

## **Corporate Policy Committee**

---

<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	14 July 2022
<b>Report Title:</b>	Communications Strategy for Residents 2022-25
<b>Report of:</b>	Jane Burns, Executive Director – Corporate Services
<b>Report Reference No:</b>	CP/5/22-23
<b>Ward(s) Affected:</b>	All wards

---

### **1. Executive Summary**

- 1.1.** This report presents a draft communications strategy which sets out vision, aims, principles and priorities for the council's communication with residents, to help deliver the Council's Corporate Plan priorities.
- 1.2.** 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.
- 1.3.** 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.
- 1.4.** 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.

## **2. Recommendations**

**2.1.** It is recommended that Corporate Policy Committee:

- 2.1.1. Approve the draft communications strategy for residents Cheshire East.
- 2.1.2. Agree to a formal consultation on the Draft Digital Strategy.
- 2.1.3. Agree that the final communications strategy for residents be submitted to Corporate Policy Committee post-consultation.

## **3. Reasons for Recommendations**

**3.1.** A communications strategy for Cheshire East Council will:

- support the strategic aims and objectives in the council's Corporate Plan 2021-25;
- support effective operational delivery of services;
- help people, including those who are under-served, access those services; and
- inform 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.

**3.3.** The views of residents and customers, will be valuable in gaining assurance that the vision, aims and priorities as set out in the strategy are appropriate, and will help positively shape our future communications with residents.

**3.4.** 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."

## **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 for residents, 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 views. However, the audience insight gained from consultation 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.** In January 2022, Corporate Policy Committee considered a report regarding the development of a new approach for communications with residents. It was resolved that the committee:

- approved the development of a communications strategy for residents, including undertaking a survey of residents and customers to understand their communications preferences and needs; and the results of the survey, together with the draft communications strategy, be brought back to the Committee;
- approved the principles and approach for communications activity; and
- noted the planned priorities for the communications programme for 2022-23.

- 5.2.** 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.

- 5.3.** This draft strategy sets out our vision, aims and priorities for the council's news and public relations, and the promotion of key council services, policies, programmes and initiatives to residents.

- 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 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. Partnerships**

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. Principles**

The draft communications strategy for residents makes the commitment that the council's communications will be:

- Accessible
- Inclusive
- Useful, relevant, engaging and timely
- Responsive
- Evidence-based
- Open and transparent
- Value for money
- Green

This complements and builds on the guidance set out in the code of recommended practice for local authority publicity.

## **5.8. Vision, aims and priorities**

The vision for council communications to residents, as set out in the draft strategy is:

“People in Cheshire East are well-informed about their council and council services, and they know how to get involved.

“They are aware of council decisions, how those decisions are made and how to influence them.

“The council is seen as an open and transparent organisation that is working for the benefit of people in Cheshire East.”

The aims of the draft strategy are:

- Aim 1 - Promote council priorities through a coordinated programme of activity
- Aim 2 - Build engaged audiences from Cheshire East’s diverse communities
- Aim 3 - Be an effective voice which promotes Cheshire East’s priorities, challenges and achievements
- Aim 4 – Build resilience to respond to new circumstances and emergencies

Priorities to deliver these aims are:

- Promote corporate plan projects, programmes and priorities
- Improve understanding of how council tax is spent, council funding and help people have their say in budget setting
- Improve understanding about key universal services
- Support the shift to digital channels
- Improve communication with under-served audiences
- Help people to understand how to influence and get involved with council decision-making
- Positively manage our relationships with local, national and industry media
- Work as an effective partner
- Develop the Cheshire East Council brand
- An employer of choice - supporting the council’s workforce strategy
- Maintain emergency preparedness and crisis communications protocols
- Horizon scanning

## **5.9. Priority subject matter for 2022/23 communications 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; waste and recycling and highways maintenance.
- 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 and adult social care 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 local elections 2023; Remembrance Sunday; Armed Forces Week; Clean Air Day; 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; November Children’s Rights Month; Holocaust Memorial Day.

## **5.12. Audiences**

It can be useful to consider our key audiences and stakeholders for general communications activity in groups, including:

- 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.

While the draft strategy presented here is focused specifically on our communications with residents, communications with all our audiences and stakeholders should be coordinated.

Importantly, we should not see ‘residents’ as a single homogenous group. To be effective, communications activity must be adapted to the needs and preferences of different people.

The approach set out in the draft strategy establishes an aim of “Build engaged audiences from Cheshire East’s diverse communities” and a priority of “Improve communication with under-served audiences”. We will build on existing audience insight and continue to take into account views shared through consultation, and ongoing work to understand individuals’ and groups’ communications needs.

## **6. Consultation and Engagement**

- 6.1.** The Council consults residents, customers and service users on a regular basis. Effective communication to promote opportunities to respond to

consultation and to raise awareness of the results and outcomes is important and is considered in this draft strategy.

- 6.2.** Recent feedback from residents shows that the key characteristic in determining preferred media channels is age, with older people less likely to say they prefer digital channels and more likely to use 'traditional media', such as newspapers, TV and radio. However, there has been a marked increase in usage of digital channels across all age groups over time.
- 6.3.** It is recommended that a consultation is undertaken to gather views about the draft communications strategy for residents prior to consideration for formal approval and adoption. This will ensure that all residents have the opportunity to make comment on the vision, aims and priorities and their views can be taken into account when finalising the strategy.
- 6.4.** 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 authority 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 2022/23 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. The draft strategy includes the aim: "Build engaged audiences from Cheshire East's diverse communities that seek to improve levels of engagement" and the priority to "Improve communication with under-served audiences". This includes rural communities, where there are obstacles to effective communication.

## 7.8. Children and Young People/Cared for Children

7.8.1. Children and young people are an important audience for the council. The draft strategy includes the aim: “Build engaged audiences from Cheshire East’s diverse communities that seek to improve levels of engagement” and the priority to “Improve communication with under-served audiences”. This includes children and young people, and we will work to ensure 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.

<b>Access to Information</b>	
Contact Officer:	Michael Moore, head of communications <a href="mailto:Michael.moore@cheshireeast.gov.uk">Michael.moore@cheshireeast.gov.uk</a> 01270 686581
Appendices:	Draft Cheshire East Council Communications Strategy for residents 2022-25
Background Papers:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><u>1. Local Government Association’s regular national polling of resident satisfaction</u></li><li><u>2. Cheshire East Council Customer Experience Strategy</u></li></ol>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>3. <u>Cheshire East Council Media Relations Protocol</u></li><li>4. <u>Cheshire East Council Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy</u></li><li>5. <u>Code of recommended practice on local authority publicity</u></li></ol>
--	---