

# Communications & Engagement Strategy

2020-23



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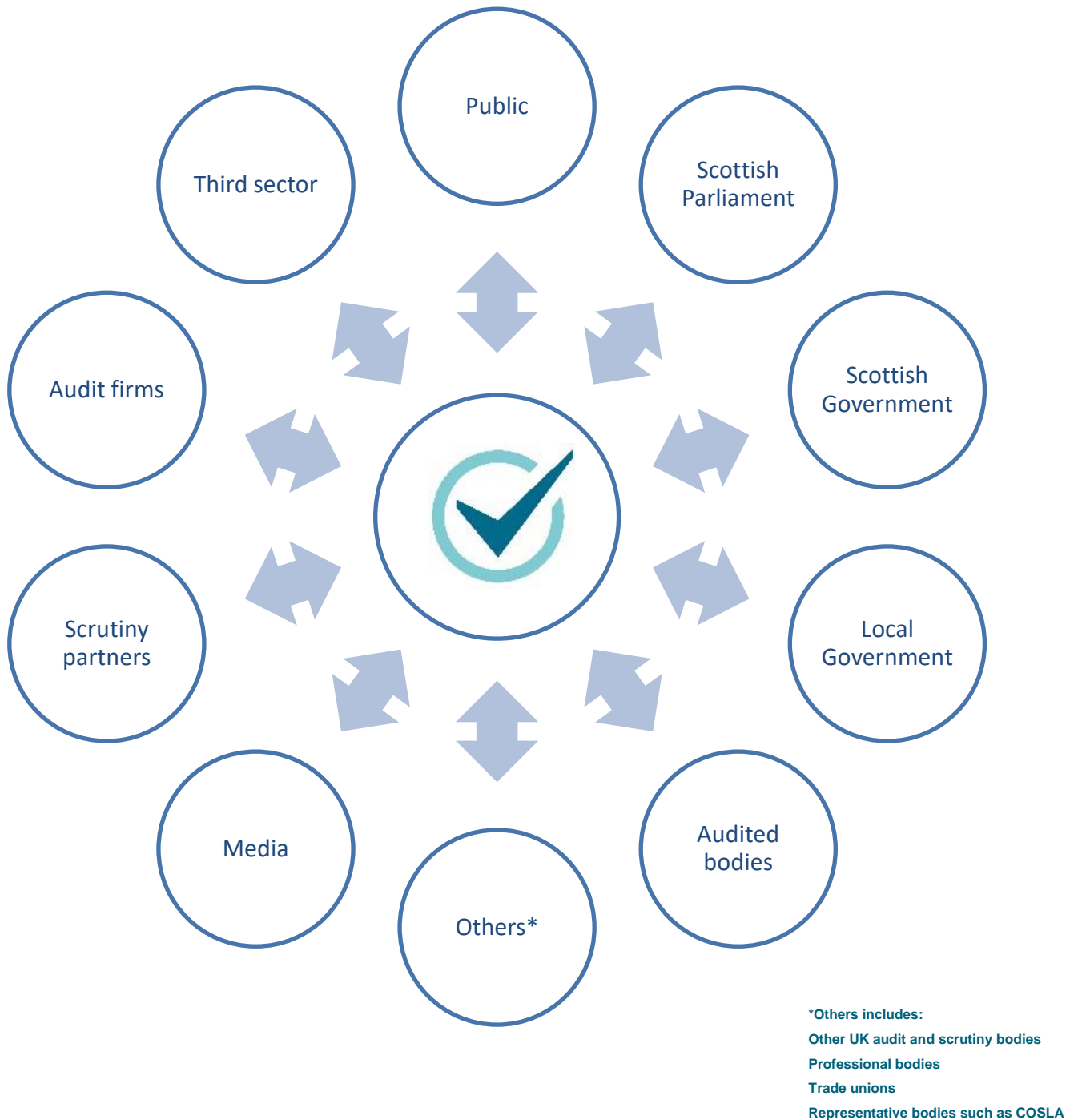
# Introduction

1. Audit Scotland has a vision to be a world-class audit organisation that improves the use of public money. Communicating and engaging effectively with the wide range of stakeholders affected by and interested in our work is key to supporting this overarching goal.
2. This means communicating our audit work in a clear, accurate and appropriate way to our diverse audiences, and having effective and collaborative conversations with stakeholders.
3. We report on our work in public through a wide range of products, including annual audit reports, performance audit and Best Value reports for Auditor General and Accounts Commission, and briefings on matters of public interest.
4. Effective communications and engagement help us:
  - focus on the right priorities
  - ensure our work has an impact
  - safeguard our independence and reputation.
5. To achieve this, we need to ensure we are reaching the people affected by our work and helping them understand and benefit from it, as well as using what they tell us to inform what we do and how we do it. We can increase our impact by making more of the range of work we do and the breadth of our view of public services in Scotland.
6. Our reputation for independent, evidence-based and robust audit, and the reputation of public audit more widely, is crucial to our work being received, trusted and acted on. Thus, our communications and engagement need to emphasise, position and reinforce the strengths of the Scottish model of public audit, and our independence, reliability and quality.
7. This strategy sets out our current approach to achieving the above as well as the developments we will make over the period of the strategy to enhance our positioning, reputation and resonance, and to respond to the dynamic environment in which we operate.
8. This strategy complements Public Audit in Scotland, a joint statement underpinning public audit in Scotland, and our 2019-22 Corporate Plan. The Accounts Commission has its own strategy, which this document supports. At the time of drafting, we are developing a new Code of Audit Practice for 2020 to 2025. This strategy has been drafted alongside the new code.

## Our stakeholders

9. Audit Scotland exists to support the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission. This strategy describes how we will deliver communications and engagement on their behalf, and our organisational corporate and internal communications requirements.
10. As well as the AGS, Accounts Commission and Audit Scotland colleagues, we have a wide range of stakeholders across Scottish life (see Exhibit One).

- 11. The 'Public' represents the people who use, work for and pay for Scotland's public services. Key to effectively communicating and engaging with them is recognising that they comprise diverse, heterogenous audiences that communicate in different ways.



**Exhibit One: Audit Scotland's external stakeholders**

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## The communications and media environment

12. The past decade has seen significant changes in how people receive, understand and share information. The emergence and rise to pre-eminence of social media, digital platforms and on-demand video streaming has altered the behaviour of individuals and communities, as well as how organisations reach audiences and disseminate information. Audit Scotland has adapted and developed our communications approaches in response, and we will need to continue to do so as technology and online communication platforms evolve.
13. Reading, listening and viewing of traditional media have declined. The number of professional journalists has reduced substantially, as has the time available for media to find, research and produce informed work. Our communications must provide journalists with relevant, reliable and accessible information in order to maximise coverage.
14. People increasingly either search for or receive news limited to their active range of interests and the issues that matter to them. At the same time, the ability of media outlets to produce and disseminate 'public interest' news has diminished. To ensure people understand how their public service are performing, and how our work can benefit them, we need to ensure our messages resonate with the issues of importance to them.
15. The proliferation of digital communications platforms and smartphone usage has led to people consuming information in short, simple and increasingly visual forms, with growing demand for interactive content they can tailor to their own interests and needs. We will need to continue developing our approach to visual communications, data interpretation and interactivity.

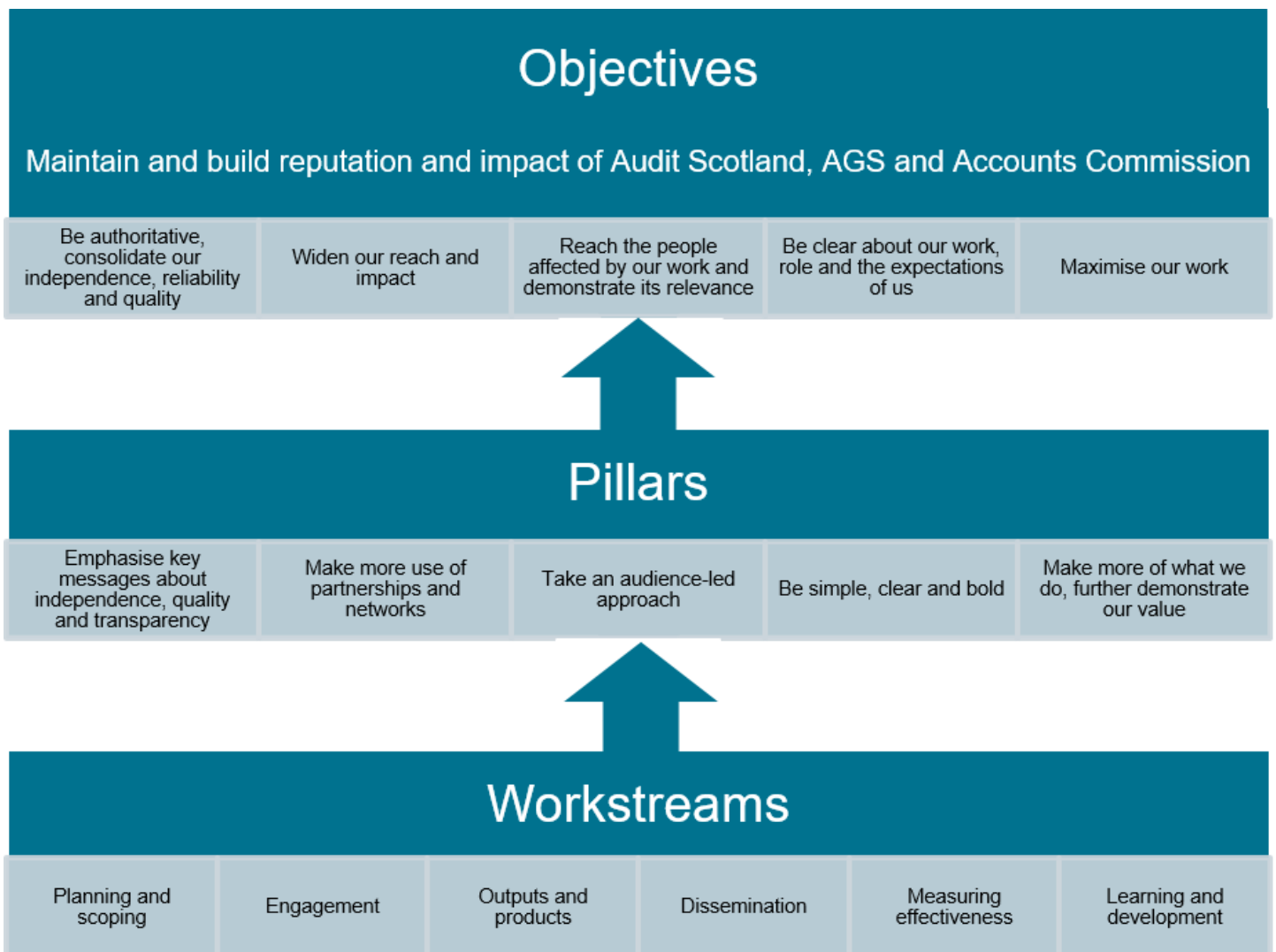
## The political and public service context

16. Public services face increasing demand and financial pressure. Scotland also has significant new financial powers, a new fiscal framework, and social security powers affecting a wide range of people, including the most vulnerable. There is an opportunity for Audit Scotland to demonstrate its ability to explain this context to service users and inform decision-making.
17. The domestic and international political environment has been and continues to be volatile, following the 2016 vote to leave the European Union and the continuing debate over Scotland's constitutional future. Research has shown declining trust in institutions, the political process and the media. Our communications and engagement can position Audit Scotland as an independent source of reliable information and a trusted guide and commentator.
18. The audit industry has also faced reputational pressures due to high profile corporate issues and subsequent reviews. Our communications should emphasise the strength and robustness of Scotland's public audit model, and our independence, reliability, integrity and quality.

# Strategic approach

## Objectives and strategic pillars

- 19. There are five overarching objectives of the Communications and Engagement Strategy 2020-23, aimed at addressing the issues and context discussed in the introduction. These are supported by five 'pillars' of our strategic approach to communications and engagement.
- 20. Exhibit Two shows our objectives, pillars and supporting workstreams. More explanation about each pillar follows.



**Exhibit Two: Objectives, strategic pillars and workstreams**

## Emphasise key messages about independence, quality and transparency

21. We will weave core corporate messaging about our independence, reliability and high quality throughout our communications and engagement activities, both proactively and reactively.
22. We will showcase the Scottish model of public audit when appropriate and through a variety of mediums, and promote the new Code of Audit Practice. We will emphasise its safeguards for independence and objectivity, strengthening Audit Scotland's positioning and value.
23. We will continue to be open and transparent in all we do, modelling the behaviours and reputation that we seek to promote. We will also do more to explain our role and work to increase clarity, manage stakeholders' expectations and emphasise our value and benefit to public bodies and service users.

## Make more use of partnerships and networks

24. We can make more of other organisations' expertise and experience to help us better understand the subjects we audit and our audiences. This will mean making more of existing relationships and networks, and building new ones. This will help prioritise and focus our work so it addresses the salient issues, increasing its value and impact and supporting our position as an authoritative and trusted commentator.
25. Many niche audiences already engage with other organisations but are unlikely to engage with an audit institution. Partners can help us disseminate our messages and outputs, increasing our reach and build our authority with those audiences through our association with bodies they already trust.
26. This will include learning from the third sector about 'hard-to-reach' and vulnerable audiences. This will increase our internal skills and capacity, and help us reach the people most affected by the services we audit but least likely to engage with them or us.

## Take an audience-led approach

27. We will more systematically identify the specific audiences for our audits. From this we can research, engage with and better understand them in order to ensure our work covers the relevant issues, we can communicate them effectively and we maximise our impact.
28. This includes identifying when there is a 'general' audience or a niche or specific audience who require a more bespoke approach. This would include tailored outputs, aligning our messages with the audience's issues of interest and disseminating via the channels they already use. This will help us widen our impact and to reach people who are affected by our work and the issues we cover but may not otherwise engage with us.
29. We will emphasise quality over quantity, allocating resources to bespoke approaches only when it will achieve a clear and significant impact. In our planning and our engagement, we will be clear in the responses and reactions we seek, in order to increase impact.

## Be simple, clear and bold

30. Simple, clear and unambiguous messages and language will help cut through the considerable 'noise' in the wider environment and engage audiences who have competing demands for their attention. Clarity about the key issues and expected responses could reinforce our reputation for being authoritative and straight-forward, and manage expectations.
31. We will be bold and creative, creating new products and approaches to better reach audiences and reinforce our findings and messages. We have done much work recently in developing our design, animation and video approaches; as technology develops and audience behaviours change, we will need to continue to adapt and innovate in order to continue reaching people and having impact, as well as maintaining our reputation for quality. Part of innovation is accepting that some experiments may not work. We will review all projects for lessons learned.
32. To be clear, authoritative and reliable, our voice needs to be human and authentic. This includes our language, and using more of our colleagues as faces of the organisation. A more human connection will build engagement and trust and help showcase our colleagues' skills, knowledge and commitment. This will help our impact and our positioning.

## Maximise our work

33. Every year we carry out audits of about 220 public bodies and produce around 800 audit reports, more than 200 risk assessments and 20 sector overview, performance audit and Best Value assurance reports.
34. We will work to extend the life of our audits beyond publication and initial publicity to increase their reach and potential impact. We will also show the range of our work and expertise to further demonstrate our value and promote better understanding of our role and work.
35. Audit provides assurance about good performance as well as highlighting areas for improvement. In order to promote better understanding of our work and to provide value to the Scottish public and decision-makers, we will promote our annual audit work more systematically and widely and share best practice across the public sector.
36. To reach the appropriate stakeholders and audiences and disseminate our work, we will engage more widely and develop new approaches to engagement. This includes being clearer with people about how our work can benefit them, to show our value, maximise impact, reach the people affected by the issues we investigate, and consolidate our reputation for valuable, high quality audit.



# Implementation

37. This strategy is supported by an activation plan detailing actions, roles and responsibilities and timescales for implementation and monitoring. These are categorised into the six supporting workstreams outlined in Exhibit Two (page 6). Key actions in each workstream are listed below.

## Planning and scoping

38. Introduce earlier and more comprehensive multi-disciplinary communications planning on both the annual audit and performance audit programmes. This is to aid audience identification and analysis, development of outputs and strategies for individual audits, and timelines and roles.
39. Review our communications function to ensure that it is appropriately resourced and structured, and improve the overarching coordination of communications projects and strands.

## Engagement

40. Continue our current stakeholder engagement programmes, including supporting and developing Parliamentary engagement and the Accounts Commission's programme.
41. Make more use of existing networks and widen our engagement to capture more organisations and audiences that are either affected by our work or working with those who are. This includes consulting more closely with the third sector.

## Outputs and products

42. Work across the organisation to review and develop our products and messaging, including working with audiences when appropriate to advise and co-create in production.
43. Significantly develop our infographic, video, animation, audio and digital content. Simplify and, where appropriate, restructure, redesign and replace core products to make it easier to digest and understand our messages.

## Dissemination

44. Develop our dissemination methods to be more flexible, up-to-date and audience-appropriate, including taking a more case-by-case approach and lengthening the timeframes of our publicity and marketing activities for audits. Weave core corporate messaging through our work where appropriate.
45. Maintain an effective presence on the main social media platforms. Review the effectiveness of our social media approach and identify where we can improve.

## Measuring effectiveness

46. Continue our current monitoring processes, including our weekly correspondence reports, monthly reports to Management Team and quarterly performance reporting, as well as impact reports and project reviews.
47. Further develop our monitoring, including considering whether new measures or workstreams are needed, whether to widen our external engagement, and change expectations and understanding about what constitutes impact and good or poor performance.

## Learning and development

48. Review our skills and experience to ensure we have the resources and skill-mix required, and to prioritise our L&D activities to meet current and future demands.
49. Work across the organisation to identify the L&D needs within other business groups to support the delivery of this strategy. This includes the Communications team leading on delivering and supporting L&D in other business groups.