	Sequenced after launch of evaluation work to ensure alignment.
Commissioned research on regional needs and gaps	6a, 8e	Research underway	Interim findings delivered April 2026. Final reporting June 2026.
AHDP review	6g	Internal scoping continues	Building on Strategic Advisory Group guidance with work beginning early 2026.
Pupil tracking and data development	9	Early development phase	Data protection work and data flow mapping underway, with support from Corporate Services and the SFC Data team.

Implementation stream	Recommendation Addressed	Status April 2026	Notes
Communications and reporting	10	Ongoing	Updates provided through quarterly partner meetings and this public report.

What's Next? (AY 2025-26 into early AY 2026-27)

8. Table 2: Where we are in the 5-year cycle?



Year	Phase	Focus	Status
2024-25	ESTABLISH	Set foundations, create governance, initiate taskforces	Complete
2025-26	SPECIFY	Define eligibility, outcomes, measures, baseline, gaps	Currently underway (this update)
2026-27	DESIGN	Build models, pilot frameworks, prepare implementation	Commencing
2027-28	IMPLEMENT	Phased national roll-out	Future
2028-29	REVIEW	Full programme review	Future

9. Key work in late AY 2025-26 (SPECIFY Phase)

A. Taskforces and evidence

35. **NSP Core Eligibility, Targeting and Selection Taskforce** first meeting scheduled by May 2026, beginning work on national criteria, targeting and selection.
36. **NSP Evaluation and Monitoring Framework Taskforce** continues to meet monthly, shaping national measures and reporting expectations, with a core framework expected to be ready for Phase 1 implementation by summer 2026 in preparation for AY 2026-27
37. **Regional Needs & Gaps Research** interim findings in April, final in June, directly informing eligibility, baseline offer and AHDP.

B. AHDP review

38. This work moves into active development in summer 2026, with the scope being refined through engagement with sector partners and contributions being prepared for the baseline offer.

C. Data and tracking infrastructure

39. The DPIA, data-flow mapping and feasibility work will continue in partnership with Corporate Services, Information Governance and the Data Analytics teams.

10. Early AY 2026-27 (DESIGN Phase)**Building the architecture for national coherence**

40. Draft national baseline offer developed using outputs from both taskforces and research insights.
41. Evaluation framework piloting begins with phase 1 across all four regions before it is reviewed and improved.
42. Eligibility transition planning for a phased move toward new national criteria from AY 2027-28.
43. AHDP future model created for consultation and integration into the baseline offer.
44. Data tracking model decision made based on DPIA and an assessment of what is technically feasible.

Reference List

Scottish Government (2026) *Commissioner for Fair Access Annual Report 2025-26*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications> (Accessed: 9 February 2026).

Annex 1: NSP Review Recommendations - RAG Status Summary

Rec. No.	Recommendation	RAG Status
1	Clearly outline the continued need for an NSP targeting access to university for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups.	Complete
2	Reaffirm and clarify the NSP role: support disadvantaged and underrepresented Senior Phase pupils to access university.	Complete
3	Improve national and regional co-ordination of NSP and widening access activities.	Ongoing - BAU
4	Encourage parity of esteem for all pathways and outcomes, including college routes.	Ongoing - BAU
5	Introduce a Strategic Advisory Group for NSP by Spring 2025 for oversight and monitoring.	Complete
6	Establish short-life taskforce groups by Summer 2025 to address NSP development areas.	Complete
6a	Better understand regional needs, differences, and eligible pupil populations.	In progress
6b	Agree core eligibility criteria, targeting, and selection methodology.	In progress
6c	Explore national support for Senior Phase-aged students pursuing college qualifications.	Not started
6d	Develop a minimum baseline offer for NSP participants.	Not started
6e	Develop a national credit-rated programme aligned with SCQF.	Not started
6f	Ensure portability of NSP participation and recognition for HE admissions.	Not started
6g	Review and refresh Access to High Demand Professions definitions and subject offer.	In progress

Rec. No.	Recommendation	RAG Status
7	Periodically review NSP activities; next review in AY 2028-29.	Not started
8	Establish a taskforce by Spring 2025 to develop the NSP monitoring and evaluation framework.	Complete
8a	Clarify expected outcomes and measures of success.	Complete
8b	Improve measurement, monitoring and reporting of NSP investment, outputs and impact.	In progress
8c	Set out a clear costing model for NSP activities.	Not started
8d	Evaluate the current NSP funding model.	Not started
8e	Identify and address gaps in NSP coverage (HEIs, schools, pupils).	In progress
8f	Identify impact of specific activities to inform future development.	Not started
9	Investigate identifying/flagging NSP pupils in datasets and enhance data sharing agreements.	In progress
10	Publicise and promote NSP outputs and impact via an annual report or similar.	In progress
11	Include pupil voice and school/college representation by Autumn 2025.	Ongoing - BAU
12	Continue making the case for multi-year NSP funding to 2029-30.	Ongoing - BAU
13	Support development of a single student identifier (Unique Learning Number) for long-term outcome tracking.	Ongoing - BAU
14	Secure wider and more consistent recognition of NSP in HEI admissions.	Not Started
15	Improve transition support for NSP learners entering higher education.	Ongoing - BAU