



Cheshire East Council
**Communications
Strategy for
Residents**

2022-25

Open

Fair

Green

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1 Context statement / background

1.1 Introduction

Cheshire East Council has committed to “promote the services of the council through regular communication and engagement with all residents” (Cheshire East Council’s Corporate Plan 2021-2025).

It is important that communication between the council and residents is open, fair, engaging and accessible. The council provides services that directly affect people’s lives and we need people to know how to access services when they need them. It is also important that people understand how decisions are made, how and why priorities are set, how the council’s activities are funded and how well the council

is performing. We also want to provide a clear picture of the challenges the council faces and the wider context in which it operates.

Individual residents need different things from the council – and they may have different preferences about how they get information and news – ‘one-size-does-not-fit-all’ in terms of communications activity. So, it is important that we constantly assess and review the effectiveness of our communications activities to make sure they are accessible, useful and meaningful, and that they provide value for money.

This strategy includes a clear vision for the council’s communications with residents. It sets out aims and outlines priorities for communications activity that will support the delivery of the corporate plan. It also sets out the principles we will follow when communicating.

1.2 Have your say

This communications strategy is focused on the council’s communications with residents.

In developing this strategy, we asked residents and other interested stakeholders and groups the following:

- What do you think about our vision for communications with residents?
- What do you think about our communications aims?
- How well will the proposed priorities deliver our aims and vision?
- Is there anything else you would like to see us focus on?
- Do you have any other comments or suggestions you would like to make?



1.3 Cheshire East Council

Serving an estimated population of 398,800 Cheshire East Council is the third largest Local Authority in the North West, and the fifteenth largest in the country.



The council is a unitary council – this means that we provide all the services that a county council and a district or borough council would provide. We provide more than 500 services in support of our communities, economy, health, education and environment.

The council's day-to-day budget for services is around £300 million per year, (excluding schools funding).

In addition, we are investing more than £600 million in major projects such as roads, town centre regeneration, infrastructure and schools.

The council is made up of 82 councillors representing 52 wards. In May 2021, the council moved to a committee system of decision making, with six service committees plus finance sub-committee.

The council employs around 3,500 staff in four directorates – corporate services, place, adults, health and integration, and children and families.

The council works closely with a wide range of other organisations in the public, private and voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sectors to deliver its priorities.

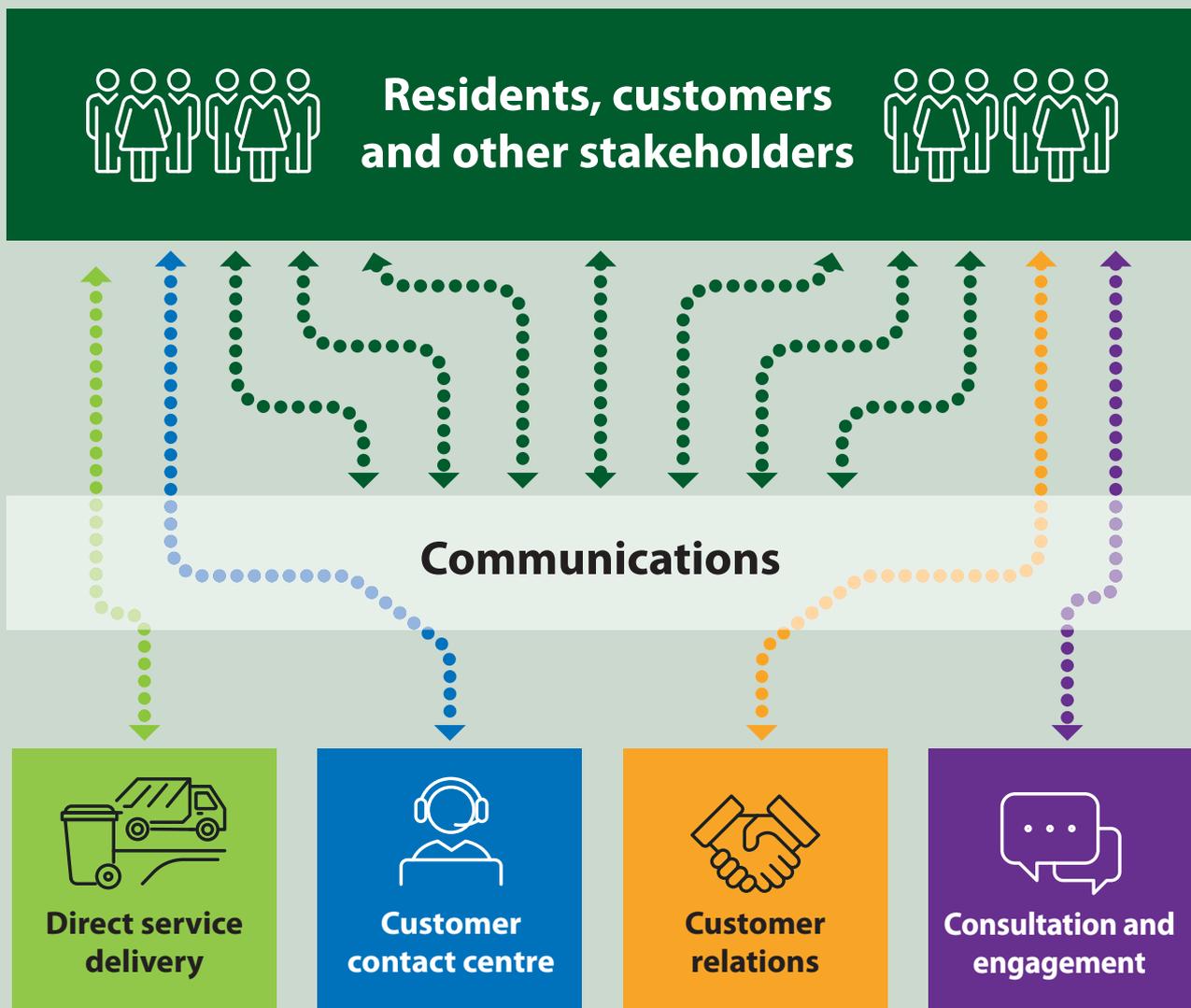
1.4 Scope of the strategy

This 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.

It works alongside other strategies and policies that cover the wider range of two-way interaction and communication between individual residents and the council, its officers and members. For example, the council’s customer experience strategy sets out

how we treat customers when they are trying to access our services - to provide the best possible experience for our customers, whoever they are and however they contact us. And the council's coordinated and collaborative approach to consultation and engagement sets out how the council will involve people in influencing decisions about services and policies

This communications strategy for residents, and the activities it covers, while clearly defined, must work as a key part of this wider strategic approach for managing the council’s relationships with residents, customers and other stakeholders.



1.5 Cheshire East Council's communications activities

In 2021/22 the council:



Published **287** media releases



Was included in more than **6,600** individual media articles and news stories



Responded to more than **700** media enquiries



Had **31,000** followers for the corporate Twitter account



Had **22,000** followers for the corporate Facebook account



More than **34,000** subscribers to e-newsletters about our services

Key subject matter in 2021/22 included:



COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery



Town centre regeneration, including Crewe and Macclesfield



Adoption of the committee system for council decision-making



Community Governance Review of Town and Parish Councils



Council tax and funding for council services



Council's carbon neutral plan



Highways maintenance and funding



Major infrastructure projects, including HS2 and Congleton Link Road



Support for refugees – including Homes for Ukraine and Afghan resettlement scheme



Adult social care funding and service pressures



Services for children and young people with special educational needs



Fostering, adoption and children's social care

2 Vision for Cheshire East Council's communication 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."

2.1 Strategic outcomes for communication with residents



3 Aims



Aim 1 - Build engaged audiences from Cheshire East's diverse communities

Cheshire East has a diverse population that lives in a diverse geography. Different individuals and groups have different needs, interests and opportunities to interact with the council.

We must take and make opportunities to listen to residents.

Some individuals and groups may experience more obstacles to accessing information and news about their council than others. These under-served communities may include:

- people who identify as minority groups in relation to protected characteristics as defined under the Equalities Act 2010,
- people who cannot or choose not to access digital channels of communication,
- people in particular socio-economic circumstances, and
- people who live in different geographical areas.

So, we must work to further understand our residents' varying communications needs and preferences and develop channels and styles of communication that encourage and enable interest and two-way engagement on an equitable basis.



Aim 2 – Promote council priorities through a coordinated programme of activity

The council delivers a wide range of services. We have an ambitious programme of activities to deliver our corporate plan. Effective and well-planned communication is essential to deliver these services, programmes and initiatives successfully.

Our residents need to be able to find out about council services and initiatives and understand the policies and vision behind them. We also want them to understand what they can do to help themselves, to reduce dependency on council services and retain independence. We will prioritise our efforts and investment in communications activity to ensure value for money.



Aim 3 – Be an effective voice which promotes Cheshire East’s priorities, challenges and achievements

Cheshire East Council works alongside many partners, including NHS and other local service providers (such as police and fire and rescue), town and parish councils, VCFSE organisations, commissioned services / private businesses and government departments.

In this increasingly complex environment, it is important that the council is accountable and credited for its work and its impact on individuals, communities, economy and environment. Council taxpayers need to understand what the council does and what local taxation pays for. The council needs to have a clear and consistent brand that is used to identify its services, projects, initiatives etc.

In order to meet the council’s corporate plan priorities, it is also important to further develop the council’s profile nationally, to improve opportunities for funding, innovation and influence.

The council is also a key employer in Cheshire East and is operating in an increasingly competitive recruitment market.

Therefore, we must take steps to ensure that the council has a clear identity and a clear and consistent voice.



Aim 4 – Build resilience to respond to new circumstances and emergencies

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of effective council communications in the response to the national emergency, giving people the information and guidance required to help them protect themselves, the people around them and the local economy.

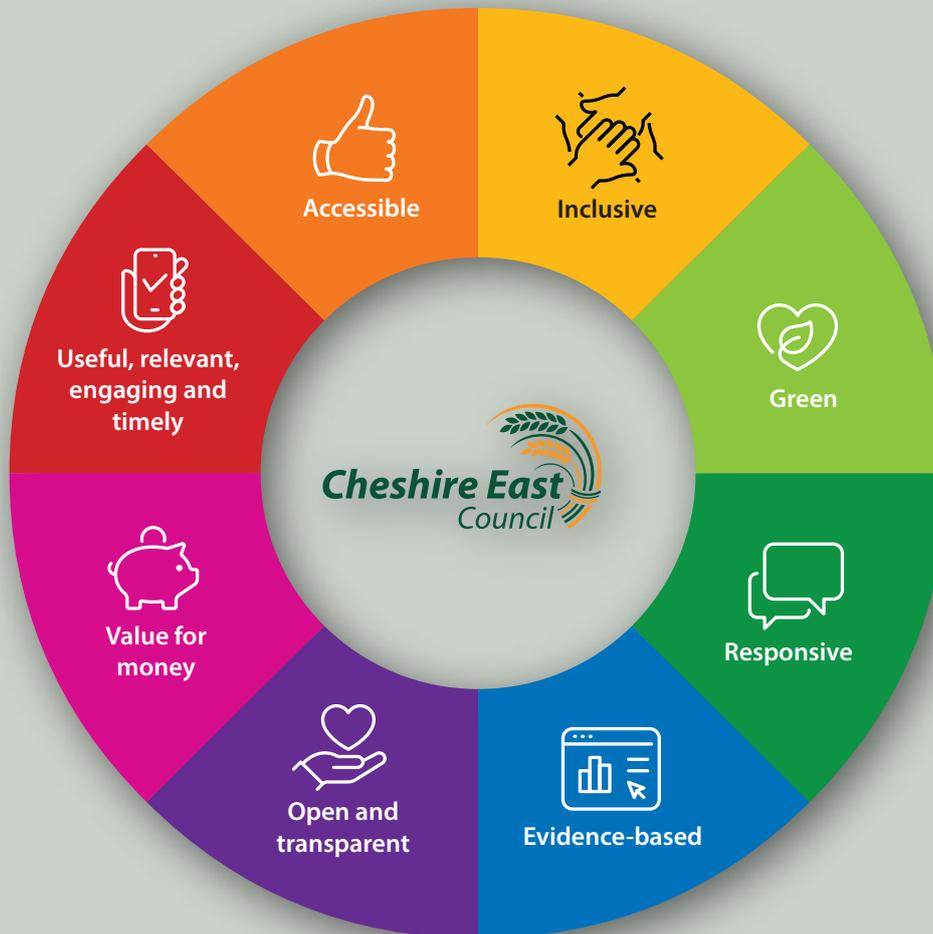
Effective communications are essential in response to major incidents and emergencies. The council has a duty under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 to “Put in place arrangements to make information available to the public about civil protection matters and maintain arrangements to warn, inform and advise the public in the event of an emergency.”

The council also has a key role in supporting the local response to national initiatives such as ‘Homes for Ukraine’.

We must also be prepared to respond to unplanned opportunities and threats, alongside delivery of a planned and prioritised communications programme for the council. This can include taking advantage of emerging national trends and initiatives, funding that might support council priorities, or tackling misinformation and dis-information about the council and its services.

This means using intelligence and insight, horizon-scanning, and developing effective protocols, resources and training to be as prepared as we can be.

4 Principles



- Accessible**
 People have different needs and preferences; we will make every effort to make all communications as accessible as possible to as many as possible.
- Inclusive**
 Communications will be representative and considerate of Cheshire East's diverse communities and population.
- Useful, relevant, engaging and timely**
 People are inundated with information, news and opinion from many different and competing sources. We will endeavour not to add to the unwanted 'noise' but will target and adapt messages and ensure that they are timely. We will aim to inspire positive action and support for council priorities.
- Responsive**
 Responsive to the changing needs of our residents and communities listening to them and supporting them to be strong, resilient and successful.
- Evidence-based**
 We will use insight and intelligence to ensure that our communications will be effective in meeting agreed objectives.
- Open and transparent**
 Our communications will be honest and factual, we will endeavour to make the council's role, and the impact of its decisions and actions, clear in any given circumstance.
- Value for money**
 We will not spend money on communications activity without being able to demonstrate the value delivered against any spend.
- Green**
 We will work to reduce the carbon footprint and environmental impact of our communications activity, for example, working to reduce use of plastic in mailings, and considering carbon cost of both digital and printed promotional materials.

5 Audiences and stakeholders



Residents' communications preferences

Recent feedback from residents about communications preferences (from a representative sample) includes:

- **88%** of residents use email on a daily basis
- **89%** of residents use the internet daily
- Daily internet use is lower for those aged 75 and over (**68%** use the internet daily)
- It is also lower for those matching the customer experience strategy persona characteristics of 'supported elderly' (**55%** use the internet daily).
- **68%** of people who identified themselves as disabled use the internet daily
- **Older people** are more likely to read a local newspaper.
- Facebook use is relatively high in age groups **16-74** (but particularly 54 years and younger).
- Some **22%** of over 75s use Facebook but use of other social media in this group is negligible.
- **Older people** were more likely to feel well informed about the council and its services than younger people.

6 Priorities - delivering our aims

Aim 1 - Build engaged audiences from Cheshire East's diverse communities

Priority 1 - Improve communication with seldom-heard audiences



Cheshire East has a diverse population that lives in a diverse geography. Different individuals and groups have different needs, interests and opportunities to interact with the council.

Some individuals and groups may experience more obstacles to having their voice heard and find it harder to access information and news about their council than others. So, we must listen and work to further understand all our residents' communications needs and preferences and develop channels and styles of communication that encourage and enable interest and engagement on an equitable basis.



Priority 2 - Support the shift to digital channels

We will support the council's digital strategy programme and will develop effective digital communications channels to reach the large majority of residents who prefer digital channels.

However, we must also ensure that we provide alternatives for those who cannot or choose not to engage digitally. While non-digital channels, such as outdoor advertising, postal mailings and face-to-face communication can be appropriate in some cases, these non-digital options can bring additional costs. We will be particularly keen to explore other methods, including seeking the support of local stakeholders in communities, such as ward members and town and parish councils.

Digital communications work will include exploring the full potential of email, social media and other digital platforms, complementing the work of digital and customer experience strategies.

Priority 3 - Help people to understand how to influence and get involved with council decision-making

Communications activity can directly support the council's approach to consultation and engagement, and participation in local democracy.

This includes raising awareness of consultation and engagement opportunities and helping people to understand how feedback has influenced decision-making.

Aim 2 – Promote council priorities through a coordinated programme of activity

Priority 4 - Promote corporate plan projects, programmes and priorities

For the purposes of this strategy, the priorities listed in the corporate plan are distilled down into the following seven themes:



- Reducing health inequality and long-term reliance on care, and an increasingly pressured health care system
- Climate change, carbon neutral plan
- Good growth, good transport links, town centres, employment – celebrating and promoting Cheshire East as a place
- Protecting the most vulnerable people in our communities
- Digital vision
- Give all children the best start in life to achieve their full potential
- Getting involved with local decisions



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

The council collects around £250 million in council tax each year, with around £50 million of income from business rates. It spends this income on providing a wide range of local public services. Of this estimated £300 million spend, just over £50 million is spent on the most visible, universal 'place' services, such as roads maintenance and waste collection, that many residents may first think of when thinking about the council's work. It is important that we listen to people and help them understand how the council's budget is prioritised and spent, and how they can have their say in the council's spending plans, for example, through the annual budget consultation.



Priority 6 - Improve understanding about key universal services

Improve understanding about key universal services and how to access them, and the standards of service people can expect, supporting the customer experience strategy. For many residents, these are the most visible and/or most frequently experienced council services. We must also listen to what residents say about these services and promote opportunities to engage about them.

Includes:

- Road maintenance
- Waste and recycling
- Planning and development control

Aim 3 – Be an effective voice which promotes Cheshire East’s priorities, challenges and achievements

Priority 7 - Positively manage our relationships with local, national and industry media



The media landscape has changed significantly over the last ten years – and continues to do so. However, while the readership of local print newspapers has dropped significantly, readership of journalists’ work in other media (online, social, broadcast etc) is thriving. Securing positive coverage about the council’s priorities in local, national and industry media is a valuable part of ensuring that people can access information and news about the council and its services.

Priority 8 - Work as an effective partner

Cheshire East Council works alongside many partners, including NHS and other local service providers (such as police and fire and rescue), town and parish councils, VCFSE organisations, commissioned services / private businesses and government departments.

We must work effectively with key partners in health, VCFSE, communities, local public services and government departments to coordinate and maximise the impact of our communications on shared priorities and audiences.



Priority 9 - Develop the Cheshire East Council brand

It is important that the council is accountable and credited for its work and its impact on individuals, communities, economy and environment. Council taxpayers need to understand what the council does and what local taxation pays for.

The code of recommended practice for local authority publicity establishes the principle that publicly funded council communications material must be clearly identifiable as such.

Therefore, we must take steps to ensure that the council has a clear identity and a clear and consistent voice.

Priority 10 - An employer of choice - supporting the council’s workforce strategy

The council’s corporate plan includes the priority for the council to be an employer of choice.

The council’s workforce strategy includes key priorities and challenges that communications activity for residents can support, including:

- Attracting and retaining talent and skills
- Competitive marketplace for people in skill shortage areas
- Challenging financial context

Like many councils and other employers, the council is facing challenges in recruiting to certain key roles and services. It also has a relatively older workforce and needs to ensure appropriate plans are in place to recruit and develop staff to ensure sustainable services and workforce.

In order to deliver against these priorities and meet these challenges, both internal and external communications will be required.

Aim 4 – Build resilience to respond to new circumstances and emergencies

Priority 11 - Maintain emergency preparedness and crisis communications protocols



Effective communications are essential in response to major incidents and emergencies.

The council has a duty under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 to “Put in place arrangements to make information available to the public about civil protection matters and maintain arrangements to warn, inform and advise the public in the event of an emergency.”



We must also be prepared to respond to unplanned opportunities and threats, alongside delivery of a planned and prioritised communications programme for the council.

The experiences of delivering communications throughout the COVID-19 pandemic have provided valuable opportunities for learning.

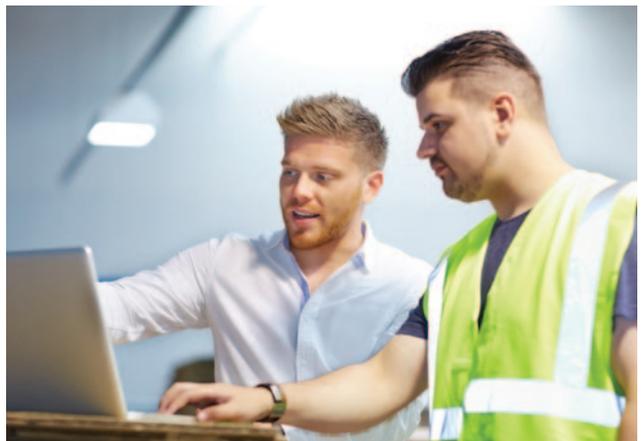


Priority 12 - Horizon scanning

Effective horizon scanning activity will enable more effective communications planning and will help us respond more effectively to emerging trends, opportunities and risks.

There are many external factors that impact on the delivery of council services, priorities and communications activity, including:

- International affairs
- National government decisions and policy
- Partner and other local stakeholder activity
- Local political developments



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