

Corporate Policy Committee

Date of Meeting:	12 January 2022
Report Title:	Communications Plan for Residents
Report of:	Jane Burns, Executive Director – Corporate Services
Report Reference No:	CP/24/21-22
Ward(s) Affected:	All wards

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1.** This report sets out proposals for how the Council will meet its Corporate Plan commitment to communicate effectively with residents.
- 1.2.** It explains the approach for communicating with residents and highlights priority communications activity for January 2022 – March 2023.
- 1.3.** The Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authority Publicity states that: “Publicity about local authorities and the services they provide should be freely available to anyone who wishes to receive such information in a format readily accessible and understandable by the person making the request or by any particular group for which services are provided.”
- 1.4.** Additionally, Cheshire East Council’s Corporate Plan 2021-2025 sets out the organisation’s priorities, including being: an open and enabling organisation, that will:
 - Ensure that there is transparency in all aspects of council decision-making;
 - Listen, learn and respond to our residents, promoting opportunities for a two-way conversation; and
 - Promote and develop the services of the council through regular communications and engagement with all residents.
- 1.5.** The Corporate Plan states that, by 2025, we want:

- Residents and staff to be aware of the council and the services we provide, and
 - Resident satisfaction with the council to be in line with similar councils.
- 1.6.** The Corporate Plan identifies the specific actions of:
- A communications plan which is targeted at residents (especially those who are hard to reach) to include digital opportunities; and
 - Review the style of communications to give a contemporary and effective approach.
- 1.7.** This report addresses those requirements, setting out the approach we will take to ensure that the organisation's communications are effective, targeted, inclusive and accessible.
- 1.8.** Central to this is the proposed development of a comprehensive communications strategy for the organisation, bringing together the various complementary strands of communications activity to support corporate plan priorities and the Council's statutory duties, and to help people to access council services.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1.** It is recommended that Corporate Policy Committee:
- 2.1.1.** Approve the development of a communications strategy for residents, including undertaking a survey of residents and customers to understand their communications preferences and needs.
- 2.1.2.** Approve the principles and approach for communications activity set out in paragraphs 5.7 and 5.8.
- 2.1.3.** Note the planned priorities for the communications programme for 2022-23.

3. Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1.** To enable the development of a communications strategy for Cheshire East Council that:
- supports the strategic aims and objectives in the council's Corporate Plan 2021-25;
 - supports effective operational delivery of services;
 - helps people, including those who are under-served, access those services; and
 - informs the effective use of council resources.
- 3.2.** A planned, strategic approach for communications, based on sound professional principles that align to the priorities and vision of the organisation, will be more effective than an ad hoc, uncoordinated approach to communicating with residents and customers.

4. Other Options Considered

- 4.1. The Council could continue to operate without a defined and documented strategic approach to communications and media activities. However, unplanned, ad hoc, reactive communications activity is rarely effective in the long-term in delivering required outcomes or offering real value for money. A comprehensive communications strategy, based on sound principles, that prioritises activity around the subjects that are most important to residents, customers and to the organisation's aims, will enable us to prioritise resources, simplify, clarify and coordinate our messages, and react more effectively to emerging issues in the context of a wider strategic approach, firmly aligned to the Corporate Plan. Without a strategy it is more difficult to ensure and evidence effective use of council resources in communicating with the public.
- 4.2. A strategy could be developed without asking our audiences about their communications preferences via a survey. However, the audience insight gained from a good, up to date survey, alongside other sources of insight, will be crucial in understanding how we can communicate most effectively with our audiences – including those people and communities who may have been under-served by conventional approaches.

5. Background

- 5.1. The importance of effective council communications has been highlighted and reinforced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Communications has had, and continues to have, a central role in informing residents, businesses, partners, Members and staff, and enabling emergency response, service delivery and recovery. Beyond the pandemic, communications will continue to be important in enabling residents and customers to understand the Council, its priorities and policies, and to access its services.
- 5.2. The [Local Government Association's regular national polling of resident satisfaction](#) identifies the following key drivers of resident satisfaction:
- Overall satisfaction with local area
 - Overall satisfaction with local council
 - Perception of value for money
 - Council responsiveness
 - How informed people feel about the council
 - How much they trust the council
- 5.3. Fundamentally, communications activity seeks to change what people **know, think, feel and/or do**. 'Communications' in this regard includes the following disciplines:
- 5.3.1. **Public relations** is the range of deliberate activities that seek to inform and influence perceptions of an organisation, idea or individual with a view to protecting and enhancing reputation and/or consolidating or

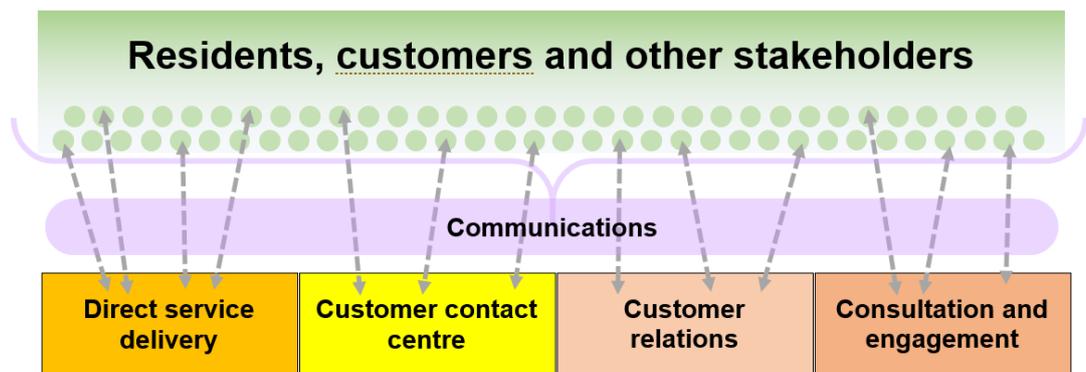
shifting position in relation to, or of influence over, the general public or publics.

- 5.3.2. **Media relations** - 'Media' in this context is printed press, broadcast (TV and radio) and online journalism. Despite the well-publicised changing media landscape, media relations remains a significant and substantial discipline within public relations.
- 5.3.3. **Marketing** is the range of activities that together identify, access and influence individuals to buy, or otherwise access, products and services. Equally, marketing techniques and technology can be used to raise awareness and affect behaviour change.
- 5.3.4. **Social and digital media** - Web content and social media content are now firmly established as some of the most, if not the most, influential and effective means to inform and engage individuals and communities. Digital spaces are the go-to destination for many people wanting to learn about anything and everything.
- 5.3.5. **Branding** is the range of activities, products, principles and standards that together define how the organisation presents itself, its work and its priorities. It includes all aspects of visual identity and 'tone of voice'.
- 5.3.6. **Events** can include everything from focus groups to community meetings, staff conferences, civic occasions, festivals etc. Effective event management requires a thorough understanding of a wide range of disciplines from risk management, health and safety and logistics to branding, entertainment and engagement.
- 5.3.7. **Emergency / crisis communications and major incidents** - Communications activity has a vital role to play during emergencies and crises in terms of outcomes for individuals and the organisation. The council is supported by a 24/7 emergency media relations services and regularly participates in emergency planning and crisis communications exercises to hone and develop skills.
- 5.3.8. **Internal communications** includes employee engagement. It can encompass all the above disciplines with the distinction of being focussed entirely around the internal audience.
 - 5.3.8.1. There is a real focus on enabling meaningful two-way conversation so that employee voices, at all levels of the organisation, can be heard, in line with our employee deal.
 - 5.3.8.2. Where staff are well-informed about the council's aims and activities, and where they fit in, they can become valuable ambassadors for the organisation.
 - 5.3.8.3. Communication with elected Members is an important part of communicating within the organisation, ensuring that Members have the information necessary to fulfil their community leadership and decision-making responsibilities.

5.4. Communications activity, as defined above, works as part of a wider range of communications, engagement activity and customer interactions, including:

- Customer services and direct communication to customers and service users, as part of service delivery;
- Public affairs and stakeholder relationship management; and
- Consultation and engagement.

In order to present a clear and cohesive customer experience and public profile for the organisation, all these disciplines need to work together. This is particularly relevant to listening, learning and responding to our residents, promoting opportunities for a two-way conversation, as set out in the Corporate Plan. Therefore, communications activity cannot be planned, considered or undertaken in isolation – relationships between individuals, teams, council services and partnerships are essential.



The ongoing work to develop the Council's approach to consultation and engagement is an example of such an interdependency, and our work to improve communications activity, must complement our approach to consultation and engagement activity, and vice versa.

5.5. Communications activity, as described above (5.3), is chiefly planned, managed and delivered by the council's communications and media team. However, teams and individuals, and commissioned providers, delivering services in many parts of the council may deliver some communications and engagement activities directly to residents and customers as part of their work. For example, they may manage and attend engagement events, produce promotional materials, produce social media content or send direct emails to customers and other stakeholders. It is important that this service-led activity is understood and valued as a key part of the council's relationship with its customers and the general public, and as part of the council's wider communications activity.

5.6. External partnerships are also crucial in effective communications about Council services and priorities. Key relationships include:

- Local NHS agencies

- Cheshire Police
 - Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service
 - Other local authorities, town and parish councils
 - Commissioned service providers (which may include wholly-owned companies, private contractors, voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise)
 - Local businesses and investors
 - Government departments
- 5.7.** The code of recommended practice for local authority publicity is a key government document that sets out parameters for how local councils should communicate. It states that publicity by local authorities should:
- be lawful;
 - be cost effective;
 - be objective;
 - be even-handed;
 - be appropriate;
 - have regard to equality and diversity; and
 - be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity, for example elections.

5.8 Our approach

Building on this, we propose an approach which includes the following additional and complementary considerations, reflecting the vision of the Corporate Plan. Council communications should:

- be accessible;
- be inclusive;
- be honest, open and transparent;
- be timely;
- be useful and relevant;
- be evidence-based, using insight and intelligence;
- be targeted to the key audiences;
- be planned;
- be evaluated; and
- promote the organisation's priorities.

5.9. Priorities for 2022/23 programme

The Council is a complex organisation, delivering many different services, making many decisions, operating within a complex policy framework and delivering a number of strategic objectives. Communications activity can help to people to navigate this complexity, but to do so it must be planned effectively and prioritised.

- 5.10.** The Council's communications requirements come from the following sources – (noting that there is significant overlap between these sources):

- Corporate Plan priorities;
- Service committee work programmes;
- Directorate and service business plans; and
- Priority operational customer service information – informed by customer requests and feedback.

5.11. For 2022/23 it is anticipated that the Council's communications will include the following subjects – reflecting Corporate Plan priorities:

- Key universal services, including development management and building control; regulatory services and enforcement; waste and recycling; green spaces and countryside; highways maintenance; leisure services; revenues and benefits, education.
- COVID response and recovery, including outbreak management / test and trace; economic recovery (including visitor economy); workplace recovery.
- Corporate Plan 2021-2025 – helping people understand the organisation's priorities and our progress to achieve them.
- Helping people understand council funding and how the Council plans and spends public funds.
- Integrated Care System (ICS) – Cheshire East place health and care integration and adult social care recruitment.
- Reducing health inequalities in the borough.
- Fostering, adoption and social worker recruitment.
- Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) strategy.
- Carbon neutral plan and environment strategy.
- Strategic infrastructure programmes, including HS2 hub station; Middlewich Eastern Bypass; Poynton Relief Road.
- Key regeneration programmes.
- Key events, including HRH the Queen's jubilee; 2023 elections; Remembrance Sunday; Annual Council and Mayor Making.
- Communications activity will support the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy, and will raise awareness about key issues that align to Council priorities. The Council will support a number of national and international awareness campaigns, including: LGBT History Month, Black History Month, International Women's Day; Carers' Week, Mental Health Awareness Week; Armed Forces Week; November Children's Rights Month.

5.12. Audiences

Key audiences and stakeholders for our communications activity will include:

- Residents and customers;
- Young people;
- Under-served communities;
- Staff;
- Councillors;
- Community, voluntary and faith sector;
- Key community influencers;
- Businesses (local, regional and national);
- Developer and investor community;
- Service delivery partners;
- Schools, colleges, early years providers;
- Town and parish councils;
- MPs; and
- Local, regional and national public sector agencies.

Note: The stakeholders and audiences listed here are generalised in terms of the general communications and media activity of the council. Specific projects and campaigns will each require tailored understanding of audience and stakeholder relationships as related to the specific subject matter and context.

Further work needs to be undertaken to update our understanding of the wants, needs and preferences of our audiences, which can change over time. This is particularly true of under-served communities. A targeted survey and potentially other engagement activity can help inform us.

We can also use and (through a communications survey) build on the customer groupings and segmentation as set out in the [Customer Experience Strategy](#) (p7), and insight from the emerging Digital Strategy. Both these documents will be important in informing our approach to engaging different audiences, alongside work with our business intelligence colleagues to access other audience insight, including customer demographics information such as [Acorn](#) or [Mosaic](#).

5.13. Improvement work

We will also work to continually improve and build on our communications activity, to better engage and inform our key audiences. Key improvement activities include:

- Development of a communications strategy for Cheshire East Council
- Undertake a communications survey of residents

- Undertake a comprehensive equalities impact assessment to analyse and understand accessibility and inclusion needs of our audiences and deliver inclusive communications.
- Improving our digital communications offer, including social media presence, communications content on website(s) and e-mail and text options. This includes 'push' notifications, delivering key information for customers accessing our services, with a view to pre-empting the information customers may need, reducing reactive demand from incoming customer service enquiries. This supports both Digital and Customer Experience Strategies.
- Supporting a new approach to consultation and engagement, promoting opportunities for two-way conversations and telling people how their responses and contributions contribute to decision-making.
- Developing stronger links between customer service demand and general operational communications output.

5.14. Measuring effectiveness

One of the key principles underlying this approach is that communications activity will be evaluated. This is to ensure effectiveness and value for money and to enable continual, measurable improvement. Key measures include:

- Number of media releases published
- Take-up of media releases (the number of media releases that appear in print, broadcast or online media)
- Sentiment of media coverage
- Following and engagement rates across a range of social media
- E-newsletter subscribers and engagement (opens, clicks)
- Responses to the communications survey of residents
- Resident satisfaction polling responses:
 - Number of people who are satisfied with the local Council.
 - Number of people who say they feel informed about the Council.

6. Consultation and Engagement

6.1. The Council consults residents, customers and service users on a regular basis. In the last twelve months, this has included the following consultations:

- Medium-Term Financial Strategy;
- Corporate Plan;
- Household Waste and Recycling Centres;
- Safety of Women in Public Places; and

- Equality Objectives.

6.2. In 2017, the [Council surveyed local residents regarding their preferences about communication](#) with them by the Council. Headline findings included:

6.2.1. 34% of respondents felt 'well-informed' about the Council; 66% felt 'not well-informed'.

6.2.2. 47% of respondents felt that the Council clearly communicated what it does.

6.2.3. 65% of respondents felt that the amount of communication received from the Council was too little.

6.3. Since then a lot of work has been undertaken to address these matters, and we know that the COVID-19 pandemic, nationally, has changed people's perceptions of local public services and that communication [from local councils has been a crucial source of valued information](#). However, we have not since directly gone back to Cheshire East residents to ask them of their views about how we communicate.

6.4. In order to develop an effective, targeted, inclusive and accessible communications strategy, it is proposed that both a new audience survey and a public consultation are undertaken regarding a draft communications strategy, based on the principles set out in this report (paragraph 5.7).

6.5. Extensive engagement with senior officers in the council is also required to ensure that communications are aligned to the delivery of key projects and programmes.

7. Implications

7.1. Legal

7.1.1. The communications and engagement activities covered by this report and strategy are subject to the following guidance and legislation:

- Data Protection Act 2018
- Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988
- Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000
- Libel and defamation law
- Code of recommended practice for local government publicity
- Advertising Standards Authority's advertising codes.
- Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018
- Civil Contingencies Act 2004

7.2. Finance

7.2.1. The recommendations in this report have been proposed in the context of agreed 2021/22 budget for communications and engagement activity.

7.3. Policy

7.3.1. The communications and media activities of Cheshire East Council are subject to the following policies:

- Media relations protocol
- Social networking policy
- Social media abuse policy
- Visual identity guide
- Brand protocol

7.3.2 There are also important connections to key council strategies, that are being considered by this committee, including:

- Customer Experience Strategy
- Digital Strategy
- Approach to consultation and engagement
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy

7.4. Equality

7.4.1. The strategic principles proposed in this report will ensure that all communications material will consider the needs of the individual it is targeted at, with consideration given to alternative formats and channels where required.

7.4.2. The principles set out in paragraph 5.7, state that all communications activity must be inclusive and accessible.

7.4.3. An Equality Impact Assessment will be prepared/attached to ensure that individuals and groups with protected characteristics are not directly or indirectly discriminated against as a result of our communications activity and strategy.

7.5. Human Resources

7.5.1. There are close connections with the council's human resources service in respect of delivering internal communications and employee engagement, and workforce strategy.

7.6. Risk Management

7.6.1. An effective communications strategy will support the organisation to ensure that it is represented fairly, that it is transparently and clearly accountable and accredited for its decisions and actions, reducing the risk of reputational damage through misrepresentation, misinformation and/or disinformation.

- 7.6.2. The principles set out here support management of the Strategic Risk Register SR13 – Reputation.

7.7. Rural Communities

- 7.7.1. Effective and planned communications activity and communications strategy are necessary tools to ensure that the council's communications resources are well-managed, and that engagement activity and opportunities are available across a range of channels, reaching individuals and communities in all geographies across Cheshire East, including rural areas.

7.8. Children and Young People/Cared for Children

- 7.8.1. Children and young people are identified in the strategy as a priority audience for the council. The strategy will include specific objectives that seek to improve levels of engagement between the council and young people, ensuring that their voices are heard and have the opportunity to influence decision making.

7.9. Public Health

- 7.9.1. Effective and planned communications activity and communications strategy are necessary tools is a necessary tool to ensure that the council's communications resources are well managed and that engagement activity around Public Health priorities can be prioritised appropriately. Communications activity will support positive behaviour change to influence and support an improvement in population and individual health and wellbeing.
- 7.9.2. Communications has played a key role in the Council's response to the Coronavirus pandemic.

7.10. Climate Change

- 7.10.1. Communications and media activity will be central to the Council's work to address the climate change emergency and deliver the ambitions of the council's Environmental Strategy. The communications strategy is a necessary tool to ensure that the council's communications resources are well managed and that engagement activity around climate change and environmental strategy can be prioritised appropriately.
- 7.10.2. Our communications approach recognises the opportunities that the accelerating shift towards increasingly digital channels of engagement offers. While not all engagement activity can, or should, be undertaken through digital channels, they are now established as the default for a significant proportion of the population and are, in general, a 'greener' alternative to, for example, print.

Access to Information

Contact Officer:	Michael Moore, head of communications Michael.moore@cheshireeast.gov.uk 01270 686581
Appendices:	None
Background Papers:	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Local Government Association's regular national polling of resident satisfaction2. Cheshire East Council Customer Experience Strategy3. Cheshire East Council Communications Survey 2017 - The Results Magazine4. Cheshire East Council Media Relations Protocol5. Cheshire East Council Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy6. Code of recommended practice on local government publicity