

**CABINET
18 DECEMBER 2018**

***PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT**

TITLE OF REPORT: COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY 2019 - 2023

REPORT OF: COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: CLLR LYNDA NEEDHAM, LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

COUNCIL PRIORITY: RESPONSIVE AND EFFICIENT

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is for Cabinet to consider and adopt the proposed North Hertfordshire District Council Communications Strategy 2019 - 2023, which sets out the strategic direction for the Council's communications over the next five years.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That Cabinet adopts the North Hertfordshire District Council Communications Strategy 2019 - 2023
- 2.2 That Cabinet agrees the delegation for creating the Action Plan and the annual review of the Action Plan contained in the Communications Strategy, to the Communications Manager in consultation with the Leader of the Council.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 To allow the Council's communications team to carry out a programme of relevant communications activities, in line with an agreed strategic approach, ensuring residents and other stakeholders are well informed about the work of the Council and about relevant activities in the District.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1 Alternative approaches could be to emphasise different aspects of the communications strategy (for example print first rather than digital first), however it is considered that the approach proposed is the most effective for the Council.

5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

- 5.1 Consultation has taken place with the Leader of the Council and with Political Liaison Board. The results from questions about the Council's current communications mechanisms from the District Wide Survey of residents and staff surveys were also used to help inform the strategy.

6. FORWARD PLAN

- 6.1 This report contains a recommendation on a key decision that was first notified to the public in the Forward Plan on 2 November 2018.

7. BACKGROUND

- 7.1 The Council's current Communications Strategy spans the period 2014 - 2018, therefore the revised Communications Strategy attached as Appendix A is an updated version to cover the period 2019 - 2023. The strategy sets out how the Council will plan and manage communications activities over the next five years.
- 7.2 The Communications Strategy is an overarching document that applies across all functions of the Council. It is intended to provide a strategic overview to the Council's approach to delivering communications over the next five years. The strategy addresses the Council's approach to communications and the various communications channels which we will use to communicate how the Council is delivering on its three corporate objectives, as well as the day to day business of the organisation.
- 7.3 The strategy does not cover explicitly corporate consultation which is covered by a separate strategy, due for review in 2020, although there is linkage between the two strategies.
- 7.4 The Council's Communications team is responsible for implementing and driving forward the Communications Strategy and delivering the outputs of the associated action plan. The team are the first port of call for all media enquiries and public relations activity. They also produce Outlook magazine, the quarterly magazine which is delivered to 56,000 households across the District. Recently, the team have launched a new digital magazine 'NH Now' and a new e-bulletin service '@NorthHerts.' The team are also responsible for internal communications to staff including the publication of the monthly 'Insight' magazine.' The team also manage the Council's social media presence and the Council's website.
- 7.5 The Strategy also sets out how we will monitor and evaluate our communications activities to ensure they are effective, provide value for money and remain fit for purpose.
- 7.6 While the Strategy covers the next five years, some flexibility over the channels used will need to be retained as the communications landscape is changing so rapidly. The action plan will therefore be reviewed annually by the Communications Manager in conjunction with the Leader of the Council and will be incorporated into service planning for the Communications team.

8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

8.1 Legal constraints on Local Government communications

- 8.1.1 The strategy sets out the confines within which we can carry out our communications, specifically with reference to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Government Publicity, now strengthened in legislation in the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and so amending the Local Government Act 1986. The 1986 Act contained the statutory power for the Secretary of State to issue a Code of Recommended Practice, the additional amendment in the 2014 Act enables the Secretary of State to direct compliance with the issued Code.

8.1.2 The Publicity Code provides guidance on the content, style, distribution and cost of local authority publicity. Local authorities are required by legislation to consider the Code in coming to any decision on publicity, which is defined as any communication, in whatever form, addressed to the public or a section of the public. It also contains provisions on appropriate communications during pre-election periods.

8.2 Perceptions of the Council

8.2.1 The 2017 District Wide Survey, carried out in September and October, showed there has been a decrease in overall satisfaction with the Council from 82% in 2015 to 75% in 2017 and a decrease in agreement levels on how well informed residents feel about the Council (see Appendix A). This research is valuable in helping guide the approach outlined in the Communications Strategy.

8.3 Growth of Digital communications

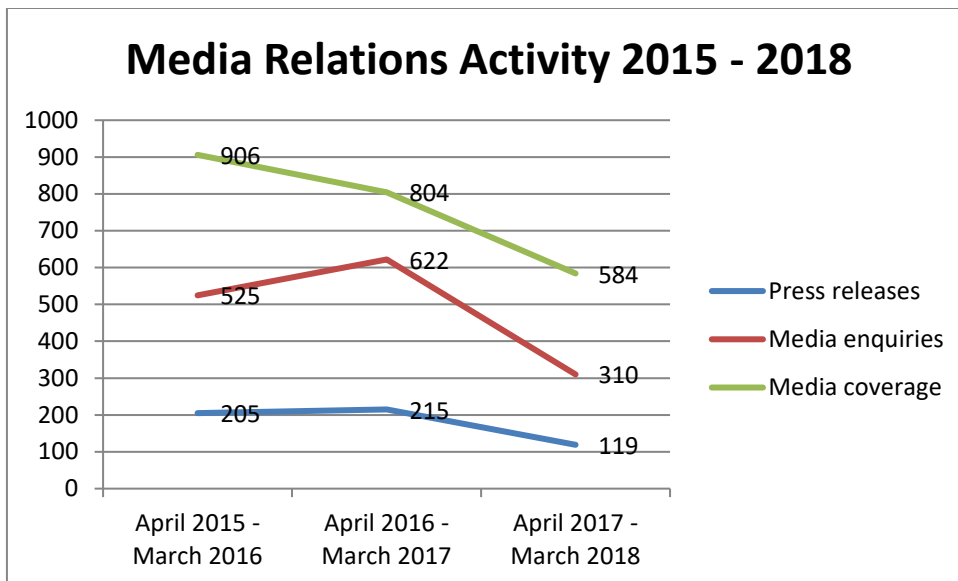
8.3.1 In recent years, we have seen a marked shift in how residents communicate and interact with the Council, with visitor numbers to both the website and our social media channels constantly increasing. We now have almost 10,000 followers on Twitter and over 1,500 on Facebook. Alongside this we have around 160,000 visits to our website every month.

8.3.2 The importance of social media to the Council can not be overstated . As an example, 2,997 people engaged with (liked, shared or commented on) a Facebook post regarding the introduction of the garden waste service. As a result, that post had the potential reach of 13,534 people, due to the post potentially being seen by friends of those people who engaged with the post.

8.3.3 Social media also has potential negatives for the Council, in that there are many private groups which we are aware of where people comment on issues regarding the Council and we have no direct way of influencing those conversations. This can mean that inaccurate information is sometimes circulated through these sites and we have no means of correcting this. There are also potential resource issues with managing social media. At the height of the waste contract problems, a large proportion of the communications team's time was spent dealing with social media on waste issues.

8.4 Decline of media relations activity

8.4.1 In the last three years we have seen a significant decline in the amount of media enquiries and media coverage which we receive, as can be seen by the graph below.



The decline in coverage is due in part to one of our key publications, the Midweek Mercury, no longer being in circulation and also less interest from the Comet in some of our stories, perhaps due in part to editorial changes at the paper.

- 8.4.2 It is important to consider why the number of press releases has dropped so significantly. The main reason for the number of press releases falling is that, simply due to our financial situation, the Council can no longer do all of the activities that it used to. For example we no longer put on many of the ‘play’ activities we used to e.g. Play Rangers. We also don’t have as many events, such as Community Reassurance Events, due to lack of resource. Similarly in waste services there is less capacity to go to roadshows and put on WEEE events. It is important to bear this in mind for our future strategy, as positive PR opportunities are more limited than they used to be.
- 8.4.3 There are large areas of the district which aren’t covered by the distribution of the Comet or the Royston Crow, and not everyone will read their local newspaper. Of course, while the local press remain important to the Council, their influence and importance is not as great as it was and we therefore need to be concentrating our efforts on reaching residents by different mechanisms.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Cabinet has within its terms of reference to prepare and agree to implement policies and strategies other than those reserved to Council.
- 9.2 The legislative framework governing local authority publicity is set out in Part II of the Local Government Act 1986, which as set out in the body of the report, has been amended by the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014. The strategy has been prepared taking into account the legislative framework.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 The delivery of the Communications Strategy (Appendix A) does not increase the Council's current budget estimates for this financial year or future years. To ensure the Communications team can adopt the 'digital first' approach outlined in the Strategy, application of Strategic Priorities fund resource has been approved for the development of the digital magazine 'NH Now', the e-bulletin service @NorthHerts and for a fixed term Digital Engagement Officer post. An interim review of the Strategy will be carried out at the end of the two year period to establish the effectiveness of the new channels, at which point future funding options will be considered.

11. RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 Managing Communication is an integral part of Risk Management, and is particularly important in relation to the Council's Corporate risks, such as Hitchin Town Hall and Museum and the Waste Project.
- 11.2 The revised Communication Strategy will ensure that the Council continues to operate in line with the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Government Publicity and the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014
- 11.3 Failure to acknowledge the decline in levels of satisfaction highlighted by the District Wide Survey 2017 may lead to a risk of reputational damage. The Strategy needs to address the shift in how residents communicate and interact with the Council and the decline of traditional print media if the Council is to avoid a further drop in levels of satisfaction among residents.
- 11.4 Incorporating the action plan into the Communications Service planning process, and reviewing annually, will help to mitigate the risk of reputational damage to the Council, and ensure that Communications remain relevant.

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 Good communication is essential in supporting our aim for openness and transparency whilst engaging with our residents, including those that have a protected characteristic and those that don't. Effective internal and external communication is also important in ensuring that our residents and partners are engaged, informed and understand our role and what we do.

13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

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

14. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 14.1 To ensure that the Communications team can effectively deliver the outputs of the Communications Strategy and adopt the 'Digital First' approach as described in Appendix A, funding has been approved on a fixed term basis for a full-time Digital Engagement Officer.

15. APPENDICES

- 15.1 Appendix A – Communications Strategy 2019 – 2023
- 15.2 Appendix B – NHDC Communications Strategy Action Plan 18-19 - 19-20
- 15.3 Appendix C– Social Media Strategy and Policy 2018

16. CONTACT OFFICERS

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17. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 17.1 2017 District Wide Survey Key Findings Report
www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/council-and-democracy/consultations/district-wide-survey