

Participation and Engagement Strategy

May 2026

Foreword

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

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

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

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



1. Introduction

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

However, we need to ensure that every resident in Highland benefits from these investments – to ensure we drive out inequality and instead introduce and maximise new and exciting opportunities for all. This will include job creation, skills development, appropriate and high-quality housing, exceptional adult and childcare facilities as well as schools which deliver on every level. 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:

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

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 (SAtdSD) - [The Scottish Approach to Service Design \(SAtdSD\) - gov.scot](#)



5. Engagement = Change – The Framework for Engagement

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

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

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:

identify opportunities for community involvement in service delivery at as early a stage as possible and always prior to decisions being made	develop and publish an action plan, highlighting anticipated opportunities for involvement	actively use the appropriate level of involvement (as set out in section 5) – the Framework for Engagement
- always include Community Councils as key stakeholders - identify the relevant communities and ascertain the best way to engage with them to ensure maximum inclusivity	- actively promote the opportunity for communities to submit Participation Requests and Community Asset Transfers - identify opportunities for Participatory Resourcing	identify other potential delivery partners – whether public, private or third sector
explore options for delivery and be honest and transparent about practical limitations eg available finance, risk, statutory requirements or limitations etc	- be open to constructive challenge and genuine two-way dialogue; - continue to improve our internal training across all services to ensure engagement is carried out to the highest standards	always make feedback available to everyone who has participated. This will help to build trust and will increase understanding of decision-making
develop an engagement ‘calendar’ to identify opportunities for others to use the same event to discuss other projects etc of interest to that community.	adopt inclusive engagement methods to ensure equity of access	



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	Engagement Platform - Development of an engagement platform which will act as a 'one-stop-shop' for all of the Council's consultation and engagement 'events' and which will provide a feedback loop. - Promotion of the new platform to raise awareness and understanding and build confidence and use of the platform In Person Local Engagement - Commit to at least one annual face to face meeting in each Committee area, focused on corporate Council activity	Community Support & Engagement Team Corporate Communications Team Council Senior Team	May 2026 Ongoing 2026/27 Annual
Improving Staff Capacity	Staff Training - Development of in-house on-line training to upskill staff in engagement techniques – utilising e.g., Traineasy platform. Staff Resources - 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	Community Support & Engagement Team Learning and Development Team	December 2026

Area for Development	Action	Lead	Timescale
Building Community Capacity	Best Practice • 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.	Community Support & Engagement Team	March 2027
Streamlining engagement	Co-ordination • 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.	Community Support & Engagement Team	March 2027
Improving involvement	Co-production • Identify pilot areas and projects which could assess the Council's and communities' capacity for co-production of services.	All clusters to identify at least one opportunity annually	Annual
Monitoring	Monitoring • Develop indicators to support monitoring of the Strategy • Annual reporting against the Strategy to be considered at Communities and Place Committee annually	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](#)