# The Highland Council

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| Agenda Item | **13** |
| Report No | **CP/35/26** |

**Committee:** **Communities and Place**

**Date:** **5 November 2026**

**Report Title:** **Participation and Engagement Annual Report**

**Report By:** **Assistant Chief Executive - Place**

## 1 Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 One of the Council's core commitments is to improve 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 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. This includes updates and work on:-

- Place planning;
- Tenant engagement;
- Local Development Plan;
- Housing Need and Demand Assessment; and
- Community Support for Renewable Energy.

1.3 The report also provides an update on actions to deliver the Participation and Engagement Strategy for the Council, which was agreed by this Committee in May 2026. Work includes:-

- Launch of the Council's new engagement platform GoVocal which now hosts all engagement activity the Council is undertaking in one place.
- Development of a Traineasy package to help staff deliver effective engagement – this will launch in November.
- Engagement calendar developed – forms part of the on-line platform front page.

1.4 The final section reports on the Council's duties relating to Participation Requests, contained within the Empowerment Act. 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. At the current time, there are two live Participation Requests – one from Plockton Community Council and one from Ardross Community Council. The Scottish Government had previously required relevant Public Service Authorities to provide an annual report on Participation Requests but whilst this is no longer required, an update is contained within this report.

## 2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:-

i. **Consider** and **note** the update on the work ongoing to increase Council participation and engagement with communities across Highland; and
ii. **Consider** and **note** the progress against the Participation and Engagement Strategy set out at Appendix 1.

## 3 Implications

3.1 **Resource** - There are no direct resource implications as a result of this report. The work outlined has been 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.

## 5 Background

5.1 In recent years, one of the council's core commitments has been to improve 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 The report provides an update on the actions being taken across the Council to improve Participation, Engagement and Involvement in what the Council does. Section 6 of the report outlines progress across a number of areas, including place planning and tenant participation, whilst also including new areas or specific activity undertaken over the course of the last year. The report also updates on delivery of actions embedded within the Participation and Engagement Strategy for the Council. Agreed by this committee in May 2026, 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. An action plan is embedded within the Strategy and progress is set out at **Appendix 1**. The final section of the report provides an update on Participation Requests. Whilst a report to Scottish Government is no longer required, an update on current requests is incorporated into this report.

## 6 Improving Participation and Involvement

6.1 In 2025-26 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 2025/26 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. Tenants are also able to directly influence policy by involvement in working groups such as, Rent Consultation – Value for Money Group, which informs the annual rent setting process and the lived experience focus group, which has informed the Domestic Abuse Housing Strategy, agreed at Committee in November 2025.

The team have also continued to support and develop engagement with Gypsy/Traveller communities via the Highland Women's group, meeting monthly to build skills and trust, improve engagement and enable women to actively shape decisions affecting their community. The annual Tenant Participation and Engagement Update report will be considered by the Housing and Property Committee on 4 November 2026.

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 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. Work has been ongoing over the course of the last year focusing on developing and delivering actions plans that underpin the priorities within the Plans. A full report on Area Place Plans will be presented to this Committee in January.

6.4 **Local Place Planning** - The resources on the Local Place Planning webpages have been added to, to support and guide community bodies in the preparation and submission of their Local Place Plans (LPPs). In February 2026 a Local Place Plan Update newsletter was published and issued directly to community bodies.

Relevant content from registered LPPs has been referenced and summarised within the Evidence Report for the Highland Local Development Plan (HLDP), which helps to demonstrate particular value in community bodies achieving registration of their LPPs.

6.5 **Local Development Planning** - 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 annual Development Plans Scheme, as required by planning legislation. Published as the Development Plans Newsletter, the January 2026 version includes for the first time a single page quick read version.

The Council consulted the public on its draft Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) report and maps between 16 January and 27 February 2026. This includes an interactive map which enables users to explore the detail of scores assigned to individual play spaces across localities. Also, targeted engagement was carried out through schools, in respect of play spaces that had received recent investment. The PSA will inform preparation of the Highland Local Development Plan (HLDP) as well as management and investment decisions for the Council's play spaces.

Masterplan Consent Areas – The Council is considering introducing Masterplan Consent Areas (MCAs) within Highland, accelerating the development process for particular sites. It has been agreed to progress a proposed Masterplan Consent Area Scheme (PMCAS) on three sites: Essich Road (Inverness), Ardersier and Embo.

In relation to these, 6 public events were held between January and March 2026 (2 at each location), at which Council officers and potential development partners presented information and answered questions – opportunities to gather information and understand any matters of concern to the principle of progressing to the next stage. In response to the representations received, the scale of each development proposal has been reduced and amended.

Masterplans are in the process of being developed within 2 communities, with a further one due to commence. These are being co-produced between the community, the developer and Council and being co-ordinated by an independent masterplanner.

6.6 **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;
- 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; and
- Renewable energy projects – supporting communities to be better able to understand and respond to planning applications for renewable energy developments.

6.7 **Housing Need and Demand Assessment (HNDA) -** The HNDA sets out current and future housing requirements in Highland, including the likely requirement for new homes as well as trends in affordability and tenure. An updated HNDA was submitted to the Scottish Government in October and is subject to a report to November Housing & Property Committee.

Since the start of the HNDA review process, a substantial evidence base has been assembled, including a large-scale household survey across Highland through which over 2,100 residents provided detailed information on their current housing circumstances, future intentions and housing aspirations. The purpose of both this and other engagement activity with community groups has been to go beyond the statutory guidance on preparing HNDAs. This has allowed qualitative information to be collected, including a focus on housing for specific groups including those with accessible housing and health needs.

6.8 **Community Support Officers – Renewable Energy -** In May 2025, the Council employed 3 FTE dedicated Renewables Engagement Community Support Officers (CSOs) and 1 FTE fixed term (Social Value Charter post) within the Community Support and Engagement Team.

These roles were the result of a motion to Council in September 2024 seeking greater support for communities to engage with renewable energy developers.

The focus of these roles is to:-

- Provide impartial advice, support, signposting, guidance and support capacity building to community councils, community groups and wider communities.
- Highlight the importance of ensuring that meaningful and inclusive engagement brings together a wide range of groups and individuals to create diversity of perspectives and insights, and to ensure that everyone living in a community has an opportunity to have their voice heard.
- Ensure that communities are maximising potential opportunities for their local area and the wider region, by engaging in constructive dialogue with developers.

During 2025/26, the team has engaged in / attended 57 events to directly support communities. These include:-

| Type of Event/Support | Number Undertaken |
|---|---|
| Community Council Meetings / Events | 20 |
| Third Sector / Sector Specific Organisation Meetings | 37 |

To further support Highland communities, a resource pack has been developed to provide individuals, communities and community groups with a range of guidance, support and information in relation to renewable energy developments.

Hosted on the Highland Community Planning Partnership website under the Highland Social Value Charter, the pack is a constantly evolving resource Community Resources. Communities are actively encouraged to engage with the team to further enhance the information they need.

6.9 **Common Good Funds** - The Council supports community engagement and participation through the management of Common Good assets and by fulfilling its statutory obligations in relation to Common Good property. In Highland, there are 13 Common Good Funds, with assets recorded on the published Common Good Asset Registers.

Part 8 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 requires the Council to consult local communities on proposals involving the disposal (lease or sale), and/or change of use of Common Good property. These consultations provide residents, community bodies, and Community Councils with an opportunity to express their views and help ensure that community interests are taken into account as part of the decision-making processes. Through these statutory engagement activities, the Council promotes transparency, accountability, and meaningful community participation in decisions affecting Common Good assets.

During 2025/26, the Council conducted 6 statutory Common Good consultation exercises relating to proposed disposals and change of use of Common Good property.

In addition to these statutory requirements, the Council seeks to further strengthen community engagement through dedicated Common Good Engagement Groups. These arrangements are currently established in Nairn, on a pilot operating on a test and learn basis, and Wick, providing a forum for community representatives and stakeholders to discuss Common Good matters, share local perspectives and contribute to the stewardship and management of Common Good assets within their respective areas.

The Wick Common Good Sub-Group has been established with agreed Terms of Reference and is supporting the work of local officers. This developing partnership brings together officer expertise with the group's local knowledge, interests, and community perspective. Since its establishment, the group has met once, providing an early opportunity to build relationships and shape future collaborative working. The initiative also presents a valuable learning opportunity for all involved.

6.10 **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 previous on-line portal, normal media channels, direct to Community Councils and through 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 – the new Scheme was agreed. Since then, the team has developed a suite of comprehensive support and guidance materials, both in written and video format - Support and guidance for community councils - Community councils - Highland Council. This will be reviewed annually to ensure it remains current and that it continues to capture the needs of Community Councils.

6.11 **Participatory Resourcing Approach** - Public engagement through the Area Place Plans (APP) process continues to identify priorities for targeting funds to inform Area Committee decisions on allocations across a number of funding streams such as the Community Regeneration Fund as well as providing officer and Member guidance on spend of Ward Discretionary Funds, Invitation to Pay, Common Good etc. 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.

6.12 **Equalities Engagement -**

**BSL Panel** - A new British Sign Language (BSL) Plan (2024-2030) was agreed in September 2024. Developed jointly with NHS Highland and in consultation with the BSL community, the Plan sets out a range of commitments and actions aimed at improving the accessibility and inclusion of BSL users across Council services.

A key commitment within the Plan is to hold quarterly BSL Panel meetings, providing BSL users with greater involvement in, and oversight of, progress against the Plan's actions.

Over the past year, these meetings have continued to be held in partnership with NHS Highland and have covered topics including communication support, the complaints procedure, and employment and employability issues.

An interim progress report on the BSL Plan will be published in 2027.

6.13 **Play Strategy** - The Play Strategy Co-ordinator has consulted with over one thousand children since last year's report. Many playpark designs are now fully child-led, sustainable, and inclusive with a choice of play for every child. Prior to upgrading playparks, valuable information is being gained from children regarding what they like and don't like about their local playpark, how the Council can help them, the importance of inclusivity and their visions for their local park.

By listening carefully to children, Highland Council is creating playparks that reflect local needs and are welcoming to all. This flexible approach to engagement helps children take part in ways that suit them, leads to better design decisions, and ensures public funding is used well.

By working closely with communities, the Council has also secured significant match funding, allowing more complete and inclusive park improvements. Together, this work is delivering play spaces that children value and communities are proud of.

Well-designed playparks and sustained investment support preventative outcomes by encouraging regular physical activity, outdoor play, and social connection. These benefits support children's physical and emotional wellbeing and contribute to long-term public health objectives. Safe and accessible play spaces reduce isolation and strengthen family and community resilience. Ongoing and appropriately earmarked funding will help ensure these preventative benefits are maintained and delivered consistently across communities.

The Play Strategy Co-ordinator is increasingly supporting schools that are seeking to improve playground provision at a time when securing funding can be challenging.

Support includes child consultation, helping schools understand what children value most in their outdoor spaces, identifying cost-effective and appropriate play opportunities, and promoting a more holistic approach to play. This includes looking beyond traditional fixed equipment and considering features such as natural play, social spaces, loose parts, opportunities for creativity and challenge, and accessible play experiences. By placing children's views at the centre of the process, schools can prioritise improvements that deliver the greatest benefit for pupils while making best use of available funding.

Any community interested in upgrading local play opportunities should be signposted to the Play Strategy Co-ordinator lynn.macgillivray@highland.gov.uk.

6.14 **Children's Rights and Participation -** Highland Council has continued to strengthen its approach to children's rights and participation, working with partners to embed meaningful participation in the systems, processes and practice that shape children and young people's lives.

The Highland Children and Young People's Participation Strategy (2024-2029) provides a shared framework for participation across the Highland Community Planning Partnership and was commissioned by the Integrated Children's Services Planning Partnership in 2023. Developed with children and young people, the Strategy identifies six key themes describing what meaningful participation should look and feel like and has recently been embedded within the Council's Participation and Engagement Policy and Education and Learning Plan.

Implementation has focused on translating these principles into practice and developing shared approaches and tools that support partners to meaningfully involve children and young people in decisions that affect them. This includes the development of the Library of Voices, helping practitioners and decision-makers make better use of what children and young people have already told us, ensuring that the Council avoids asking children the same questions without meaningful action and strengthening the visibility of their experiences, views and priorities.

Alongside this, the Voice and Influence process supports clearer routes for children and young people's voices to reach decision-makers across the Integrated Children's Services Planning Partnership, with an emphasis on ensuring children and young people can see what has happened as a result of sharing their views.

A strong focus has also been placed on understanding the conditions needed for meaningful participation. Participation Reflecting on Children's Capacity through their Say (ROCCS) research with children and young people in Highland explored children's views on adult myths about their capacity for participation. This learning is informing work to build sustainable capacity for participation across the partnership and has been embedded within Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) training and shared nationally.

Practical support includes *Involving Children and Young People in Decisions That Affect Them: A Practitioners' Guide*, developed to support implementation of the Participation Strategy across the Community Planning Partnership. Highland's approach has received external recognition, with Professor Laura Lundy describing the Decision-Making Guide as "next level". Highland's resources and learning continue to be shared nationally, contributing to wider practice around children's rights and participation across Scotland.

The Children and Young People's Participation Community of Practice, delivered in partnership with the Highland Child Protection Committee, continues to bring together practitioners from across Highland to share learning, build skills and strengthen participation practice. Children and young people are also being involved directly as partners in improvement and service development, including work to develop more child-friendly complaints processes.

The next phase of work will continue to strengthen implementation of the Participation Strategy across the Community Planning Partnership whilst further embedding children's and young people's participation within Highland Council's own structures

and decision-making. This includes development of a Chief Executive's Forum to strengthen routes for young people's voices to inform senior-level decision-making.

6.15 **Inverness-Highland UK City of Culture 2029 -** As part of the Inverness-Highland UK City of Culture 2029 bid, children and young people from across Highland were invited to participate through schools, voluntary organisations and community groups. A range of age-appropriate engagement methods were used, including a child-friendly workbook, online survey and focus group activities launched through a Children and Young People's Cultural Assembly held at Eden Court in June 2026. Feedback from these activities was analysed and used to help inform development of the bid, ensuring that the views and aspirations of children and young people were reflected throughout the process.

6.16 **Highland Youth Parliament -** The Highland Youth Parliament (HYP) continues to provide an important platform for young people to influence decision-making and identify priorities affecting their communities. During 2026, young people from across Highland contributed to the development of HYP's first manifesto, *Our Voices, Our Future, Our Highland*.

The manifesto was developed through a structured programme of engagement involving local youth groups, forums, schools and partner organisations from across Highland. A "You Said, We Did" review considered progress against issues previously raised by young people, while members of the HYP Executive worked collaboratively to develop manifesto proposals covering education, environment, health, transport, leisure, employment, online spaces, culture, rural issues, housing and money.

Particular effort was made to engage with and hear from young people whose voices may be less frequently represented, including young carers, care experienced young people, young people with additional support needs, LGBTQ+ young people, homeschooled young people, young people from military families, young people moving and settling from other countries, and young people involved in the justice system.

The annual Highland Youth Parliament Conference brought together approximately 123 young people from Highland's 29 secondary school areas alongside Council services and partner organisations. Through a ranked-choice voting process, participants identified both Highland-wide and local priorities for action, ensuring that the final manifesto reflects the issues that matter most to young people and supports meaningful participation in decisions affecting their lives. The work also contributed to engagement activity linked to the Inverness-Highland UK City of Culture 2029 bid by showcasing young people's aspirations for the future of Highland communities.

6.17 **Parent Engagement -** Significant progress has also been made in relation to parental involvement and engagement. A new model has been established whereby parent representatives have been identified across Highland's Associated School Group areas, creating a more locally connected approach to engagement and strengthening opportunities for parents to influence education policy and service development. The first meeting of the new representative group is scheduled for October 2026.

6.18 **Statutory Consultations -** Education provides opportunities for the voices of children and young people to be reflected in statutory school consultation processes. Pupil Councils are encouraged to lead engagement with pupils, with teachers using a range of approaches to ensure that all children are able to have their views heard. Parents are likewise encouraged to reflect their children's views as part of their feedback. Future statutory consultations will also make use of the Council's Engage Highland platform, alongside other appropriate engagement methods, to improve accessibility and broaden opportunities for participation.

6.19 **Community Regeneration Funding and BeConnected** - The team continues to deliver a number of funding streams under the umbrella term of Community Regeneration Funding (CRF). Drawing on priorities developed through area place planning work, the CRF team works closely to engage with potential applicants, supporting them to access funding opportunities. Key engagement and participation activities this year have been:-

- Piloting the BeConnected online portal, enabling community organisations to register project proposals and map activity taking place within their communities. Aligned with Area Place Plan priorities, the portal provides a single point of entry for communities to access a range of funding opportunities and support. It also offers elected members, council services and partner organisations greater visibility of community-led activity, helping to identify opportunities for collaboration, avoid duplication and support the delivery of local priorities.
- Ongoing support of the Highland Local Action Group (LAG). The LAG oversees the implementation of the Community Led Local Development (CLLD) Fund and in line with the fund requirements has a majority voting membership outwith the public sector. The LAG has responsibility for setting the direction of the programme and for funding awards. There are currently 8 community representatives on the LAG.
- Within the CLLD programme the LAG has also supported the establishment of a Highland Youth LAG. Facilitated by the Highlands and Islands Climate Hub, the Highland Youth Lag comprises 7 volunteers between the ages of 16 and 30. In 2026/27 the Youth LAG oversaw the distribution of the Youth Impact Fund with a total of £25k in funding awards being made to young people and organisations that support young people. The 7 members of the Youth LAG were directly responsible for setting the priorities for fund and for decisions on the awards.

6.20 **Highland Investment Plan (HIP) -** A period of consultation and engagement has commenced in relation to the phase 1 projects at Beauly, Charleston, Dingwall, Fortrose, Inverness High School, Thurso and Tornagrain. These projects focus on modernising the school estate, reviewing assets which should be retained, refurbished, repurposed or replaced, and delivering public facilities that meet the needs of communities now and into the future. A key element of the HIP is the creation of community hubs, known as Points of Delivery (PoDs), supporting a move towards a single public estate incorporating schools, council services and partners into modern, integrated community-based facilities. A series of 'roadshows' have taken place over the summer providing project overviews to groups of internal and external stakeholders. Since the start of the new term in August a number of stakeholder meetings have taken place regarding individual projects and regular engagement will continue during term time. In addition, the Highland Council and its delivery partner Hub North Scotland continue to work in partnership to deliver a community wealth building and community benefit strategy. This will support aspirations to ensure local, social and economic benefits with a strong focus on community needs.

Development of the Council's website is actively ongoing to provide a useful resource for project overviews and information relating to community engagement, stakeholder group meetings and consultations on proposals. The Land and Property page is already providing information on the phase 1 projects but is being expanded to incorporate other HIP project information.

6.21 **Lived Experience Panel -** The Council, in partnership with NHS Highland, secured Scottish Government funding to pilot embedding Lived Experience engagement in Highland. The first phase of the pilot, which ran from April to September 2026, involved the production of a feasibility study exploring how lived experience can be embedded in policy development and service improvement. This work aligns closely with the transformation in culture and ways of working called for by the Highland Poverty and Equality Commission in its Essential Elements report.

The feasibility study provides both local context and an overview of the lived experience engagement activity already taking place in Highland. The report sets out recommendations on how the Council and its partners can embed lived experience in future policy development, service design and service improvement. This includes a set of practical tools, guides and templates to deliver lived experience engagement, alongside recommendations regarding organisational commitment, resourcing, governance and long-term sustainability. At the time of writing, the feasibility study is being used to inform discussions across the Council and its partners on how to take forward the recommendations. This includes consideration of the proposed and funded second phase of the pilot, which provides an opportunity to test the recommendations.

## 7 Participation and Engagement Strategy Update

7.1 In May 2026, this Committee approved the Participation and Engagement Strategy - 21 May 2026: Communities and Place Committee - Highland Council. Since then, considerable work has been undertaken to broaden the awareness and understanding of the Strategy, to develop training for Council staff which will support them to engage effectively. A monitoring framework has been developed **(Appendix 1)** which reflects the actions contained within the Strategy document. The framework has been populated with progress to date and progress reports will be provided within these annual reports.

7.2 Highlights on progress include:-

- Procurement and launch of the new on-line engagement platform – complete.
- Development of a Traineasy package to help staff deliver effective engagement – this will launch in November.
- Engagement calendar developed – forms part of the on-line platform front page.
- Development of a 'How to Engage' guide for community groups - currently in development.

Whilst good progress has been made against a number of the actions, it should be noted that the Strategy was only launched in May and therefore work on some actions has not yet commenced.

7.3 **Engage Highland -** As noted at 7.2, the procurement of an effective engagement platform has been a key strand of the Participation & Engagement Strategy. After a lengthy process involving representatives from services across the Council, it was agreed to purchase the engagement platform provided by GoVocal. GoVocal demonstrated a strong product, well used and trusted by a range of public sector partners and which was able to deliver almost all of the Council's requirements. The site can be accessed here - https://engage.highland.gov.uk/en-GB/. The provider has delivered a highly responsive support mechanism with regular review sessions and a very efficient and effective contact mechanism for enquiries.

7.4 The site became 'live' in early June and is gradually becoming populated with a number of engagements and consultations, such as school consultations, visitor levy consultation, Dark Skies, Call for Ideas survey for the Highland Local Development Plan etc. By the end of September, there were almost 3,000 registered users. The advantage of registering is to ensure that alerts are received when project consultation changes phase, and also to minimise irrelevant information being received from the Council and making notifications more tailored to the individual. Those registering can select their areas of interest – geographic or sectoral.

7.5 Usage figures for the period 24th June – 24th September are as follows:-

- 12,488 visitors.
- 3,115 participants.
- 2,768 registrations.

Recognising that this is a cross-service resource, there are now 8 site administrators and 36 project managers.

One of the key features of the new platform is 'Translation Requests', where the user switches language on the Platform. Where this has taken place, 57% have switched to Gaelic and 43% to Polish.

7.6 The Council has committed to this Platform being the primary online method for all consultation and engagement, but it is essential to consider the platform as only one method of engagement and that more 'traditional' methods such as face-to-face meetings, direct engagement with sectoral groups, workshops etc must still be used.

## 8 Participation Requests

8.1 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 can ask the public body to take part in a process to improve that outcome. It has been noted that where existing participation and involvement measures are working well, participation requests should not be required.

Previously, the Scottish Government required the Council to submit an annual report on participation requests. This is no longer required but an update on current participation requests is included within this report.

8.2 There are currently two live Participation Requests, as follows:-

- Plockton Community Council – traffic management. It is anticipated that a final report on this request will be submitted to the next Communities & Place Committee.
- Ardross Community Council - Community engagement on local priorities for maintenance and upkeep of roads. This is a recent request, and the outcome improvement process is now underway.

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| Designation: | Assistant Chief Executive - Place |
| Date: | 28 September 2026 |
| Author: | Dot Ferguson, Senior Community Development Manager |
| Background Papers: | None |
| Appendices: | Appendix 1 – Participation & Engagement Strategy – Performance Monitoring |

**Appendix 1**
**Participation and Engagement Strategy – Action Plan Monitoring**

## Action Plan Progress Report

| Area for Development | Action | Lead Service | Target Date | KPI | Current Position | RAG |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Improving Access | Engagement Platform developed and launched | Community Support & Engagement Team | May 2026 | Platform operational (Y/N) | Launched in June 2026 and now has almost 3,000 registered users | G |
| Commentary: | The site has developed well with some topics receiving more responses than others. | | | | | |
| Next steps: | Continue cross-service promotion to ensure consistent use of site.<br>Increase public messaging to ensure as many as possible are aware of the site and confident in providing responses | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Improving Access | | Corporate Communications Team | Ongoing | Number of promotional campaigns | • 1PR issued when launched<br>• Social media campaign<br>• website homepage feature box for 3 weeks<br>• included in Community Briefing<br>• Reinforced with every PR re consultation | G |

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| Commentary: | This process is ongoing and will reflect number of engagement exercises shared on-line. | | | | | |
| Next Steps: | Ongoing | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Improving Access | Annual face-to-face meetings in each Committee area | Council Senior Team | Annual | Number of Meetings delivered | • 3 events held since May 2026 | G |
| Commentary: | This action is underway. There have been 3 events in communities across Highland since launch of the Strategy in May 2026 in Thurso, Tain and Golspie with others planned before the end of the calendar year. | | | | | |
| Next Steps: | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Improving Staff Capacity | Online training developed | CSE Team/L&D | Dec 2026 | Training completed (Y/N) | Bespoke Traineasy module designed and delivered | G |
| Commentary: | This is the first time a bespoke Participation & Engagement module has been created. Support will be required from all services to encourage staff who are involved in engagement activities to undertake the module. | | | | | |
| Next Steps: | Ongoing promotion of available training; receiving feedback for improvement etc | | | | | |
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| Building Community Capacity | Community How to Engage Guide | CSE Team | Mar 2027 | Guide published (Y/N) | Draft underway | G |

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| Commentary: | | | | | | |
| Next Steps: | | | | | | |
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| Streamlining Engagement | Engagement calendar developed | CSE Team | Mar 2027 | Calendar produced | Engagement event calendar is on front page of on-line platform | G |
| Commentary: | This is helpful to allow HC teams to see where other colleagues are having engagement events to allow them to piggy-back on the activity. This makes more sense from both a stakeholder and HC perspective as it saves time, money and reduces duplication. | | | | | |
| Next Steps: | Continue to promote this across the Council; promote the calendar to the public | | | | | |
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| Improving Involvement | Co-production pilots identified | All Clusters | Annual | No. pilot projects | Not yet started | |
| Commentary: | Work is still to commence on this action. | | | | | |
| Next Steps: | | | | | | |