

OPEN FOR PUBLICATION

Corporate Policy Committee

Thursday, 11 July 2023

**Communications Strategy for Residents
2022-25 – progress update**

Report of: Sarah Bullock, Director of Policy and Change

Report Reference No: CP/12/23-24

Ward(s) Affected: All wards

Purpose of Report

- 1 The purpose of this report is to update members on progress towards delivery of Cheshire East Council's Communications Strategy for Residents 2022-2025 up to 31 May 2023.
- 2 The strategy sets out how the Council will develop communications with residents, delivering news, information about services and promotional campaigns.
- 3 The Communications Strategy for Residents supports the council's vision for an open, fairer, greener Cheshire East, as set out in the Corporate Plan. In particular, the strategy supports the priorities of:
 - (a) Ensure that there is transparency in all aspects of council decision making
 - (b) Listen, learn and respond to our residents, promoting opportunities for a two-way conversation
 - (c) Promote and develop the services of the council through regular communication and engagement with all residents
- 4 And the following actions from the Corporate Plan 2021-25:
 - (a) A communications plan which is targeted at residents (especially those who are heard to reach) to include digital opportunities

- (b) Review the style of communications to give a contemporary and effective approach,
- (c) Regular, proactive communications through all channels

Executive Summary

- 5 In December 2022, Corporate Policy Committee approved the Communications Strategy for Residents 2022-25. Progress is reported below against the four agreed strategic aims.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Corporate Policy Committee is recommended to:

1. Consider progress in delivering the Communications Strategy for Residents; and
2. Agree to receive further updates every six months to monitor progress.

Background

- 6 The Communications Strategy for Residents 2022-25 states the following vision for the council's communications with residents:
- "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 The strategy includes the following aims:
- (a) Aim 1 – Build engaged audiences from Cheshire East's diverse communities
 - (b) Aim 2 – Promote council priorities through a coordinated programme of activity
 - (c) Aim 3 - Be an effective voice which promotes Cheshire East's priorities, challenges and achievements
 - (d) Aim 4 – Build resilience to respond to new circumstances and emergencies

- 8 Each of these aims will be delivered through a number of priority actions.
- 9 Progress against each of these aims and actions up to 31 May 2023 is reported below.
- 10 **Aim 1 - Build engaged audiences from Cheshire East's diverse communities**
- (a) Priority 1 – Improve communication with seldom-head audiences**
1. We have used alternative approaches to communicate with seldom-heard groups about key council activities, including producing easy-read documents, sharing messages via adult and children's social care staff, using internal staff networks, engaging with service user groups, working with our communities teams and highlighting key promotions, news and consultation opportunities with Councillors for onward sharing. Projects have included:
 - a. Elections
 - b. Children's rights month
 - c. Produced a video as part of the new member induction programme featuring members of Youth Council and Youth Parliament setting out what they think is important for councillors to know and what is important to young people for the next 4 years.
 - d. Homes for Ukraine scheme
 - e. Cost-of-living resources
 - f. Health and wellbeing initiatives, including vaccinations
 - g. SEND strategy
 - h. Medium-term financial strategy (MTFS)/Budget consultation and council tax.
 2. We have supported Armed Forces Day 2023, complementing the council's our Armed Forces Covenant commitments.
 3. We are planning to:
 - a. Undertake further analysis of digitally-excluded to understand communications needs and alternatives.
 - b. Explore opportunities with other stakeholders including town and parish councils, community and voluntary sector organisations and partners to help share

information to communities and individuals who may not routinely or easily access council information and news.

- c. Continue our work to ensure that all videos that are published by the council have subtitles or supporting transcripts that are linked to or available on request.
- d. Continue to ensure we add alternative text (alt-text) to digital content and photos and generate accessible documents (including PDFs) wherever possible.
- e. Work with Cheshire East health and care partners to share best practice and opportunities to increase the reach of our communications.

(b) Priority 2 – Support the shift to digital channels

- 1. We promoted Digital Cheshire's achievement of 3,000 full fibre connections across the county
- 2. As of 31 May 2023, there were 42,103 subscribers to the council's various e-newsletters an increase of 858 in the last six months. We are working to develop and launch a sign-up campaign to further promote this service alongside further development of our newsletter offer.
- 3. We will continue to review our social media practice and policy, recognising the changing social media landscape and user habits and preferences.
- 4. We will continue to work with the customer experience programme and services to maintain, develop and promote e-newsletter communication and subscriptions across council services.
- 5. We will continue to support digital strategy initiatives and digital inclusion partnership plan.

(c) Priority 3 – Help people to understand how to influence and get involved in council decision-making

- 1. We have promoted consultation and engagement opportunities for the general public and specific stakeholder groups, including:
 - a. Medium-term financial strategy (MTFS)/Budget consultation
 - b. Day opportunities in Knutsford
 - c. Care at home survey
 - d. Mental health plan consultation

- e. High needs funding top-up funding
 - f. Family hubs branding
 - g. Falls prevention strategy
 - h. Cheshire East health and wellbeing strategy
 - i. Conversation with the leader and deputy leader, December 2022
2. We also promoted, extensively, the requirements for voter ID and to register to vote, to support people's right to vote in the local borough and town and parish council elections.
 3. We are developing a multi-channel information campaign to improve understanding of and access to ways to influence council decision, policy and services delivery – based on the approach to consultation and engagement approved by corporate policy committee in July 2022.
 4. We are developing an automated email service to promote new consultations as they are published onto the website at cheshireeast.gov.uk/consultations

11 Aim 2 - Promote council priorities through a coordinated programme of activity

(a) Priority 4 – Promote the corporate plan, projects programmes and priorities

1. We have delivered a range of communications activities and campaigns in support of corporate plan projects, programmes and priorities, these include:
 - a. Carbon neutral action plan
 - b. Fostering
 - c. Crowd funding
 - d. Winter wellbeing and ongoing health and wellbeing initiatives, including CWP's Living Well service
 - e. SEND strategy
 - f. Major infrastructure projects, including Middlewich Eastern Bypass and Poynton Relief Road.
 - g. Town centre regeneration and vitality plans
 - h. Active and sustainable travel initiatives
 - i. Improving our leisure centres (Congleton Leisure Centre)

- j. Local plan / Site Allocations and Development Policies Document (SADPD)

(b) Priority 5 – Improve understanding of how council tax is spent, council funding and help people have their say in budget setting

1. We delivered a campaign to explain the council's budget and MTFS proposals, informing people about financial pressures, demand on services and council funding.
2. Following this we produced detailed information about council tax, which was included with all council tax bills.
3. We are now planning extensive communications activity to support the 2024/25 budget setting process while continuing to support work to deliver 2023/24 budget proposals. This will include campaign activity to provide further general information on council funding and current and forecast financial pressures.

(c) Priority 6 – Improve understanding about key universal services

1. We are working with service delivery partners to develop communications campaigns, for deployment later this year, to help people to understand the following key services:
 - a. Highways maintenance
 - b. Planning / development management
 - c. Waste and recycling collections, including proposed changes to garden waste collections
 - d. This is alongside frequent ongoing day-to-day operational communications about these key services.

12 Aim 3 - Be an effective voice which promotes Cheshire East's priorities, challenges and achievements

(a) Priority 7 – Positively manage our relationships with local, national and industry media

1. Corporate Policy Committee approved a revised media relations protocol in February 2023.
2. We have provided support and continued to build relationships with journalists at elections counts and annual general meeting.
3. We have dealt with 386 media enquiries during this six-month period.

4. We are planning a media training programme for council spokespersons to ensure they are well-equipped to work with the media when representing the council.
5. We have spoken to all key media outlets operating across Cheshire East to ensure our media release style and sending mechanism is able to maximise our opportunity in printed and digital placements.
6. We have contacted key media outlets to gain a deeper understanding of the traditional media readership trends in printed press, versus online digital audiences to ensure we have a better picture of Cheshire East Council's changing media landscape.
7. We are working towards developing a new streamlined way to manage distribution of our releases to the media so we can track monitor open and 'bounce' rates. This will help us to ensure that our releases are being effectively distributed.

(b) Priority 8 – Work as an effective partner

1. The council's communications team is closely involved with the Cheshire East Health and Care Partnership and Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board. We are working to coordinate strategic and operational communications about health and care integration in Cheshire East.
2. The team is also actively involved in the Cheshire Resilience Forum (CRF) communications and engagement network – shaping sub-regional communications preparedness and response in case of emergencies.
3. The team also works with partners to deliver communications about a range of partnerships, including: SEND partnership, Cheshire East Safeguarding Children's Partnership, Crewe Towns Board, Cheshire and Warrington Local Enterprise Partnership.

(c) Priority 9 – Develop the Cheshire East Council brand

1. We have engaged with partners to ensure that branding is applied appropriately and proportionately in partnership working context – for example:
 - a. Ansa
 - b. Everybody Health and Leisure
 - c. Cheshire East Health and Care Partnership

2. We are planning ahead to ensure that future branding aligns to the council's long-term strategic plans (Corporate Plan beyond 2025)
3. Ensuring correct application of the visual identity on committee decision template.

(d) Priority 10 – An employer of choice – supporting the council's workforce strategy

1. Recruitment campaigns for:
 - a. Adult social care
 - b. Children's services social workers
 - c. Apprenticeships
2. Promotion of all Cheshire East vacancies via did you know e-newsletter campaign and ad hoc social media posts
3. Promoting workforce engagement events at all levels, across the organisation.
4. We continue to develop a series of mini videos that highlight the benefits of working at Cheshire East Council from the perspective of current staff members to potential employees. One video also incorporates an element of British Sign Language.

13 Aim 4 - Build resilience to respond to new circumstances and emergencies

(a) Priority 11 – Maintain emergency preparedness and crisis communications protocols

1. The communications team regularly participates in emergency planning exercises and live incidents with Cheshire Resilience Forum (CRF) – this has included the live major incident standby for severe weather in March 2023.
2. The team is also actively involved in the Cheshire Resilience Forum (CRF) communications and engagement network – shaping sub-regional communications preparedness and response in case of emergencies.
3. We are reviewing preparedness plans in line with CRF protocols and Cabinet Office crisis comms operating model.
4. Reviewing the top 10 more likely emergency events to happen in Cheshire East and developing model communication plans for each.
5. We have responded to cold weather alerts and given feedback on partner response to storms to improve

subregion communication responses in live incidents, particularly power cuts.

(b) Priority 12 – Horizon scanning

1. Cheshire East Council is a member of LGcomms, a national body made up of an association of organisations working together to raise the standard of communications in the public sector. This provides a range of resources, seminars and networking opportunities, sharing best practice, professional horizon-scanning and learning opportunities. The head of communications is a member of the executive committee.
2. Team members regularly attend and engage with Government Communications Service networking and information events to better understand locally relevant, national campaigns. Local communications activity related to this has included:
 - a. National emergency alerts
 - b. Voter ID
 - c. Childhood vaccinations
 - d. Energy bills support vouchers
 - e. Coronation of His Majesty King Charles III

Consultation and Engagement

- 14 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.
- 15 Response to the consultation was largely supportive of the draft strategy, as presented to the committee in July 2022. 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.
- 16 The strategy was therefore updated as a direct result of feedback provided through the consultation.

- 17 As work towards the aims and priorities of the strategy continue, there may be occasion to undertake further consultation, engagement or co-production, for example, to design channels and opportunities for specific audiences.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 18 The Communications Strategy for Residents outlines a clear vision for the Council's communications with residents required to deliver against its commitments as set out in the Council's Corporate Plan 2021-25. Corporate Policy Committee has oversight of progress against the actions contained within the Strategy as part of the Council's commitment to openness and transparency.

Other Options Considered

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Option	Impact	Risk
Do nothing – the committee could decide to not receive updates on progress towards the aims and priorities of the Communications Strategy for Residents 2022-25	The committee would not be sighted on progress towards the aims and priorities of the Communications Strategy for Residents 2022-25	The committee may miss opportunities to support progress towards the aims and priorities of the Communications Strategy for Residents 2022-25

Implications and Comments

Monitoring Officer/Legal

- 20 There is no statutory duty for the local authority to have a communications strategy, but it must ensure that all communications comply with relevant legislation. In particular, these are:
- (a) Data Protection Act 2018
 - (b) Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988
 - (c) Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000
 - (d) Libel and defamation law
 - (e) Code of recommended practice for local authority publicity

- (f) Advertising Standards Authority's advertising codes.
- (g) Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018
- (h) Civil Contingencies Act 2004

Section 151 Officer/Finance

- 21 The recommendations in this report have been proposed in the context of agreed budget for communications and engagement activity (corporate communications service cost centre).

Policy

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<p>An open and enabling organisation</p> <p>Ensure that there is transparency in all aspects of council decision making</p> <p>The council to be seen as being a fair open and transparent organisation and able to demonstrate it</p> <p>Listen, learn and respond to our residents, promoting opportunities for a two-way conversation</p> <p>Our communities will be well informed about things they can do to prepare for emergencies</p> <p>The council is seen by residents as responsive</p> <p>Support and develop our workforce to be confident, motivated, innovative and empowered</p> <p>Cheshire East Council seen as an employer of</p>	<p>A council which empowers and cares about people</p> <p>Work together with our residents and our partners to support people and communities to be strong and resilient</p> <p>Cheshire East is a welcoming and supportive place, where equality, freedom, fairness and opportunities are available to all.</p>	<p>A thriving and sustainable place</p>
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<p>choice</p> <p>Promote and develop the services of the council through regular communication and engagement with all residents</p> <p>Residents and staff to be aware of the council and the services we provide</p> <p>Resident satisfaction with the council to be in line with similar councils</p> <p>The council to be regarded as a good partner</p>		
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23 The communications and media activities of Cheshire East Council are subject to the following policies:

- (a) Media relations protocol
- (b) Social networking policy
- (c) Social media abuse policy
- (d) Visual identity guide
- (e) Brand protocol

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

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

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

25 An equality impact assessment was completed for the Communications Strategy for Residents decision report.

- 26 The strategy includes the principles that our communications should be inclusive and accessible.

Human Resources

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

Risk Management

- 28 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.
- 29 The principles set out here support management of the Strategic Risk Register corporate risk SR13 – Reputation.

Rural Communities

- 30 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 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.
- 31 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.

Children and Young People including Cared for Children, care leavers and Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

- 32 Children and young people are an important audience for the council. The 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.

Public Health

- 33 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.

Climate Change

- 34 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.
- 35 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.
- 36 The strategy includes the principle that our communications should be 'green'. We will work to reduce the carbon footprint and environmental impact of our communications activity. Our communications procurement framework makes explicit references to our aspirations to be carbon neutral by 2025 and asks all our suppliers to be mindful of file size, printing products and materials and we actively challenge any requests for single use plastic.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Michael Moore, Head of Communications Michael.moore@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Appendices:	Appendix 1 – Communications Strategy for Residents, 2022-25
Background Papers:	

