

Chief Executive's Report
19 March 2026 Board Meeting
Laura Skaife-Knight, Chief Executive

Board Meeting
19.03.26
Open Session
Item 5



Purpose of this report

This report updates Board members on progress against priority issues since the last Board meeting as well as other significant updates which I wish to bring to the Board's and the public's attention.

Welcome

I am pleased to present my report to the Board as we move towards the end of what has been a demanding and challenging winter period and begin to plan for the year ahead. While operational pressures remain across our system, there are tangible signs of progress in a number of priority areas. These are underpinned by strengthened governance, improved grip and control, improving our culture, strengthening relationships with key external stakeholders and partners and the sustained commitment of our hardworking staff.

Over recent months I have continued to emphasise the importance of visible and compassionate leadership, putting people first and openness and transparency as we navigate the many challenges we face together; all of which are central parts of our culture work which remains a top priority as we move into 2026/27.

Public Audit Committee

On 25 February 2026, I attended the Scottish Parliament's Public Audit Committee with our Board Chair and Director of Finance to give evidence on behalf of NHS Grampian in relation to our Section 22 audit report.

At the forefront of my mind during this session was my responsibility to represent our 18,000 staff as best I could and to provide an honest, balanced account of both the challenges we face, our response to them and the progress being made that we can evidence. I was clear with the Committee that, for the current financial year, we are confident in delivering the financial and savings requirements we have agreed with Scottish Government for 2025/26. This is the result of much-strengthened grip and control and discipline being applied consistently when it comes to financial management and controls and a sustained effort and focus by the entire organisation which I want to recognise.

I also emphasised that, while the year ahead will be more challenging still, we have credible and well-developed plans for 2026/27 and a clear trajectory towards returning to financial balance by 2029/30. I personally welcomed the scrutiny from the Committee that being held to account brings and I described the constructive challenge and support we continue to receive via the Scottish Government-chaired Assurance Board, which I believe continues to be an important driver of our improvement at the required pace.

Unscheduled Care

System-wide pressures on urgent and emergency services remain significant. However, there is increasing evidence that our improvement actions are beginning to deliver measurable operational benefits.

New and expanded models of care are starting to have an impact. These include the continued expansion of Hospital at Home, strengthened Flow Navigation Centre arrangements, frailty (geriatricians) in our Emergency Department, enhanced Same Day Emergency Care provision and a daily focus on improving our discharge practice - where we have much more to do. Strengthened leadership arrangements with our new Aberdeen Royal Infirmary Site Director and Deputy Medical Director for Unscheduled Care are now in place, supported by strong, data-led governance and close alignment between programme and operational teams.

Encouragingly, we are seeing improvements in a number of key indicators, including reductions in ambulance turnaround delays, shorter median turnaround times, and fewer very long waits in our Emergency Departments at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary and Dr Gray's Hospital. Our front-door improvement work, including the focus on earlier discharges and ambulatory pathways, as mentioned above, is also contributing to improved flow and bed availability earlier in the day.

While we remain a significant distance from meeting national standards consistently, our direction of travel is positive and provides confidence that our whole-system approach is beginning to deliver some benefits for our patients and staff.

Planned Care

Reducing our longest waits remains a critical priority, and progress continues despite ongoing challenges. Scottish Government funding is supporting the treatment of patients waiting over 52-weeks across outpatient and elective (planned) pathways, and revised trajectories have been accepted in recognition of the operational challenges (including the shutdown of our Central Decontamination Unit) experienced during the year.

Long wait pressures remain significant, particularly within outpatient pathways, and specialties such as Dermatology, Orthopaedics and Neurology continue to require our collective focus. Performance is being actively managed through enhanced governance arrangements, including weekly trajectory monitoring and via our Planned Care Programme Board.

As I reported at our last meeting, our Central Decontamination Unit is now operational again and I am pleased to be able to update you that its resilience has now been further improved with the successful installation of three more machines. The learning from the Central Decontamination Unit shutdown, and our response to this incident, has been shared nationally and will be shared in detail via our own internal governance, including at Board level, to maximise learning for us all.

Value and Sustainability

We continue to make strong progress against our financial recovery and savings programme. At this stage in the year, our savings delivery is slightly ahead of plan, with forecast savings marginally exceeding the £61.8 million target. Importantly, at over 70%, a high proportion of these savings are recurring savings, exceeding the

Scottish Government's benchmark and making NHS Grampian the second highest performing Board for this measure in Scotland.

As above this progress reflects improved and consistent financial discipline, clearer accountability and the sustained efforts of staff and teams across the organisation. Alongside this, work is well underway to shape our 2026/27 Value and Sustainability Programme. Indicative savings plans against our £40m savings target for the year ahead are being converted into detailed and validated delivery schemes, with a growing level of confidence emerging as this work matures.

It is clear that the coming year and future years will require a greater emphasis on redesign and transformational change. This will involve clinical and non-clinical service redesign, digital transformation, workforce optimisation and whole system opportunities being progressed collaboratively with Integration Joint Boards and wider system partners through the refreshed North-East Transformation Group. As Chair of the Group, I will ensure that we proactively pay attention to "Once for Grampian" opportunities.

Operational Governance

Strengthening operational governance remains a key enabler for delivery and improvement. Indeed, it was one of the recommendations in the external diagnostic review published in October 2025. Proposals have since been developed, with input from senior leaders in the organisation, to reshape NHS Grampian's operational governance arrangements and to move to a more inclusive decision-making model.

A phased approach, beginning with the establishment of a streamlined Executive Team as the primary decision-making forum, will be complemented by the introduction of a quarterly Extended Leadership Team, designed to involve a broader group of senior leaders in shaping strategic direction and key programmes of work. Beyond this, we will explore the move to a more inclusive decision-making model, with a strengthened clinical voice at the heart of this shift.

I look forward to bringing further updates on the progress being made through these enhanced structures over the coming months and sharing the outputs of the broader engagement work I am leading with our senior leadership community, including our Divisional leaders, recognising the work we will need to do as senior leaders to set these new arrangements up for success.

Strengthening and stabilising leadership

I am pleased to share that Gail Woodcock has been appointed as our substantive Director of Strategy, Transformation and Performance, replacing the Interim Director of Improvement role I brought into the organisation last summer. Gail brings over 30 years' experience in health and social care, culture, sport and community services to NHS Grampian. She is currently Chief Officer for Falkirk Integration Joint Board and Director of Health and Social Care for NHS Forth Valley and Falkirk Council, where she is responsible for driving collaboration between health and local authority partners to further improve outcomes for the local community.

Gail has previously held a range of senior leadership roles including Managing Director for Bon Accord Care and Transformation Lead for Aberdeen Health and

Social Care Partnership and Head of Integration in Falkirk. I expect Gail to join us in June of this year.

I would also like to welcome Melanie Saunders to NHS Grampian as our Interim Director of People and Culture. Melanie joined NHS Grampian formally on 9 March 2026 and brings 25 years of NHS people leadership experience to the organisation, including a decade as Chief People Officer at South Central Ambulance Service in England. She has also held Board-level roles at Oxford Ambulance NHS Trust, where she was Director of Personnel and Governance. Most recently, Melanie has worked within NHS England's Workforce Improvement directorate alongside working in a strategic HR role at Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

Planning for 2026/27

Over the last month, we have been listening to the views of our patients, community, partners and staff to ask what matters to people as we develop our priorities for the year ahead.

It is really important to me that we are ready to hit the ground running in April (quarter 1 of the new financial year) with really clear priorities, actions and measures of success which link to what matters to our patients and staff, join-up with our wider system partners' priorities and link to the Sub National and national priorities.

Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to have their say. I look forward to the discussion around this which appears later on the agenda, which will include how we will report progress in a regular and open and transparent way in the year ahead against the priorities we agree as a Board.

Final reflection

As we approach the end of a challenging year, I believe there are very strong grounds for optimism. We are seeing tangible improvements in financial control, operational performance and organisational culture and many green shoots, underpinned by clearer priorities and stronger governance.

I am in no way shying away from the challenge ahead of us and I know there remains much to do, yet I know we will rise to this and continue to make the improvements that are necessary for our patients and staff and I believe many of the right foundations are now falling into place that will support sustainable change.

Laura Skaife-Knight, Chief Executive