**The Highland Council**

**Ambitious, Sustainable and Connected**

**Communications and Engagement Strategy 2019-22**

**Introduction – Our vision: Ambitious, Sustainable and Connected**

The Vision of the Highland Council is to be an ambitious, sustainable and connected Council. In order to achieve this vision, a complete transformation of the Council is required and this must be supported by a Communications and Engagement Strategy to underpin the necessary change and support the delivery of the Council Programme.

The Council Programme sets out a clear and **ambitious** vision for the Highlands as

* A place to live
* A place to learn
* A place to thrive
* A welcoming place and with
* A redesigned Council

The Council seeks to:

***“safeguard and enhance Highland’s significant reputation and standing nationally and internationally”***

Marketing the Highlands and “talking Highland up”, making it a place of choice for visitors, investment and employment will therefore be a key focus of the Communication Strategy.

A Programme of Change which commenced in 2019 sets the Council on track of transformation, with the aim of aligning reducing resources to support the Council becoming a **sustainable**, high performing and dynamic organisation into the future.

The Highland region has 4,905 km 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 population.

Tourism is an important industry for the Highlands and this means that the population increases substantially at various points throughout the year and puts additional pressure on a fragile infrastructure and scarce resources.

**Sustainability** of these communities into the future is vital to a thriving economy and healthy and connected population.

Effective communication and engagement is not just a function of one department, but is part of everyone’s role across every part of the Council.

The Highland Council is comprised of 74 elected Members serving on 21 wards representing our communities and the largest employer 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.

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 forums tells us that staff want to feel **connected** to the organisation, to understand the rationale behind change, 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.

A theme from Member feedback is that the Council needs to be more responsive to contacts from the public and to be more proactive and “on the front foot”. Members value briefings and support on key issues, to provide the information - background, explanation, facts and the Council’s position, which supports them as Council ambassadors to answer media or constituent enquiries.

Criticism does not equal governance, challenge and scrutiny; and criticism which is not informed or constructive can be harmful to the council as a whole. The concept needs to be of the Council as a collective of 10,000 individuals and dozens of teams working towards a common goal - “our council”, rather than seeing “the” Council as a separate and often negatively viewed entity. Unfair criticism and reputation damage can have a detrimental impact on individuals and teams and can result negatively on wellbeing and performance.

“It takes many good deeds to build a good reputation, and only one bad one to lose it.”—Benjamin Franklin

Reputation is recognised as a significant risk to any organisation, particularly through a period of significant change and resource reduction. The strategic objectives identified will seek to address this by managing this risk.

The Council does not work 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 and Workforce Recruitment are key opportunities for the Council to work together with partners on joint campaigns and shared resources.

The challenge of reducing budgets and the impact on services and the workforce is set to continue for the foreseeable future. It is imperative that the Council works in a new way with staff, partners and the public to foster a better understanding; to enable redesign, innovation and sharing of good ideas and best practice. It will be important for the Council to work with partners and with Highland politicians to engage with the public and to promote the Highlands with a shared vision.

The council is at its most effective when it is helping people to live successful lives as independently as possible and helping communities to help themselves to be **sustainable**.

The Community Empowerment Act (2015) gives more powers to communities to be involved in local decision-making and Localism is a key priority for the Highland Council’s Programme. The Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy sets out a vision for engaging with and empowering communities to make decisions about things that affect them. “Strong local democracy must be about enabling communities themselves to participate…” The report advocates principles of transparency and participation.

If people are to be more engaged and empowered in decisions, they need access to clear information and to feel listened to. Genuine listening builds trust and is fundamental to the development of effective local democracy.

The Council has begun to reset its relationship with communities and staff, starting with a programme of engagement in November 2018. The Communication Strategy sets out how the Council will continue this commitment to being more **connected** to communities, with a continuing programme of engagement, listening and enabling empowerment and democracy.

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.

**Current analysis: Where are we now and what do we know?**

Understanding where we are now (our culture, our resources and capacity, our successes and our weaknesses) is crucial to planning what is required to enable us to transform and be what we aim to be in the future.

**Our achievements 2015-2018**

Our previous communication strategy 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 (we now have over 50,000 followers on the most popular platforms including facebook, twitter and Instagram); The Highland Council ranks 6th for Facebook and 10th for Twitter followers in Scotland. We have set up a Corran Ferry twitter feed and webpage to improve access to real time information.
2. Increased referrals to the website; the successful development of school closures communications through the web and social media; the twitter feed on the home page;.
3. Development of the Corporate Identity and Branding Guidelines has helped to improve the professional image of the Council through design, publications and imaging.
4. Development of the quarterly Highpoints Magazine which is a platform for positive stories and promoting awareness and information, including performance.
5. Promotion of Plain English to a wider number of staff and Development of a media protocol
6. Development of positive publicity and enhanced reputation through a number of project specific communication strategies e.g. West Link, City-Region Deal, Free WiFi, Waste, Elections, Budget and Redesign. 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.
7. Increased resilience through a partnership Major Incident Communications Plan, a revised Emergency Plan, exercise participation and promotion of business continuity and security information and policies.
8. Development of the staff newsletter; a staff facebook page and improvement in satisfaction in the most recent staff survey for internal communications.

**Resources:**

The Council, like other public sector organisations, has been undergoing significant funding reductions over recent years and this is set to continue for the foreseeable future. This, combined with increasing pressures and increasing public expectation, has created an imperative for considerable change and transformation to be sustainable. Reduced resources have impacted on the Council’s capacity in all areas, and in particular, its capacity for communication and engagement – and this at a time when effective communication is most fundamental to driving change.

The management of budget reductions and transformation projects requires significant communication resource; there is an increased demand for information through digital means; Freedom of Information requests are increasing; and a high number of local and regional media outlets and a 24 hour media and social media demand exerts additional pressure on very limited resources.

**Public engagement feedback:**

Local public engagement in communities has been well received. There is a clear need for visibility of the council and opportunities for face to face conversations. Facebook chats have also been used successfully as another method of online engagement. Key themes from public engagement during recent months have told us that people would like to see a council that is more:

1. Efficient
2. Commercial
3. Outward looking
4. Flexible

**Staff Forum feedback:**

Staff forum engagement has been very much welcomed by staff and there are plans to action and respond to the key themes highlighted from staff forums which have taken place to date. The themes are:

1. Access and barriers to information – currently manual roles, IT access and line management can be barriers to information access
2. More face to face communication and more staff forums would be welcomed by staff
3. Line manager support/training is needed to improve performance management and internal communication
4. Senior manager visibility is needed across the whole Council
5. Culture – a feeling that the culture needs to change to enable improved communication
6. Employee Review and Development (ERD) process – there is a clear need for this to change to support both staff and transformation
7. Social activities -staff would like to see more opportunities to connect and network across services
8. Physical environment – often not conducive to connectivity. Dated buildings, closed office doors and segregated canteen facilities are barriers to staff and member contact

**Member feedback:**

Discussions with members have highlighted a number of themes:

1. The Council needs to be quicker and better at responding to public contact (enquiries and complaints).
2. Member briefings on specific topics are valued
3. Media training is identified as a need
4. The Council needs to be more proactive and can be seen to be on the back foot when negative issues arise. Members need to be briefed in order to respond effectively to media enquiries.
5. There is an identified need for an improved digital presence, with responsive social media and more video content. Recent cuts to the corporate communications budget and limited resource to do this is well acknowledged.
6. Campaign activity would help to promote the Highlands as a place to visit, live, work and invest. There is a need to raise awareness on the vast scale of the road and school infrastructure and need for investment.
7. There is a need to continue to improve influence with regional politicians and at a national level

**Culture**

Reputation is one of the highest strategic risks for an organisation as highlighted in an internal audit **- Auditing within Public Spending Constraints (**January 2016) – see appendix 1

Reputational damage can have a negative impact on public and partner confidence, staff morale, performance, and the ability to achieve the organisation’s vision.

Reputation is closely linked to communication and organisational culture.

Organisational culture is about setting the right tone at the top and it also has to operate right through the organisation. Effective leadership and the role of leadership and culture in communication must therefore be a key strand of the Communication and Engagement Strategy.

Culture is the values, beliefs and behaviours – the symbols and stories, which describe an organisation. Culture has a direct impact on the performance of an organisation. Culture is intrinsic in:

* How we manage change
* Our respect for others
* How we listen and respond to what we hear
* Our inclusiveness
* How we describe ourselves and our values
* How we demonstrate our values
* How we value people
* Our openness to ideas and opportunities

**The Sturrock Report** (insert link) focuses on cultural issues and the impact of this on organisational health, wellbeing and performance. It challenges other organisations to examine their own culture and behaviours and to learn from the report’s findings.

Recommendations within the report highlight the importance of transformation of an organisation in productivity and culture though its workforce and leadership.

The report refers to examples where “..focusing on people who form the workforce has transformed an organisation..” leading to people “ being more productive and effective”.

The report also emphasises the importance of leadership on the productivity and wellbeing of a workforce: “If leadership can be inspiring, visionary, energetic and attractive, people will deliver more”.

The report highlights the need for:

* Effective communication
* Being open with “struggles” and challenges
* Engagement and openness
* Cooperation and respect
* Attitudes and behaviours
* Shifting power from hierarchy to a shared vision
* Develop skills and capacities
* Problem solving must be honest, inclusive and collaborative

It is important that the Council examines the report and the findings and amongst others themes highlighted, considers:

* The importance of understanding our Culture – how it affects us, our wellbeing, our success and our productivity; what our culture is and what we want and need it to be
* The importance of internal communications and the style of our communications, including the ability to listen, communicate with kindness and challenge with respect
* An organisation has a responsibility to its staff - staff need to feel safe & cared for and to create space for listening, allowing challenge and support for managers dealing with poor performance effectively and appropriately
* The importance of Leadership which carries the vision and values of the organisation

**Change and transformation**

The Council is undergoing transformation, from organisation and governance structures to service change and workforce strategy. The Change Programme is driving numerous key projects and each of these encompasses a varied range of stakeholders and key messages.

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/>) (see illustration appendix 2)

1. Establishing a sense of urgency – accepting change is necessary
2. Forming a powerful guiding coalition – Line managers are key players to support and lead change.
3. Creating a vision (ambitious, sustainable, connected)
4. Communicating the vision – the communication strategy is a fundamental step in the change process (acting the values is in itself communication)
5. Empowering others to act on the vision
6. Planning for and creating short term wins (making change attractive)
7. Consolidating improvements – demonstrating successes; praise and reward
8. Institutionalising new approaches – creating new standards and performance/behavioural expectations

**A Communications and Engagement Strategy for 2019-22**

The Council Programme states the ambitions of the Council and the Corporate Plan sets out specifically what the Council will do to deliver the Programme. Culture, communications and performance are the enablers to ensure the Council is best placed to achieve organisational transformation and success. This is described in the Organisational Strategy.

The Communication and Engagement Strategy sets out six key objectives to enable the Council to deliver its vision and priorities.

1. Enabling change – Setting out the rationale for change – Identifying the required values and culture - being responsive, collaborative, empowering, inclusive – through values and behaviour
2. Developing leadership – expert communicators – Leaders carry the vision and values of the organisation, Line manager and Member training and member briefings, senior manager visibility, listening and responding to staff, communities and partners
3. Communicating the vision and Developing a “shared vision” of Ambitious, Sustainable and Connected.
4. Internal Communication: Improving performance thought building an engaged, flexible and connected workforce – through an effective internal communication strategy to improve two-way communication, access, visibility, social networking, physical environment, revised ERD process, wellbeing, compliance, greater face to face communication through staff forums
5. Promoting success – Promoting the Council by communicating the quick wins and the successes and managing reputational risk/expectation
6. Championing the Highlands – through our relationship with partners, communities, the media and relationship with partners, MPs MSPs and Govts – “Talk Highland up”

**Objective 1: Enabling Change**

The first step towards achieving change is to set out the clear rationale for change. Clear messaging which manages expectations about reducing and limited resources is fundamental to people understanding why change is necessary and the reason for sometimes difficult or unpopular decisions.

Change can be very difficult for some and can be see as threatening the status quo. Providing explanations and a clear rationale with facts and evidence to support the basis for change can help people who may be impacted by the change come to terms with it. Communications must be realistic, honest and transparent in order for the audience to understand and trust the message.

Communication must also be two-way. Change is easier to accept if you understand the reason for and are involved and engaged in the change process. The Council must demonstrate responsiveness.

It is also important to describe the intended outcomes and what can be achieved as well as being clear about things the Council cannot do.

Identifying the required values and culture - honest, responsive, collaborative, empowering, inclusive – through values and behaviour

*To bridge reputation-reality gaps, an organisation must either improve its ability to meet expectations or reduce expectations by promising less*.(reference)

**Links to Corporate Plan:**

Deliver meaningful engagement with Highland Communities, listening and responding (Outcome 6.1)

Supporting the delivery of a change programme (6.6.6)

**Key messages:**

The Council continues to face significant challenge and financial uncertainty

We need to adapt to be sustainable

Reducing resources

Flexible and adaptable staff

Redesign

**Actions:**

1. Project communication plans which reflect the vision and key messages to enable change
2. Identifying the values and behaviours required for a positive Culture which enables change. Breaking down barriers to communication. Involvement of people in change
3. Setting clear expectations for responsiveness, develop proposals for improving response times and mechanisms (e.g. webchat), and building greater capacity for public engagement and listening to the public and customers
4. Hold a rolling programme of public engagement with regular opportunities, supported by the new Executive structure and reflecting local priorities and responding to local issues
5. Building capacity through the change fund for improved digital skills and tools to increase video content online.
6. Improving analysis so that we have better information about our media coverage and reach.

**Objective 2: Developing Leadership**

Developing leadership – expert communicators – Leaders carry the vision and values of the organisation, Line manager and Member training and member briefings, senior manager visibility, listening and responding

**Key messages:**

Leaders carry the vision and values of the organisation

**Actions:**

1. Describing clear expectations from our leaders (visibility, supportiveness, positive communication, respect, challenge, stimulating motivation and morale, promoting the vision and carrying the values)
2. Developing a leadership programme, including effective communications skills, strategic awareness and thinking, championing behaviours
3. Member and senior officer media training
4. Developing support and mentoring and promoting best practice

**Objective 3: Communicating the Vision**

The Council’s vision is to be Ambitious, Sustainable and Connected. This objective is about articulating the vision and what it means in order to establish a shared vision with our staff, our partners and our communities.

**Links to Corporate Plan:**

Council Strategic Priorities

**Key Messages:**

The Highland Council is striving to be an ambitious, sustainable and connected council**.** The vision is described in three short statements.

**Ambitious:**

*We aim to be high performing and forward thinking, embracing change and challenge.*

**Sustainable:**

*We will be efficient, resourceful and adaptable, striving for best value and a secure future.*

**Connected:**

*We will listen to and work together with communities, staff and partners for the best outcomes for Highland.*

**Actions:**

1. Marketing the vision through press releases, materials, publications, visual aids such as banners, livery etc.
2. Use of digital and marketing capacity to support the messaging
3. Communicating the vision through Leaders and Line Managers (see Objective 2)
4. Developing key messages and building these into communications
5. Demonstrating the vision as follows:

An ambitious Council –

* Telling the success stories (see objective 5)
* To champion the Highlands and innovation (see objective 6)
* Developing leadership (see objective 2)
* Improving performance through being target focussed
* Delivering quality services
* Being positive about change

A Connected Council –

* Connecting with our communities and our partners
* Improving internal communication (see objective 4)
* Building on our Social Media success and developing use of digital communications
* Involving and engaging staff and communities in decisions
* Breaking down barriers
* Being proactive
* Encouraging ideas and listening

A Sustainable Council –

* Explaining the rationale for change (see objective 1)
* Changing our culture to support the vision (see objective 1)
* Managing expectation and dispelling the myths
* Developing resilience
* Being efficient and prudent with resources
* Looking outward and capturing learning
* Being more inclusive

**Objective 4: Internal Communication**

**Links to Corporate Plan:**

Championing the role our staff play (Outcome 6.1.2)

Improving council performance (Outcome 6.6.4)

**Key messages:**

Communication is everyone’s responsibility

Our staff are all ambassadors

**Actions:**

1. Update induction process to reflect vision and values
2. Regular Staff forums (supported by new Executive structure)
3. Improve access to information (including a new webpage)
4. Increase face to face opportunities
5. Member briefings and factsheets
6. Rebranded newsletter “Staff Connections”
7. Review of the Employee Review and Development (ERD) process
8. Building social networks – developing social activities in partnership with staff

**Objective 5: Promoting success**

**Links to Corporate Plan**

Strategic priority - Promote fairness and welcome diversity

A Place to thrive (Outcome 6.3)

A place to prosper (Outcome 6.4)

**Key Messages:**

The Highland Council is an ambitious, sustainable and connected Council

**Actions:**

1. Through culture and behaviours (objective 1)
2. Identifying the quick wins to make the case for change
3. Positive PR – Promote image of council internal and external publications
4. Celebrating success and valuing staff - Quality Awards and Area celebrations

**Objective 6: Championing the Highlands**

**Links to Corporate Plan**

Promote prosperity and well-being (6.1.3)

We will attract more people to make the Highlands their home. (6.2.1)

We will promote and support the Gaelic language and culture (Corporate Plan 6.2.7)

Promote opportunities in culture, learning, sport, health and wellbeing (6.2.8)

Promote the Highlands as a diverse, safe, and friendly place to live, study, work and visit. (6.5.1)

**Key messages:**

Highland is – a place to live, thrive, learn – a welcoming place

#Highlandaplacetolove #talkHighlandup

**Actions:**

1. Develop a campaign to promote the Highlands as a place to visit, live, work and invest
2. Develop campaigns & shared working with partners to raise awareness of the scale of need in the Highlands and lobby for investment and funding
3. Talent attraction – working in collaboration to support talent attraction
4. Developing relationships with partners and regional politicians
5. Promotion of Gaelic language and culture in line with the Gaelic Language Plan and Corporate Plan

**Next Steps:**

The next steps are to develop and deliver a specific action plan, which links to the performance indicators and Outcomes in the Corporate Plan, with progress reported back to Council (annually).

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**Appendix 1**

**Ref: Internal Audit - Auditing within Public Spending Constraints** January 2016

(Extract) This section reflects on how public sector funding reductions impact on internal audit and how this had led to a changing approach to audit and a different environment within which the internal audit function operates.

The effects of public spending constraints can have a significant effect on an organisation’s culture, which may affect its ability to achieve its corporate objectives. Public services have come under closer scrutiny following a number of high profile failures, many of which have led to criticism of the organisation’s culture for tolerating or failing to stop the root causes.

This has also led to reputation increasingly becoming a ‘top ten’ risk on strategic risk registers. It can then become relevant for internal audit to consider these issues within the scope of reviews.

Organisational culture is about setting the right tone at the top, through documents such as the strategy, codes of conduct, financial and contract regulations: it also has to operate right through the organisation.

This can be difficult to identify, but there are a number of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ measures that can be reviewed to assess the impact of public spending constraints. These can include:

* how the service looks and feels to a third party
* sickness and staff turnover levels
* compliance with corporate policies and procedures (including responsiveness to audit recommendations)
* number of complaints (for forward-facing services)
* quality of record-keeping.

These areas are more likely to be incorporated into existing testing programmes than to be the subject of discrete audit reviews. See [Culture and the Role of Internal Audit](http://iia.org.uk/policy/publications/culture-and-the-role-of-internal-audit/) (IIA, 2014).

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
* data protection
* business continuity and emergency planning.

See also

<https://hbr.org/2007/02/reputation-and-its-risks>

**Appendix 2**

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**Appendix 3**

Enablers of the organisational strategy

