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HEALTHCARE IMPROVEMENT SCOTLAND (HIS) ANNUAL REVIEW

Thank you for hosting the HIS Annual Review at Delta House on 15 December 2025, where I was supported by Christine McLaughlin, NHS Scotland Chief Operating Officer. It was a valuable and productive day and I'm grateful to you and all HIS colleagues involved in the planning and preparation of the event.

This letter summaries the content of the Review, highlighting the progress and challenges we discussed, and agreed actions.

Clinical Forum

Thank you to everyone who contributed and presented during this session. We explored the vital role of the clinical voice and the impact of strong clinical leadership in driving improved Health and Social Care outcomes.

There was an interesting discussion on the use of data and intelligence as early warning signs, which I would like to have a follow-up conversation about. I was interested in the idea of sharing best practice in a way that is flexible enough to be deployed in different geographical areas so that services are attuned to fit the needs of the population. When asked about the extent to which clinical colleagues feel heard in HIS, the SG and Boards, it was agreed that further discussion would be valuable. The HIS Sponsorship team will arrange a follow up discussion with relevant Scottish Government and HIS colleagues.

When asked about the extent to which clinical colleagues feel heard in HIS, the SG and Boards, I learned that there has been progress within HIS, particularly in embedding expert clinical leaders at the inception of programmes.

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Building trust and confidence with Board colleagues by utilising their Strategic National Clinical Leads (SNCLs) has also been an important part of this approach. It was agreed that clinical engagement could be further integrated and strengthened with SG sponsors and policy teams, and that further discussion would be valuable and should include the SNCLs. HIS Sponsorship team will arrange a follow up discussions with relevant Scottish Government and HIS colleagues.

Workforce Partnership

Presentations in this session provided me with a diverse range of views and significant evidence on the way in which HIS works in partnership with its staff. The Carers Network and its work to produce a Carers Passport was held up as an exemplar which has had positive impact on a large number of staff. The example of fixed-term contracts for staff to mitigate against the loss of talent and support succession planning is something that would be useful to share across Boards and the HIS Sponsorship team will arrange a discussion to discuss this point further. Thank you for all of the work underway ahead of the Reduced Working Week. It was reassuring to hear about the preparations taking place to ensure this is implemented on 1 April 2026. It was encouraging to hear that HIS' iMatter scores have improved in 26 out of 28 areas and the strong partnership working between HIS Leadership and the HIS Employee programme was clear, offering staff the best possible opportunities to engage and influence what matters to them across the organisation.

Stakeholder

I am grateful to each of the stakeholders for their valuable presentations on how they have worked with HIS in the past year, ensuring that community and patient involvement is at the heart of changing services. I found the way in which HIS has enabled engagement inspiring and was struck by how effectively HIS has driven improvement through an enhanced understanding of peoples' lived experience, to the point that this is an integral part of decision making. This approach into what comes next in terms of service renewal is critical. HIS' trauma-informed approach to engagement encouraged and created opportunities to listen to those with lived experience to reflect together and act collectively. This was applauded, as was the trust between HIS and stakeholders, and the focus on What Matters To You. I was also pleased to hear HIS' challenge to Boards on what they are doing to engage with staff on what matters to them.

Private Meeting

We then moved in to a private session with representatives of the HIS Executive Team, to further discuss HIS' performance.

Public Meeting

The public session was well attended and I was pleased to see HIS staff there, as well as members of the public with an interest or connection to HIS and the varied questions were effective in holding HIS to account. Thank you for your presentations covering HIS' important role in providing intervention and innovation at the right time in support of NHS Boards. I was interested to hear how HIS is moving forward in response to the requirements of the Service Renewal Framework, Population Health Framework and Operational Improvement Plan and how it will support change alongside and in collaboration with counterparts such as NHS Delivery, for instance by providing a robust evidence base for decision making.

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We also explored how HIS can balance its critical 'watchdog' role with providing supportive interventions that drive improvement and foster resilience within systems. I see this as a critical role for HIS going forward, and another opportunity to collaborate with National Board counterparts.

I was interested to hear about the design work being undertaken to co-produce a suite of resources, including grounding principles to boost and sustain our primary care services. We also heard about HIS' involvement in three drug and alcohol programmes which have resulted in a 35% increase in available beds at residential rehabilitation facilities. I made clear that any further opportunity for expansion of Hospital @ Home should be pursued, to provide patients with a faster, more convenient service away from a hospital setting and providing greater choice. I've been impressed by statistics which present clear improvement in outcomes for patients receiving treatment through this model of care. Similarly, HIS' person centred approach to communication and health literacy was discussed and I envision HIS supporting Boards from the ground up in this area, driving reform and ensuring communications are fair and impactful.

HIS' key role in the Accelerated National Innovation Adoption (ANIA) programme means that evidence has influenced and scaled-up change and more of this would be welcomed. In the same vein, going forward, HIS have a large role to play in digital innovation and are a trusted voice in the digital landscape. As colleagues noted, HIS will provide evidence to ensure processes and decision making produce safe solutions. There will be a similar approach to AI opportunities, where evidence will support the creation of a Digital Intelligence Strategy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I was consistently impressed by the evidence presented at the Annual Review which demonstrated HIS' key contribution to NHS Scotland. Going forward, I look forward to seeing the tangible impact that HIS should have in terms of service delivery and longer term outcomes. I ask that you now take forward the actions identified and keep the HIS Sponsorship team updated. In particular I would like you to give strategic consideration to proactively positioning HIS within priority areas; initiate more cross-working with National Board counterparts to look at services through diverse lenses to identify gaps; and to consider what strengths and agility HIS can bring, what can be achieved and how, in relation to the Service Renewal Framework, Operational Improvement Plan and the Population Health Framework. In respect of primary care, I see a role for HIS in exploring pathways of care; and in terms of secondary care please consider how HIS can get upstream of evidence, data and soft intelligence to ask questions and better understand when systems are under pressure, then actively support.

I would like to affirm my thanks to everyone working within HIS for the committed contribution they each provide to ensure the continued delivery of safe, person centred, quality healthcare across our NHS. Evelyn, I would like to extend my particular thanks to you as your time as interim Board Chair draws to a close, for the personal contribution and leadership you have provided HIS in the last 9 months.

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I hope that by HIS' next Ministerial Review some of the current pressure has dissipated through implementation of our plans for service renewal. I look forward to seeing the contribution of HIS continuing to bolster and ever-improve services for the people of Scotland.

Yours sincerely



NEIL GRAY

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