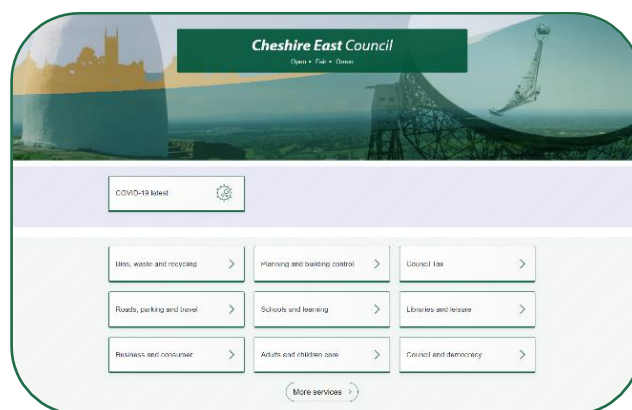


A summary of responses to Cheshire East Council's

# Communications Strategy for Residents Consultation 2022



# Executive summary

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## Introduction

Cheshire East Council consulted on a draft Communications Strategy for Residents in October 2022. The draft strategy set out how the council will communicate with residents in future.

Prior to this consultation the strategy had been drafted informed by feedback from Cheshire East residents in a survey conducted in May 2022, which was completed by 1,068 Cheshire East residents.

The consultation was widely promoted and received 151 responses in total, including 149 survey completions, and 2 email responses from Town and Parish Councils.

## The strategy vision

Opinion was fairly split on whether they felt the vision was a suitable one for the strategy, with 47% agreeing it was, and 33% disagreeing. The remainder neither agreed nor disagreed.

Some respondents felt that strategy visions generally speaking are “ornamental”, and that what actually happens is more important.

Others felt the council must improve its communications and transparency, especially around decision-making generally, that it feels remote, and that a shorter or more simplified vision may be desirable.

## The strategy aims

Support for the strategy aims was higher – 64% agreed the strategy aims were suitable with 19% disagreeing.

Some felt there is too much emphasis on council aims, and not enough emphasis on resident aims, and that the strategy is not felt to be 2-way, that it focuses too much on the provision of information. Others felt the aims could be simplified or written in plainer English.

## The strategy priorities

Support for the strategy priorities was also higher – 58% agreed the strategy priorities were suitable with 23% disagreeing.

Suggested improvements to the strategy priorities included that:

- 12 priorities may be too many – they could be simplified or reduced

- Some priorities seem contradictory
- Too much emphasis is put on digital communication, and that more effort is needed to ensure all have access to a good level of information
- The council should listen more to residents and engage in more 2 way dialogue

## **Final comments on the strategy**

Final comments on the strategy included that:

- The council listening is key, 2 way communication is important
- Residents want to be more involved in decision-making
- The council should share more information about their local area
- There is a need for alternative forms of communications, including postal, face to face and telephone
- The strategy has to actually be deliverable and not just a wish list
- The strategy should be simplified much more, written in plain English, and possibly reduced to a 1 page summary

## **Conclusions**

### **Consultation response**

The consultation received 151 responses in total, which is a fairly typical number of responses for a consultation on a strategy of this type.

However, more in-depth face to face engagement on the strategy, or on the key aspects of it, may be required in future to ensure the strategy is consulted on more widely, and remains relevant and effective.

Consultation responses are also weighted heavily towards Digital Influence Panel members, who are naturally more inclined to want to get involved in local decision-making than other stakeholders.

### **General support for the strategy**

It is positive to see general support for the strategy from those that fed back, with 64% of respondents agreeing the strategy aims are suitable, and 58% agreeing the strategy priorities are suitable.

### **Areas for improvement**

Respondents suggested the strategy could be improved by:

- Delivering on the vision, and making the vision shorter
- Having more emphasis on non-digital communication, such as postal, face-to-face and telephone communication

- Having more emphasis in the strategy on the council listening and on 2 way communication
- Making the strategy shorter and simpler, using plain English
- Having fewer priorities (12 may be too many)
- Involving residents more in decision-making processes

# Contents

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Executive summary.....	2
Contents.....	5
Introduction.....	6
The Communication Strategy for Residents vision.....	8
The Communication Strategy for Residents aims.....	10
The Communication Strategy for Residents priorities.....	12
Final comments on the strategy .....	14
Conclusions.....	16
Appendix 1 – Email consultation responses .....	17

Report produced 24 October 2022 by the Research and Consultation Team, Cheshire East Council. Email [RandC@cheshireeast.gov.uk](mailto:RandC@cheshireeast.gov.uk) for further information.

# Introduction

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## Consultation purpose

Cheshire East Council consulted on a draft of a Communications Strategy for Residents, which set out how the council will communicate with residents in future.

The strategy had been drafted informed by feedback from Cheshire East residents, which had been gathered through an extensive Communications Survey conducted between April and May 2022, and which was completed by 1,068 Cheshire East residents.

Feedback from the final consultation on the strategy would be used to finalise it, before it is considered for approval by the council's Corporate Policy Committee.

## Consultation methodology

The consultation was conducted between 19 September and 23 October 2022.

The consultation was widely promoted in the following ways:

- [On the Cheshire East Council consultations webpage](#)
- [Through public media releases](#)
- Via Social Media, including on Twitter and Facebook
- Through an email to 998 members of the council's Digital Influence Panel, sent on 27 September 2022
- Through an email to all Town and Parish Councils, and to Cheshire Association of Local Councils sent on 6 October 2022
- To Cheshire East Councillors through a Members Bulletin
- To Cheshire East Council employees, through internal employee newsletters
- To Cheshire East Council Managers through Manager Share and Support sessions

## Consultation response

In total 151 consultation responses were received.

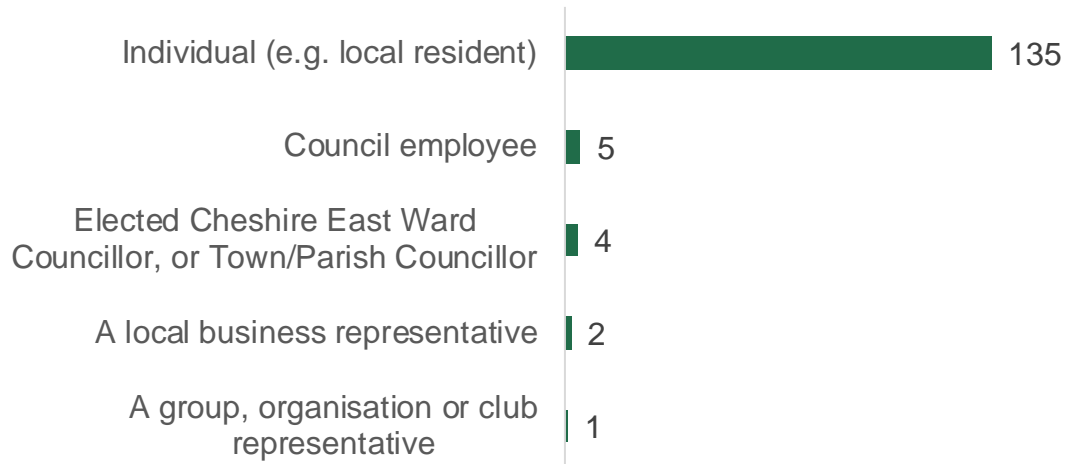
This included 149 respondents who completed the consultation survey, including:

- 115 via the Digital Influence Panel, at a response rate of 12%
- 25 via the consultation webpages
- 2 from Town and Parish Councils
- 7 from all other sources

In addition, 2 email responses were received – see Appendix 1 to read these.

The vast majority of respondents were individuals (e.g. local residents), with 5 council employees responding, and 4 local Councillors.

Number of survey responses, by respondent type:



# The Communication Strategy for Residents vision

## Support for the vision

The Communications Strategy for Residents vision is that:

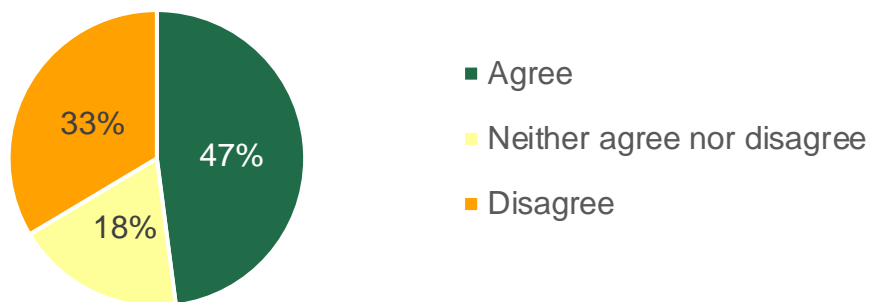
"People in Cheshire East are well-informed about their council and council services, and they know how to get involved.

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".

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

How strongly do you agree or disagree this is a suitable vision for the strategy?



Number of responses = 146

## Comments about the vision

A total of 61 comments were left by respondents to the question "Do you have any comments to make about the vision", which were coded into four themes with a total number of 65 references. A comment could generate multiple references, so the total number of references can exceed the total number of comments.

A summary of all the comments and references made is provided below:

### Transparency comment (23 references)

Respondents challenged the openness and transparency at Cheshire East feeling that their voices were not being heard or they were being involved after decisions had been made (18 references). Respondents also reported the council seeming 'remote' and that it was keeping residents in the dark about decision-making (5 references).



*“Cheshire East certainly does not act in an 'open and transparent' way – in fact communications have been designed to obfuscate”*

### **Improve communication comment (22 references)**

Respondents felt that communication with residents should be improved generally (12 references) and should be more regular (1 reference). Respondents felt that more should be done to inform them and that more advertising of upcoming decisions should be done with improvements to access to information (8 references). Concerns around an overreliance on digital methods was expressed (1 reference).

### **Vision comment (12 references)**

Respondents felt that the proof of the vision would be in the actions the council took in response to it, that it would mean very little until changes were made, and how would the impact be measured moving forward (10 references). Respondents also felt that it was too detailed and should be simplified for ease of reading (2 references).

*“Visions are there as part of the UK's essentially top-down and centralised governance system. For most people, the visions in local authority strategies are essentially ornamental: few members of the general public can easily identify with / own them, irrespective of the good intentions of local authority officers”*

### **General comment (8 references)**

Respondents left general positive comments such as support for the strategy (4 references). Respondents also left general negative comments such as the state of the roads and other items they felt should be a priority for the council over strategy development (4 references).

## The Communication Strategy for Residents aims

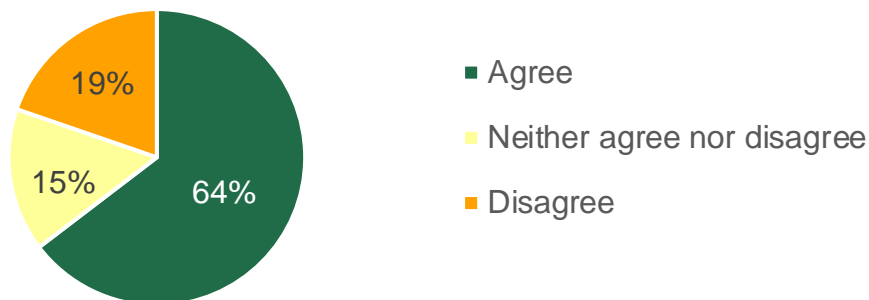
### Support for the aims

The Communications Strategy for Residents has the following 4 aims:

- 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

64% of respondents agreed these are suitable aims for the strategy, 19% disagreed.

How strongly do you agree or disagree these are suitable aims for the strategy?



Number of responses = 147

### Comments about the aims

A total of 37 comments were left by respondents to the question "Do you have any comments to make about the aims?", which were coded into three themes with a total number of 44 references. A comment could generate multiple references, so the total number of references can exceed the total number of comments.

A summary of all the comments and references made is provided below:

#### Listening to residents (24 references)

Respondents generally felt the aims would not help them in terms of encouraging the council to listen and respond to them, feeling the council did not see communication as a two-way process and was only looking to inform them (16 references).

Respondents called on the council to consider them rather than focusing on council aims and priorities which they felt the aims currently did (8 references).

*“The overall balance of the strategy tends to come across as focussing on the delivery or provision of information. It could perhaps include more on the importance of communication as part of the consultation and engagement functions associated with service development and provision”*

*“As written the aims focus on ‘persuading’ the population to understand, and presumably accept what is decided. Communication is two way street not sure the wording sufficiently reflects community influence”*

### **Aims comments (16 references)**

Respondents raised concerns about the cost and effectiveness of some of the stated aims (2 references). Respondents also felt the aims were too generic and could apply to any council (2 references) and that the proof of their effectiveness would be in the actions taken by Cheshire East (4 references). Respondents also encouraged the council to rewrite these in plain English and to ‘keep it simple’ (4 references).

Respondents felt that the aim could consider the importance of communities more (3 references) especially in regard to making sure all were involved as well as having a more environmental focus (1 reference).

*The first priority is to meet the council's own needs. Shouldn't it be to meet the needs of its community?*

### **General comments (4 references)**

Respondents raised general negative comments such as sounding ‘wishy washy’ (2 references) and general positive comments such as the aims being ‘well intentioned’ (2 references).

# The Communication Strategy for Residents priorities

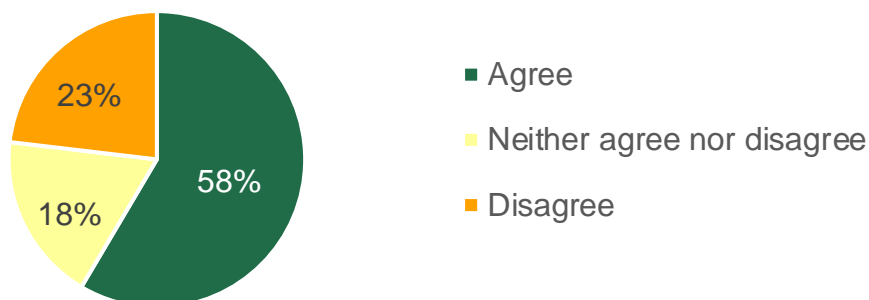
## Support for the priorities

The Communications Strategy for Residents priorities are:

- Priority 1 – Promote corporate plan projects, programmes and priorities
- Priority 2 – Improve understanding of how council tax is spent, council funding and help people have their say in budget setting
- Priority 3 – Improve understanding about key universal services
- Priority 4 – Support the shift to digital channels
- Priority 5 – Improve communication with under-served audiences
- Priority 6 – Help people to understand how to influence and get involved with council decision-making
- Priority 7 – Positively manage our relationships with local, national and industry media
- Priority 8 – Work as an effective partner
- Priority 9 – Develop the Cheshire East Council brand
- Priority 10 – An employer of choice - supporting the council's workforce strategy
- Priority 11 – Maintain emergency preparedness and crisis communications protocols
- Priority 12 – Horizon scanning for more detail about these priorities.

58% of respondents agreed these are suitable priorities for the strategy, 23% disagreed.

How strongly do you agree or disagree these priorities will deliver the strategy vision and aims?



Number of responses = 147

## Other priorities to focus on

A total of 50 comments were left by respondents to the question “Is there anything else you would like us to focus on?”, which were coded into four themes with a total number of 53 references. A comment could generate multiple references, so the total number of references can exceed the total number of comments.

A summary of all the comments and references made is provided below:

### **Priority focus (23 references)**

Respondents felt that 12 priorities for the council may be too many and that these should be simplified or reduced (11 references). Respondents made a number of comments about how some of the priorities seemed contradictory or that one should be more important than others (6 references).

Respondents felt priorities should have measurable outcomes (2 references) and that they should be service focused (4 references).

*“I feel Priority 1 should be placed around fifth - it detracts from the initial point; engaging with communities. Ensure you can reach your audience before telling them what you intend to do. I also feel that Priority 7 should be after Priorities 8, 9 and 10. Presenting a happy workforce reinforces a brand, presenting a more favourable media presence on any scale”*

*“12 priorities is a lot and arguably too many to clearly focus on. From a resident perspective starting with the dissemination of corporate information, whilst doubtless important, could be seen as looking down the wrong end of the telescope. Perhaps something more focussed on explaining how residents’ diverse needs are being met might be a more popular starting point”*

### **Communication methods (15 references)**

Respondents raised concerns about the move to more digital communication methods and felt this may lead to more being excluded (9 references) and expressed preferences for postal and face to face communication (2 references). Respondents felt the council should do more to make sure all have access to a good level of information (4 references).

### **Resident voice (10 references)**

Respondents once again reiterated that they felt the council should listen more to resident concerns and that more two-way dialogue should take place (10 references). Respondents felt more consideration should be given to residents when decision-making and that when they contact the council more should be done ensure responses are given.

### **General comments (5 references)**

Respondents left both positive (1 reference) and negative (4 references) comments under this theme. Negative comments included issues with services or perceptions that this was a waste of money.

## Final comments on the strategy

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A total of 69 comments were left by respondents to the question “Do you have any other comments or suggestions you would like to make about the Communications Strategy for Residents?”, which were coded into four themes with a total number of 81 references. A comment could generate multiple references, so the total number of references can exceed the total number of comments.

A summary of all the comments and references made is provided below:

### Listening and transparency (26 references)

Respondents were clear in their request to feel listened to by Cheshire East, again iterating they felt this should be a key part of the strategy (15 references) and being more involved in an open decision-making process (4 references). Respondents felt the council should have a greater commitment to responding to residents and that the council should engage in more two-way dialogue (7 references).

*“There appears to be too little emphasis on the Council’s responsibility if not duty to respond to queries and complaints and requests made by the residents”*

### Communication methods (22 references)

Respondents generally felt that Cheshire East should do more to communicate and share information, particularly in regard to their local area (9 references). Respondents questioned the methods of making communication expressing a preference for postal, face to face and phone access (10 references).

Respondents raised a number of alternative communication channels they felt should be used more such as radio, establishing a podcast, or expanding the social media offering (3 references)

### Strategy comments (20 references)

Respondents had two key suggestions for the strategy under this theme. The first was to make sure that the strategy was actually deliverable and not just a wish list (10 references). The second was to simplify the strategy and question whether it needed a number of the aims, that is should be in plain English and a one-page summary format if possible (9 references). One group also commented on the need to focus on environmental issues and how this strategy could address the decarbonisation of Cheshire East and the information residents would need to do so (1 reference).

*“This feels like a communications strategy for the council not for residents”*

### **General comments (13 references)**

Respondents left general positive comments about the strategy (7 references) as well as general negative comments including topics such as the strategy, roads, local issues, or waste collection (6 references).

*“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 how these aims are to be met in a little more detail”*

## Conclusions

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### Consultation response

The consultation received 151 responses in total, which is a fairly typical number of responses for a consultation on a strategy of this type.

However, more in-depth face to face engagement on the strategy, or on the key aspects of it, may be required in future to ensure the strategy is consulted on more widely, and remains relevant and effective.

Consultation responses are also weighted heavily towards Digital Influence Panel members, who are naturally more inclined to want to get involved in local decision-making than other stakeholders.

### General support for the strategy

It is positive to see general support for the strategy from those that fed back, with 64% of respondents agreeing the strategy aims are suitable, and 58% agreeing the strategy priorities are suitable.

### Areas for improvement

Respondents suggested the strategy could be improved by:

- Delivering on the vision, and making the vision shorter
- Having more emphasis on non-digital communication, such as postal, face-to-face and telephone communication
- Having more emphasis in the strategy on the council listening and on 2 way communication
- Making the strategy shorter and simpler, using plain English
- Having fewer priorities (12 may be too many)
- Involving residents more in decision-making processes



## **Appendix 1 – Email consultation responses**

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The following appendix includes all consultation email responses received that the council has permission to publish. Emails are listed in chronological order of when they were received.

### **Email 1 – Crewe Town Council, Regeneration Team**

Email received 10 October 2022:

“I agree with the majority of comments but would question the Council ‘Brand’ and promotion of Cheshire East.

Cheshire East does not have an identified place brand, however some of the places within Cheshire East have established or developing brands.

If the proposal is to promote the entire area then some consultation on what its brand values and identity are should be undertaken.

Where appropriate, the individual place brands should continue to be used.”

### **Email 2 – Holmes Chapel Parish Council**

Email received 18 October 2022:

“Please see below a response from Holmes Chapel Parish Council to the Communications Strategy for Residents:

This strategy appears to be somewhat one-way, focusing primarily on how Cheshire East are communicating, which is in essence just PR. It does not cover how to obtain feedback from residents and, in particular, from Town and Parish Councils. A greater emphasis on 2-way communication is needed. Cheshire East is not effectively communicating with Town and Parish Councils, in particular when receiving ideas and areas for improvements from Town and Parish Councils who have greater depth of knowledge and understanding of the issues facing their local areas. 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. This strategy needs to address how to engage more with residents and other bodies, in particular Town and Parish Councils. Town and Parish Conferences that used to take place twice a year were also a useful forum for communication.”

