

## **Corporate Policy Committee**

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<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	1 December 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/16/22-23
<b>Ward(s) Affected:</b>	All wards

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### **1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1. This report presents the Communications Strategy for Residents 2022-25 for approval, with the results of public consultation on the draft strategy.
- 1.2. The strategy has been developed as part of the Council's work to deliver the following priorities in the Council's Corporate Plan 2021-25:
  - 1.2.1. Ensure that there is transparency in all aspects of council decision-making
  - 1.2.2. Listen, learn and respond to our residents, promoting opportunities for a two-way conversation
  - 1.2.3. Promote and develop the services of the council through regular communication and engagement with all residents.
- 1.3. And the following actions from the Corporate Plan 2021-25:
  - 1.3.1. A communications plan which is targeted at residents (especially those who are hard to reach) to include digital opportunities
  - 1.3.2. Review the style of communications to give a contemporary and effective approach, and
  - 1.3.3. Regular, proactive communications through all channels.

## **2. Executive Summary**

- 2.1.** In January 2022 a report was submitted to Corporate Policy Committee requesting approval to develop and approve a new approach for communications with residents. The committee approved the development of a communications strategy for residents.
- 2.2.** In July 2022, Corporate Policy Committee considered a draft communications strategy which sets out vision, aims, principles and priorities for the council's communication with residents. The committee approved the draft to go to public consultation.
- 2.3.** This report presents the final communications strategy and results of the public consultation.
- 2.4.** The strategy sets out the 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.

## **3. Recommendations**

- 3.1.** It is recommended that Corporate Policy Committee:
  - 3.1.1.** Approves the final Communications Strategy for Residents 2022-25.
  - 3.1.2.** Approves that further updates are provided to Corporate Policy Committee on progress against the aims of the strategy on a six monthly basis.

## **4. Reasons for Recommendations**

- 4.1.** A communications strategy for residents 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 or seldom-heard, access those services; and
  - inform the effective use of council resources.
- 4.2.** 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.
- 4.3.** The strategy has been informed by the views and preferences of residents and customers through public consultation

## 5. Other Options Considered

### 5.1.

Option	Impact	Risk
Create a strategy without public consultation. (Not recommended)	We would have a strategy that shapes council's communication output for residents.	Without residents' input we may miss opportunities to communicate more effectively with them.
Do nothing – continue to operate without a defined and documented strategic approach to resident communications and media activities. (Not recommended)	No agreed strategic rationale to prioritise resources, simplify, clarify and coordinate our messages, and react more effectively to emerging issues.	Unplanned, ad hoc, reactive communications activity is rarely effective in the long-term in delivering required outcomes or offering real value for money. It would be difficult to ensure and evidence effective use of council resources in communicating with the public.

## 6. Background

6.1. The Corporate Plan includes the priority “Promote the services of the council through regular communication and engagement with all residents”. It also includes the actions:

6.1.1. “A communications plan which is targeted at residents (especially those who are heard to reach) to include digital opportunities”

6.1.2. “Review the style of communications to give a contemporary and effective approach” and

6.1.3. “Regular communications through all channels”.

6.2. In January 2022 Corporate Policy Committee approved the development of a communications strategy for residents to address these corporate plan priorities and actions. In July 2022, Corporate Policy Committee approved a draft strategy to go to public consultation.

6.3. Response to the consultation was largely supportive of the draft strategy, as presented to the committee in July. However, respondents made a number of points and recommendations that relate to this strategy and, more generally, to the council's wider approach to communicating, engaging and

consulting with residents and customers. Respondents also made some specific comments and suggestions about the vision, aims and priorities set out in the draft strategy.

- 6.4. The strategy has therefore been updated as a direct result of feedback provided through this consultation.

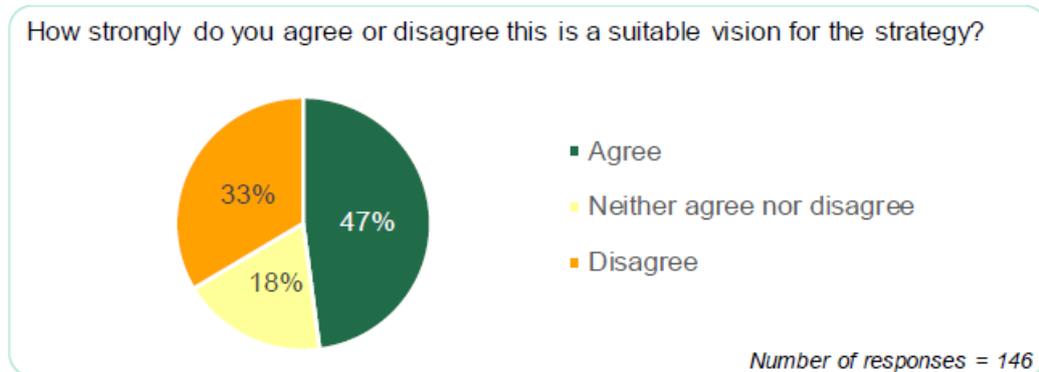
## 7. Consultation and Engagement

7.1. The draft Communications Strategy for Residents was subject to formal consultation between 21 September and 23 October 2022. The consultation was promoted on the council’s website and through local media and social media. A survey questionnaire was available online and as a paper copy for postal responses. It was issued to the Digital Influence Panel and promoted in our local libraries. It was also promoted to Cheshire East Council staff, including managers, Cheshire East members and was sent to Town and Parish Councils.

7.2. 151 responses were received with the majority being generally supportive of the vision, aims and priority actions. A summary of responses and changes made as a result are below.

### 7.3. Vision:

47% of respondents agreed that this is a suitable vision for the strategy, 33% disagreed.

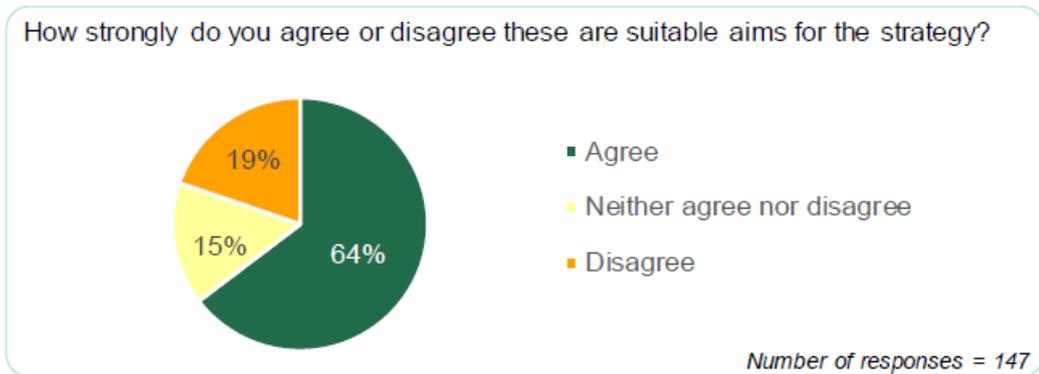


7.3.1. The vision statement has been amended in response to comments made by respondents to the consultation. The statement has been shortened to really focus on the core purpose of communications activity.

7.3.2. The vision now reads:

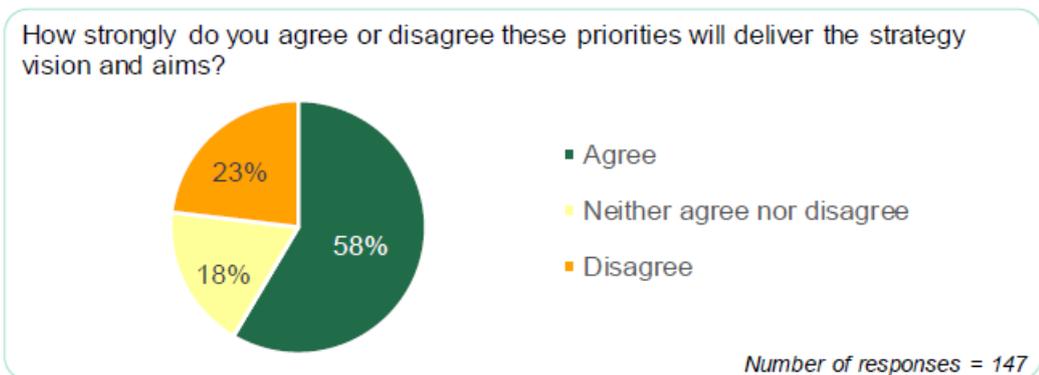
“People in Cheshire East are well-informed about their council and council services.  
“They are aware of council decisions and how to influence them.”

#### 7.4. Aims:



- 7.4.1. The aims have been amended in response to comments made by respondents to the consultation. Respondents raised the importance of two-way communication and listening to what residents say. The aims and priorities have been amended to more explicitly reflect these fundamental and important considerations that also apply to the council's wider work to improve customer experience and consultation and engagement.
- 7.4.2. The first two aims have been re-ordered in response to suggestions that the strategy could more clearly prioritise the importance of residents as our key stakeholder. While the aims and priorities are not intended to appear in order of importance, this does make the importance of the resident more obvious.
- 7.4.3. Therefore, Aim 1 is now "Build engaged audiences from Cheshire East's diverse communities". The brief narrative for Aim 1 also now includes explicit reference to taking and making opportunities to listen to residents and enabling two-way engagement on an equitable basis.
- 7.4.4. Aim 2 is now "Promote council priorities through a coordinated programme of activity"
- 7.4.5. Aim 3 and Aim 4 remain unchanged.

#### 7.5. Priorities:



- 7.5.1. A number of the priorities have also been amended in response to comments made by respondents to the consultation.
- 7.5.2. Priorities under Aims 1 and 2 have been re-ordered reflecting the re-ordering of Aims.
- 7.5.3. There is now more explicit emphasis on non-digital communication and the potential to work with Members and town and parish councils (Priority 2).
- 7.5.4. There is now more explicit emphasis, in a number of priorities, on the role and importance of two-way communication and listening to the voice of the resident and customer in this strategy – including Priorities 1, 3, 5 and 6.
- 7.6.** We also asked for other comments and suggestions about the draft strategy. Some notable answers, which have been taken into account in the updated strategy, are below:
- 7.6.1. *“Town and Parish Councils can also be an effective conduit for information from Cheshire East for residents who would not look at Cheshire East’s website or literature.”*
- 7.6.2. *“I particularly liked how the information was displayed in a visual format. It was interesting and the data was easy to access quickly and clearly. The aims stated are laudable and desirable. I did wonder if the strategy should have discussed these aims are to be met in a little more detail.”*
- 7.6.3. *“There appears to be too little emphasis on the Council’s responsibility if not duty to queries and complaints and requests made by the resident”*  
While this emphasises the importance of listening and genuine two-way conversation, which are very important to this strategy, it perhaps relates more directly to the range of interactions that are in the scope of the Council’s [Customer Experience Strategy](#).
- 7.7.** Prior to drafting the strategy, we asked residents about their communications preferences, how they get information and news about the council and how they would prefer to get that information.
- 7.7.1. There has been a marked increase in usage of digital channels across all age groups over time. Feedback showed that the key characteristic in determining preferred media channels is age. While older people are increasingly using digital channels, some are less likely to say they prefer digital channels and state a preference for more ‘traditional media’, such as newspapers, TV and radio.
- 7.7.2. In the recent consultation, respondents were also keen to point out that we should not entirely depend on digital communication methods.

## **8. Implications**

### **8.1. Legal**

8.1.1. 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

### **8.2. Finance**

8.2.1. The recommendations in this report have been proposed in the context of agreed 2022/23 budget for communications and engagement activity.

### **8.3. Policy**

8.3.1. 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

8.3.2. 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

### **8.4. Equality**

8.4.1. 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.

8.4.2. The principles set out in the strategy, state that all communications activity must be inclusive and accessible.

- 8.4.3. An Equality Impact Assessment (appendix 3) has been prepared 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.

## **8.5. Human Resources**

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

## **8.6. Risk Management**

- 8.6.1. An effective communications strategy will support the organisation to ensure that it is represented fairly, that it is transparently and clearly accountable and credited for its decisions and actions, reducing the risk of reputational damage through misrepresentation, misinformation and/or disinformation.
- 8.6.2. The principles set out here support management of the Strategic Risk Register corporate risk SR13 – Reputation.

## **8.7. Rural Communities**

- 8.7.1. 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" and the priority to "Improve communication with seldom-heard audiences". This includes rural communities, where there are obstacles to effective communication.
- 8.7.2. Priority 2 in the strategy recognises the potential to seek the support of local ward members and town and parish councils to share information about council services, where digital and other forms of communication may be less accessible.

## **8.8. Children and Young People/Cared for Children**

- 8.8.1. 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" and the priority to "Improve communication with seldom-heard 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 as well as having access to the information they need about council services.

## 8.9. Public Health

- 8.9.1. 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 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.
- 8.9.2. Communications has played a key role in the Council's response to the Coronavirus pandemic.

## 8.10. Climate Change

- 8.10.1. 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.
- 8.10.2. 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 often, in general, a 'greener' alternative to, for example, print.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Michael Moore, Head of Communications <a href="mailto:Michael.moore@cheshireeast.gov.uk">Michael.moore@cheshireeast.gov.uk</a> 01270 686581
Appendices:	Appendix 1 - Cheshire East Council Communications Strategy for residents 2022-25 Appendix 2 - Communications Strategy for Residents Consultation 2022 - Full report Appendix 3 – Equality Impact Assessment
Background Papers:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="#">1. Cheshire East Council Customer Experience Strategy</a></li><li><a href="#">2. Cheshire East Council Media Relations Protocol</a></li><li><a href="#">3. Cheshire East Council Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy</a></li><li><a href="#">4. Code of recommended practice on local authority publicity</a></li></ol>