

# Communications Strategy

## Ro-innleachd Conaltraidh

**2024-2027**

Ambitious

Sustainable

Connected

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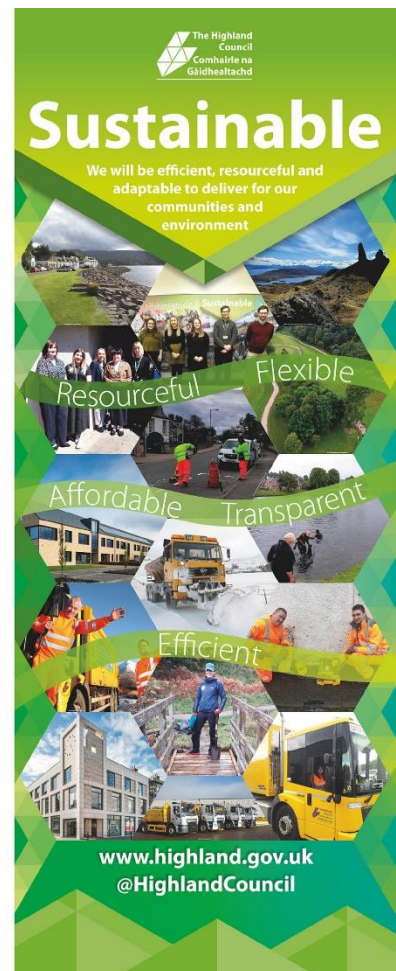
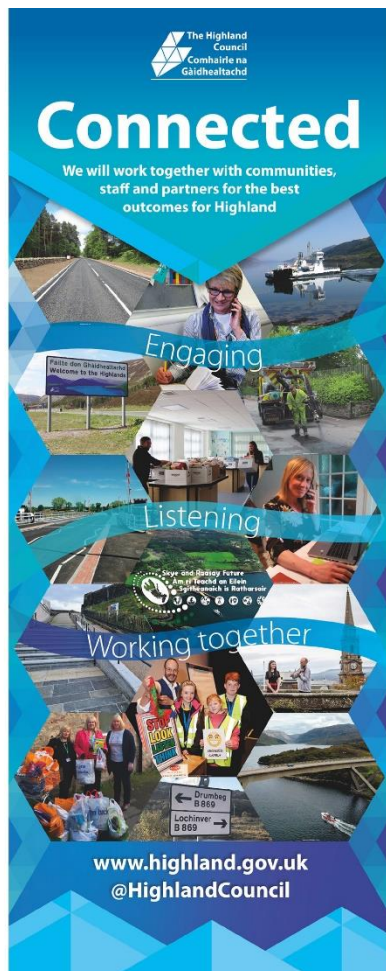
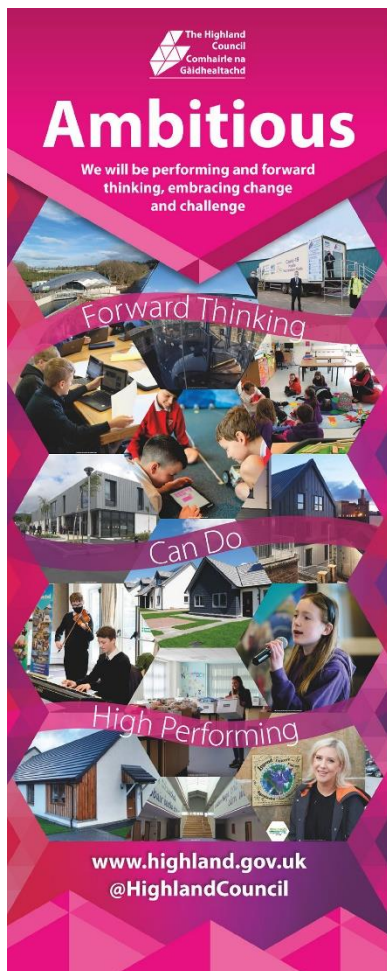
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# Introduction

## Our vision: Ambitious, Sustainable and Connected

The Vision of the Highland Council is to be an ambitious, sustainable, and connected Council, with a set of core values underpinning the vision.

The Council Programme “**Our Future Highland**” was agreed in December 2022. This Communications Strategy seeks to support the delivery of the Council’s Programme, the **Delivery Plan** (2024-27) and the **Highland Outcome Improvement Plan** (2024) and reflect the values set out below.



# Strategic Context

## Our Future Highland

The development of the Council's Programme, "Our Future Highland", was set within a context of recovery from a global pandemic and a severe financial crisis.

Nevertheless, the Council Programme sets out a clear and **ambitious** vision for the Highlands for economic regeneration and to be a global centre for renewable energy.

Key themes from the Programme are the need for a **sustainable** and resilient council and sustainable and resilient communities, with affordable housing, a clean and safe environment, access to transport and work and a good quality of life.

Fairness, value for money, partnership and collaboration are all values which emerged during the development of the Programme. The Council seeks to be **connected**, work closely with partners and communities and to:

**"be a listening Council – engaging with communities to ensure their views are reflected in our priorities"**

The communications strategy will support the achievement of the Programme's strategic priorities which are:

- A Fair and Caring Highland: Working together to improve quality of life and opportunities for Highland people.
- Resilient and Sustainable Communities: Helping our communities to be prosperous, sustainable, and resilient, making a positive difference to the lives of people.
- Accessible and Sustainable Highland Homes: Build houses to support communities and economic growth.
- A Sustainable Highland Environment and Global Centre for Renewable Energy: Accelerate our response to the climate and ecological emergency. Make the most of the financial and environmental opportunities arising from the huge renewable energy potential in the Highlands.
- A Resilient and Sustainable Council: Working with partners to address service delivery challenges with a positive approach to change.

All of this is taking place against the backdrop of a challenging financial context in which Highland Council has agreed a savings package of £58 million over three years

(2024-27), and has historically made £190 million in savings over the previous eleven years.

A successful budget engagement exercise was delivered over the winter of 2023-24 which fed into the budget proposals for 2024-27. This process used a range of methods and engaged with staff, community groups, partners and the public, providing a template for how we will seek to communicate and engage with broader groups in the future.

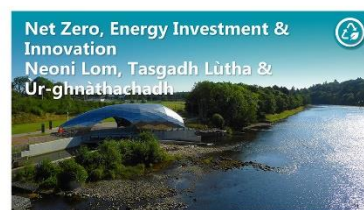
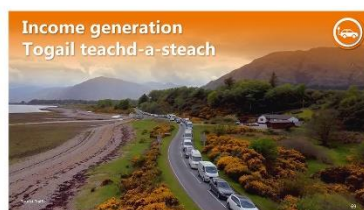
## The Delivery Plan

The Council's **Delivery Plan** has been developed to ensure the delivery of the Council's Programme, the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan, the budget savings and investment agreed by Council.

Effective communication and engagement will be an essential aspect to the success of the Delivery Plan. Some of the projects within the Delivery Plan will require formal consultation processes; some will require marketing strategies, especially where the outcome is take-up of a scheme, such as tourist offerings, or influencing behavioural change, such as recycling; all will require planned communication with staff, members, Trade Unions, partners, government bodies and the public.

The scale and complexity of the change programme will necessitate coordination across the portfolios as part of an overarching communications and engagement plan, which is a key element of achieving success and managing risk in all of the workstreams. Beneath this there will be specific communications and engagement plans for each of the projects.

The key projects delivering significant change sit within six portfolios:



Supporting a sustainable Council Budget, and key messages around savings and the impacts of revised service delivery will require significant communications and engagement resource.

Communication is fundamental to change at every stage and every level.

John Kotter describes 8 steps to effect change. (<https://www.kotterinc.com/8-steps-process-for-leading-change/>)

1. *Establishing a sense of urgency* – accepting change is necessary in the current financial and demographic context – for example, budget setting
2. *Forming a powerful guiding coalition* – Senior leaders and line managers, our partners and the third sector are key players to support and lead change.
3. *Creating a vision* (ambitious, sustainable, connected – a Future Highland) based on significant public consultation over recent years and well embedded in the organisation and acknowledged by External Audit.
4. *Communicating the vision* – the communication strategy is a fundamental step in the change process, generating further opportunities to engage with communities. (acting the values is in itself communication).
5. *Empowering others to act on the vision* – enabling and empowering others through better understanding and through leadership, for example developing more integrated models of delivery with key partners.
6. *Planning for and creating short term wins* (making change attractive), built into our project management approach.
7. *Consolidating improvements* – Performance management; demonstrating successes; promoting and publicising achievements; praise and reward. Our Staff Recognition Awards demonstrate strong staff engagement with numerous entries based on improvement and achievement.
8. *Institutionalising new approaches* – creating new standards and performance/behavioural expectations.

## The Highland Outcome Improvement Plan

A revised Highland Outcome Improvement Plan ([HOIP](#)) has been developed and agreed through the Community Planning Partnership. A new HOIP Communications Plan sets out how partners will work together on communicating and delivering the Plan's priority outcomes.

The Plan's three strategic priorities are as follows:

**People** - Enable people to live independently, safe and well within their community

**Place** - Work in partnership to develop sustainable and resilient local communities

**Prosperity** - Creating opportunities for all people and places to thrive economically

## The Highland Context

The Highland region has 4,905km of coastline, 19 inhabited islands and 6,752km of rural roads. The Highland Council provides services to a population of some 230,000, in a region of 26,484 square km, comprising a third of the land area of Scotland including the most remote and rural and sparsely populated parts of the United Kingdom, with fragile economies and an aging demographic. Depopulation trends are becoming a significant issue for many communities.

The challenges are unique in such a large and diverse UK local authority and this means that explaining and setting out context is particularly important in our communication in helping to manage expectations and develop greater understanding.

## The Highland Council

The Highland Council is comprised of 74 elected Members serving on 21 wards representing our communities and is one of the largest employers in the region with around 10,000 staff, delivering services based at various locations across the region.

The Council is **ambitious** for its people, to develop a healthy, agile, and high performing workforce, to improve flexibility and resilience, to grow capacity and to create opportunities.

Effective communication and engagement are not just functions of one department, but are part of everyone's role across every part of the Council.

Our staff and members are also our service users and our ambassadors, living and working in and **connected** to their communities. Indeed, our workforce, together with their friends and families, makes up perhaps a quarter of the Highland population.

Feedback from staff surveys tells us that staff want to feel **connected** to the organisation, to understand the rationale behind change, to be involved in change management, and they want to feel valued.

Our workforce needs to be informed and to understand the part they play in the Council being successful and our managers need to be leaders who can articulate the Council's vision. Therefore, leadership and effective internal communication are fundamental to the organisation achieving its aims and outcomes. If we get internal



communication and culture right, the external image of the organisation will improve.

The Council does not operate in a vacuum – it must be **connected** – It works closely with numerous key partners, including Community Planning Partners, other public bodies and category one responders, both regional and national. It operates in a complex and changing political environment, influenced by Scottish, EU and UK legislation and policy frameworks, as well as community bodies and other groups at local level. The Council is a community planning partner and often needs to communicate shared messages with other agencies to achieve common goals. It is most effective when working in partnership on issues such as Resilience, where trust and relationships are integral to success.

Promoting the Highlands, Workforce Recruitment, and wellbeing issues, such as suicide prevention and poverty reduction, are key opportunities for the Council to work together with partners on joint campaigns and shared resources for the key priorities identified in the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan.

The challenge of reducing budgets and the impact on services and our workforce is set to continue for the foreseeable future. It is imperative that the Council works with staff, Trade Unions, partners, and the public to foster a better understanding; to enable redesign, innovation and sharing of good ideas and best practice.

Sustaining communities and the aging demographic continue to deepen the challenges for Highland communities. The council is at its most effective when it is enabling people to live successful lives, as independently as possible, and supporting communities to help themselves to be **sustainable**.

The future Highland vision will also be about describing new ways of doing things, repurposing of buildings, assets, services and resources to enable, not just sustainability, but investment and development.

# Background

## Our achievements 2019-2023

Our previous two Communication Strategies achieved a number of objectives which provide a foundation to build on. These include:

1. Development of our social media channels with a phenomenal growth in our reach on social media platforms (including Facebook, X (Twitter), Instagram, You Tube and LinkedIn); The Highland Council ranks highly amongst Local Authorities in Scotland for social media followers(6<sup>th</sup> for Facebook and 10<sup>th</sup> for Twitter/X). We have more than doubled our followers in 4 years to over 86,000 across all our channels; reaching millions (over 50,000 on LinkedIn alone); achieving over 17,000 views of our You Tube videos in the last quarter of 2023.
2. Highland Council is the first Local Authority in the UK to introduce live streaming of elections and the promotion of local democracy and transparency.
3. Increased referrals to the website; the successful development of school closures communications through the web and social media; a social media feed for the Corran Ferry to inform users of real time incidents.
4. Development of the Corporate Identity and Branding Guidelines has helped to improve the professional image of the Council through design, publications and imaging.
5. Development of positive publicity through several project specific communication strategies. The Council issues around 700 press releases per year on a vast range of topics, providing information to the public, members, and staff; and manages around 2500 media enquiries per year.
6. Increased resilience through partnership Major Incident Communications Plans; a revised General Emergency Plan; a new Business Continuity Policy; resilience exercise participation and promotion of business continuity and community resilience resources for communities and community groups.
7. Development of the new SharePoint based intranet homepage which received over 2.5m views in the first few months, and reaching 6,900 staff
8. Development of online staff engagement sessions
9. Delivery of in-house Staff Recognition Awards with the support of external sponsorship.

10. Increased awareness of the Council's vision and priorities, as confirmed by External Audit.

## External Audit

The [2022/23 Annual Report](#) where reporting on Best Value, the External Auditors concluded:

"The Highland Council has a clear and well-articulated strategic vision. This is well embedded across the organisation and through the service planning process."

## Feedback

There has not been a public attitudes survey for some time, however some survey activity has been carried out for specific projects e.g. Budget engagement 2023-24, which demonstrated positive levels of engagement.

Staff feedback from the most recent survey in 2022 identified the following corporate areas for improvement:

- Employee Engagement
- Senior Leader Visibility
- Managing Change

The survey also highlighted the importance of being responsive and feeding back outcomes and actions in a timely manner, following a survey of staff, in order to build trust and confidence in managing change.

# Strategic objectives

## Internal Communications Strategy

Objectives:

- To enable staff to feel connected to the organisation and to better understand the role they have within the Council and the reasons for change
- To improve access to information and confidence in the management of change
- To improve senior management visibility
- To enable staff involvement and feedback of ideas to support change
- To improve staff and members' awareness of resilience matters (e.g. cyber awareness, business continuity, power failure etc)

A number of initiatives are underway to improve internal communications and engagement including:

- Transformation of the intranet onto a SharePoint site. **Staff Connections** has had over 2.5m page views in the first 9 months. The structure allows promotion of news and information to staff, the development of project sites, visible statistics showing views of individual articles, and personalised content.
- Extension of Microsoft licenses to all staff to improve inclusiveness for manual and non-office-based staff is underway.
- Development of Microsoft staff social media platform **Viva Engage** (formerly Yammer) for informal engagement and collaboration. This was trialled in the autumn of 2023 and launched in February 2024.
- Regular programme of online and in-person staff engagement sessions led by senior officers. This allows the delivery and explanation of key corporate messages and a platform for staff to ask questions and make comments.
- Development of a staff feedback form for budget savings ideas. This was very successful with over 200 suggestions submitted by staff and taken forward as part of the budget setting process for 2024-25.
- Development of an internal Emergency Roads group to share live roads issues and assets – this has significantly improved live communication of major roads incidents and increased support to roads operational staff.
- Communications plan to raise staff and partner awareness of the Delivery Plan

## External Communications Strategy

### Objectives

#### **To tell the Stories of Highland Council's Plans and Achievements for its Residents**

- To promote the Council Programme and its vision and objectives through press releases, social media, and highlighting initiatives or achievements.
- To work with our partners on shared messaging supporting the delivery of shared outcomes through the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan.
- To continue to extend the reach of our external communications through digital media and the use of film and digital tools.

#### **To provide important information for council residents to make our communities more resilient and sustainable**

- To inform residents and service users of services and service changes and explain decisions such as budget and investment strategy.
- To communicate improved customer contact methods, once developed through the outcomes of the "My Council" Project
- To develop guidance for the management of openings and launches and associated publicity for property and infrastructure schemes.
- To improve resilience awareness and preparedness of communities and businesses in line with Preparing Scotland responsibilities.
- To build better understanding and influence behaviour change for the successful delivery of key projects such as climate change/Net Zero and waste/recycling and 20mph roll-out.

#### **To promote the heritage, culture, history and future opportunities of the Highland area**

- To promote Highland culture and heritage through the promotion of Council supported events and activities which promote the Highlands e.g. Blas Festival, Archeology Festival, Mountain Bike Championships etc and through our Highland AR App. (Lochaber is the location for The Royal National Mòd in 2025.)
- To promote the Gaelic Language through the [Gaelic Language Plan](#)

### **To improve engagement with individuals and communities**

- To encourage participation in the democratic process and support elections communications.
- To develop communications, engagement and marketing plans for specific projects within the Delivery Plan.
- To support the development of a stakeholder engagement strategy which coordinates the approach to stakeholder engagement and involvement across the Council.

# Audience

## Stakeholders and engagement activity

The Highland Council has a large, diverse audience of stakeholders. Understanding the audience is fundamental to developing effective communication plans for specific projects, activities and messaging.

In addition to formal consultation, there is a huge amount of engagement activity undertaken by various services, including staff and Trade Union engagement; local community engagement; partnership engagement; strategic engagement; service delivery engagement; planning engagement; Tenant participation; budget engagement; project stakeholder engagement and other informal consultations.

Currently engagement feedback is not captured in a single place, providing rich data to inform decision-making and change management. Without coordination of engagement activity, there are risks of duplication, survey fatigue, gaps in knowledge/data and missed opportunities for more effective and efficient approaches and better use of engagement tools and channels.

There is therefore an objective to support the development of an engagement strategy, and set of guidance and standards to inform the Council's approach to stakeholder engagement and involvement across all services.

### Stakeholders:

Staff	Community Planning Partners	Children in our care
Trade Unions	Third Sector	Service users
Members	Government Bodies	Community Groups and "stakeholder" groups
Arms Length External Organisations (ALEOs)	Chambers of Commerce	Highland citizens
Suppliers	Commercial sector	Tourists/visitors
Funded or commissioned groups	Business partners	Media

# Channels

## Digital media

Further development of our digital communications capabilities continues, building on a digital communications transformation project, which has demonstrated a range of benefits including increased social media reach and engagement, as well as use of drone footage and live broadcasting of council meetings and elections.

“A picture paints a thousand words” and therefore increased use of photo/video, infographics and digital content enables us to reach a wider audience and better explain difficult concepts or new ways of doing things. These methods are ideal for example: [explaining project proposals](#), [describing how to recycle](#), [how to vote](#), [demonstrating impact on a service](#) etc.



Activity to build on this enhanced capacity includes:

- Further extension of social media reach and engagement on our platforms, including further development of our Instagram channel, a new Corran Ferry Facebook page, recruitment advertising, budget infographics, and digital video content.
- Further development of drone usage to improve digital content and to generate income. It should be possible in the near future to commercialise our You Tube channel thereby generating additional income.
- Further development of filmmaking, digital content and marketing through staff training and capacity building.
- Enhanced engagement through live broadcasting of the democratic process/elections and of activities and conferences, such as Climate Change



conference and the Green Energy conference. This has also generated income streams.

- Dedicated social media for waste and recycling services and the bus service.
- Plans to develop dedicated social media in the Gaelic language and provide training to the Gaelic team.
- The [Social Media Policy](#) sets out the Council's approach to social media

## Website

The Council's website is an important channel for providing information and managing transactions. Functionality of the search engine remains a frustration reported by users.

The redevelopment of the website is currently underway through the My Council project.

## Partnerships

A number of shared outcomes and visions require partnership work across our community planning and resilience partners to plan and deliver communications and engagement activity which are key to achieving shared outcomes.

These include for example:

- Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport (ICFGF consortium)
- Highland Community Planning Partnership (HCPP) Highland Outcome Improvement Plan
- Highlands and Islands Local Resilience Partnership (HILRP)
- City Region Deal and Inverness castle Project (IHCRD)
- Suicide Prevention and Mental Health (HCPP)
- Visitor Management
- Active travel partnerships
- Place plans: including SARF, FW204 and Inverness Strategy

Amplification of partner activity, such as wildfire campaign messaging, ensures a wider reach and builds audience trust in partnership communication.

## Media

Traditional media remain an important channel of communication, however, unlike direct digital communication with audiences, the communication is subject to nuancing and interpretation in its reporting. For complex and significant issues, media briefings are helpful in ensuring a better understanding of the complexities and detail. Ensuring accuracy and balance is important and the Independent Press Standards Organisation's [Editor's Code of Practice](#) sets out the standards we can expect.

The Media rightly holds public sector organisations to public scrutiny. However, due to the political nature of councils, coverage of differing views and controversy is unavoidable. The press rightly highlight when things go wrong, but positive news and achievements find it more difficult to get the same column inches.

The Highland area, given its geographical size, is home to a significant number of local titles, community newsletters and websites, as well as the regional and national titles and broadcast media.

While national, regional and local papers have moved much of their content online, the majority of these channels are subscriber only. Printed circulation has continued to drop significantly across the majority of titles in recent years.

The Council's Corporate Communications service positively engages with the media through press releases, responding to media enquiries and the use of features and advertising, where budget is available to promote campaigns. The use of promoted posts (paid for social media advertising) continues to be by far the most cost-effective way to reach the desired audience, especially when recruitment advertising.

Endeavours are made to always respond to media enquiries and interview requests within deadlines, where practicable and reasonable.

Due to the political context of local government, officers respond with factual information, context and provide Member quotes, and it is Members who represent the outward face of the Council and Council Policy and decisions, through media engagement – interviews, briefings and quotes.

The [media protocol](#) sets out how the Council manages publicity, media requests and identifies appropriate spokespersons for council communications, and arrangements for pre-election periods.

## Resource

The Corporate Communications team is a small team in comparison to other councils. The team manage around 2500 media enquiries per year, issue some 700 press releases per year and create thousands of posts and digital media content.

Each of the team has a Service/Committee/subject portfolio and works with services, project managers, senior officers, and Committee Chairs in their role as office bearers of the Council.

All the staff support the resilience team function with crisis communication, planning, warning, and informing and resilience and business continuity training.

In addition, part of the team specialises in digital and marketing content and social media, and part of the team specialises in external and internal event planning, elections, and partnership communications. We also have a graphic design function, with a single in-house graphic designer.

Diminishing budgets over recent years have resulted in no advertising or marketing resource within the corporate communications budget. Therefore funding for paid advertising needs to come from service/project budgets. Some income generation is possible through providing broadcast and drone services, within current capacity, as well as a plan to commercialise our You Tube channel.

The Corporate Communications team relies on receiving timely information from services in relation to activities, news, and projects to proactively plan ahead and deliver outcomes. Each of the communication and engagement officers endeavours to work closely with services to plan ahead, provide advice and develop appropriate communications products and digital content, relevant to the audience.

# Risk

## Corporate Risk

There are no direct risk on the corporate risk register regarding corporate communications and engagement.

## Organisational Culture

Effective communication is not just about the quality of the communication itself – it is about creating the right environment and conditions – or culture - to enable good communication. Understanding and addressing organisational culture is fundamental to the success of communication and ultimately performance, and the realisation of the Council's vision.

### **Internal Audit - Auditing within Public Spending Constraints** (January 2016)

reflects on organisational culture and reputation, which may affect public confidence and the ability to achieve corporate objectives. The management of reputational risks can be addressed by audit reviews covering areas such as:

- communications and publicity policies
- complaints procedures
- social media management
- staff and public surveys
- whistleblowing procedures

An effective Communication and Engagement Strategy can therefore help to mitigate the reputational and cultural risks within the Council.

# Evaluation

## Measuring success

Key performance indicator actions for Communications within the Performance Plan are:

- Maintain social media followers within the top third of Councils
- Promote the Gaelic language and culture
- Promote culture and heritage, including through the HighlandAR app

The Council's social media accounts can be found [here](#):

Quarterly social media reports are produced and [published](#) on the Council's website.

Other measures of the success of the Council's communication and engagement approach can be found in:

- Staff survey responses
- Public survey responses
- Expressions and levels of complaint or compliment
- Website visits
- Internal and external audit reporting
- Media coverage

## Plan

A separate plan to deliver the agreed objectives will set out measures of success, timescales and leadership roles.

## Review

The Strategy will be reviewed in 2027.