

Łyaa Gijih Nizii Nihts'an Tr'ahahtsyaa Ts'at... Gwiintl'oh Gwiinzii Tr'igiheekhyaa... Nihjih Kheh Ts'o'

"We will exchange good words and have a strong back and forth conversation together."

Vuntut Gwitchin Government Communications Plan 2021-2023

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Produced by Castlemain on behalf of the Vuntut Gwitchin Government

*"Many of our people are dreaming of being on the mountains
and on the land with their grandparents.
Through communications we can deliver that connection."*

— VGFN Citizen



Vuntut Gwitchin Government

Table of Contents

3	Part 1. Introduction
4	Part 2. Approach
4	Part 3. Gwich'in Guiding Principles
6	Part 4. Audiences
9	Part 5. Key Messages
10	Part 6. Communications Objectives, Priority Activities and Measurable Outcomes
13	Part 7. Communication Tools and Tactics
15	Appendix 1. What We Heard

Part 1. Introduction

Łyaa Ginjih Nizii Nihts'an Tr'ahahtsyaa Ts'at... Gwiintl'oh Gwiinzii Tr'igiheekhyaa... Nihjih Kheh Ts'o' (Vuntut Gwitchin Government Communications Plan 2021-2023) was prepared through an inclusive and collaborative approach based on direct engagement with Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation (VGFN) Citizens and Vuntut Gwitchin Government staff and leadership.

Łyaa Ginjih Nizii Nihts'an Tr'ahahtsyaa Ts'at... Gwiintl'oh Gwiinzii Tr'igiheekhyaa... Nihjih Kheh Ts'o' ("the Plan") Plan takes guidance from the *Vuntut Gwitchin Strategic Plan 2020-2025*, which sets a pathway for Vuntut Gwitchin Government (VGG) to achieve long-term organizational resilience.

The Plan specifically addresses VGG's commitment to communicate internally and externally using a fair, balanced and accurate voice in our efforts toward good governance. This includes the implementation of our agreements; the revitalization of our culture, language and traditions; the empowering of our Youth and Elders; the delivery of our programs, services and training, and our exploration of new processes and tools for improved engagement and collaboration.

The plan is not meant to be an exhaustive list of activities VGG should undertake to improve communications, but rather a snapshot of priorities distilled from internal and community feedback that will guide VGG in developing a workplan designed to achieve the Plan's objectives.



Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation Citizens Irwin Linklater and Jocelyn Benjamin at Dàadzàii Vàn Park.
Photo by Shirleen Smith

Part 2. Approach

In developing the Communications Plan, existing practices were explored, including how VGG communicates with Citizens, how VGG communicates internally and how VGG communicates with external audiences. In five workshops with approximately 30 participants, including Council, directors, managers and staff, participants shared their opinions about past and ongoing communications practices; the Youth Council, in a separate workshop, explored how to amplify young voices.

In addition, between May 13 to June 7, 2021, a survey that was made available online and in printed form, collected feedback from VGG staff, from Citizens during the 2021 Vadzaih Choo Drin celebrations in Old Crow and in Whitehorse at an open house event. Heritage staff were also asked to provide specific guidance on how the Gwich'in language, culture and traditions might benefit and be incorporated into both internal and external communications strategies.

Council relayed the following as important principles to guide the development of the communications plan:

- VGG belongs to our VGFN Citizens; government communications should reflect this relationship and aim to build trust in the government.
- VGG must be attentive to the different communications needs of its VGFN Citizens and responsive to the ways they consume information.
- VGG recognizes that communication is a two-way conversation and VGG will create interactive opportunities for VGFN Citizens to dialogue with their government.

Part 3. Gwich'in Guiding Principles

Heritage staff at the John Tizya Centre shed light on how Gwich'in values and teachings—all of which can be found in Nits'oo Diik'itr'iindhat—How We Were Raised can help guide VGG in its internal and external communications.

Principle ~ Kindness and Understanding

For Gwich'in, communication should come from a place of kindness, understanding and with the intention of doing things 'in a good way.' Elders emphasize that being a good listener is one of the most important character traits to develop, especially at an early age.

It's important to listen to people around you. What you learn from them, you carry it on, and you pass it on to other people.

—Marvin Frost Sr.

Application to internal and external communications:

- All communications should be clear and easy to understand. Avoid corporate jargon and terms that might not be familiar to people who don't have experience working in a specific field.
- When writing internal and external communications, tone should always be neutral or positive.
- Listen to what Citizens are asking and do your best to answer their questions. If the question is unclear, ask if it can be repeated or explained differently. If you don't know the answer, do your best to find out or refer them to someone who can help.
- When communicating internally or externally, do so in a good way, in other words, a way that is respectful, understanding and professional.

Principle ~ Collaboration

Gwich'in have always had to work together to get things done. They had to find ways to get along even in times of distress or when relationships were difficult. They would have to work together.

Application to internal and external communications:

- Communications is a shared responsibility; Chief and Council, directors, managers and staff should create and use processes for sharing information internally.
- Internal communications can be strengthened by providing regular, relevant updates to all staff.
- When launching a new project, consider ways that VGG can provide key messages internally, to other staff, and to Citizens.
- Communications staff should always work with the internal subject experts on any project.

Principle ~ Consensus Building

Traditionally there would be a lot of discussion among community leaders in order to build a consensus before making a decision. In the old days, when any community member spoke up in disagreement, everyone respected their input and tried to come to a resolution.

Even the children, they respected the children too those days. And they obeyed each other. When somebody did something out of place, when another man told him not to do that, right there they stop doing it, you know, in those days. Really, the people obeyed each other those days.

—Charlie Peter Charlie

Application to internal and external communications:

- When receiving feedback from VGFN Citizens, be open to a diversity of perspectives and to receiving opinions that may not be ones you expected.

Principle ~ Community Involvement

In *Nits'oo Diik'irt'iindhat*, Elder Charlie Peter Charlie shares a story about how leaders frequently engaged with the community:

Those days nearly every day they had just like meeting. Whoever is the leader, every day in the evening, all the people gathered. In the daytime they hunted and in the evening they came home. After their meal, whoever is the people's leader, he would go outdoors and yell out. He would speak to all the people outside, just like a meeting. Every day was like that.

—Charlie Peter Charlie

Application to internal and external communications:

- Communication methods and practices should build trust and reflect the relationship Citizens want to have with their government.
- Communication should be frequent and targeted.

Part 4. Audiences

When communicating internally or externally, it is important for VGG to take into account the different perspectives of its various audiences. Successfully engaging different audiences will often require distinct messages, tools and tactics.

VGFN Citizens in Old Crow (and Old Crow residents)

Key motivators to interact with VGG:

- Are proud of their Gwich'in language, culture, and traditional knowledge
- Want updates on jobs, training and economic development opportunities
- Want to stay informed on environmental impacts to land and wildlife; want to be aware of VGG health care and services
- Have family in leadership and government

Hesitations in choosing to interact with VGG:

- May prefer more plain language information
- May not be aware of government policies and programs
- May need person-centered forms of communications
- May not have access to technology or adequate internet
- May be busy or feel a lack of trust

VGFN Citizens in Whitehorse

Key motivators to interact with VGG:

- Grew up in their community and want to stay connected with government initiatives
- May not have grown up in Old Crow but want to stay connected with their Nation
- Are proud of their Gwich'in language, culture, and traditional knowledge
- Want to hear about the success of VGG
- Want updates on jobs, training and economic development opportunities
- Want to stay informed on environmental impacts to land and wildlife; want to be aware of VGG health care and services
- Have family in leadership and government

Hesitations in choosing to interact with VGG:

- Live outside of Old Crow
- Have few ways of getting information in person
- Are not always directly impacted by issues in Old Crow
- May not have access to plain language information
- May not be aware of government policies and programs
- May not have access to technology or adequate internet
- May be busy or feel a lack of trust

VGFN Citizens living in BC, Alaska and elsewhere

Key motivators to interact with VGG:

- Want to stay connected with government initiatives
- Are proud of their Gwich'in language, culture, and traditional knowledge
- Want to hear about the success of VGG, VGFN, and VGFN Citizens
- Want updates on jobs, training and economic development opportunities
- Want to stay informed on environmental impacts to land and wildlife

Hesitations in choosing to interact with VGG:

- May have moved away from Old Crow and Whitehorse
- May have no way of getting information in-person, unless they are visiting Whitehorse or Old Crow
- May not be directly impacted by issues in community
- May not have access to plain language information
- May not be aware of government policies and programs
- May not have access to technology or internet
- May be busy or feel a lack of trust

VGG Council, directors, managers and staff in Old Crow and Whitehorse

Key motivators to interact with VGG:

- May feel loyalty after working for VGFN and/or VGG for many years
- Want to protect VGFN Citizens' rights and freedoms
- Are working for a future where VGFN is completely self-reliant/self-sustainable
- Want to add value to the experiences of their community

Hesitations in choosing to interact with VGG:

- May not be VGFN Citizens
- May be located outside of Old Crow
- May not be receiving information relevant to their department, programs or policies
- May lack internal capacity
- May disagree with decisions made in community or by leadership

External Audiences

Who?

- Yukon First Nations
- Gwich'in Nations in NWT and Alaska
- Northern communities
- Partners: industry, governments, non-profits
- General public and Media

Key motivators to interact with VGG:

- May be drawn to success stories coming out of VGFN and/or VGG
- May want to hear about partnership opportunities
- May be Gwich'in from Alaska or NWT
- May be interested in the environmental and economic development
- May be looking to support VGFN's goals
- May have relationships with VGFN Citizens, leadership and/or VGG government

Hesitations in choosing to interact with VGG:

- May lack information on economic and environmental development
- May have difficulty travelling to Old Crow
- May not know who to contact or communicate with
- May not know where to access information on government programs, policies and projects

Part 5. Key Messages

Key messages convey VGG's guiding principles as they relate to specific programs, projects, campaigns and initiatives.

For Citizens in Old Crow

Overarching Message:

- Government belongs to the people.
- This is your government—it's your right to be informed.

Specific Messages:

- You are the General Assembly and you define government priorities through Resolutions.
- Council provides the leadership necessary to direct government to fulfill your Resolutions.
- Your government is here to support and inform you, or to help you find the support and information you need.

For Citizens outside of Old Crow

Overarching Message:

- Government belongs to the people—VGG is your government regardless of where you live.

Specific Messages:

- You live outside VGFN settlement land, but you are invested in your government and its future for the sake of your community.
- You are connected and engaged with VGFN through a variety of channels.
- Your engagement strengthens VGFN.

For Internal Audiences

Overarching Message:

- We are a team that is most successful when working collaboratively and with Citizens.

Specific Messages:

- We are committed to transparency.
- We will communicate internally because it strengthens the programs, projects, services and strategies of our government.

For External Audiences

Overarching Message:

- Our strength comes from the unity of our government and our Citizens.

Specific Messages:

- VGG's priority is to improve the quality of life of our Citizens.
- VGG will work collaboratively with partners and governments to improve the lives of our Citizens.

Part 6. Communications Objectives, Priority Activities and Measurable Outcomes

The following section outlines five objective, priority activities associated with each goal, and measurable outcomes so that Vuntut Gwitchin Government (VGG) can monitor and evaluate activities to help ensure they advance the goals.

Objective 1. Gwich'in language and culture is featured prominently in VGG internal and external communications.

Priority Activity 1.1 ~ Determine best practices for translating communications into Gwich'in and vice versa.

Priority Activity 1.2 ~ Develop a simple guiding document for all staff to learn best practices when incorporating Gwich'in language and culture in their work.

Priority Activity 1.3 ~ Create opportunities for VGG staff to participate in Gwich'in language training so that they can become comfortable using Gwich'in language on the job.

Priority Activity 1.4 ~ Collaborate with VGG Heritage staff regularly to collaborate on communications materials and campaigns.

Priority Activity 1.5 ~ Work with the VGG Heritage Committee to develop a process for working with Elders and Gwich'in language speakers to ensure that Gwich'in language, culture and values are featured prominently in VGG internal and external communications activities.

Measurable Outcomes:

- Gwich'in is featured prominently in all VGG communications materials.
- VGG staff are engaged in best practices and processes for incorporating Gwich'in in their work.
- VGG staff have developed a Gwich'in vocabulary.
- VGFN Citizens are speaking more Gwich'in as a result of VGG internal and external communications activities.

Objective 2. Citizens are engaged in VGG planning and activities.

Priority Activity 2.1 ~ Collaborate with VGG leadership and staff to ensure accurate, plain language information and stories about VGG programs, services and initiatives is communicated to audiences regularly through a variety of ways, including, web, radio, print, photo, video and in person communications.

Priority Activity 2.2 ~ Identify opportunities for Citizen-led projects or events such as a storytelling festival, an art market or a mural project.

Priority Activity 2.3 ~ Create a new, user-friendly website that provides Citizens with easy access to services and forms, as well as libraries of archival information, such as reports, maps, policies and photographs.

Priority Activity 2.4 ~ Create a plan to resource the Crow FM radio station so that Citizens can anticipate regular programming focused on current events, youth culture, language and storytelling, or leadership updates.

Priority Activity 2.5 ~ Develop a communications activity plan for every project, program or initiative that includes a checklist of possible communications activities and materials, such as open houses, surveys, news releases, posters, flyers, videos and social media messaging.

Priority Activity 2.6 ~ Build and nurture relationships with journalists and media outlets to maintain interest in VGG projects and initiatives; this will lead to more and higher-quality stories that will serve to inform Citizens as it informs the general public.

Measurable Outcomes:

- Citizens feel informed and engaged in VGG activities
- Less misinformation is circulated
- Citizens have better access to services
- Citizens become accustomed to regular updates

Objective 3. Invest resources to improve, replace or create processes to streamline VGG internal communications and foster a culture of learning and collaboration among staff.

Priority Activity 3.1 ~ Conduct a systems audit to develop an inventory of existing communications processes and products and engage staff to determine what has worked or not in the past.

Priority Activity 3.2 ~ Create and/or update templates for communications materials such as news releases, posters, letterhead and reports.

Priority Activity 3.3 ~ Formalize internal processes for the development, approval and distribution of external VGG communications.

Priority Activity 3.4 ~ Hold regular all-staff meetings with set agendas, project updates and opportunities for staff participation.

Priority Activity 3.5 ~ Develop VGG branding and style guides to maintain consistency and professionalism in VGG messaging and visual identity.

Priority Activity 3.6 ~ Develop a schedule for major projects that can be shared between VGG staff.

Priority Activity 3.7 ~ Develop relationship building and knowledge sharing opportunities, such as:

- Staff gatherings to connect and debrief, communications training for all staff
- Incorporating outdoor activities to regular work activities to increase staff productivity (ie. host a staff meeting outside)

Measurable Outcomes:

- Staff collaboration across portfolios increases and is normalized.
- Internal communications processes keep staff well informed.
- Staff feel engaged and invested in their work and other VGG projects.
- Engagement opportunities are clear, understood, and staff participation increases
- Increased knowledge of VGG initiatives and interdepartmental collaboration

Objective 4. Create interactive opportunities for VGFN Citizens to engage with their government, both online and in person.

Priority Activity 4.1 ~ Develop transparent processes for communicating effectively with different external audiences, including Citizens in Old Crow, Citizens in Whitehorse or elsewhere, and the general public in Yukon, or nationally.

Priority Activity 4.2 ~ Develop community meeting protocols focused on promoting respectful, focused dialogue at public gatherings, including the General Assembly.

Priority Activity 4.3 ~ Develop a method in which all VGG policies, procedures, laws and resolutions are made accessible to Citizens.

Priority Activity 4.4 ~ Work with the Youth and Elders Councils to create opportunities for them to engage with the general public, the community, with Council and with staff.

Measurable Outcomes:

- There is wide interest and participation among Citizens in VGG activities.
- Citizens are engaged and bring their own ideas to government.
- Citizens are knowledgeable about their government and feel inspired to get involved.

Part 7. Communication Tools and Tactics

This is not an exhaustive inventory of tools but a general list of common tools that can be used to accomplish some VGG's communications goals.

Social Media

According to the VGFN Citizen 2021 Communications Survey, the most popular source for information about VGG is Facebook. Facebook page is a source for updates, news, and announcements and the page should be used to make information timely and accessible for many VGFN Citizens.

For key announcements and updates, Facebook should be combined with other tools (e.g., posters and flyers) because the reach of a Facebook post is unpredictable. While VGG strives towards transparent, timely communication with its VGFN Citizens, there may be circumstances when information needs to be kept private between VGG and VGFN Citizens. In these situations, information should not be posted on Facebook but distributed through other channels.

Website

A new VGG website can host detailed information about VGG programs, events and opportunities, as well as the latest announcements, news articles and updated policies can be made available. The website could also be used to host a library of archived minutes of meetings, General Assemblies and historical photographs.

A frequently updated website, curated with intention will enhance VGG's transparency.

Flyers and Posters

Visually appealing flyers and posters can be used at the community level to engage Citizens living in Old Crow with news of VGG events, elections, open houses, job opportunities or new programs.

The same visuals can be duplicated for use on Facebook page and on the VGG website.

Canvassing or Mail-Outs

Going door-to-door to share information with Citizens in Old Crow residents, also known as canvassing, enables VGG to reach people directly. Canvassing allows for conversation and sharing of reading materials. Similarly, mailing the information to all VGFN Citizens or all Old Crow residents ensures that everyone receives the same information.

Open Houses

Community open houses allow VGG to share information with VGFN Citizens in a less formal way. VGFN Citizens can drop in during the hours of the open house, review information VGG has displayed about an issue or proposed project, ask questions to the hosts and offer feedback.

Community Meetings

These meetings are more formal, but still enable Council and VGG staff to engage in a two-way dialogue with Citizens. An issue or proposed project is first explained in detail, then there is a formal question period for Citizens to address Council or technical experts.

Surveys

Citizens can provide input into VGG services, programs, and projects as a way to influence the direction of government. A survey can have multiple distribution channels, such as Facebook, the VGG website, or it can be filled out on paper at the VGG office or at an Open House.

Surveys were identified as the top preference for sharing feedback by VGFN Citizens in the 2021 Communications Survey.

Crow FM

There was wide support for revitalizing the Crow FM radio station in Old Crow in both staff and VGFN Citizen engagement sessions. The radio station would provide a communications channel for Old Crow residents without access to internet tools.

CHON FM, CKRW and CBC

VGG can use CHON FM and CKRW to communicate to audiences in both Old Crow and Whitehorse. CBC has a morning 'marquee' where they announce community activities.

Both CHON FM and CBC offer regular Gwich'in programming.

News Releases

News releases are used to share information to local or national news media about something new and interesting, such as the Scree Vyah solar project. Although they are not intended to communicate information to Citizens, a well-written news release and good follow-up stories by journalists can enhance transparency.

Appendix 1. What we heard

The Engagement Process ~ VGFN Citizen Survey and VGG Workshops

From May 13 to June 7, 2021, Vuntut Gwitchin Government conducted a Citizen Survey to inform the development of its communications strategy. Online and printed surveys were made available to VGFN Citizens. Members of the Youth Council encouraged Citizens to complete surveys during the 2021 Vadzaih Choo Drin celebrations. An open house was hosted in Whitehorse to give Citizens there a chance to learn about the strategy and complete a survey. VGG received 92 responses to the survey. Three-quarters of respondents live in Old Crow, twenty-six per cent live in Whitehorse and two per cent of are in NWT or another location.

For the purpose of this Communications Plan, Castlemain conducted four virtual workshops with VGG staff, managers, departments and Chief and Council on April 28-29 and May 6, 2021. Approximately 30 attendees provided feedback about past and ongoing communications efforts. The feedback provided during the internal and Citizen engagements are summarized in the What We Heard Section below and integrated throughout the communications plan.

Below is a themed summary of comments provided during engagement workshops and submitted through the community survey. This section is meant to contextualize the communications goals and priority areas, and to share feedback submitted by VGFN Citizens and VGG staff and leadership.

Theme 1: Gwich'in Language and Culture

Promote Gwich'in culture, language, traditional knowledge, and values in VGG external and internal communications. As heard from Heritage staff, "there is a Gwich'in way of communicating." Leadership and staff shared that the incorporation of Gwich'in language and culture could look like posting Gwich'in stories and quotes on social media, incorporating traditional language into government documents and branding Gwich'in heritage statements.

Staff Feedback:

- Incorporate traditional language into government documents and promote fluency
- Communicate directly with language speakers and access oral history
- Involve more traditional stories
- "Keep it Gwich'in". Incorporating our values and stories into our communications

Commentary about the theme from VGFN Citizens' perspective:

- Revitalize VGFN language, culture and traditional teachings for all VGFN youth
- Revitalize Gwich'in storytelling and language "plays"

Theme 2: Proactive Communications

Be proactive with communications about VGG programs, services, and initiatives through a timely, consistent, and targeted approach. By anticipating upcoming community updates and initiating effective internal communications procedures, VGG can share new information to VGFN Citizens in a prompt and meaningful way. Opportunities for direct VGFN Citizen communications expressed in the workshops and surveys included using the radio station, posting videos to social media and posting information to community information boards.

Staff Feedback: Government communications need to be more frequent; be more proactive than reactive

- Reach more people; bring our people together
- Make programs and events more accessible to the community either through social media, radio, or any other way we can use

Commentary about the theme from VGFN Citizens' perspective:

- Create a new website and include images and information on what is happening in the community.

Theme 3: Systems and Processes

Design innovative government systems and processes for efficient internal and external communications. VGG leadership and staff expressed that improved external communications is based on effective internal systems, processes and clear staff policy and protocol. As heard from VGG staff this could look like a communications checklist, standardized templates and staff communications training.

Staff Feedback:

- Improve external communications by improving internal processes
- Standardize and create tools, templates and processes to save time and assure consistency
- Develop an employee on-boarding orientation program
- Have consistent staff meetings and monthly all-staff meetings

Commentary about the theme from VGFN Citizens' perspective:

- Develop communications protocols for Citizen engagement with Chief and Council, and staff
- Develop clear communication guidelines
- Create transparent and accessible ways and policies for VGFN Citizens to converse with elected and government officials so that everyone has equal access to engage with VGG

Theme 4: Citizen Engagement and Transparency

In the Community Survey, VGFN Citizens emphasized the need for more face-to-face contact from their leaders and government officials. Leadership, staff and VGFN Citizens agreed that the incorporation of two-way communications tools would help build community trust and engagement, and better connect VGFN Citizens who live outside of Old Crow and Whitehorse to the good work of VGG. We heard both traditional and non-traditional methods of knowledge sharing, for example, community meals or an office-based booth to record VGFN Citizen ideas.

Staff Feedback:

- Develop more tools for two-way conversations with VGFN Citizens. This is important for local Old Crow Citizens and Citizens living outside of Old Crow and Whitehorse
- Ensure immediate communication of critical information to VGFN Citizens regardless of way they receive information from VGG.
- Meet people where they are; have patience and do what is necessary to reach all Citizens
- Engage Citizens and get them excited about what VGG is doing as an organization

Commentary about the theme from VGFN Citizens' perspective:

- VGG should promptly inform Citizens about changes to programs, services or initiatives
- Create opportunities for Chief and Council to hear Citizen concerns in Old Crow
- Create opportunities for Chief and Council to provide in-person updates on new and existing programs, services and initiatives
- Create a campaign for Citizens on VGFN's Final and Self-Government Agreements

Theme 5: Inclusion and Collaboration

Strengthen VGG staff, leadership and VGFN Citizen inclusion efforts through purposeful collaboration on shared interests, solutions and community issues at all levels. Leadership and staff expressed the importance for more opportunities to support one another as a greater VGG team, beyond individual department or project. Staff ideas of inclusion and collaboration included weekly staff meetings, summary emails from leadership meetings and software for internal communications.

Staff Feedback:

- Collaborate with other departments; seek out opportunities to engage and share resources between departments; create more opportunities for in-person or interactive communication

Commentary about the theme from VGFN Citizens' perspective:

- Get young people involved with communications; hold regular leadership meetings in Whitehorse develop a forum to seek input from Citizens.