

Agenda Item	7
Report No	CP/23/25

The Highland Council

Committee: Communities and Place

Date: 6 November 2025

Report Title: Participation and Engagement Update

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive – Place

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 In recent years, one of the Council's core commitments has been to improve our working with communities and encourage greater involvement in service design, priority setting and delivery. This is reflected in the Council's Programme and its commitment to:-

Helping our communities to be prosperous, sustainable and resilient – making a positive difference to the lives of people

and agreement of the Place Based Framework in December 2021. This commitment also aligns to a number of duties set out in the Community Empowerment Act.

- 1.2 One of the duties contained within the Empowerment Act is the right of community bodies to submit a Participation Request. Participation requests allow a community body to talk with public authorities about local issues and services. Where a community body believes it could help to improve an outcome, it will be able to ask that public body to take part in a process to achieve that. As part of this duty, public bodies are required to submit an annual report to the Scottish Government. In recognition that the number of participation requests across Scotland remains very low, the annual report asks public bodies to report more generally on their activities to involve communities and encourage participation and engagement.
- 1.3 The Council has a strong track record in involving and engaging communities in its activity. The report therefore provides a summary of a range of activity taken across the Council over the course of the last year to improve participation and involvement across Highland as well as introducing the Annual Participation Request Return to be submitted to the Scottish Government.
- 1.4 The report also introduces a draft Participation and Engagement Strategy for the Council. The Strategy outlines the principles that will guide the Council's approach to engagement, the methods to be used and how it aims to increase greater involvement from communities in service design and delivery. Members are asked for their views on the draft strategy prior to a period of public engagement to seek views from the public and key community stakeholders.

2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:-

- i. **Consider and note** the update on the work ongoing to increase participation and engagement with communities in Council activity across Highland;
- ii. **Agree** the Annual Participation Request report for the Scottish Government set out in Appendix 1; and
- iii. **Consider** the draft Participation and Engagement Strategy set out at Appendix 2 and **Agree** that it is circulated for wider engagement before being finalised.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** - there are no direct resource implications as a result of this report. The work outlined is planned and budgeted for.
- 3.2 **Legal** - the Council has a legal duty to meet the terms of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act. This includes duties to better empower and involve communities.
- 3.3 **Risk** - there are no risk implications identified in the report.
- 3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – there are not considered to be any implications.
- 3.5 **Gaelic** - there are not considered to be any implications.

4 Impacts

- 4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.
- 4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.
- 4.3 This is an annual monitoring report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.
- 4.4 An initial screening has been undertaken on the Participation and Engagement Strategy. This has highlighted the importance of a range of methods and approaches in order to maximise engagement and involvement from individuals with different accessibility needs, with different socio-economic backgrounds, from different geographical communities and to increase involvement from young people. The screening will be completed following engagement with the local community and key stakeholders.

5 Background

- 5.1 In recent years, one of the Council's core commitments has been to improve our working with communities and encourage greater involvement in service design, priority setting and delivery. This is reflected in the Council's Programme and its strategy commitment to:-

Helping our communities to be prosperous, sustainable and resilient – making a positive difference to the lives of people

and agreement of the Place Based Framework in December 2021. This commitment also aligns to a number of duties set out in the Community Empowerment Act including Community Planning, Participatory Budgeting, Participation Requests and Community Asset Transfer.

- 5.2 One of the duties contained within the Empowerment Act is the right of community bodies to submit a Participation Request. Participation requests allow a community body to talk with public authorities to achieve an improvement in a specific area of service delivery. Where a community body believes it could help to improve an outcome, it will be able to ask that public body to take part in a process to improve that outcome. Participation requests are not a replacement for consultation or other forms of engagement, nor are they a mechanism to change a decision that has already been made that a group may not agree with. It has been noted that should existing participation and involvement measures be working well, participation requests should not be required.
- 5.3 As part of this duty, public bodies are required to submit an annual report to the Scottish Government. In recognition that the number of Participation Requests across Scotland remains very low, the annual report asks public bodies to report more generally on their activities to involve communities and encourage participation and engagement.
- 5.4 This aligns with the approach in Highland where the number of participation requests has generally been low. However, the Council has a strong track record in involving and engaging communities in its activity. This report outlines a number of strands of work ongoing or planned to support or improve participation and involvement of communities in Council service design, delivery and priority setting. A further aim alongside this is to support groups to realise their aims and deliver against their own local priorities. The approach to supporting Area Place Plans and Local Place Plans, is a good example of this. These are summarised in the Annual Participation Request report to Scottish Government which can be found at **Appendix 1**.
- 5.5 The report also introduces a draft Participation and Engagement Strategy for the Council. The Strategy outlines the principles that will guide the Council's approach to engagement, the methods to be used and how it aims to increase greater involvement from communities in service design and delivery. Members are asked for their views on the draft strategy prior to a period of public engagement to seek views from the public and key community stakeholders.

6 Improving Participation and Involvement

- 6.1 In 2024-25 there have been a number of strands of work progressed to encourage greater participation and involvement from communities. These include:-
- 6.2 **Tenant Participation** – in the 2024/25 period, the Tenant Participation team continued its comprehensive programme of engagement with tenants. This has included conducting both online and face-to-face tenant surveys to gather feedback and identify priorities, facilitating tenant meetings and forums, offering opportunities for tenants to engage directly with officers and Elected Members and delivering a comprehensive housing training programme, in partnership with the Chartered Institute of Housing. **Rate your Estate** walkabouts continue to provide a valuable platform for tenants and residents to raise issues of concern, identify local priorities, and contribute to shaping the environment in which they live and directly influence the improvement action plans for each area. Tenants are also able to directly influence policy by involvement in working groups such as, Rent Consultation – Value for Money Group; Domestic Abuse Policy etc. The annual Tenant Participation and Engagement Update report will be considered by the Housing and Property Committee on 5 November 2025.
- 6.3 **Area Place Planning** – the Community Support and Engagement team has carried out a wide range of engagement across Highland in drawing together the creation of place-based Area Place Plans which will identify the priorities of a community and provide an over-arching plan which signposts to other relevant Local Place and Community development plans and provides a focus for funder and service-delivery partners. A full report on Area Place Plans is also presented at this Committee.
- 6.4 **Local Place Planning and merging of engagement activity** - The Council co-ordinated a learning event about Local Place Plans with communities in Highland on 28 May 2024 and, working with partners, a follow-up event with them that focussed on Local Place Plans and Climate Change, on 22 August 2024. Both events were well attended and received good participation and feedback.

The Council ran the Highland Place Standard Tool survey from 20 March to 16 August 2024 and the approximately 1000 responses, taken together with the growing register of Local Place Plans, is providing evidence of lived experiences and local priorities as part of the evidence base for preparation of the new Highland Local Development Plan.

To inform the consideration of local living principles within a Highland context, the Council's Local Living Tool was developed, including a consultation on the methodology that ran from 17 June to 16 August 2024. The Tool is published and available as one source of evidence on ease of accessibility to a range of services in and around Highland's city, towns and villages.

As part of evidence gathering for the new Highland Local Development Plan, an Evidence Consultation was held online from 31 January to 2 May 2025, with an information webinar being held for community organisations on 13 March 2025. In parallel, a Call for Sites was held online, with an information webinar for developers on 20 March 2025.

Information was provided on the Highland Local Development Plan evidence gathering and evidence consultation at a number of in-person drop-in events held around Highland jointly with colleagues leading on Area Place Planning and on Highland Investment Plan. This provided opportunity not only to promote engagement in the Local Development Plan but also to explain the relationship between different plans and programmes.

Arrangements for public and stakeholder engagement in the Local Development Plan process are guided in the first instance by the Council's Participation Statement set out within its Development Plans Scheme, as required by planning legislation.

- 6.5 **Community Support and Engagement team activities** – the Community Support and Engagement team continues to work with a multitude of groups across Highland, providing a conduit between groups considering developing projects, undertaking Community Asset Transfers, applying for ward-based funding, interested in Common Good Funds and assets or generally wishing to engage with the Council. Types of groups supported include Community Councils, Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisations (SCIOs), unincorporated groups etc. Activities supported include:-
- project development - signposting groups to available funding streams to enable project delivery, facilitating community groups to overcome barriers, making connections between groups to encourage joint work and local delivery;
 - actions to tackle inequalities - assisting mental health and wellbeing groups to develop priority approaches. This supports the Community Partnership/Locality Plan priorities and to effectively meet need;
 - working with groups around delivery of Council service priorities within budgetary constraints/reductions – e.g., increased community activity around grass-cutting, litter collection, town clean-up volunteers, supporting climate action town activity etc; and
 - food growing – supporting groups seeking to develop community food growing initiatives and access Council land. Leading on aspects of delivery of the Highland Community Food Growing Strategy, such as collaboration between the Council and Highland Good Food Partnership on facilitation of a community food growing network and workshop series.

An example of this type of work was the engagement around **Wick Town Centre** improvement. At the Wick Community Council's invitation, several council officers joined members of the community for a walk about to discuss progress with the various projects. A collaborative approach was agreed, with the Council leading on some activity and the community on other strands.

Following the walk about a meeting was convened with local Members, Council officers and members of the community where progress with the original list of projects was reviewed. Work was allocated to services and where appropriate to the community, which included the Council providing materials (for example paint and brushes). Significant progress has been achieved over the summer and many of the projects on the list have been completed. More importantly relationships between Councillors, officers and the community have been strengthened by the joint effort to improve the appearance of the community.

On 12th November a community engagement event is being held in Fort William which will combine engagement on Fort William 2040, the Lochaber Community Partnership and the Lochaber Area Place Plan. This "Progress Through Partnership"

event is strongly supported by Voluntary Action Lochaber as well as a wide range of Council services and other public, private and third sector delivery partners.

- 6.6 **Community Councils – Review of Scheme of Establishment** - between January and September 2025, the review of the Community Council Scheme of Establishment for Highland included two phases of public consultation. Promotion of this consultation was distributed through the Council's Engagement Highland portal, normal media channels, direct to Community Councils and through our partner/third sector networks. The review provided an opportunity for members of the public and Community Councils to consider and comment on a series of draft proposals to amend the Scheme, and to suggest any further amendments or changes to the Scheme, including reviewing Community Council boundaries.

Following the second stage of consultation a Report was presented to a Special meeting of the Council on 18 September 2025, where Members were asked to note the feedback received during the phase two consultation as part of the review of the Community Council Scheme and agree a new Scheme of Establishment for Community Councils in Highland. Work moves forward to addressing a number of requests from Community Councils for certain aspects of training, to support them undertake their roles more effectively.

6.7 **Equalities Engagement**

BSL panel - a new British Sign Language (BSL) plan (2024-2030) was agreed in September 2024, this is a joint Plan with NHS Highland, developed in consultation with the BSL community. It sets out a range of commitments and actions that aim to improve the accessibility and inclusion of BSL users in our services. There is commitment to hold quarterly BSL panel meetings to give BSL users greater involvement and oversight of progress with the Plan's actions. Three BSL panel meetings have been held since the start of the year discussing accessibility, service delivery and NHS priorities. The panels will continue, with future topics identified including improving customer contact.

Neurodiversity Equality Outcome - at the November 2024 Communities and Place Committee it was noted that the Council, as a service provider need be aware of neurodiversity. Alongside a short-life officer group and consultations with self-selected Members, engagement sessions were held with Access Panels, neurodiversity groups and wider community groups on the development of a new equality outcome and the supporting actions.

6.8 **Play Area Review**

The Highland Council Play Park Strategy 2023-2033 was approved in November 2023, aligning with the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act, the Council's Equality Outcomes, and obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It also considers Climate Change implications, current budgetary constraints, and the need to tackle local inequalities. Key highlights include:-

Environmental and Financial Sustainability - Following extensive community consultation, young people indicated a preference for localised, accessible and inclusive play opportunities with less reliance on larger play parks requiring adult transport. In response, the play estate has been categorised into three distinct sizes. This approach future-proofs ongoing maintenance responsibilities, reduces unnecessary capital spend, and minimises environmental impact such as avoiding

over-specification of equipment (e.g. multiple roundabouts). It contributes directly to the Council's commitments on climate resilience and more sustainable public services by reducing equipment whilst increasing accessibility to local play opportunities.

Participation, Community Planning and Co-design with Young People - The Strategy embeds a Community Planning approach by promoting early and meaningful engagement with children and young people in the design and improvement of their unique local play spaces. A standardised questionnaire, issued to local schools, gathers views on existing provision and local aspirations. Feedback has consistently highlighted a preference for activities such as swinging rather than more complex climbing structures, challenging assumptions previously held by adult stakeholders. This work represents a strand of ongoing participatory practice and supports the broader aim to improve involvement of communities in service delivery and priority setting. It also assists in project development at a local level by giving communities a clear "sheet of paper" to shape play provision based on local need.

Play Sufficiency and Accessibility of Information - Play Sufficiency Assessments have been completed and are being reviewed in collaboration with the Planning Department. We are currently discussing the resulting reports to be made accessible in multiple formats to support wider community understanding, including for children and young people. A digital mapping project is also being discussed, aiming to provide visual and descriptive information about each play park in the estate. This reflects the Council's commitment to transparency, local place planning, and improving access to services.

Inclusion and Tackling Inequalities - The Strategy supports the legal obligation to ensure play is inclusive and accessible to all children, regardless of age or ability. One-third of all play equipment is targeted to be inclusive in both design and use. This aligns with broader efforts to tackle inequalities, support mental health and wellbeing, and deliver against the Council's Equality Outcomes. The Strategy also enables Community Partnerships to engage in planning and delivery, helping local groups to identify resources, build capacity, and where appropriate, assume responsibility for assets or co-delivery of services.

The approach outlined in this Strategy is intended to support local groups to realise their aims, deliver against their own local priorities, and contribute to the Council's wider objectives of community empowerment, climate action, and sustainable service delivery.

- 6.9 **Corran Ferry** – in response to community concerns about the operation of the Corran Ferry and plans for a replacement vessel, a specific Corran Ferry Steering Group was established. The key purpose of the group is to ensure links between Highland Councillors, Community Councils and officers involved in the Corran Ferry project are maintained and everyone can be engaged within the project. Representatives from the 6 Community Councils of Ardgour, Nether Lochaber, West Ardnamurchan, Sunart, Morvern and Acharacle are invited to attend each meeting and feedback to their individual Councils. Prior to planning consent being sought for the Corran Ferry Infrastructure Improvement Scheme we held several pre-planning application consultation events (PACs) with the local community.

When the contract is awarded and construction commences, a dedicated Community Engagement Officer will be appointed.

- 6.10 **Gaelic Development** - the Gaelic Team works closely with age 0-3 groups and Adult Learning for Gaelic Learning classes and worked with volunteers to re-introduce a local Mòd to the community. Local place plans guidance - the Gaelic Development team has supported community participation by promoting the use of Gaelic in Local Place Plans. Notably, guidance was developed on using Gaelic in Local Place Plans. This work aligns with the Empowerment Act by enabling meaningful engagement and inclusivity.

Gaelic Economy Conference - in May 2025, Highland Council hosted a conference on Gaelic in the Economy, which brought together stakeholders from across sectors to explore the role of Gaelic in economic development. The event generated a wide range of ideas and practical suggestions with feedback gathered both during the sessions and through a post-event form. Insights from this engagement are informing ongoing work to strengthen Gaelic's contribution to local and national outcomes. In addition, team members have participated in local events, consultations and workshops where Gaelic was used as a medium of engagement, helping to ensure that Gaelic-speaking communities are represented in decision-making processes.

- 6.11 **Participatory Resourcing Approach:** during 2021/22, the Council agreed a new approach to participatory resourcing. As part of the budget setting process, the Council committed to working with communities and partners to identify shared priorities within an area to ensure resources, funding and action are targeted to address the needs of people and place. Participatory resourcing builds on the previous model of participatory budgeting which involved communities directing discretionary grant spend. This approach will involve communities in developing local priorities and service design across a range of budget areas.

The Council has continued and extended its commitment to devolving expenditure decisions to local committees. During 2024/25, the Community Regeneration Fund via its strategic local action group (which includes community representatives) and local committees have made decisions on key external funding streams totalling £979,645.68 of revenue and £444,789.92 of capital, enabling far more funds to be decided and distributed locally.

Public engagement through the Area Place Plans (APP) process is identifying priorities for targeting funds to inform area committee decisions on allocations across a number of funding streams such as the Community Regeneration Fund. As this approach evolves, the aim will be to include other mainstream budgets delegated to local level. The completion of Area Place Plans across Highland further supports greater local participation and involvement in service design, priority setting and delivery.

7 **Scottish Government Annual Report on Participation Requests**

- 7.1 The Annual Report can be found within **Appendix 1**. In addition to the broader approach to participation outlined, the following key points are noted:-

- during 2024-25 there were no participation requests received;
- the report notes the Council's intention to foster a culture of participation and involvement and embed this throughout our widest engagement and participation process rather than focus specifically on participation requests; and
- the Council promotes participation requests through the website and provides a single point of contact for groups wishing to pursue a request.

The annual report will be submitted alongside a copy of this report to demonstrate the wider participation and involvement activity being progressed.

8 Participation and Engagement Strategy

- 8.1 Involving, listening, and delivering for our communities is at the heart of what the Council does. The aim of the participation and engagement strategy is to set out:
- how the organisation will engage with and listen to communities in order to inform how we operate; and
 - how we will improve our involvement and relationships with communities to deliver greater community involvement in service design, planning and delivery.

- 8.2 The proposed vision for the strategy is:

Our communities have the opportunity to have their voice heard, can influence and get involved in decisions that are important to them and are empowered to shape their communities.

This vision is underpinned by four key principles:

- We will listen and respond to our communities, valuing their diversity and treating everyone with respect as we consult and engage. We are self-aware and reflect on our impact on others;
- We will be fair, open and accountable - willing to explain and be open to constructive challenge. We are co-operative and non-judgmental;
- We will work in partnership with our communities, learning from others and being adaptable in order to provide the best possible solutions for the Highlands; and
- We will understand and respect the views and needs of others and will work collaboratively. We continue to be flexible and work to common goals and targets, learning from others without bias or judgement.

- 8.3 The strategy sets out what we mean by participation and engagement, identifies the barriers to good engagement that need to be overcome and highlights opportunities for improved involvement utilising the framework for engagement. The strategy also sets out our commitments as an organisation for participation and engagement moving forward.
- 8.4 A core element of any strategy will be to ensure that we are taking an inclusive approach to involving our communities. Inclusive approaches to engagement and ensuring that we are including and involving all members of our community, must be central to any engagement strategy.
- 8.5 A draft of the strategy is set out in **Appendix 2**. Following Member review, it is proposed to undertake a period of public engagement to get wider community and stakeholder input to shape the strategy. This engagement will commence in January, with the final strategy coming back to the May Communities and Place Committee. The final strategy will be accompanied by an action plan to support implementation and performance measures to measure how we are performing against the strategy.

Designation:	Assistant Chief Executive - Place
Date:	26 September 2025
Author:	Dot Ferguson, Senior Community Development Manager
Background Papers:	None
Appendices:	Appendix 1 - Participation Requests Reporting Template 2024/25 Appendix 2 - Participation and Engagement Strategy (draft)

Participation Requests Reporting Template 2024/25 for Public Service Authorities

Section 32 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 requires Public Service Authorities to produce an annual report on Participation Request activity and publish this no later than 30 June each year. This template has been created to gather Participation Request data for the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025. Information provided will help inform policy and practice at local and national level as the data will be collated and shared by the Scottish Government's Community Empowerment Team. However, it is for each Public Service Authority to make their own annual report publicly available by 30 June each year, whether using this template or not.

Please provide information in the sections below and email the completed template by 30 June 2025 or as soon as possible thereafter to community.empowerment@gov.scot.

Section One – Public Service Authority Information

Organisation: The Highland Council

Completed by: Dot Ferguson

Role: Senior Community Development Manager

Email: dot.ferguson@highland.gov.uk

Telephone: 01397 707253

Date of completion: 26th September 2025

Are you the Participation Request Lead Contact for the organisation? Yes

If not please provide the name, job title and email address for the lead contact for any queries:

Section 2: Participation Request Data for 2024/25

Please complete following overview table:

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Outstanding applications received prior to 2024/25 and still to be determined at 31 March 2025	Applications received prior to 2024/25 and decided on in 2024/25	Applications received prior to 2024/25 and accepted in 2024/25	Applications received prior to 2024/25 and refused in 2024/25	Total new applications received in 2024/25	Number of applications received in 2024/25 which were decided on in 2024/25	Number of applications received in 2024/25 which were accepted in 2024/25	Number of applications received in 2024/25 which were refused in 2024/25	Number of applications received in 2024/25 which are yet to be decided on
1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

2.1 Where you were unable to accept a Participation Request, how did you address the community group's needs/ support them?

N/A

2.2 Please provide details of participatory activities with community groups you have agreed/ undertaken during 2024/25. This can include Participation Requests and also any informal arrangements you have agreed that doesn't involve using Participation Request legislation that has led to improved local outcomes:

A broad range of activities have been carried out by the Council encouraging and developing participation in service design and partnership activity. One of the primary activities has been around the development of Area Place Plans which have now been adopted across Highland (the majority were adopted within the 2024-25 period). These plans have been designed and developed through engagement sessions using a number of mechanisms to produce plans which reflect the communities' priorities, tie with other plans impacting the areas and ultimately guiding how the Council and other service-delivery bodies prioritise their spending. This place-based approach has informed and influenced a wide variety of projects including; Whin Park Play Area redevelopment; west coast community meetings with amenities services around more design of services and involvement by the community; Corran Ferry Steering Group – involvement of several Community Councils in each stage of design for new service. Further examples are contained in the report to Communities and Place Committee (6th November 2025). [Link to be added.](#)

2.3 The recent Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 -Part 3 Participation Requests Findings Report which was published on 31 March 2025 showed that many Public Service Authorities believe that Participation Requests should only be used when informal engagement has failed and therefore do not proactively promote them.

In the report some Public Service Authorities highlighted alternative community engagement processes used which avoids the need for a Participation Request. Please provide information on your local community engagement strategies and your approaches to working collaboratively with your communities:

The Council continues to promote the opportunity to submit a Participation Request on it's website - [Participation requests |](#) However, a new Participation and Engagement Strategy is being developed (submitted as part of the 6th November (20??) report) and it is expected this draft will now be shared for comment with third sector groups. The draft strategy references the need to highlight the opportunity for these requests. In addition, a new engagement platform is being developed which will see a 'one-stop shop' for all consultations and engagement opportunities. It is still essential to remember that on-line processes exclude many people from taking part and therefore using different mechanisms and consolidating engagements to avoid 'engagement exhaustion' is essential.

Collaborative working with communities continues to develop strongly. The newly formed Community Support & Engagement team is forging strong links with Community Council, development trusts etc and there is increasing interest from communities in Community Asset Transfer opportunities which are supported by the team. Cross-service and cross-partner working is also a key element of the role, with the CS&E team able to identify and make the 'introductions' to relevant colleagues and support both Council services and the community in developing a positive and productive relationship. This has allowed opportunities for engagement events (both face-to-face and on-line) to cover a number of topics – e.g., Area Place Plan, Local Place Plan, Highland Investment Plan and Visitor Levy consultation. As well as reducing time to have to attend multiple events, this approach broadened the 'audience' and also helped communities understand the complementarity across a number of themes.

2.4 We are looking to gather Participation Request case study examples with a particular focus on the outcome improvement process. Please include a link to any examples or provide information here:

Whin Park Play Area in Inverness was an ageing but much-used play park in the west side of Inverness. Increasingly equipment was being removed from use as it was unsafe and not capable of economic repair. Ultimately a funding package of around £500,000 was assembled and new provision started to be planned.

The redevelopment of Whin Park has been shaped by a robust, multi-stage consultation process involving the local community, children, young people, and specialist groups. Initial consultations (2023) identified clear priorities: inclusive play for all ages and abilities, accessible and holistic equipment, improved paths, and better facilities. These findings informed the commissioning of two potential playpark designs, which were then subject to a second round of extensive public and school-based consultation in June 2024. Over 2,800 online votes were cast, with 60% from young people, and face to face sessions engaged nearly 100 children and young people, as well as staff and parents from The Haven Centre (ASN). Both online and in-person feedback showed overwhelming support (over 77%) for “Design 1 – Nessie,” praised for its inclusivity, variety, challenge, and imaginative features.

The process highlighted the community’s commitment to equity of play, intergenerational engagement, and the importance of accessible, exciting spaces. The chosen design, developed by Jupiter Play, exemplifies best practice in outcome improvement, embedding user feedback at every stage and ensuring Whin Park is a flagship, inclusive destination for all.

Completed by: Dot Ferguson Role: Senior Community Development Manager

Email: dot.ferguson@highland.gov.uk Tel: 01397 707253

Date of completion: 26th September 2025

Please email the completed template to community.empowerment@gov.scot

If you have any queries please contact Malcolm Cowie, Participation Request Policy Manager at Malcolm.cowie@gov.scot

Community Empowerment Team, Scottish Government

Appendix 2

DRAFT

Participation and Engagement Strategy

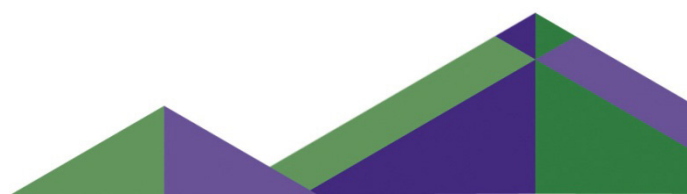
Foreword

The Highland Council has a proud history of being ambitious – of meeting issues head-on and seeing the potential for opportunity from every challenge.

‘Our Future Highland’, the Council’s Programme, sets out that ambition in establishing the foundations of a brighter and more sustainable future for our communities, particularly our younger generation. We aim to support communities to be prosperous, sustainable and resilient, in order to make a positive difference to the lives of people.

This Council is committed to being a listening council – we have spent time engaging with communities to ensure their views are reflected in our priorities. But this commitment is ongoing and is mirrored in our organisational values.

Community engagement and participation are key to how we move forward, working with our communities in order to shape each community’s future to ensure the best outcomes for everyone in Highland.



1. Introduction

The Highland Council is entering an exciting period with opportunities for investment and development on a scale which has not been seen before. The driver for this is the Council's Highland Investment Plan which will see over £2 billion invested in the Highland economy over the next 20 years. This is in addition to significant levels of investment which will come from the development of the Cromarty Firth Green Freeport, as well as renewable energy and other major infrastructure projects across the whole area.

However, we need to ensure that every resident in Highland benefits from these investments – to ensure we drive out inequality and instead introduce and maximise new and exciting opportunities for all. This will include job creation, skills development, appropriate and high-quality housing, exceptional adult and childcare facilities as well as schools which deliver on every level. All this will be delivered in alignment with the Council's commitment to net zero.

To achieve this, we will work with all our statutory partners alongside our third and private sector partners. But most of all, we need to work with and understand our communities and their aspirations. The starting point for this has been the development of Area Place Plans which have been adopted across Highland. These Plans have provided a framework for all Council services, public sector partners and the third sector to ensure place-based services are delivered in a way that works for every community.

This Participation and Engagement Strategy provides a structure to guide how we work together to maximise the benefits to our communities through effective participation and engagement reflecting the Scottish Government's vision "*... that people can be involved in the decisions that affect them, making Scotland a more inclusive, sustainable and successful place*". This strategy also supports and complements both our Customer Experience Strategy and Highland's [Children and Young People's Participation Strategy](#), ensuring there are mechanisms in place for all voices to be heard and direct contacts to be efficiently resolved.

2. Purpose of the Strategy

Our Vision is that:

Our communities have the opportunity to have their voice heard, can influence and get involved in decisions that are important to them and are empowered to shape their communities.

Without effective opportunities for communities (including individuals) to participate and engage in decision-making, how can we know what the crucial elements are of an individual's quality of life? Every person should have an equal opportunity to contribute **and** feel confident and motivated to take part in decision-making. They should know they have an equal right to be heard but tempered with the understanding that not everyone may get the outcome they are looking for.

Barriers to engagement need to be identified – physical or psychological, language or capacity.

This strategy sets out our commitment to overcome these barriers to encourage genuine participation and engagement.

Principles for Participation and Engagement:

- **Listening** - We will listen and respond to our communities, valuing their diversity and treating everyone with respect as we consult and engage. We are self-aware and reflect on our impact on others.
- **Transparent** - We will be fair, open and accountable - willing to explain and be open to constructive challenge. We are co-operative and non-judgmental.
- **Accessible** - We will adopt accessible and inclusive approaches to engagement to ensure that everyone who wishes to engage can do so in a way that suits them.
- **Collaborative** - We will work in partnership with our communities, understanding and respecting the views and needs of others, learning from others and being adaptable in order to provide the best possible solutions for the Highlands.

3. Participation – What is it?

Participation: an umbrella term used to describe how people get involved in decisions which affect or are important to them. This can be in their local communities, as part of interest groups' campaigns or in Government policies and decisions.

Participation must be:-

- meaningful - used when outcomes of policy and service design can be genuinely influenced;
- respected – with responses properly considered, and results used to inform decision-making; and
- acknowledged - there must be a feedback mechanism to allow communities to properly understand how their involvement has been recognised.

Effective participation and engagement is a cornerstone of **community empowerment** which aims to build confident, resilient communities where people have as much control over their lives as possible. By encouraging more involvement, local communities develop a collective 'power' and pride in themselves and their area. This in turn delivers a common purpose, with individuals more likely to volunteer, share skills and knowledge, have a greater confidence in putting forward ideas and suggestions and generally enhances quality of life.

Inclusive Engagement

Everyone has the right to participate in decisions which affect their human rights. Fair access is an equalities and human rights issue. It is absolutely fundamental that when considering any participation or involvement opportunities that every effort is made to identify all potential barriers and design the engagement to remove as many of those barriers as possible. This can often be done with small adjustments e.g., use of interpreters (including BSL), consideration of venue, time of day, room layouts etc. However, the starting point should always be to ask the most impacted groups how they would like to be engaged with.



4. Participation and Engagement – Why do it?

If we don't know what matters to our communities, we can't design services and infrastructure which best support their needs. We also need to address different types of community, which broadly break down into:-

- communities of place ie where people have a shared geographic boundary where they live, work or spend time;
- communities of interest – eg service user groups, people with a common interest in hobbies etc; and
- communities of identity – those who might be defined by how they identify themselves

Our participation and engagement needs to ensure everyone is aware of opportunities to engage and have their voice heard. The mechanisms to do this must be:

• simple to access	• inclusive
• appropriate for the affected community or individuals	• designed to develop a sense of ownership in those responding
• honest, in terms of the level and type of 'input' and if or how this can change our delivery	• built on, but not repeat previous engagements (unless there has been change of circumstances or period of time)

The process of engagement is an excellent opportunity to build trust and relationships.

The quality of our engagement must be high. It must meet our communities' expectations and define Highland Council as a Local Authority which listens to everyone who lives in Highland, who works and studies here and to those who visit. Our engagement will be inclusive, comprehensive and appropriate to its audience.

We will be guided by:-

- the [National Standards for Community Engagement](#);
- the Scottish Approach to Service Design (SAtdSD) - [The Scottish Approach to Service Design \(SAtdSD\) - gov.scot](#)



5. Engagement = Change – The Framework for Engagement

In order to be honest with our communities we will use the most appropriate level of involvement for the purpose of the engagement. There are 5 key 'levels' on the spectrum, each with a defined purpose and 'offer' to participants, as follows:

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PURPOSE	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision. This will include the development of alternatives and identification of preferred solutions.	To place final decision- making in the hands of the participants in the process.
WHAT WILL WE DO ?	We will keep you informed, providing information openly and transparently	We will keep you informed, listening seriously to your contributions. We will provide feedback on how your input has influenced the outcome.	We will keep you informed working alongside you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed. We will provide feedback on your input has influenced the outcome.	We will ask for your advice and innovative ideas to formulate solutions. We will incorporate your advice and recommendations into decisions as far as is possible.	We will implement what you decide.
EXAMPLE	We will provide you with up-to-date information which matters to you, via our website, social media and others means as appropriate. This could range from school term dates, to waste bin calendars etc.	We will consult you when we have a statutory duty to do so eg a proposed school closure, changes to traffic orders, Common Good asset disposals etc.	Involving communities ensures a better outcome for everyone. Recent involvement in the creation of Area Place Plans across Highland has identified comprehensive and robust priorities for delivery of place-based services and spend.	Collaboration delivers wins for all parties. This has been demonstrated in Applecross with the Council providing funding to the local Community Company to run school transport. Two nine-seater vehicles have been leased for school runs, and they are also available to the wider community for use.	Participatory Budgeting and schemes such as Invitation to Pay, provide an excellent opportunity for communities to directly decide how some grant funds should be spent. Street-naming is now decided by Community Councils, formerly they were agreed by Highland Council.

7. Challenges to Overcome and Opportunities for Improved Involvement

The Highland area is vast with a relatively low population. Population densities for Community Council areas vary from almost 5,000 people per square kilometre in the urban centres to less than 1 person per square kilometre in some rural areas. How do we properly involve people in our decision-making when communities can be so dispersed, which makes effective and equitable delivery of services even more important?

Here are just some of the challenges:-

- consultation overload creating apathy – *what's the point?*
- over-consulting / lack of 'joined-up' engagement – *consultation exhaustion*
- large area / sparse communities – *how to reach everyone*
- too much use of digital / virtual methods – *not another Teams meeting*
- scarce resources / capacity – *financial / environmental cost of physically reaching everyone*
- Communities sceptical about local authority and lack of belief or trust in engagement exercises – *been asked before – nothing changed*
- Little community or individual confidence – *'scared to speak up'*

So how do we address these challenges? We work within the resources we have but maximise effectiveness by partnering with communities to understand how best to engage.

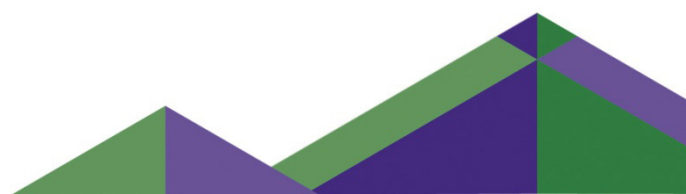
We also have the following valuable components which provide strong foundations for every participation and involvement opportunity:-

- a proper understanding of communities' priorities
- strong, local community leadership
- enthusiastic volunteers
- positive experiences of participation and enthusiasm for partnership working between communities and the Highland Council
- digital technology and improving infrastructure
- a willingness across the statutory partnerships to use local plans to prioritise funding allocations, service delivery etc
- strong Community Partnerships
- the Community Empowerment Act – opportunities for Participation Requests, Community Asset Transfers and participatory resourcing

8. Our Commitments – What we will do

To promote positive participation and engagement, the Highland Council will:-

• identify opportunities for community involvement in service delivery at as early a stage as possible	• develop and publish an action plan, highlighting anticipated opportunities for involvement	• actively use the appropriate level of involvement (as set out in section 5) – the Framework for Engagement
• identify the relevant communities and ascertain the best way to engage with them to ensure maximum inclusivity	• actively promote the opportunity for communities to submit Participation Requests	• identify other potential delivery partners – whether public, private or third sector
• explore options for delivery and be honest and transparent about practical limitations eg available finance, risk, statutory requirements or limitations etc	• be open to constructive challenge and genuine two-way dialogue	• feed back results to everyone who has participated
• develop an engagement ‘calendar’ to identify opportunities for others to use the same event to discuss other projects etc of interest to that community.	• adopt inclusive engagement methods to ensure equity of access	



9. Improving Outcomes

What will the outcomes from these involvement opportunities look like? We hope and expect to see:-

- reduced consultation 'exhaustion'
- more diverse and inclusive community members feeling confident to express their ideas and views
- confident, empowered communities, who feel they can deliver their own priorities either by themselves or in partnership with others (including statutory partners)
- communities becoming more resilient and having strong social networks
- greater trust being built between communities and the Council, which in turn will develop more participation and involvement
- increased collaboration between internal services and between private sector, third sector and other public sector partners

10. Draft Action Plan

An action plan will be developed to support implementation of the Strategy. This will be informed by the public engagement exercise. Initial actions have been identified to support delivery of the identified commitments. These include:-

- **Engagement Platform** - Development of an engagement platform which will act as a 'one-stop-shop' for all of the Council's consultation and engagement 'events'. This would mean one site which will include statutory consultations such as school closures and traffic orders, through to engagement around preferred mechanisms for service delivery, participatory resourcing etc – all of which require direct input from our communities.
- **Empowering Staff** - development of in-house on-line training to upskill staff in engagement techniques – utilising e.g., Traineasy platform.
- **Best Practice** - production of a 'How to Engage' guide – a simplified version of the National Standards for Community Engagement recognising Highland's geography to support staff and communities wishing to undertake engagement. This will include methods and approaches for undertaking inclusive engagement.
- **Co-ordination** - investigate production of a calendar which will allow all services to identify opportunities for engagement; ultimately an on-line version could be made available to ensure communities know where we will be, and when
- **Co-production** - investigate identification of pilot areas and projects which could assess the Council's and communities' capacity for co-production of services.



RELATED LEGISLATION, STRATEGIES, PLANS AND GOOD PRACTICE

LEGISLATION

- Community Empowerment Act - [Community Empowerment \(Scotland\) Act: summary - gov.scot](#)

STRATEGIES AND RELATED DELIVERY PLANS

- Our Future Highland - [Our priorities | Programme of The Highland Council 2022-27](#)
 - [Our priorities | Delivery Plan 2024-2027](#)
 - Highland Investment Plan – Highland Council - [Highland Investment Plan | The Highland Council](#)
- Highland Outcome Improvement Plan (HOIP) - [Improvement Plan | Highland Community Planning Partnership](#)
 - Highland Outcome Improvement Plan (HOIP) - Delivery Plan - [HOIP Delivery Plan](#)
- Highland Community Wealth Building Strategy - [Community Wealth Building Strategy |](#)
 - Highland Social Value Charter - [Social Value Charter for Renewables Investment | Social Value Charter for Renewables Investment](#)
- Highland Children and Young People’s Participation Strategy - [Children's Rights and Participation Highland - Children & Young People's Participation Strategy](#)
- Highland Council Customer Experience Strategy - [Customer experience |](#)

GOOD PRACTICE

- Participation Handbook – Scottish Government - [Participation handbook - gov.scot](#)
- National Standards for Community Engagement - [The National Standards — VOiCE](#)
- The Scottish Approach to Service Design (SAatSD) - [The Scottish Approach to Service Design \(SAatSD\) - gov.scot](#)