The Highland Council	Agenda Item 3
Community Safety, Public Engagement and Equalities Committee – 25 March 2015	Report No CPE 1/15

Corporate Communications Strategy

Report by Corporate Communications Manager

Summary

A Corporate Communications Strategy has been developed, which identifies 12 core objectives and a number of themes for achieving these objectives. Members are asked to approve the strategy and review implementation in 12 months.

1.   Background

1.1   The purpose of the Corporate Communication Strategy is to support delivery of the Council's programme and to ensure effective communications with Highland people and relevant stakeholders.

1.2   Consultation has taken place on what Members, Directors and Staff view as priorities for corporate communications across the Council. The Corporate Communications Manager has visited a number of ward meetings to talk to local Members, held a Members' seminar on 27 February, and consulted with Directors and various staff.

1.3   Effective communication is part of everyone's role across the Council.

1.4   Twelve objectives have been identified.

2.   Objectives

2.1   1. To ensure that the Council is promoted and represented in a manner which maintains, and wherever possible, enhances our reputation.

        2. To provide useful, informative and accessible information about Council services and initiatives and to promote the priorities of the Council across a range of channels, including events and campaigns.

        3. To create and embed a new relationship between the Council and our Highland communities based on listening, trust, empowerment and participation.

        4. To work with community planning partners and partner agencies to communicate shared ambitions and promote the economic growth and wellbeing of the Highlands

5. To promote the Council's Digital First programme, demonstrating a modern and efficient organisation, encouraging use of online services, whilst practising digital inclusion.

6. To ensure we promote principles of inclusive communication, through support for people who do not have English as their first language, making information available in alternative formats and to include ways of communicating with people who do not have access or skills to use digital communications.

7. To develop the use of social media channels to disseminate messages, increase understanding, promote the ambitions and work of the Council and warn and inform.

8. To work with partners to plan for and provide warning and informing in the event of a major incident or emergency, promoting business continuity and recovery.

9. To promote Gaelic language and culture in line with the commitments of the Council Programme and our Gaelic Language Plan.

10. To provide communication support and guidance for elections and referenda to all relevant stakeholders, whilst maintaining public confidence in the integrity of processes.

11. To provide strategic communications advice and training to assist members and officers who have responsibility for communicating Council initiatives, policies and decisions as well as agreed campaign activities.

12. To develop an internal communications strategy, ensuring access to information, training and an understanding of priorities amongst our staff.

3. Themes

3.1 In addition to the 12 objectives, there are 12 themes of supporting work to enable the achievement of these objectives:

1. Corporate identity
2. Developing a Listening Culture
3. Media relations
4. Website
5. Social media and online web presence

6. Communicating in Partnership
7. Communicating in a crisis
8. Access to information
9. Plain English
10. Promotion of Gaelic Language
11. Celebrating success
12. Internal Communication

3.2 An action plan will be developed to take forward the implementation of the strategy and this will include key performance indicators. Progress will be reported annually.

4. Implications

4.1 **Resource:**
There is a very limited budget for Corporate Communications, which is almost entirely staff costs. In-house graphic design is an effective and efficient way of delivering professional design and publications. There are very limited resources to provide printed publications or purchase advertising or marketing services. Effective use of branding and corporate identity should enable a more efficient way of working.

4.2 **Legal:**
The Council has legislative duties under the Civil Contingencies Act, Freedom of Information and other Acts as well as statutory duties to provide specific performance information to the public.

4.3 **Equalities:**
The Communication Strategy aims to reduce inequalities by delivering communications in a range of mechanisms to target a range of audiences including those with special needs. An example is to ensure that Plain English is at the heart of all our communications.

4.4 **Climate Change/Carbon Clever:**
The Communications Strategy aims to support Carbon Clever initiatives and to reduce printing costs.

4.5 **Risk:**
Local Authorities are responsible for warning and informing during emergencies and for cooperating with partners to plan and prepare for as well as manage emergencies. The Communication Strategy aims to ensure that the Council meets its legislative and regulatory responsibilities with regard to communication.

4.6 **Gaelic:**
The Communication Strategy addresses the Promotion of the Gaelic Language and Culture as set out in the Council Programme.

4.7 **Rural implications:**

The Communications Strategy aims to deliver effective communications across a mix of urban and remote and rural populations. The difficult geography and infrastructure and dispersed population of the Highlands present particular challenges for communication; with varied internet access; long travelling distances to deliver or access services; social deprivation; and diverse communities and cultures.

Recommendation
Members are asked to approve the Corporate Communications Strategy.
Members are asked to review implementation progress in 12 months.

Designation:

Date: 13 March 2015

Author: Ruth Cleland

Background Papers:

Council Programme "Working together for the Highlands",
http://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/file/4611/programme_of_the_highland_council_2012_-_2017

Gaelic Language Plan,
http://www.highland.gov.uk/info/283/community_life_and_leisure/335/gaelic/2

Organisational Values
http://www.highland.gov.uk/info/695/council_information_performance_and_statistics/392/our_organisational_values

The Highland Council
Comhairle na Gàidhealtachd

Communications Strategy 2015-17
Ro-innleachd Conaltraidh 2015-17

Introduction

The purpose of the Corporate Communications Strategy is to support delivery of the Council's programme and to ensure effective communications with Highland people and relevant stakeholders. This strategy seeks to ensure that communications are managed in a planned and proactive way.

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 sparsely populated parts of the United Kingdom. The region has 4,905 km of coastline and 6,752km of rural roads. Tourism is an important industry for the Highlands and this means that the population increases substantially at various points throughout the year.

The Council delivers an extensive and varied range of services across education, social work, environmental protection, planning, infrastructure, waste management, roads maintenance, trading standards, children's services, business support, registrations, tourism and leisure, to name but a few.

The Highland Council is comprised of eighty elected Members representing our communities and employs around 10,000 staff, delivering services based at various locations across the region. Our staff are also our service users and our ambassadors; therefore effective internal communication is extremely important.

The Council 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.

Along with our community planning partners and the Scottish Government, we have made 16 commitments to identify areas of improvement and to deliver better outcomes for the people of the Highlands as part of a Single Outcome Agreement.

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. 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.

Our corporate and partnership commitments are set out in the Programme of The Highland Council: "Working together for the Highlands" 2014-17.

How effectively we communicate is vital to achieving the programme commitments, particularly those highlighted below:

"The Council will aim to achieve its equality outcomes, so that: people are, and feel, free to live their lives without harassment and discrimination, and can take part in community life"

"…People benefit from public services in a fairer way and are able to have their say about them"

"..Staff feel there is an organisational culture where everyone is treated with dignity and respect"

"Working with our many partners, the Council will seek to expand access to culture and the arts across the Highlands"

"The Council will work to alleviate poverty by encouraging benefit uptake and supporting a range of advice services"

"We are committed to giving more young people a voice in this Council"

"The Council will improve public access, including out-of-office-hours access, to the Council and its services, offering members of the public a range of access points including by phone, online and in person"

"The Council will provide information to the public in clear language, to the 'Crystal Mark' plain English standard"

"The Council will continue to measure its progress openly, report on it publicly and listen to its communities"

"Working with the UK and Scottish Government and Electoral bodies we will encourage voter turn-out, especially among younger people"

"We will reduce the volume of printed material produced by the Council"

"The Council will support communities to be more resilient to climate change and extreme adverse weather events"

Effective communication is not just a function of one department, but is part of everyone's role across every part of the Council. Media enquiries to staff, however, should be referred to the Corporate Communications Department.

The Council actively undertakes lobbying and campaign activities in key areas, where this is agreed as part of Council strategy. The Council's communications will however, at all times, remain politically neutral and may not be used to promote political views.

Seven principles underpin the work of the council and our communication strategy therefore needs to be based on these principles.
http://www.highland.gov.uk/info/695/council_information_performance_and_statistics/392/our_organisational_values

- **Listening:** We will listen and respond to our communities, value their diversity and treat everyone with respect, developing new mechanisms to hear people's views
- **Open:** We will be fair, open and accountable. We will explain our decisions and be honest about our challenges
- **Valuing:** We will value our staff, look for the positives and celebrate our successes
- **Improving:** We will be efficient and effective in our communications and seek improvement by evaluating what we do
- **Supporting:** We will support our staff ensuring they have access to the information they need. We will support people in our communities to have equal access to information and services
- **Partnering:** We will work in partnership with communities and with other agencies to communicate shared initiatives and achieve common aims
- **Delivering:** We will aim to achieve the best outcomes through effective and efficient communication across a range of channels

Objectives

1. To ensure that the Council is promoted and represented in a manner which maintains, and wherever possible, enhances our reputation.

2. To provide useful, informative and accessible information about council services and initiatives and promote the priorities of the council across a range of channels, including events and campaigns.

3. To create and embed a new relationship between the Council and our Highland communities based on listening, trust, empowerment and participation

4. To work with community planning partners and partner agencies to communicate shared ambitions and promote the economic growth and wellbeing of the Highlands

5. To promote the Council's Digital First programme, demonstrating a modern and efficient organisation, encouraging use of online services, whilst practising digital inclusion

6. To ensure we promote principles of inclusive communication, through support for people who do not have English as their first language, making information available in alternative formats; and to include ways of communicating with people who do not have access or skills to use digital communications

7. To develop the use of social media channels to disseminate messages, increase understanding, promote the ambitions and work of the Council and warn and inform

8. To work with partners to plan for and provide warning and informing in the event of a major incident or emergency, promoting business continuity and recovery

9. To promote Gaelic language and culture in line with the commitments of the Council Programme and our Gaelic Language Plan

10. To provide communication support and guidance for elections and referenda to all relevant stakeholders, whilst maintaining public confidence in the integrity of processes.

11. To provide strategic communications advice and training to assist members and officers who have responsibility for communicating Council initiatives, policies and decisions, as well as agreed campaign activities.

12. To develop an internal communications strategy, ensuring access to information, training and an understanding of priorities amongst our staff.

In order to achieve these objectives, this strategy covers a number of cross-cutting themes:

1. Corporate identity
2. Developing a Listening Culture
3. Media relations
4. Website
5. Social media and online web presence
6. Communicating in Partnership
7. Communicating in a crisis
8. Access to information
9. Plain English
10. Promotion of Gaelic Language
11. Celebrating success
12. Internal Communication

1. Corporate Identity

Corporate identity is the overall image of The Highland Council which reflects our values and objectives.

This is visibly manifested by way of branding; use of design, language and images to communicate our organisational philosophy and culture.

Our Values are Listening, Open, Valuing, Improving, Supporting, Partnering and Delivering. The way in which we present our image should also reflect that we aim to be accessible, effective and efficient; that we are fair and consistent; that we are professional and forward thinking; that we are Corporate family, working in partnership, not silos; and that, whilst we value our heritage and culture, we are commited to modernisation and continual improvement.

Therefore our corporate identity incorporates and goes beyond branding, reflected in:

- Our logo
- Our style of publications and use of typography
- Our style and tone of writing
- Our use of colours, pictures and signage
- Our website
- Our social media and other online presence
- Our key messages
- Our promotion of Gaelic
- Our vision

A set of guidelines for use of graphic design, encouraging plain english and promoting efficiency, will be developed to strengthen our Corporate Identity and to reflect what we want to say about The Highland Council. With 134 programme commitments, there are a huge number of priorities for the public to understand. We will therefore focus on developing a number of clear key messages which illustrate the council's ambitions and values.

Outputs	Outcomes	Objectives
Produce Guidelines	Enhanced corporate identity and reputation	1,2,5,9,12

2. Listening Culture

The Council seeks to create and embed a new relationship between the Council and our Highland communities based on listening, trust, empowerment and participation. In order to do this we need to develop a culture of listening, both to staff and to service users. Listening is hearing people's experiences and views, reflecting on how these can enrich our understanding and responding by acting and feeding back.

We already have numerous ways of capturing views by way of consultation, satisfaction surveys, analysis of complaints, analysis of social media comments and so on. How do we ensure that we actively listen, consider and respond and embed this into all our processes?

We will hold a series of workshops with staff, members, partners and the public to assess our current approach and develop a listening culture.

Outputs	Outcomes	Objectives
Hold workshops Identify tools for analysis	Listening culture	3,7

3. Media relations

There is an active and diverse media in the Highlands, including numerous titles, broadcasters and local radio stations and community papers and websites.
Local and regional media can perform a valuable service of providing information to the public and scrutinizing council decisions and services. The Council issues around 1000 news releases per year, provides webcasting and media access for committee meetings and briefings and photo opportunities for specific events.
We will seek to maintain and further improve positive media coverage and develop our media relations by:

- Providing media briefings to explain complex projects and issues
- Generating a flow of positive and informational news stories
- Defending the council by rebuttal of inaccurate coverage
- Being open and transparent
- Providing media training for staff and members
- Implementing online tools to effectively manage media requests and evaluate coverage
- Building relationships and consulting with the local media to improve media relations

Outputs	Outcomes	Objectives
As above	Accurate and balanced media coverage	1,2,6,10,11

4. Website

The new Council website is an important channel of communication and information, as well as a tool for delivering online services. The website will be continually improved to ensure ease of navigation and accessibility. A number of features have been designed to enable better access to information:

- An effective search engine
- A school closures page linked to social media
- Prominent access to committee meeting information
- A twitter feed on the home page to enable access to the latest news
- A severe weather page with useful links to warn and inform
- Easy access to services through prominent icons
- A traffic and travel page with access to up to the minute travel information
- An increased number of accessible user-friendly online services
- Use of social media and traditional media to signpost to online services

Outputs	Outcomes	Objectives
Increase website referrals to digital services	Increased customer satisfaction Increased website visits 40% of transactions delivered online by 2017	2,5,8,9

5. Social media and Online presence

There are currently around 35 million users of social networks in the UK and this figure is continually growing with people, across a wide demographic, networking on a range of social networks, with many spending an average of over 3 hours per day online. We should therefore focus attention on using the most popular social media platforms to communicate and engage with the public.

Highland Council currently uses the top three platforms for social media in the UK, Facebook, and Twitter and You Tube, as well as Flickr as a photo gallery. As Facebook is by far the most dominant social media platform with the greatest local audience, efforts have been made to develop the Council's use of this channel over recent months, resulting in a vast increase in the number of likes and a reach of over 40,000 people.

Social media channels present opportunities to:

- listen
- communicate directly with the public
- provide and signpost information
- promote events
- disseminate and increase understanding of key messages
- consult
- manage and enhance reputation
- warn and inform
- engage, demonstrating the council's value "to listen and respond"
- gather information/monitor/evaluate/learn/adapt
- Support the delivery of the Digital First Programme

Social media will not be used as a service delivery mechanism, but it is an effective tool for signposting customers to direct services and to information about services.

Outputs	Outcomes	Objectives
- Signpost to available online services, or other services as appropriate - Continue to develop social media use - Establish a Linked In presence - Utilise social media monitoring and analytical tools to evaluate - Engage on a range of topics by holding facebook chats - Use promoted posts for key topics to reach a wider audience - Develop the use of video and photographic content to promote council messages - Provide staff training	15,000 Facebook likes by 2017 15,000 Twitter followers by 2017	1,2,3,4,5,7,8

6. Communicating in partnership

The Highland Council is a member of a community planning partnership of public services in the Highlands, working together to improve the wellbeing of people of the Highlands and to develop collaborative ways of working.

By pooling expertise and resources and working together to communicate shared goals, we have a better chance of achieving successful outcomes.

We will therefore work with partners to identify key projects which would benefit from our shared collaboration, learning and best practice.

Outputs	Outcomes	Objectives
Develop Highland communications planning group	Shared communications plan for major campaigns	4,8,9

7. Communicating in a crisis - Warning and Informing

The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 places a responsibility on Category One Responder organisations to have in place emergency plans and business continuity management arrangements, which include a duty to communicate with the public prior to, and in the event of and during recovery from, an emergency. The Council also has duties in respect of helping prepare businesses for business continuity and it takes the lead role in Recovery from an emergency.

Effective and speedy communications are essential in any emergency. The Council works closely with other Category One and Two Partners in the Regional and Local Resilience Partnerships to plan and prepare for emergencies and major incidents.

- We will work with partners to develop a Resilience Partnership Major Incident Communications Plan
- We will review communications in all our Council Major Incident and Off-site Plans
- We will participate in learning, training and debriefing events
- We will continue to develop our website and social media capacity to enable us to effectively warn and inform in an emergency
- We will help to build resilience in our communities and businesses through the promotion of resilience and business continuity information

Outputs	Outcomes	Objectives
• Major Incident Communications Plan	Increased resilience to the impact of emergencies	7,8

8. Access to information

We have a duty to ensure that people who do not have the means or skills to access digital communications or services have alternatives or the support to access digital if they wish.

The Council has less resource than ever before, to produce printed publications, therefore we need to be better at communicating effectively through a variety of other mechanisms. What we do print, will be done as concisely and economically as possible, avoiding any waste.

The Council produces a vast range of publications and informational materials, from school menus to council tax fact sheets. Publications will be made available on line, where possible, and printed copies or extracts made available if requested.

We will work with the media to ensure people have accurate information in an appropriate format, in newspapers and on local radio or tv about services and changes which affect them.

We also need to make it convenient for people to engage in consultations. This can be done by holding meetings and exhibitions in local settings or by providing officers to talk to local groups.

- We will promote the various support mechanisms that are available to help people access online information and services
- We will provide information in a format that is easy for people to understand and that is suited to their needs
- We will continue to work with traditional media to complement online information channels
- We will consult with communities to find out how we can improve how we communicate with them

Outputs	Outcomes	Objectives
Consult with communities	Public satisfaction survey	2,3,6,9

9. Plain English

We are committed to communicating in Plain English in all our documents and publications, as well as online, to make information as accessible as possible to everyone. As part of this commitment, we will ensure an increasing number of staff are trained in Plain English techniques and that this becomes a core skill in Employee Development Reviews.

Outputs	Outcomes	Objectives
Make Plain English training available to staff Make PE a core skill in EDRs	Increased customer satisfaction 20 staff trained in 2014-15 40 staff trained in 2015-16 40 staff trained in 2016-17	2,6

10. Promotion of Gaelic Language and Culture

The Council Programme makes a commitment to the promotion and future growth of Gaelic education, language and culture.

A recent independent report commissioned by the Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and other partners has highlighted that 60% of businesses surveyed felt that their use of Gaelic enhanced the value of the language within the community. Over half the businesses said that Gaelic is an asset in particular when used to promote the creative industries, tourism, food and drink. The Research also showed that the potential value of Gaelic to Scotland's economy was between £82 million and £149 million. The Highland Council's Gaelic Language Plan clearly states our commitment to create and support initiatives that

strengthen the use and raise the profile of Gaelic within economic development and tourism in the Highlands.

There are clear guidelines for all printed media (leaflets, posters, reports, documents, banners, signage etc) produced by The Highland Council.
www.highland.gov.uk/gaeliclanguageplan

The Council will also continue to work with partners to promote events, festivals and other cultural activities which raise the profile of Gaelic.

The Gaelic related pages on our website, will be refreshed and made bi-lingual and the following is a link to our Gaelic Language Plan 2012-16
http://www.highland.gov.uk/info/283/community_life_and_leisure/335/gaelic/2

Outputs	Outcomes	Objectives
To provide a bilingual Gaelic area on the website.	This will achieve a stated aim in our Gaelic Plan; that will enhance the profile of Gaelic and extend the use of the language on the Council's public website.	9

11. Celebrating Success

The Highland Council has a lot of very positive news to tell. It is important to our staff and to our communities that we tell those positive success stories.

- We will proactively seek out local positive news about Council initiatives and successes
- Meetings now have an agenda item for positive news
- We will produce an online magazine called "Highpoints" which highlights news and information and Council successes
- We will continue to hold annual Quality Awards to celebrate staff successes and show we value them

Outputs	Outcomes	Objectives
Publish online magazine Quality Awards	Increased number of positive media stories Increased staff satisfaction in survey	1,2,9

12. Internal Communications

Effective internal communications is fundamental to the success of any organisation. Every member of staff is an Ambassador for the Council. It is vital that staff have the information

they need to do their jobs and know how their role contributes to the overall objectives and values of the Council. It is also important that Elected Members have adequate information to ensure that they can best represent their communities and the Council.

We have recently introduced a corporate staff newsletter, In Brief. We also copy Members and Ward Managers into all press releases and widely circulate severe weather warnings.

We will develop an Internal Communications strategy to ensure our internal communication systems are as effective as they can be.

Outputs	Outcomes	Objectives
Develop Internal Communications Strategy	Increased staff satisfaction in survey	11,12

Corporate Communications

The team, led by the Corporate Communications Manager, has responsibility for external and internal communication strategy, responding to media enquiries, issuing news releases, developing campaigns, managing and monitoring social media, delivering media training and providing a graphic design service. The team works closely with staff across all services and provides support and information to Council Leaders and provides media training and advice to elected Members on council initiatives.

The team is comprised of 5.6 full time equivalent (FTE) staff.

Evaluation – Measures of Success: Outputs and Outcomes

An action plan will be prepared with actions, target dates and key performance indicators so that progress can be monitored and measured.

Communication can be a rather intangible thing to measure as improvement can affect other areas of service and outcomes across an organisation, however evaluation measures available include:

1. Citizens' Panel, Communities Panel Surveys
2. Public Satisfaction Survey
3. Employee Survey
4. Social media measures – Facebook and Twitter follower numbers and Reach
5. Website statistics (hits and referrals)

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www.highland.gov.uk