

Agenda Item	6
Report No	CP/08/26

# The Highland Council

**Committee:** Communities and Place

**Date:** 21 May 2026

**Report Title:** Participation and Engagement Strategy

**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 localism approach, setting out its commitment to Place 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 A draft Participation and Engagement Strategy was considered by this Committee in November 2025, and it was agreed that a period of engagement should be undertaken to identify any missing opportunities or methods for improved engagement.
- 1.3 Engagement was carried out from mid-February to mid-April - a summary of views expressed and actions to address these are set out at Sections 6 and 7 of this report. The proposed final Participation and Engagement Strategy is set out at **Appendix 2**.

## 2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
  - i. Consider and **note** the extent of the engagement and responses received;
  - ii. **Note** how consideration of these responses has been incorporated into the strategy;
  - iii. **Agree** to support the content of the Action Plan contained within the strategy; and
  - iv. **Agree** the strategy, noting that reports on progress will be submitted to this Committee as part of the wider Participation and Engagement annual update.

## 3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** - the cost of the new Engagement Platform was agreed as part of the Council's Budget setting process for 2026/2027. Other elements of the action plan will be delivered within existing resources. The costs associated with other engagement methods, including face to face, should be built into project delivery plans.
- 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** – as noted within the feedback at section 6, and from wider feedback received from other engagement, there is a need to build confidence and trust across communities in the Council's engagement and consultation processes. The strategy and action plan have been developed to support a consistent approach to engagement and build confidence amongst the public.
- 3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – there are no risk implications identified in the report
- 3.5 **Gaelic** – there are not considered to be any implications.

### 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 **Integrated Impact Assessment - Summary**

An Integrated Impact Assessment screening has been undertaken in April 2026. The conclusions have been subject to the relevant Manager Review and Approval. The screening process has concluded that there are only positive impacts from the work of the participation strategy. Members are asked to consider the summary set out in **Appendix 1** to support the decision-making process.

4.4

Impact Assessment Area	Conclusion of Screening Assessment
Equality	Positive
Poverty and Socio-economic	Positive
Human Rights	Positive
Children's Rights and Well-being	Positive
Impact Island and Mainland Rural	Positive
Climate Change	Minor positive impacts
Data Rights	No impact

## 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 has been reflected in the Council's Localism approach and its commitment to Place and agreement of the Place Based Framework in December 2021. This commitment also aligns to several duties set out in the Community Empowerment Act including Community Planning, Participatory Budgeting, Participation Requests and Community Asset Transfer.
- 5.2 As previously reported to this committee, there is a commitment to develop a broader Participation and Engagement Strategy for the Council. This will reflect how we will engage with and involve communities in how we operate and help support and enable their involvement in service design, planning and delivery. A core element of any strategy will be to ensure that we are taking an inclusive approach to involving our communities. Including and involving all members of our community, is central to any engagement strategy.
- 5.3 The draft Participation and Engagement Strategy is set out at **Appendix 2**. This was considered at Committee in November 2025. The draft Strategy outlines the principles that will guide the Council's approach to engagement, the methods to be used and how it aims to encourage greater involvement from communities in service design and delivery.

The Vision for the Strategy 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.*

The Principles for the Strategy are:

- **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.*

- 5.4 Members agreed that a period of public engagement should be implemented to seek views from the public and key community stakeholders. This report provides a summary of the feedback received, outlines changes made to the Strategy as a result of the comments received and proposes next key actions.
- 5.5 The draft Strategy was issued for public engagement in mid-February, running on-line until mid-March, with further opportunities available until 23<sup>rd</sup> April.

Mechanisms for the engagement included:

- on-line (on the Council's previous engagement platform)
- cascade of the strategy and survey via the Community Support & Engagement team to Community Councils and Community Partnerships for sharing throughout those networks
- hard copies available via Service Points and Libraries (including mobile libraries)
- targeted communications with Highland Disability Access Panels
- targeted communications to the Highland Third Sector Interface membership
- discussions with Education colleagues to check for alignment against the Children and Young People's Strategy

## 6 Engagement Responses

- 6.1 50 responses were received, 45 online via the platform and 5 returned via email. Of these, 35 were responding as individuals, 2 as Community Council representatives, 3 as community group representatives, 1 as the representative of a charity and 1 as a business.

Direct contact was made with Disability Access Panels across Highland and the Highland Third Sector Interface who provided comment on the strategy as well as sharing with its membership. Work was carried out to cross-reference with the Children and Young People's Strategy to ensure the two strategies are complementary.

- 6.2 The consultation sought views and opinions against each section of the Strategy. As expected, there were similar points made against different sections and a mix of constructive, neutral and negative views. A brief summary of each section is set out below:

6.3

<b>1. Vision Statement Agreement</b>
Most respondents agreed with the vision, with a small number strongly disagreeing. Key issues raised included lack of trust, previous negative experiences, perceived lack of transparency, and frustration that engagement often does not influence decisions. Many comments reflected cynicism, consultation fatigue, and a belief that the Council does not listen or deliver. Suggestions of 'tick-box exercise' and tokenism were made on multiple occasions.
<b>2. Principles for Participation and Engagement</b>
There was strong overall agreement with the principles of being a listening, transparent, accessible and collaborative Council. Where respondents disagreed, concerns focused on accessibility (especially for disabled, neurodivergent, working and digitally excluded people), lack of funding, and perceptions that engagement is tokenistic and not acted upon.
<b>3. Making Participation Meaningful</b>
Respondents consistently called for earlier engagement before decisions are made, clear ownership and accountability, realistic timescales, and adequate resources. Strong emphasis was placed on face-to-face engagement, varied timings, inclusive

methods, paid or supported participation, plain English communication, and clear 'you said, we did' feedback loops. Community Councils were repeatedly highlighted as undervalued but vital conduits. A small number of respondents felt the Strategy lacked ambition and that it should identify bolder targets.

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#### **4. One Change to Improve Engagement**

The dominant theme was action and delivery. Respondents want visible outcomes, genuine listening, realistic plans, and specific engagement with those directly affected by something rather than the 'usual suspects'. It was also noted that it was important Councillors listen to the feedback received. Many emphasised that having a presence in communities mattered a lot, as did improved access to officers.

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#### **5. Preferred Ways to Engage**

It was clear from responses that no single method suits all. Respondents favoured a mix of drop-in sessions, workshops, surveys (online and paper), and face-to-face conversations. There was recognition that engagement should be proportionate to the issue, with more dialogue required for complex topics and more straight-forward methods being used for less complicated issues.

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#### **6. Confidence to Participate**

The feedback received would suggest that confidence is largely dependent on trust and proof of impact. Seeing feedback acted upon, visible officer presence, respect, plain language, inclusive venues, and reliable engagement processes were all seen as essential. Many respondents stressed that past negative experiences deter future participation.

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#### **7. Challenges and Barriers**

Some of the key challenges noted related to mistrust, digital exclusion, rural geography, poor transport, volunteer burnout, limited Council capacity, lack of coordination, and consultations occurring too late. Cultural issues within the Council, perceived defensiveness, and lack of responsiveness, were frequently cited.

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#### **8. Making Participation More Inclusive**

Respondents called for accessible formats, varied timings, translations - including Braille and British Sign Language (BSL), child-friendly and neurodiverse-friendly approaches, travel and childcare support, as well as engagement in places people already gather. Paper-based options remain important, especially for older and rural residents who may struggle with access to digital services.

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#### **9. Supporting Empowerment in Decision-Making**

Communities want early involvement, clear explanations of what can and cannot be influenced, consistent feedback, and respect for local knowledge. Stronger support for Community Councils, visible leadership, and decentralised decision-making were commonly requested.

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#### **10. Commitments and Actions**

Respondents questioned the effectiveness of the 'ranking' questions, with most stating that all the options were of equal importance. Concerns were expressed that commitments lack ambition, measurable targets, timescales and accountability. There was strong support for shared tools, engagement platforms, and calendars, but with caution about digital exclusion and the need for face-to-face engagement.

## 11. Desired Outcomes

The most desired outcomes are stronger trust, communities seeing their input shape decisions, wider participation (including seldom-heard groups), improved services aligned with local need, and genuinely empowered communities with shared ownership of solutions.

## 12. Additional Feedback

A recurring message was that engagement must move from rhetoric to delivery, rebuild trust over time, and embed meaningful participation into everyday Council practice.

## 7 Revisions to the draft Participation and Engagement Strategy

- 7.1 As a result of this feedback, the draft strategy has been amended, and the revisions contained within the Strategy document set out at **Appendix 2**. It is anticipated that these revisions will strengthen the strategy and better reflect the requirements highlighted by respondents. It is important to note that a number of the comments received relate not to the Strategy itself but how it will be implemented and therefore it will be important to review the implementation of the Strategy as we go forward.
- 7.2 By adopting the strategy and implementing it across the whole Council, there are gains to be made for both the Council and its communities. Reflecting on the comments made and the desire to see clearer and real change, it is anticipated that tangible improvements will be seen across a number of factors, as follows:
- **Building Trust and Confidence** - an increase in the proportion of participants who agree that their engagement influenced a decision, and a related reduction in qualitative feedback citing tokenism, lack of listening or lack of action.
  - **Earlier and Better-Planned Engagement** - majority of major strategies, policies and projects demonstrate community engagement before preferred options are identified. Clear case studies showing where engagement has influenced scope, options or delivery approach.
  - **Reach and Inclusion** - increased participation from under-represented groups, including young people, disabled people, rural communities and digitally excluded residents. All strategic engagement exercises offer non-digital options, accessible formats and out-of-hours opportunities.
  - **Community Council Engagement** - consistent evidence that relevant Community Councils are engaged early in consultations affecting their area. Improved satisfaction from Community Councils regarding access to officers, clarity of communication and feedback received.
  - **Visibility and Presence** - an increase in the number of face-to-face engagement activities held within communities, with visibility of senior officers and elected member in engagement activity.
  - **Closing the Feedback Loop** - 100% of engagement activities publish a clear *“You said – We did / We couldn’t because”* summary within an agreed

timescale (e.g. 6–8 weeks). A publicly accessible record of engagement outcomes and responses – this can be delivered as part of the new engagement Platform and can be made available on request for those unable to access on-line resources through libraries and service points.

- **Delivery and Action** – tangible examples of service improvements, policy changes or delivery adjustments made as a direct result of engagement. Reduced time between engagement closing and decisions or actions being clearly communicated back to communities.

7.3 As demonstrated from the range of comments received, people’s expectations on how engagement is undertaken and what is considered ‘positive’ engagement do vary and therefore our future engagement will not always meet everyone’s expectations. Clarity and transparency in messaging and the decisions and rationale for decisions taken are vital.

It is anticipated that the new engagement portal will assist in supporting the organisation to deliver on the asks of communities including:

- Streamlining engagement - avoiding duplication and consultation exhaustion
- Communication - providing the right information at the right time
- Transparency in decision making - providing greater clarity about factors taken into account when decisions are made and any factors which have had to be discounted
- Feeding back - closing the ‘feedback loop’.

## 8 Next Steps

8.1 There are clear actions required to ensure the Strategy is quickly implemented which will begin to build confidence in the processes and deliver improved engagement.

Key actions include:

- a) Delivery of the new on-line engagement platform - this key strand of this strategy will deliver a digital platform which will streamline all the Council’s consultations and engagement to be available in one place, improving the Council’s approach to public involvement and participation. This will significantly enhance engagement with features which will allow people to sign up for alerts, make comments, allow for voting etc (opening up the opportunity for more participatory resourcing but still recognising that an on-line platform cannot be the only mechanism for engagement).
- b) Development and delivery of staff training via the Council’s Traineasy platform - this is currently under development and all staff who engage with communities will be encouraged to undergo the training to understand a wide range of appropriate mechanisms which can be considered for various types of project, service design etc. Part of this will include supporting staff to ensure that a feedback mechanism is included as part of any engagement activity.
- c) Annual reporting – updates on participation and engagement activities, including monitoring against the implementation of the strategy, will be reported as part of the annual participation and engagement report.

In addition to our formal engagement mechanisms, it is important that we also build on and improve informal engagement with our third sector delivery partners. Work is underway to improve our work, involvement and relationships with third sector partners, recognising the importance of the third sector to the delivery of services across Highland. The aim is to develop a Third Sector Strategy, in conjunction with the sector, which will set out how we will work better together.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive – Place

Date: 29<sup>th</sup> April 2026

Author: Dot Ferguson, Senior Community Development Manager

Background Papers: Communities and Place Committee - 6<sup>th</sup> November 2025  
Participation and Engagement Update - [Participation and Engagement Strategy](#)

Appendices: Appendix 1 – Integrated Impact Assessment  
Appendix 2 – Participation and Engagement Strategy

## **Integrated Impact Assessment Screening Summary**

**Proposal name: Participation and Engagement Strategy**

**High level summary of the proposal:** The proposal relates to the development and implementation of a Participation and Engagement Strategy for Highland Council. Implementation of the Strategy will contribute to the Council's commitment to robust participation and engagement. This will help to ensure all voices are heard in relation to both statutory and non-statutory consultation and engagement

**Equalities, poverty and human rights** – the Strategy encourages use of the widest techniques to ensure all voices are heard. This will have a positive impact on everyone, including those with protected characteristics. More people will have the chance to express how projects and service delivery can be improved to provide positive impacts

**Children's rights and wellbeing** – this Strategy will enhance opportunities for children and young people to engage with the Council and complements the Children and Young People's Strategy. There will be direct positive impacts through increased opportunity and encouragement to make their voices heard.

**Island and mainland rural communities** – there are minor and enhanced positive impacts. The strategy encourages use of widest engagement techniques allowing for all voices, regardless of location, to be heard.

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.*

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# 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. Recognising the substantial physical and mental health benefits which arise from sport and outdoor activities, it is vital that all residents have ready access to green spaces and sports facilities.

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 enhances our response to our statutory duties such as equalities legislation, United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child etc, and complements our Customer Experience Strategy. This ensures there are mechanisms in place for all voices to be heard.

## 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.

We also have statutory requirements to meet, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), recognising young people in Highland have also helped produce their own participation strategy - [C&YPPS](#)

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 eg 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** - where people have a shared geographic boundary where they live, work or spend time;
- **communities of interest** – 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 etc

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

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• simple to access</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• inclusive</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• appropriate for the affected community or individuals</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• designed to develop a sense of ownership in those responding</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• honest, in terms of the level and type of 'input' and if or how this can change our delivery</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• built on, but not repeat previous engagements (unless there has been a change of circumstances or significant period of time has elapsed)</li></ul>

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

We must of course meet our statutory duties and 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 (SAAtSD) - [The Scottish Approach to Service Design \(SAAtSD\) - 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:

	<b>INFORM</b>	<b>CONSULT</b>	<b>INVOLVE</b>	<b>COLLABORATE</b>	<b>EMPOWER</b>
<b>PURPOSE</b>	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.
<b>WHAT WILL WE DO ?</b>	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.
<b>EXAMPLE</b>	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.

## 6. 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 will check what previous engagement has been carried out, to avoid repeating work. Resources such as the library of voices - [library of voices](#) and similar sources relevant to other interest groups should be checked to avoid wasteful duplication of effort and consultation fatigue from communities.

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 including Community Councils
- 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 Place Plans to prioritise funding allocations, service delivery etc
- strong Community Partnerships

## 7. Our Commitments – What we will do

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

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify opportunities for community involvement in service delivery at as early a stage as possible and always prior to decisions being made</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develop and publish an action plan, highlighting anticipated opportunities for involvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• actively use the appropriate level of involvement (as set out in section 5) – the Framework for Engagement</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• always include Community Councils as key stakeholders</li> <li>• identify the relevant communities and ascertain the best way to engage with them to ensure maximum inclusivity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• actively promote the opportunity for communities to submit Participation Requests and Community Asset Transfers</li> <li>• identify opportunities for Participatory Resourcing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify other potential delivery partners – whether public, private or third sector</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• explore options for delivery and be honest and transparent about practical limitations eg available finance, risk, statutory requirements or limitations etc</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• be open to constructive challenge and genuine two-way dialogue;</li> <li>• continue to improve our internal training across all services to ensure engagement is carried out to the highest standards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• always make feedback available to everyone who has participated. This will help to build trust and will increase understanding of decision-making</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develop an engagement ‘calendar’ to identify opportunities for others to use the same event to discuss other projects etc of interest to that community.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• adopt inclusive engagement methods to ensure equity of access</li> </ul>	



## 8. 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



## 9. Draft Action Plan

An action plan has been developed to support implementation of the Strategy. Reflecting on responses received from the engagement on the strategy, this has been redefined and is set out below. This now identifies specific and measurable actions with defined timescales and lead services. This will be monitored through the Communities and Place Committee through the Annual Report on Participation and Engagement.

Area for Development	Action	Lead	Timescale
Improving Access	<p>Engagement Platform</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of an engagement platform which will act as a 'one-stop-shop' for all of the Council's consultation and engagement 'events' and which will provide a feedback loop.</li> <li>• Promotion of the new platform to raise awareness and understanding and build confidence and use of the platform</li> </ul> <p>In Person Local Engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commit to at least one annual face to face meeting in each Committee area, focused on corporate Council activity</li> </ul>	<p>Community Support &amp; Engagement Team Corporate Communications Team</p> <p>Council Senior Team</p>	<p>May 2026</p> <p>Ongoing 2026/27</p> <p>Annual</p>
Improving Staff Capacity	<p>Staff Training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of in-house on-line training to upskill staff in engagement techniques – utilising e.g., Traineasy platform.</li> </ul> <p>Staff Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Production of a 'How to Engage' guide – a simplified version of the National Standards for Community Engagement and in alignment with the Strategy to support staff wishing to undertake engagement. This will include methods and approaches for undertaking inclusive engagement, recognising Highland's geography</li> </ul>	<p>Community Support &amp; Engagement Team Learning and Development Team</p>	<p>December 2026</p>

Area for Development	Action	Lead	Timescale
Building Community Capacity	Best Practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Production of a Community 'How to Engage' guide – a simplified version of the National Standards for Community Engagement to support communities wishing to undertake engagement. This will include methods and approaches for undertaking inclusive engagement, recognising Highland's geography.</li> </ul>	Community Support & Engagement Team	March 2027
Streamlining engagement	Co-ordination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explore options for 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.</li> </ul>	Community Support & Engagement Team	March 2027
Improving involvement	Co-production <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify pilot areas and projects which could assess the Council's and communities' capacity for co-production of services.</li> </ul>	All clusters to identify at least one opportunity annually	Annual
Monitoring	Monitoring <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop indicators to support monitoring of the Strategy</li> <li>Annual reporting against the Strategy to be considered at Communities and Place Committee annually</li> </ul>	Community Support and Engagement Team	November 2026 Annual

## RELATED LEGISLATION, STRATEGIES, PLANS AND GOOD PRACTICE

### LEGISLATION

- Community Empowerment Act - [Community Empowerment \(Scotland\) Act: summary - gov.scot](#)
- [UNCRC Full Text - The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland](#)
- Equalities - [Equality Act 2010 Guidance](#), [Equality Act Scottish Specific Duties Guidance](#)

### 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](#)
- [Mainstreaming Equality and Equality Outcomes](#)
- Highland Council Customer Experience Strategy - [Customer experience - Highland Council](#)

### 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](#)
- [Involving Children and Young People in Decisions that Affect Them](#)