

Agenda Item	8
Report No	HC/15/26

The Highland Council

Committee: Highland Council

Date: 14 May 2026

Report Title: UK City of Culture 2029

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The opportunity to bid for UK City of Culture 2029 is an important one for the Highlands. It brings Highland Council and its partners together around a shared ambition: to shape a year-long programme that celebrates arts and culture across the region, reflecting the richness, creativity and diversity of our places and communities.
- 1.2 The bid also provides a timely opportunity to pause and take stock. It allows us to refresh our Arts and Culture Strategy alongside partners, and to strengthen the Council's role in supporting and enabling cultural activity. With clear links to sustainable tourism and infrastructure investment, this moment offers momentum to set a clear direction towards 2029 - one that supports long-term prosperity for Inverness and the wider Highland area.
- 1.3 Crucially, the bid provides an opportunity to strengthen connections between Inverness, the Highlands and visitors from across the UK and beyond. It offers a platform to deepen understanding of the region's cultural richness and contemporary identity, building on its established appeal and reinforcing its position as a distinctive place to visit.
- 1.4 This paper sets out the strategic context for developing the Inverness–Highland bid for UK City of Culture 2029, and the steps needed to take it forward. It explains the proposed partnership and governance arrangements, outlines the emerging vision for an ambitious but realistic programme, and considers how culture can play a meaningful role in supporting wider economic, social and place-based priorities across Highland.

- 1.5 The report also considers the practical implications of bidding, drawing on experience from previous bidders and titleholders. It explores how the bidding process itself can act as a catalyst for longer-term cultural development, stronger partnership working and future investment. Feedback from the Expression of Interest stage has informed this approach, alongside a clear outline of next steps and how communities and partners will continue to shape the bid as it develops.
- 1.6 Alongside programme and partnership development, a focused communications plan is being implemented to support the next stage of the bid. A summary is provided in **Appendix 1**. The purpose of this work is to build understanding and awareness of the bid, its ambition, and vision, with a focus on its distinctiveness and value and legacy; ensure communities, artists and partners are well informed and lead the bid development; and raise the profile of the area nationally as a confident, credible and nationally relevant candidate for UK City of Culture 2029. Communications activity will emphasise openness, visibility and participation, helping to maintain momentum, manage expectations and support meaningful engagement throughout the bid process.

2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:-

- i. **Note** the update on the UK City of Culture 2029 application process and timetable;
- ii. **Note** that the Highland Council will act as Lead Partner and Accountable Body for the bid;
- iii. **Note** the appointment of a Bid Director under an exemption to Contract Standing Order 3.10, as set out in Paragraph 9.4;
- iv. **Agree** that a Cultural Assembly is convened in early summer 2026 as part of the preparation of the full UK City of Culture 2029 application;
- v. **Agree** that authority is delegated to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Convener, Leader and Leader of the Opposition of the Council, to undertake the actions required to implement and progress delivery of the Inverness-Highland UK City of Culture 2029 bid. This would include (but are not limited to):-
 - a. appointment of any additional external support to prepare the bid;
 - b. establish appropriate governance arrangements;
 - c. approval of expenditure relating to the development of the bid; and
 - d. submission of final application.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** – The estimated budget for developing the bid is £200k. The Council has received £60,000 from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to support the development of the UK City of Culture bid. This funding is being used to resource bid preparation activity, including programme development, partnership engagement, governance planning and the preparation of the full application. In parallel, officers are actively pursuing additional match funding and in-kind contributions from partners to maximise the overall resources available during the bid development phase.
- 3.1.1 If match funding cannot be attracted to support the development of the bid, as a contingency position the Council would utilise reserves to cover any costs beyond the £60k bid funding, and up to the estimated £200k total bid development cost.

- 3.1.2 Should the bid be successful, there may be implications for future budgets, plans and priorities. These would be identified and considered as part of ongoing work through the bid and delivery planning process. This would include consideration of how existing Council spend and planned investment could be aligned with the City of Culture programme, as well as the scope for securing further external funding from public, private and third-sector sources. Any future financial commitments would be subject to separate reporting, governance arrangements and Member approval, in line with the Council's established financial management processes.
- 3.2 **Legal** - As the Accountable Body for the bid development phase - and, if the bid is successful, for the early stages of delivery - the Council is responsible for ensuring that funding is managed properly and in line with legal requirements. This includes meeting its duties under the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty, which will inform both funding decisions and how the programme is designed and delivered.
- 3.2.1 The Council is also required to comply with subsidy control and procurement rules, whether appointing external advisers or providing financial support to partners. If the bid is successful and an independent delivery organisation is established, clear legal agreements and governance arrangements will be put in place to ensure accountability, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and to safeguard the Council's statutory duties as the programme moves forward.
- 3.2.2 Section 9.4 covers the procurement of the Bid Director under an exemption to Contract Standing Orders. Suspension of the Contract Standing Orders is permitted where a contract award is urgently required and where adherence to standard procurement procedures would materially affect service delivery
- 3.3 **Risk** – The main risks relate to the scale and complexity of developing a region-wide bid across a large and dispersed geography, including managing capacity, coordination and stakeholder expectations. These risks will be mitigated through clear governance arrangements, strong partnership working, phased planning, and early consideration of delivery, transport and infrastructure requirements.
- 3.3.1 As with any national competition, there is always the possibility that the Inverness–Highland bid may not be successful. As interest grows and more communities and partners become involved, expectations naturally increase. If the title is not awarded, some disappointment is inevitable and needs to be managed carefully.
- 3.3.2 For that reason, the bid is being shaped from the outset to ensure its value does not depend solely on the final decision. Experience from other places shows that the process of bidding can deliver real and lasting benefits in its own right, provided there is a clear sense of purpose and a constructive plan for what follows.
- 3.3.3 Should the bid be unsuccessful, the work being undertaken will still leave a strong legacy for Highland. It will have helped refresh and clarify the Council's Culture Strategy, strengthened relationships across the cultural, community, education and business sectors, and improved how partners work together across a large and diverse area.

- 3.3.4 The bid will also strengthen the evidence base for future funding opportunities. Work on programme development, audience growth, partnership mapping and economic impact will place the Council and its partners in a stronger position to secure further support, whether from UK or Scottish funding programmes, philanthropic sources or the private sector.
- 3.3.5 At the same time, the bidding process will invariably raise Highland's profile and extend its connections beyond the region. Relationships built with UK-wide cultural networks, creative organisations and international partners will continue to offer value, creating opportunities for collaboration and supporting wider ambitions around tourism, investment and outward-facing engagement.
- 3.3.6 Taken together, this approach allows expectations to be managed realistically while ensuring the bidding process leaves a positive and lasting legacy. Whatever the outcome, the work already underway is expected to strengthen cultural planning, deepen partnership working and improve the case for future investment across Highland.
- 3.4 **Health and Safety** (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people) – None arising from this report.

3.5 **Gaelic** – None arising from this report.

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 report provides an update on the preparation and submission of a bid and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5 UK City of Culture 2029 – Background

- 5.1 UK City of Culture is a national programme led by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), working closely with the devolved governments. Every four years, one place is given the opportunity to use culture and creativity to shape its future. The programme supports regeneration, helps local economies grow, strengthens communities and improves wellbeing. Previous Cities of Culture - such as Derry/Londonderry, Hull, Coventry and Bradford - have shown how culture, when put at the heart of long-term plans, can make a real and lasting difference.

- 5.2 The competition for UK City of Culture 2029 was launched in late 2025. After an open Expression of Interest stage, Inverness–Highland was confirmed in March 2026 as one of nine places invited to develop a full bid. Being longlisted reflects national recognition of the area’s strong cultural identity, its creative strengths, and its ambition to use culture as a driver for long-term change.
- 5.3 At this stage, longlisted places must submit a detailed application. This sets out a clear vision for the area, a strong and achievable cultural programme for 2029, and practical arrangements for funding, governance, delivery and long-term legacy. Applications are assessed by an independent expert panel against published criteria. These include how effectively communities are involved, how the programme supports inclusive growth and jobs, the quality and originality of proposals, environmental responsibility, and the strength of plans beyond the title year.
- 5.4 DCMS has confirmed £10m of funding for the winning place to support delivery of its programme. Each longlisted place has also received £60k to support bid development, with runner-up places eligible for a further £125k to help progress elements of their plans. Full bids must be submitted by August 2026, with shortlisting expected later in the year and the final decision announced before the end of 2026.
- 5.5 The Inverness–Highland bid is being developed in partnership with organisations across the public sector, cultural and community groups, education providers and local businesses. It aligns closely with Council priorities, including inclusive economic growth, regeneration, wellbeing, Gaelic and Scots language and culture, net zero ambitions, and strong, resilient communities. Whatever the outcome of the competition, the process of developing the bid has already brought value - helping partners work together more closely, clarify shared ambitions and build momentum for future place-based development.

6 Expression Of Interest Submission

- 6.1 The Inverness–Highland bid for UK City of Culture 2029 begins with a straightforward belief: culture is strongest when it grows out of the places and people it belongs to. From that starting point, the bid makes the case for the Highlands as clear, practical evidence that cultural life can thrive beyond cities - strengthening communities, supporting environmental change, and contributing to long-term economic wellbeing. Inverness plays an important role as a point of connection, but the focus is firmly regional, reaching across towns, rural communities and islands within one of the UK’s largest and most diverse landscapes. Five themes shape the work: Power and Renewal; Land and Sea Stewardship; Living Languages; Rural Futures; and Innovation from the Edge. These threads will run through the programme, rooting culture in the energy transition, everyday relationships with land and sea, Gaelic and multilingual creativity, opportunities for young people, and contemporary ways of living and working. Shaped through shared leadership, strong partnerships and close collaboration with communities across the Highlands, Scotland and the UK, the ambition is deliberately practical and long-term - to widen access to culture, create meaningful creative opportunities, support people to stay or return, and strengthen the cultural economy. The goal reaches beyond a single year, aiming for a lasting shift marked by greater confidence, stronger connections, and a credible model for cultural life beyond the city.

7 Expression of Interest Feedback

7.1 The UK City of Culture panel responded very positively to the Inverness–Highland bid, recognising both the ambition behind it and the depth of cultural activity already taking place across the region, particularly around indigenous culture. They were intrigued by the originality of a large-scale, non-urban proposal and felt the creative vision was distinctive and convincing. As the bid develops, they encouraged the team to bring artists more fully into the spotlight and allow their voices to play a stronger role in shaping the story. Alongside this encouragement, the panel offered clear and practical guidance for the next stage. They highlighted the importance of showing how the programme would connect with - and feel relevant to - people across the wider UK, as well as addressing real-world considerations such as transport and the management of increased visitor numbers. There was a strong emphasis on demonstrating a genuine cultural step change that matches the scale and expectations of a City of Culture award.

At the same time, they advised being realistic about working across such a large geography, taking care not to spread activity too thin, and continuing to build on the Highlands' existing strengths in touring, connectivity and well-established cultural networks rather than relying on new infrastructure. The panel also pointed to the Highlands' strong international appeal, the £10m award as a catalyst for wider investment, and the need to approach the competition with confidence, visibility and an active media presence as the bid moves forward.

8 Expected Benefits

- 8.1 Economic Benefits - Experience from previous UK Cities of Culture shows that the programme can support meaningful and sustained economic growth. Past titleholders have attracted significant new investment, supported job creation, and seen lasting increases in tourism and visitor spending. Employment growth has been particularly evident in sectors such as hospitality, tourism and the creative industries, with wider economic benefits continuing well beyond the title year.
- 8.2 Alongside this, programmes at this scale have proven both achievable and effective in mobilising wider investment. Derry/Londonderry delivered its City of Culture programme in 2013 with a budget of £25.8m, followed by Hull in 2017 with £32.8m and Coventry in 2021 with £44.5m. Each programme was supported through a combination of central government funding, National Lottery support, local authority contributions and partner investment.
- 8.3 Crucially, these programme budgets did far more than fund a single year of cultural activity. In each case, they provided momentum and confidence, helping to unlock significantly larger levels of public and private investment. Collectively, previous titleholders have leveraged more than £1b in additional investment into their local economies, substantially exceeding the original cost of delivery. Hull alone is estimated to have attracted around £676m, with Derry/Londonderry securing £160m and Coventry more than £183m. Much of this investment supported regeneration, cultural infrastructure, skills development, tourism and business growth.

Many places also experienced longer-term gains, including stronger cultural facilities, improved business confidence, and a raised national and international profile. Around a quarter of this additional funding came from the private sector, reinforcing the UK City of Culture title as a credible signal to investors and a proven mechanism for delivering lasting economic, cultural and place-based benefits well beyond the title year itself.

- 8.4 Social Benefits – UK City of Culture also delivers strong social outcomes. Evaluations consistently show higher levels of participation in cultural activity, improved wellbeing, and a stronger sense of pride in place - particularly in communities that have traditionally been less involved. Volunteering plays an important role, giving people opportunities to build skills, gain confidence and form new connections. Targeted cultural activity has delivered clear wellbeing benefits for participants, while wider impacts include more positive perceptions of place, stronger local identity and closer-knit communities.
- 8.5 Wider benefits and legacy - Beyond measurable economic and social impacts, UK City of Culture can also change how a place is perceived. It can raise national and international awareness, strengthen cultural leadership and build lasting partnerships across sectors. Importantly, many of these benefits begin during the bidding stage itself. The process helps places work more closely together, agree shared priorities and prepare for future regeneration and investment - regardless of the final outcome.
- 8.6 These benefits are especially relevant for Highland. The area's large geography, dispersed population and demographic pressures - including an ageing population, the loss of younger people, and reliance on a seasonal visitor economy - present ongoing challenges. A culture-led programme offers a way to spread economic benefit more widely, encouraging visitors to stay longer, explore rural and island communities, and support local businesses throughout the year rather than only during peak seasons. At the same time, cultural activity rooted in local places can strengthen community ties, build pride and develop skills, while creating inclusive opportunities to take part, volunteer and work locally. Together, these outcomes support Highland's wider ambitions for inclusive growth and long-term resilience.

9 Governance

- 9.1 The governance arrangements for the Inverness–Highland UK City of Culture bid - and for delivery if the bid is successful - are designed to be clear, credible and practical. They provide strong leadership and accountability, support effective partnership working, and leave enough space for creativity to flourish. Just as importantly, they reflect the scale and ambition of the programme, without over-engineering the structure.
- 9.2 During the bid phase - Throughout the bid phase, Highland Council will act as the Accountable Body. In this role, the Council will provide overall oversight of the process and retain responsibility for public funding.

Strategic direction will be provided by an Interim Bid Partnership Board. During the bid phase, it is proposed that the Board is chaired by the Council Convenor, reflecting the Council's leadership role and Accountable Body function. Alongside this, efforts will be made to appoint an independent Co-Chair, in line with UK City of Culture expectations that bids are culture-led, outward-facing and supported by credible independent leadership as well as local authority oversight.

An independent Co-Chair would bring external perspective, sector expertise and constructive challenge, helping to balance civic leadership with cultural credibility and strengthening confidence among partners, funders and assessors.

The Board will bring together senior representatives from the Council alongside voices from the cultural sector, education, business and other key partners, providing focused and inclusive strategic oversight throughout the bid phase. It is anticipated that the Board will comprise around twelve members, deliberately sized to remain agile and effective. Keeping the Board at this scale will support timely decision-making, constructive discussion and clear accountability, while avoiding the risk of becoming overly large or unwieldy during what is a fast-paced and time-limited bid process.

- 9.3 The day-to-day development of the bid will be led by a small, dedicated Bid Team under the direction of a Bid Director. The team will be responsible for community engagement, programme development, partnership building and preparation of the full application. Close working with the Chair of the Council Officer Group will provide effective coordination, clear lines of communication and timely decision-making throughout what will be an intensive delivery period.
- 9.4 Given the very short timeframe for preparing and submitting the final bid, an exemption was sought under Contract Standing Order 3.10 to allow for the timely appointment of the Bid Director, alongside a small number of clearly defined, short-term support services that are essential to bid development. In this instance, the exemption is necessary to ensure the Council can appoint the role quickly enough to meet the fixed submission deadline of 10 August 2026.
- 9.5 Highland Council Officer Group - Establishing a Council Officer Group chaired by the Chief Executive provides clear leadership and keeps this work firmly on the corporate agenda. It signals that the Council sees this as a shared priority rather than a standalone piece of work. With the Chief Executive in the chair, strategic direction, delivery and financial oversight are considered together, supporting timely decisions and early resolution of any issues that arise.

The group also brings senior officers together around a common purpose, encouraging collaboration across services and helping to avoid siloed working. This approach ensures the Council presents a clear and consistent position when engaging with partners and stakeholders. Taken together, it provides confidence - both internally and externally - that the Council has the leadership, governance and organisational capacity in place to support successful delivery.

- 9.6 National Reference Group - Several national agencies contributed to the early development of the EOI, strengthening the bid from the outset. As the only bid from Scotland, there is clear strategic value in establishing a national reference group to support the Inverness–Highland UK City of Culture 2029 bid. Acting as an independent critical friend, the group would provide experienced insight and constructive challenge, helping to refine the bid and reinforce its credibility at a UK level.

Working alongside the Council Officer Group and Bid Team, the reference group would help test the creative vision against national cultural priorities, offer practical advice on governance and delivery, and share learning from comparable national programmes. This external perspective would build confidence with UK Government, assessment panels and potential funders, while also strengthening links to national networks and opportunities, supporting a lasting legacy beyond 2029.

- 9.7 Moving into delivery - If the bid is successful, governance would move to an independent arm's-length delivery organisation, following the model used by previous UK City of Culture titleholders. This organisation would typically be established as a charitable trust or a company limited by guarantee.

Highland Council would remain the Accountable Body, continuing to hold responsibility for public funding, legal compliance and overall assurance. The independent organisation would take on the role of Delivery Body, with responsibility for commissioning, producing and delivering the UK City of Culture programme.

The delivery organisation would be overseen by a Board of Directors or Trustees, chaired by an independent Chair. Membership would include a balanced mix of cultural leaders, business representatives, community voices and public-sector involvement. This combination provides strong governance and accountability; while allowing creative leadership the freedom it needs to deliver an ambitious programme.

- 9.8 Guiding Principles - Across both the bid and delivery phases, governance is shaped by a small set of clear principles:

- clear roles and responsibilities between the Accountable Body and the Delivery Body;
- open and transparent decision-making, supported by strong financial management and reporting;
- partnership working that reflects the full breadth of Inverness–Highland's communities and sectors;
- creative independence within a clear and agreed strategic framework; and
- a strong focus on legacy, ensuring benefits extend well beyond the programme year

Taken together, this phased and proportionate approach gives confidence to funders and partners, supports delivery at the right scale, and leaves Inverness–Highland well placed to submit a strong, credible bid - and, if successful, to deliver UK City of Culture 2029 with clarity, integrity and lasting impact.

10 Next Steps and Key Dates

- 10.1 As the bid moves into its final development phase, communications activity will play a key role in maintaining momentum and supporting delivery of the next steps set out below. This will include keeping partners, communities and stakeholders informed of progress; providing clear opportunities for engagement, contribution, and leadership; and ensuring the emerging vision and ambitions of the bid are developed and agreed in partnership with key stakeholders, rooted in local communities, but relevant across the whole of the UK, as the application is finalised.

- 10.2 The next phase of work focuses on developing and submitting a robust full application for UK City of Culture 2029. This will involve continued partnership working, community engagement, programme development and confirmation of governance, delivery and funding arrangements, in line with DCMS guidance.
- 10.3 Cultural Assembly - It is proposed that a Cultural Assembly is convened in early summer 2026 to support the development of the full UK City of Culture 2029 bid. The Assembly would bring together a wide cross-section of people and organisations connected to culture and place, including artists and creative practitioners, communities, learners and educators, businesses, tourism interests, and partners from the public and third sectors.
- 10.3.1 The Cultural Assembly would provide a shared space to describe what is emerging, reflect on priorities and possibilities, and speculate on what the programme and vision could become. Its role would be to explore the direction of travel, test ideas, and enrich the evolving narrative of the bid through collective insight and dialogue.
- 10.3.2 As well as shaping the bid, the Assembly would offer an open and visible moment of connection-building, helping to grow trust, relationships and a sense of shared ownership. This approach reflects a commitment to inclusive, meaningful engagement that values lived experience alongside professional and sectoral expertise.
- 10.3.3 The Cultural Assembly would be convened by the Bid Team working collaboratively with partners, drawing on existing networks, resources and in-kind support wherever possible. Beyond strengthening the quality and credibility of the application, the Assembly is intended to build momentum, capability and partnerships with lasting value, regardless of the outcome of the competition.
- 10.4 Inverness–Highland will continue to progress the bid through the following key stages:-
- **Spring–early summer 2026**
Ongoing development of the full application, including programme design, community engagement activity, partnership development, governance planning and preparation of supporting evidence.
 - **2 June 2026**
Attendance at the DCMS Information Event for longlisted places, providing further guidance on expectations for the full application and the assessment process.
 - **June–July 2026**
Finalisation of the full application, refinement of the programme and legacy plans, confirmation of delivery and governance arrangements, and completion of financial and supporting documentation.
 - **10 August 2026 (5.00pm deadline)**
Submission of the full application to DCMS.

- **Autumn 2026**
Announcement of shortlisted places by DCMS. Shortlisted places may be invited to host panel visits and take part in final presentations.
- **Late 2026**
Announcement of the successful UK City of Culture 2029.

Throughout this period, progress will continue to be overseen through the proposed governance arrangements, with regular updates provided to committee as appropriate. Regardless of the outcome, the work undertaken during this phase will help strengthen partnerships, clarify long-term ambitions, and support wider place-based development across Inverness–Highland.

Designation:	Assistant Chief Executive - Place
Date:	30 April 2026
Author:	Alan Webster – Service Lead – Economic Development & Regeneration
Background Papers:	None
Appendices:	Appendix 1 - City of Culture: Communication Plan (Summary)

Appendix 1 - City of Culture: Communication Plan (Summary)

Background

Inverness-Highland has been longlisted for UK City of Culture 2029. The Highland Council has received £60,000 from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to develop a full application. Winning the title would bring significant benefits for local communities, with previous hosts attracting millions of pounds in additional investment, increased visitor numbers, and new jobs. The winning place will receive £10 million investment, with £125,000 grants for shortlisted runners-up.

Timeline:

- **Late 2025:** UK City of Culture 2029 competition launched. Open expression of interest stage.
- **18 March 2026:** Long-list announcement (nine entries). Each long-listed place will receive £60,000 to support bid development.
- **7 April 2026:** Bid feedback from Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)
- **April-May 2026:** Development of full application begins, including programme design, community engagement activity, partnership development, governance planning and preparation of supporting evidence.
- **2 June 2026:** Information event/workshop for long-listed entries, providing further guidance on expectations for the full application and assessment process.
- **Early Summer 2026:** Cultural assembly to be held to support development of the bid (TBC)
- **June-July 2026:** Finalisation of the full application, refinement of the programme and legacy plans, confirmation of delivery and governance arrangements, and completing of financial and supporting documentation.
- **10 August 2026:** Submission of full application bid. Must set out a clear vision for the area, a strong and achievable cultural programme, practical arrangements for funding, governance, and long-term legacy.
- **Autumn 2026:** Shortlist announcement (four entries). Shortlisted places may be invited to host panel visits and take part in final presentations. Applications will be assessed by an independent expert panel.
- **Late 2026:** City of Culture announced.

Communication objectives – April 2026 to August 2026

- Build sustained, positive awareness of the Inverness-Highland longlisting and the next stages of the bid, clearly articulating ambition, distinctiveness, and potential impact.
- Position the bid as confident, credible, and nationally relevant, while remaining rooted in local people and places.
- Create an open public conversation about what culture means Highland and how it supports everyday life, work and place – how it is defined, how it is experienced.

- Ensure artists, cultural partners, communities and young people lead the bid – reframing the bid externally as community led, with Highland Council as enabler (to ‘un-council’ the bid and ensuring wider ownership and leadership).
- Engage media as active cultural partners, not just promoters, recognising the unique role of media in supporting cultural life in rural and urban communities.

Key communication narrative:

Communications activity will be shaped around three key strands:

- **Nationally distinctive bid.** Inverness-Highland is the first region-wide City of Culture bid, and the only Scottish bid. It will demonstrate how culture thrives beyond an urban, cultural hub, and plays a key role in contributing to long-term resilient, sustainable rural and island communities.
- **Bid built by communities.** The bid is being led by communities, artists, and cultural partners, actively shaping ideas, priorities and ambitions.
- **Value and legacy:** Experience from other cities shows the act of bidding delivers real benefits – stronger partnerships, improved evidence and raised profile – with winning places going on to deliver longer term, meaningful economic growth and regeneration.

Key messages:

- **This is a once in a generation opportunity to celebrate the strength and diversity of culture across the region and reshape how Inverness and the Highlands are seen, through a year-long programme rooted in contemporary creativity, energy, landscape, language and welcome.** It will widen access to culture and creative opportunities, increase participation, provide volunteering/skills development, support wellbeing and foster a sense of pride. Themes include:
 - Power and renewal – culture and the green energy revolution.
 - Land, sea and stewardship – culture in and of the landscape.
 - Living languages and contemporary traditions – Gaelic and multilingual futures.
 - Rural futures – work, belonging, migration and return.
 - Innovation from the edge – new cultural models for dispersed places.
- **Longlisting is national recognition of Highland’s cultural ambition.** Being longlisted is a strong endorsement of Highland’s cultural strength and ambition. The independent panel recognised the originality of a large scale, non-urban proposal, and the depth of existing indigenous and contemporary cultural activity. One of only nine places long-listed places and the only Scottish bid.
- **We are building from an already strong platform.** The bid will build on an already strong cultural network, touring model, and strengths, including the success of the *Spirit of the Highlands*, a major storytelling initiative brought to life through the Inverness Castle Experience, with Inverness as a gateway for exploring the wider region.

- **Our bid will be nationally distinctive.** Inverness-Highland is the first region-wide City of Culture bid. It will demonstrate how culture thrives beyond an urban, cultural hub, and plays a key role in contributing to long-term resilient, sustainable rural and island communities. Rural areas are not cultural peripheries, but places of innovation, invention, and leadership. The bid will look and feel like no other – rooted in Highland communities, but relevant across the whole UK.
- **A region wide vision led by communities.** Our bid will be community-led, supported by a broad partnership including cultural organisations, artists, community representatives, young people, education, business and the public sector. Communities will shape the programme as it develops, ensuring it remains ambitious, inclusive, and realistic. Success will depend on broad participation from stakeholders, artists, communities and partners.
- **The bid process will deliver real benefits.** Experience from other places show that the process of bidding itself delivers value – raising the profile, strengthening collaborations, building evidence for future funding, and improving cultural planning.
- **The bid will act as a catalyst to reset and strengthen the region’s cultural strategy, unlock new partnerships, public and private investments, and support long-term social, economic and place-based benefits, with culture as a driver of long-term change.** It will demonstrate how culture can drive economic growth, social connection, civic pride and long-term change, aligning culture with wider regional priorities, including net zero, green energy, sustainable tourism, skills, jobs, housing, and community resilience. Evidence from previous winners shows that City of Culture status can drive long-term economic growth and regeneration across communities (as demonstrated by previous UK Cities of Culture, including Londonderry, Hull, Coventry, and Bradford). Previous titleholders have leveraged more than £1 billion additional investment into their local economies.
- **City of Culture status offers the chance to build on our strong visitor economy, reshape perceptions, and strengthen Inverness and Highlands as a year-round cultural destination - showcasing the region to the wider UK and world.** It provides an opportunity to build on our strong visitor economy in a transformative way; strengthening Inverness and Highlands as a year-round cultural destination; broadening the visitor offer; encouraging visitors to explore more places, stay longer, and return; and showcasing the region to audiences across the UK and beyond. It would also promote the Highlands as a place to live, work, study, create and invest. It also provides the opportunity to shift perceptions of Inverness and the Highlands as a beautiful place to visit, to being recognised as one of the most imaginative and future-facing places in Britain – moving the story from one about scenery and heritage, to a contemporary Highland narrative rooted in culture, language, creativity, confidence, sustainability, diversity and the future. The previous four winners of the competition have seen visitor numbers rise between 24 to 40 per cent during the year itself.

Spokespeople

Artists, cultural practitioners, communities need to be front-and-centre of storytelling, with civic leaders providing assurance.

Civic accountability:

- Chair of the Inverness-Highland UK City of Culture Board – Convener.
- Council Leader

Creative leadership:

- Inverness-Highland UK City of Culture Bid Director
- Committee members
- Bid ambassadors

Work is underway to identify key stakeholders and develop a detailed tactical plan, which will be developed as actions required to implement and progress delivery of the bid are agreed. This communication plan provides a starting point for the bid, which will evolve as external support is confirmed, governance arrangements are established, and application development progresses.