

North Herts Council Marketing and Communications Strategy, 2024 - 2028

1.0 Introduction

With residents facing a cost-of-living crisis and council budgets being tightened further, it has never been more important for councils to communicate effectively with their audiences. Effective communication is critical as it has the power to engage communities, challenge misconceptions, build trust and confidence in the council and through that, strengthen relationships with residents, stakeholders and staff. The Communications team is a vital function of North Herts Council as they support members, officers and partners convey the council's vision, strategic priorities and themes and ensure the council is communicating in one clear and consistent voice.

Although communications help to tell the story of North Herts Council (and improve resident perceptions of the council), marketing is needed to promote and raise awareness of our vision, priorities and themes, to ensure that the right people, get the right message, at the right time through their preferred channel of choice. This was evident in the 2022 Outdoor Pools marketing campaign which helped drive a 53% increase in season ticket sales at Letchworth Outdoor pool and helped drive a 54% increase in total usage figures across both outdoor pools (2022 Vs 2021). It is therefore recommended, that the 2024 - 2028 strategy is a Marketing and Communications Strategy.

Communication is changing fast and as we move from a historic 'broadcaster' role that fixes problems, to a 'relationship-builder' that pre-empts problems and helps create solutions, we will need to embrace new technology and channels and the opportunities they provide us to reach our residents. This will not only be the responsibility of the Communications team but also the wider council, as ultimately, good communication is the responsibility of all officers and members.

This strategy builds on North Herts Council's current communication successes and includes learnings from other Local Authorities and the wider Marketing and Communications landscape. It sets out how we will communicate with our audiences and plan our marketing and communication activities for the next four years.

The main purpose of the 2024 - 2028 Marketing and Communications strategy is to support the delivery of the North Herts Council's 2022 - 2027 Council Plan and bring our vision, strategic priorities, and themes to life.

2.0 Current situation – where are we now?

Our last Communications Strategy was approved in 2019, just before COVID-19. The pandemic meant that the Communications team had no choice but to switch their focuses from the newly approved strategy to predominantly communicating National COVID-19 messages from Spring 2020 to Spring 2022. As the National lockdown lifted, the team were able to execute some of the key elements of the 2019 – 2023 Communications Strategy, namely:

- **Promotion of key projects/initiatives** – including Climate initiatives, the Churchgate redevelopment, the North Herts Place Narrative and our Local Plan.
- **Developing our Filming offer** – we have welcomed productions from Dr Foster, My Policeman and Tell Me Everything and are now being supported by FAMEPro (a free film permits management service for UK councils) to widen our reach.

- **Delivering positive and engaging campaigns** – Ease the Squeeze, Outdoor pool extensions, driving footfall & ticket sales at HTH and NHM.
- **Digital First** – we’ve increased our social media followers, e: news readership and partnered with Zencity to enhance our resident engagement and develop our consultation offer.

<p>Strengths – what do we do well?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campaigns – our 2023 Recruitment refresh saw a 14% increase in jobs page views (3 months post Vs prior). • Promoting two of our four Corporate themes: Our Places and our Environment. • Collaborative working – with teams from across the council and with Cabinet members. • Creativity – in terms of branding, campaign ideas, and look & feel. 	<p>Weaknesses – areas to improve.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of comms promoting two of our four Corporate themes: Our Services and Our Economy. • Strategic comms and sense-checking our campaigns/activity against our three priorities. • Lack of proactiveness pitching ideas/positive news stories to the media. • Internal promotion of key calendar dates to staff.
<p>Opportunities - to enhance our Comms.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased use of film/video – to create ‘thumb-stopping’ (i.e. attention-grabbing) content which talks directly to residents and humanises the council. • Briefing ‘in the field’/on reception staff on our priorities and current campaigns so that they become our advocates. • Greater collaborative working with District Partners i.e., Place Narrative is a good example of this. • Exploring new ways to reach residents (e.g., WhatsApp Channels) as reliance on traditional media reduces. 	<p>Threats – detrimental to our Comms.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An over-reliance on digital channels – the whole mix should be used wherever possible. • Budget – increased use of film/video requires the right equipment to do the best job possible. • Lack of forewarning of potentially contentious issues by council teams to enable proactive comms to be prepared, leaving us on the back foot. • Over-promotion of certain areas in the district rather than a ‘whole district’ approach.

3.0 Aims and Objectives – what are our focuses?

3.1 Corporate

Vision:



Priorities:



Strategic themes:



3.2 Marketing and Communications

Aims:

- **INFORM** – to bring our services and support to life; help residents understand who we are and what we do; show value for money.
- **INSPIRE** – people to take part/join in by sharing real-life examples of district successes. Work in partnership for a brighter future together and create Civic pride.
- **INVOLVE** – residents in our decision-making by giving them as many opportunities as possible to have their say and show we have listened by sharing outcomes.
- **INTERACT** – get the conversation going. Have two-way conversations whether in-person (e.g., Ward Walks) or online (e.g., Engage hubs). Give a face to the Council and show we are approachable/do listen.

Principles:

- Clear and consistent
- Open and transparent
- Targeted, relevant and timely
- Collaborative
- Accessible
- Cross-channel
- Cost-effective
- In line with corporate style and identity guidelines

Strategic approach:

- **People First** - a key priority so let's ensure our comms constantly highlight that we do put people first by sharing photo/film of people in the district and celebrate their successes.
- **Campaign-led** – results show that campaigns drive engagement, so a campaign-led approach is recommended wherever possible.
- **Cross-channel** – use the whole mix of channels to ensure that our key messages reach all audiences on the platform they prefer.
- **Digital First** - maintain this element of our cross-channel approach and ensure we 1) exploit the opportunities digital channels provide us with and 2) make it easier for people to share their views at a time that suits them.

3.3 Measurables:

Deliver well-planned, engaging, and measurable campaigns which are aligned to our Corporate vision, priorities and themes and which:

- Improve resident satisfaction levels with the way we run things (43% Source: March to June Community survey results).
- Improve our 'involves, consults and engages with the community' score (21% Source: March to June 2023 Community survey results).
- Maintain a balanced/positive press score for our press, broadcast and digital media coverage (99% Source Q3 Media Monitoring report).
- Social media:
 - Increase our Facebook fans by 10% YOY.
 - Increase our LinkedIn followers by 5% YOY.
 - Increase our Instagram followers by 10% YOY.
 - Increase our X (formerly Twitter) followers by 1% YOY.
- Digital:
 - Increase our e: news subscribers by 5%.
 - Increase our e: news open rate by 2%.
 - Increase our website sessions by 5%
 - Increase our website page views by 5%

Internal:

- Increase our Insight page views by 2%.
- Maintain a minimum of a third of staff attending our staff briefings.
- Maintain a minimum of 50% attendance at SMG meetings.

4.0 Audiences – who are we talking to?



Audience type

External – inform and engage.	Internal – inform & involve.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residents • Businesses/workers • Visitors • Media – local, regional, national and trade. • Community groups - including charities and voluntary organisations. • District Partners – including BIDs, Letchworth Heritage Foundation, Police, Fire & Rescue, Housing associations, County & District Councils. • Stakeholders – including Town and Parish Councils, MPs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council staff • Councillors • Contractors/Suppliers

Audience detail

The North Hertfordshire population is 51% women and 49% men, with 35% of the population 35 – 59 years of age.

From the audience information we can access across our digital channels, we are currently talking to a majority female audience, aged 35 – 54 years of age.

5.0 Key messages - what are we promoting?

- Clear and consistent messaging will be used to promote our Corporate priorities (which will be included in an updated version of our Corporate Style Guide).
- And our Corporate themes:



- All campaigns will be sense-checked to ensure they align/convey the above before creation begins. Taking our new-launched Ward Walks as an example:



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- We will ensure that our Corporate Brand Identity is always reflected, with a friendly, supportive, expert and positive tone. Humour will be injected (where relevant) to humanise the council further.
- Visually, we will feature people wherever possible. Any graphics created will have the same look & feel as the Council Plan and use colourways from our corporate branding guidelines.
- We will continue to use key calendar dates to maximise our exposure within any national campaigns being run and discussed/debated in the public arena.

6.0 Channels - how we're promoting our key messages?

- Our campaigns will be multi-channel to ensure that our key messages reach all audiences on whichever platform they prefer.
- We will explore new digital channels to continue our Digital First approach and ensure our communications remain relevant.
- New news be launched at peak viewing times per channel to ensure the greatest possible engagement.
- We will use marketing to tease, launch, and repeat our campaign messaging to ensure cut-through.
- All of the above will ensure that the right people (our audiences), get the right message (re our services/priorities) at the right time (time of year, time of day) and place (channel of choice).

Current channels:

External	Internal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Press - releases issued to Media (print, digital or radio) • Social Media (Facebook, X, Instagram and LinkedIn). Monitor Threads too. • Website • E-newsletters • Outlook magazine • Zencity resident engagement Hubs (Climate Hive and Churchgate Conversations) • In-person • Physical i.e., our buildings, DCO reception, libraries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff (ambassadors) • Insight • SharePoint (intranet) • Staff briefings • Senior Manager meetings • Global emails

New channels:

External	Internal
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <u>WhatsApp Channels</u> – once LAs are able to access it.• LGA Case Studies – look for opportunities to be featured and seen as industry-leading.• Awards – are there awards worth applying for, where resource and relevancy allows?• Press - proactive pitching of ideas/positive news stories.• Website Search Engine Optimisation and Pay Per Click, social media targeting and sponsorship (all of which would require additional investment).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Viva Engage and Forms• TEAMS• Regular team up-skilling

7.0 Planning and evaluation – measuring the impact of our Comms

We will continue to plan and evaluate our activity on a quarterly and annual basis using the Communications Activity Planner and Channel performance trackers, which were put in place in 2022.