

**CABINET**  
**16 January 2024**

**\*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT**

**TITLE OF REPORT:** 2024 – 2028 Marketing and Communications Strategy

**REPORT OF:** Service Director, Place

**EXECUTIVE MEMBER:** Leader of the Council, Elizabeth Dennis

**COUNCIL PRIORITY:** PEOPLE FIRST

**1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 To outline the Council's proposed approach to Marketing and Communications for the five-year period from 2024 – 2028.
- 2.2. To inform our residents on how we will communicate with them in the future.

**2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1. That Cabinet approves the 2024 - 2028 Marketing and Communications Strategy.

**3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 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.
- 3.2 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.
- 3.3 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.
- 3.4 It is therefore recommended, that the 2024 - 2028 strategy is a Marketing and Communications Strategy.

**4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 4.1. A purely Communications-based strategy was initially considered, however, one of the key learnings since the adoption of the 2019 – 2023 Communications Strategy is that where Marketing has been used to promote our news, event or initiative, it has driven greater engagement.

## **5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS**

- 5.1. A draft of the 2024 – 2028 Marketing and Communications strategy was taken to the internal, informal Political Liaison Board of the Executive and the Leadership team on 5 December 2023 where it was recommended that Cabinet approves the 2024 - 2028 Marketing and Communications Strategy. The Leader of the Council and Deputy Leader of the Council have also been consulted on this strategy.

## **6. FORWARD PLAN**

- 6.1 This report contains a recommendation on a key Executive decision that was first notified to the public in the Forward Plan on the 13 October 2023.

## **7. BACKGROUND**

- 7.1 The 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 restrictions of the pandemic 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 the Churchgate redevelopment and the North Herts Place Narrative.
- **Developing our Filming offer**, welcoming several large productions and securing support from FAME Pro (a free film permit management service for UK councils) to widen our reach.
- **Delivering positive and engaging campaigns** – including Ease the Squeeze (our cost-of-living campaign) and the 2022 Outdoor pool extensions.
- **Digital First** – we've increased our social media followers, e: news readership and partnered with Zencity to enhance resident engagement.

## **8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS**

### **8.1 The changing landscape**

- 8.1.1 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.
- 8.1.2 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 five years.

## **8.2 Purpose**

- 8.2.1 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.

## **8.3 Future strategic approach**

- 8.3.1 People First - a key priority so let's ensure our communications constantly highlight that we do put people first by sharing visuals of people in the district and celebrate their successes.
- 8.3.2 Campaign-led – results show that campaigns drive engagement, so a campaign-led approach is recommended wherever possible.
- 8.3.3 Cross-channel – use the whole mix of channels to ensure that our key messages reach all audiences on the platform they prefer.
- 8.3.4 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.

## **8.4 The 2024 - 2028 Marketing and Communications Strategy**

- 8.4.1 Please refer to Appendix A for the detailed strategy document.

## **9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 Cabinet TOR at 5.7.1 provides that the Cabinet will exercise the following function: "To prepare and agree to implement policies and strategies other than those reserved to Council."
- 9.2 The Local Government Act 1986 contained the statutory power for the Secretary of State to issue a Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity which all Local Authorities are required to have regard to. This was further strengthened by the insertion of a new section 4A of the 1986 Act by the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 which grants the Secretary of State the power to direct specific authorities to comply with requirements of the Code.
- 9.3 The current Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity sets out guidance on the content, style, distribution, and cost of local authority publicity. Seven principles underpin the guidance which requires all local authority publicity to be lawful, cost effective, objective, even handed, appropriate, to have regard to equality and diversity and to be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity. The Council follows the Recommended Code of Practice for Local Authority Publicity.
- 9.4 It is important to note that the Local Government Act 1986 specifically prohibits Local Authorities publishing any material which appears to be intended to affect public support for any particular political party.

## **10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 There are no direct financial implications from this report. The cost of the activities outlined in the marketing and communications strategy will be funded from the existing budget provision.

## **11. RISK IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1. Good Risk Management supports and enhances the decision-making process, increasing the likelihood of the Council meeting its objectives and enabling it to respond quickly and effectively to change. When taking decisions, risks and opportunities must be considered.
- 11.2 A lack of timely forewarning of potentially contentious issues by council teams may result in reputational risk to the council were the communications team placed in a position where they are unable to provide proactive, accurate and transparent marketing and communications. Processes have been put in place by the Communications team since the last strategy to lower the risk of this occurring in the future.
- 11.3 A lack of communications promoting our Corporate themes and priorities may result in reputational risk should residents not be fully aware of the variety of local services that their council tax is used to provide. This strategy clearly states that more will be done to communicate two of our four Corporate themes: Our Services and Our Economy; and that future campaigns/activity must be sense-checked against the council's three main priorities.

## **12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 12.1 In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 12.2 While females typically engage more than males, whatever the channel used, our channels are open to everyone, and all marketing and communication is widespread so there is a channel suitable for all to keep up to date with the Council's activities. Should future resources allow, consideration could be given to trialling targeting male residents specifically to see if that increases engagement levels.

## **13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS**

- 13.1. The Social Value Act and "go local" requirements do not apply to this report.

## **14. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 14.1. There are no known Environmental impacts or requirements that apply to the 2024 – 2028 Marketing and Communications strategy.

## **15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 15.1 There are no direct Human Resource implications associated with the 2024 – 2028 Marketing and Communications strategy. Future plans outlined in the strategy for internal communications will overlap with Human Resources focuses, so it is recommended both teams work together on this.

## **16. APPENDICES**

- 16.1 Appendix A, North Herts Council 2024 – 2028 Marketing and Communications Strategy.

## **17. CONTACT OFFICERS**

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