The Highland Council	Agenda Item **5**
Lochaber Committee – 23 August 2016	Report No **LA/16/16**

Making the Best Use of Digital Tools

Report by Acting Head of Policy and Reform

Summary

This report updates Members on the potential future use of digital tools as a way to engage with individuals and communities across the Highlands.

1.   Background

1.1   The Council is making increasingly good use of the opportunities presented by digital tools and technology. At a previous meeting of the Lochaber committee (10 June 2016), details of the Council's "Digital First" and "Digital Highland" projects were presented. These projects aim to help people access Council services online, to the potential benefit of both the resident and the Council.

1.2   The Council is also increasingly communicating with the public online. This includes through the Council website, social media (including facebook, twitter, and youtube), and consultations (http://consult.highland.gov.uk/portal/).

1.3   The use of digital technology is becoming part of "business as usual" throughout the public sector, and a report by the Public Sector Transformation Network[1] highlights how local government may operate in 2025 in relation to digital technology.

1.4   Having conversations online has several strengths and weaknesses. It can help to reach new audiences, involve more people in decision making, and be flexible overcoming barriers of time and place. It can also enable effective use of on-line networks, and be an economical way to speak to a wide range of people. Weaknesses of the approach include excluding people from the process who are unable to use digital tools, or people who are used to using online communications dominating the process ("e-usual suspects"). It is often suggested that digital tools cannot completely replace face to face methods of engagement. But in combination, digital tools could improve communication between the Council and communities.

1.5   There are a number of pieces of work being undertaken across the Council which may benefit from the use of digital tools. Council officers are looking at a wide range of digital tools which could be used to have discussions with individuals and communities across the Highlands.

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[1] Public Service Transformation Network (2016). Connected Councils: A digital vision of local government in 2025. http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/connected-councils-digital-vision-local-government-2025

2.   The Commission on Highland Democracy and Digital tools

2.1   The Council decided in March 2016 to set up an independent commission to challenge the current state of democracy in the Highlands, and to have conversations locally about the kind of democracy we want to have. Digital tools provide an excellent opportunity to enable people to share their views and opinions, and to have discussions and debate on the kind of democracy we have in the Highlands. Whilst there will also be a number of public meetings, the use of a digital tool could widen the discussions by allowing more people to contribute, and at a time which suits them.

2.2   "Dialogue" is a digital tool which could enable a wide ranging discussion and it is therefore being considered for use in the Commission. It works in a similar way to an online forum and it has a simple design which should make it easy for people to contribute their thoughts and opinions. Dialogue can be purchased with an annual licence, which allows an organisation to start as many "challenges" as they want. It can therefore be used simultaneously for different types of consultation and discussions, providing a platform for different types and levels of engagement.

2.3   "Dialogue" is currently being used by wide range of public sector organisations, including Bristol City Council[2], Forestry Commission[3], the City of Edinburgh Council[4], and Scottish Government[5].

3.   Council Redesign

3.1   In March 2016, Highland Council agreed to undertake a complete redesign of the Council. It was agreed that the redesign would take into account the views of a wide range of stakeholders, including the public and staff. A number of methods for gathering views are proposed, including the use of a digital tool.

3.2   The redesign board had a session exploring the potential of digital tools for public engagement on the 26 July 2016. The board are currently considering which digital tool could best suit its requirements.

4.   Participatory Budgeting and Digital Tools

4.1   Participatory budgeting (PB) is a way for local people to have a direct say in how public funds are spent to address local needs. There have been seven PB processes in Highland to date: Lochaber; Caithness (Wick); Nairn; Sutherland; Skye; Caithness (Thurso); and Inverness West. These have been designed and led at a local level, helping create a partnership of local people supported by public agencies.

4.2   In addition to PB being a process that engages communities in allocating resources it can also:
   - Help to create networks;
   - Improve knowledge and awareness of community activity;
   - Promote a discussion about issues and priorities;

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[2] https://georgesideaslab.dialogue-app.com/ideas
[3] https://dialogue.forestry.gov.uk/
[4] https://edinburgh.dialogue-app.com/
[5] https://www.ideas.gov.scot/

- Improve engagement with excluded groups;
- Support wider democratic participation; and
- Prepare communities and public bodies for discussions on mainstream budgets

4.3 Seven local areas have agreed to allocate discretionary funding via participatory budgeting before the end of 2016/17. The process will build on the success of the PB processes that have been happened in Highland so far. To support this, the Council has applied to the Scottish Government Community Choices Fund.

4.4 To help all sections of a community participate in the PB process, a variety of different methods have been used to support groups or individuals who face barriers to participation. Lochaber have led in this approach by piloting online voting, and using social media to promote PB.

4.5 Where a need is identified locally, digital tools could be used as part of the PB process to widen participation. The Council is currently working with The Democratic Society to consider the use of digital tools as part of PB processes, given this organisation's relevant expertise[6].

5. Implications

5.1 <u>Resource Implications:</u> There are resource implications associated with purchasing digital tools. There is funding available from Scottish Government to pilot the use of digital tools as part of PB processes.

5.2 <u>Equalities implications:</u> Digital tools may help the Council reach a wider range of individuals and communities. However, this format of communication is not suitable for all, and should be used in combination with other methods.

5.3 <u>Climate Change/Carbon Clever implications:</u> Digital tools can enable people to have discussions and make decisions on-line, reducing the need to travel.

5.4 <u>Gaelic implications</u>: Some digital tools allow for discussions to be translated into a number of languages (such as French, German, Polish), but Gaelic is not one of these, and most tools do not have this capacity. A digital tool, or a discussion in a tool, could be set up in Gaelic, but it is unlikely at this stage to be able to have a tool set up that could fit the requirements of both English and Gaelic speakers simultaneously.

5.5 <u>Rural implications</u>: Digital tools may allow people to be involved in local discussions without the need to travel. However, as it requires good and consistent internet connection this could stop some people from being involved.

5.6 <u>Legal and risk implications:</u> None identified at this time.

Recommendation

Members are asked to note the progress on using digital tools in the Council and to discuss the potential use of digital tools locally.

Stephen Carr, Principal Policy Officer, Chief Executive's Office; 11/08/2016

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[6] The Democratic Society (2016) Digital Tools and Scotland's Participatory Budgeting programme. http://www.demsoc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/DS-Digital-Tools-paper.pdf