

Communications and Engagement Strategy

2021-26

ACCOUNTS COMMISSION 

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Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Objectives and strategic pillars	5
3. Positioning	6
4. Communicating our strategic priorities	7
5. Promoting our work	9
6. Engaging with stakeholders	10
7. Making more of our work and expertise	12
8. Reporting and reviewing impact	13

1. Introduction

1. The Accounts Commission aims to assure the people of Scotland about the performance of local government, and to help councils and Integration Joint Boards (IJBs) improve. We seek to achieve these aims through the audit work we secure, the findings and recommendations we make, and by reporting in public.

2. Communicating and engaging effectively with the wide range of stakeholders affected by and interested in our work is crucial to supporting these objectives. This means communicating clearly, accurately and appropriately to all of our audiences and stakeholders, and demonstrating the relevance, usefulness and robustness of our work to the lives, priorities and needs of individuals, communities, organisations and decision-makers.

3. It also means effectively establishing and asserting the unique position the Accounts Commission holds in Scotland's public sector.

4. This strategy sets out how we will achieve the above by:

- supporting our core priorities through clearly and consistently communicating and amplifying our priorities
- engaging effectively with our diverse stakeholders
- promoting and disseminating the audit work we oversee
- maximising our unique blend of expertise and experience
- and monitoring and reporting on the effectiveness of our communications and the impact of our work.

5. This strategy supports and complements the [Accounts Commission Strategy: 2021-2026](#), [its work programme](#), the [Code of Audit Practice](#), and [Audit Scotland's Communications and Engagement Strategy: 2020-23](#). At the time of drafting, we are working with the Auditor General and Audit Scotland to refresh *Public Audit in Scotland*, a joint statement underpinning public audit in Scotland. We will support the updated statement through this strategy.

Stakeholders

6. A wide range of stakeholders are affected by and are interested in our work:

- Communities
- Councils and IJBs
- Councils' partners

- Scottish Parliament
- Scottish Government
- Third and voluntary sector
- Strategic scrutiny partners

7. In the past 15 years there has been a revolution in how stakeholders receive, understand and share information. The rise of social media, digital platforms and on-demand video streaming has been mirrored by a decline in the consumption of traditional media, circulation and news organisations' resources. Our audiences have dramatically changed their behaviour, as have organisations trying to reach audiences and disseminate information.

8. Our communications must reflect these changes through how and where we communicate. We will need to increasingly take an audience-focused approach in order to reach, inform and engage with our stakeholders. This means speaking to the specific priorities and concerns of these diverse audiences, and using the most appropriate language, content and channels to connect with them. We recognise the importance of ensuring easy access to our work for all of our stakeholders. By reaching our stakeholders and showing how our work directly addresses their needs, we can increase its impact.

9. Understanding our stakeholders and their priorities comes from effectively engaging through various methods and channels, to both inform our understanding and our audit work, and to increase the value and impact of our work once it is complete.

Public sector context

10. The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly increased pressure on Scotland's public services and exacerbated long-standing inequalities. Prior to the pandemic, Scotland's councils and IJBs were facing increasing demand due to inequalities, changing demographics, the ongoing impacts of the global financial crisis, and a lack of financial stability and certainty in local government.

11. In coming years, public services will have a significant role in Scotland's recovery from the pandemic and its response to the climate emergency as well as addressing these other long-standing issues. The domestic and international political context remains volatile, with the impacts of the UK leaving the European Union beginning to be felt, and continuing developments and debate over Scotland's constitutional future and its economic implications. There is also declining trust in institutions, the political process and the mainstream media.

12. Through communicating and engaging with stakeholders, we want to position ourselves as a trusted, authoritative, robust and independent expert on the issues affecting councils and IJBs and the communities they serve. We also provide assurance about how services are run and public money is spent.

2. Objectives and strategic pillars

13. The primary and overarching aim of this communications and engagement strategy is to support the [Accounts Commission's Strategy: 2021 – 2026](#).

14. Supporting this are four objectives:

- Appropriately positioning the Commission in Scotland's public sector
- Raising awareness of the key issues facing local government in Scotland
- Ensuring effective engagement and dialogue with stakeholders
- Increasing the impact of the Commission and its work to support and encourage improvement.

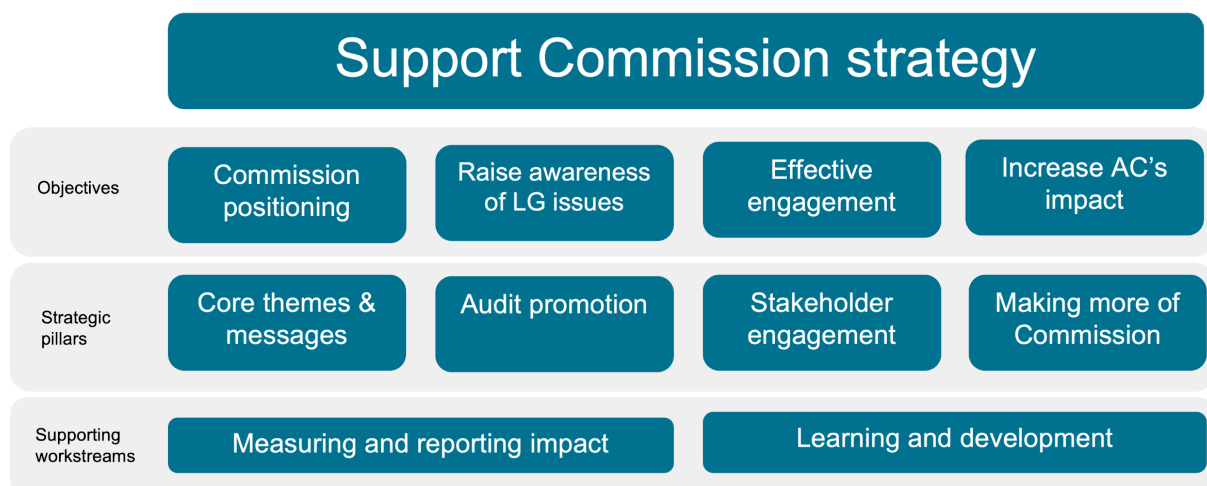
15. These are underpinned by four strategic pillars:

- Amplifying the Commission's four strategic priorities
- Promoting the Commission's audit work to stakeholders
- Planning and delivering a stakeholder engagement programme
- Making more of the Commission's expertise, experience and work

16. Audit Scotland's Communications Team and Commission Support Team will monitor the strategy's effectiveness through impact reporting and support its development through learning and development activities.

17. Exhibit 1 shows the strategy's structure.

Exhibit 1: Structure of communications and engagement strategy



3. Positioning

18. For the Commission to effectively provide assurance and to drive improvement, it needs to hold an appropriate position or strategic space in Scotland's public sector.

19. Through this strategy, we will work to achieve and consolidate our role as:

- Scotland's national body for holding local government to account
- The public body with a unique and independent overview across local government in Scotland
- An authoritative, evidence-based voice on the issues facing local government in Scotland, both as a sector and as organisations.

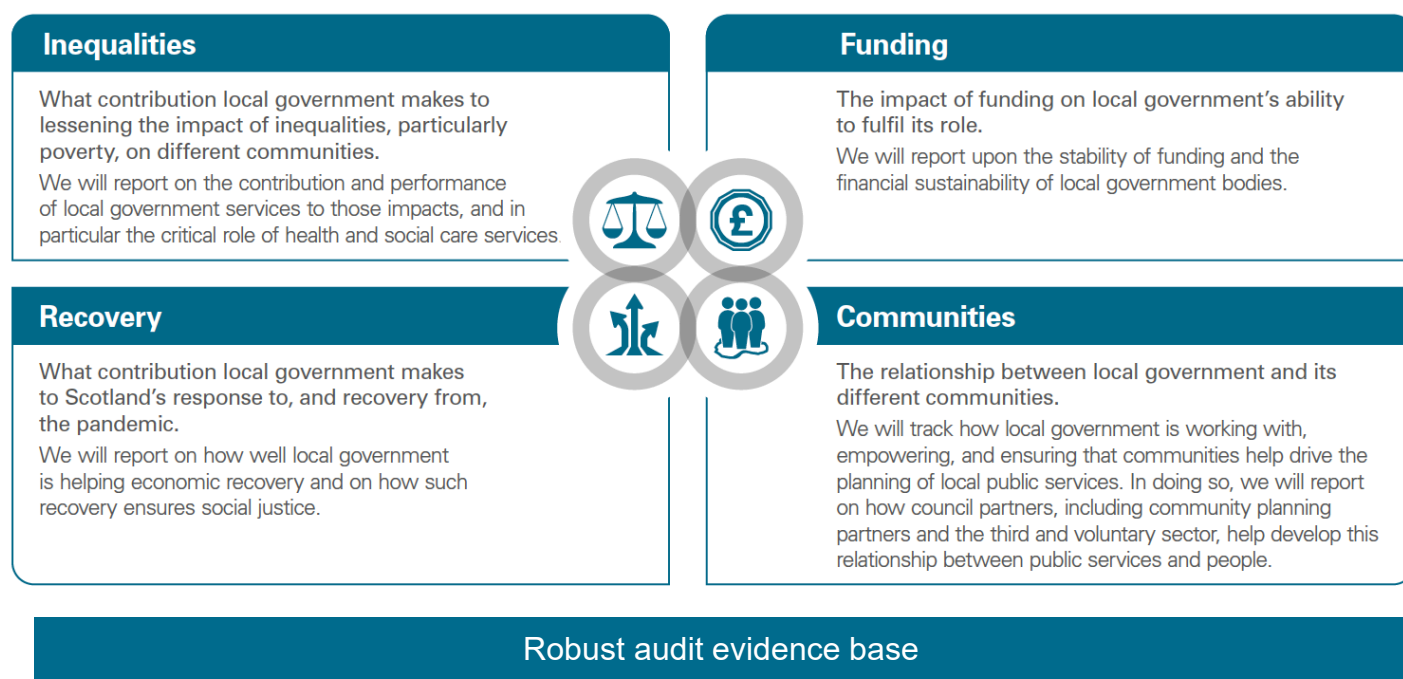
20. We will assess whether this position has been achieved, and the effectiveness of this position, through both engaging with our stakeholders and measuring and reporting on impact.

4. Communicating our strategic priorities

21. Through the duration of the strategy, we will emphasise and amplify the Commission's four strategic priorities (Exhibit 2):

- Inequalities
- Finance and Funding
- Recovery from Covid-19
- Communities

Exhibit 2: Accounts Commission strategic priorities 2021-26



22. We will support the communication of these priorities through themes of:

- our impartiality and independence
- our unique expertise and position across all of local government
- the robustness of the evidence base our conclusions, findings and views.

Delivery

23. We will deliver this through two methods. The first is through specific, bespoke activities that focus on our strategic priorities (themes). These include:

- Producing specific audit outputs on a core theme.
- Interviews on core themes.
- Blogs
- Speaking at conferences and seminars on the core themes.

An example of how this would work in practice is extending the impact and ‘life’ of the joint report on educational outcomes. For example, the Commission recently discussed the [*Improving outcomes for young people through school education*](#) performance audit at the [Scottish Learning Festival](#) and will explore findings and recommendations of the same report with local education leaders, through a [joint event](#) with the Improvement Service.

24. The second approach is through leveraging other opportunities to highlight and amplify the themes. These include:

- Weaving messaging into our promotion and joint outputs
- Basing case studies for audit outputs on the core themes
- Using external and internal events to amplify the themes
- Emphasising core themes in media comment on related issues.

Recent examples of this include the news release for [East Dunbartonshire Council](#) and the joint update on [community empowerment](#). Both amplified the Commission’s core themes.

5. Promoting our work

25. We will support the dissemination and impact of our audit work through targeted promotion and engagement.

26. This will be based on the specific aims and key stakeholders for each audit. These considerations will drive the messaging, outputs, channels, targets and measurements used in the promotion of audits.

Delivery

27. We will take a phased approach to the promotion of our work. The phases are:

- Scoping
- Preparation
- Promotion
- Post-publication
- Evaluation

28. These phases will run simultaneously with planning and drafting work. Specific promotion and post publication activities will depend on the type and theme of each report. For each report we will develop an action plan to determine the priorities for each phase and the activities we will undertake.

6. Engaging with stakeholders

29. Engaging effectively with stakeholders will mean our priorities, work programme and audits are better informed, relevant and targeted. It also supports the impact of our work by ensuring service users, service deliverers and decision-makers receive and act on our findings and recommendations.

30. Our approach to engaging with all stakeholders needs to reflect the unique needs, priorities and context of each, and support our strategic priorities. To achieve this, we will engage with all stakeholders based on two core questions:

- What are their priorities?
- How can we address and reflect those?

31. This will require identifying how our audiences each receive and consume information, the language and terms they use, the organisations and influencers they follow – be that other public bodies, charities and media and social media outlets – and the types of outputs that most effectively communicate with them. We will engage with stakeholders in both formal and informal settings.

32. Detailed below are our main stakeholders. We will develop an action plan to determine the priorities for each stakeholder group, our 'offer' for each group and the activities we will undertake.

Stakeholder groups:

- Citizens and communities
- Councils and IJBs
- Scottish Parliament
- Scottish Government
- Third and voluntary sectors
- Councils' community planning partners
- Our strategic scrutiny partners

33. An example response and action plan for engaging with citizens and communities is below:

Stakeholder	Example priorities	Our 'offer'	Example activities
Citizens and communities	<p>How good are my council or IJB's services?</p> <p>Does my council/IJB offer good value?</p> <p>Does it need to improve and if so, where?</p>	<p>Reflecting communities' and service users' experiences</p> <p>Promoting community engagement and citizens' say in shaping services and localities</p> <p>Independent scrutiny of service quality, provision, planning</p> <p>Financial management and governance</p>	<p>Newsletters</p> <p>Roundtables</p> <p>Media relations</p> <p>Social media targeting</p> <p>Social media</p> <p>Outreach events</p> <p>Opinion surveys</p> <p>Blogs and videos</p> <p>Market research</p>

7. Making more of our work and expertise

34. We will make more of our diverse expertise and experiences, and its unique position overseeing all of local government in Scotland. This will help us position our work as authoritative, impartial and independent, as well as better connecting with audiences – particularly in communities – and thus better demonstrate our relevance to their lives and experiences of public services.

35. By making more of our work and expertise, we can help achieve more impact and more value for the public money funding our operations.

36. We propose five key strands in achieving this:

- Emphasising the human face of Commission
- Showcasing expertise
- Extending the life of audits
- Maximising existing work
- Building partnerships

37. We will develop an action plan, which will detail the purpose of each strand and its supporting activities. An example of this for ‘emphasising the human face of the Commission’ is below.

Strand	Purpose	Activities	Supporting plans
Emphasising the human face of Commission	Better connect with stakeholders and reduce barriers to engagement with an ‘institution’	Showcase Commission members Emphasise impact of work and issues on people and communities Interact with communities more	Member promotion schedule Audit promotion plans Stakeholder engagement programme

8. Reporting and reviewing impact

38. We will measure and report on the impact of our work regularly to assess what influence it is having, whether it is helping achieve our aims and priorities, and how we and our work are perceived.

39. As part of this, we will consider our impact at a macro level, asking:

- What is the overall impact of the Commission?
- Are we achieving our goals and our priorities?
- How do our key stakeholders view us and our work?
- Are we in the strategic positions we aim to occupy?
- Are we seen as independent, relevant, robust and value for money?

40. We will continue to explore opportunities to apply tools such as annual opinion surveys and targeted feedback with key stakeholders.

41. We will also monitor and report on the impact of our individual audits and outputs, using agreed performance indicators for each. For example:

- What reach did the output achieve?
- How well disseminated were our key messages?
- How did key stakeholders respond and how did communities engage with our work?
- Have our findings and recommendations been acted on, and what impact is that having on services?

42. It is worth noting that specific aims for specific outputs will mean focusing on the right indicators for that output. For example, if a key aim is wide dissemination, we will focus on indicators such as volume and reach of media coverage and reach of social media. If it is engagement with targeted audiences, we will focus on indicators such as reactive statements, sentiment and social media engagement.

43. We will ensure that our approach informs and is consistent with Audit Scotland's approach to measuring and reporting impact.

44. We will use all our learning from our impact reporting to develop and improve our approaches, linked to the Commission's own development needs.