

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY 2019 – 2023



1. INTRODUCTION

Communications is at the heart of everything the Council does. This strategy outlines how we will plan and manage our communications activities over the next five years. It sets out our approach to communicating with residents, partners, businesses, with staff and Councillors. The corporate Communications Strategy is relevant to all service areas and functions of the Council.

The Council has achieved 3.6 million of savings since 2014/15 and we have had to radically rethink how we can continue to deliver quality services, while facing an uncertain financial future. Embedding commercialisation into the organisation's culture is now fundamental to our future strategy, as well as considering further opportunities to make efficiencies.

Meanwhile, the way in which residents want to communicate with us has also changed, with digital communications continuing to evolve and grow in importance. Our approach will always be inclusive, using a range of channels to reach as many residents as possible, however we are now at a stage where we need to put more resource and thought into our proactive digital communications activities.

This revised communications strategy reflects the changing landscape that we operate in. In uncertain financial times and with huge challenges ahead for local government, the role of communications in explaining what we stand for, how we will deliver services and provide value for money is critical.

The Communications Strategy supports the Council's corporate objectives which are set out in the Corporate Plan which can be found here: www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/council-data-and-performance/corporate-plan

We will focus our efforts on communicating how the Council is delivering on those objectives and on projects which fall under those objectives e.g. the Local Plan, regeneration of Churchgate Centre, Green Space Strategy and the completion of the North Hertfordshire Museum and Hitchin Town Hall project. By communicating about what the Council stands for and how we deliver on our priorities and policies, we can successfully build on our organisational reputation.

Aside from communicating strategic messages, we won't forget the basics and will ensure we provide effective information on the core services that people value the most, including waste and recycling, parks and open spaces, street cleaning and housing services.

We will also ensure that our Communications operate within legal boundaries and consider the seven principles of the Government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Government Publicity (2011). The principles state that:

Publicity should:

- Be lawful
- Be cost-effective
- Be objective
- Be even-handed
- Be appropriate
- Have regard to equality and diversity
- Be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity

2. BACKGROUND

The 2017 District Wide Survey (DWS) of North Hertfordshire residents, 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. More recently, issues with the new waste and recycling contract and introduction of a charge for collection of garden waste have undoubtedly had an impact on the reputation of the Council. Although things are now a lot better, the reputational effect will take some time to resolve.

As part of the DWS, residents were also asked how well informed they feel about a range of issues. Only around four in ten residents feel informed about how to get involved in local decision making (39%), what the Council spends its money on (39%) and how well NHDC is performing (41%). There have been significant drops in how well informed residents feel about these measures since 2015.

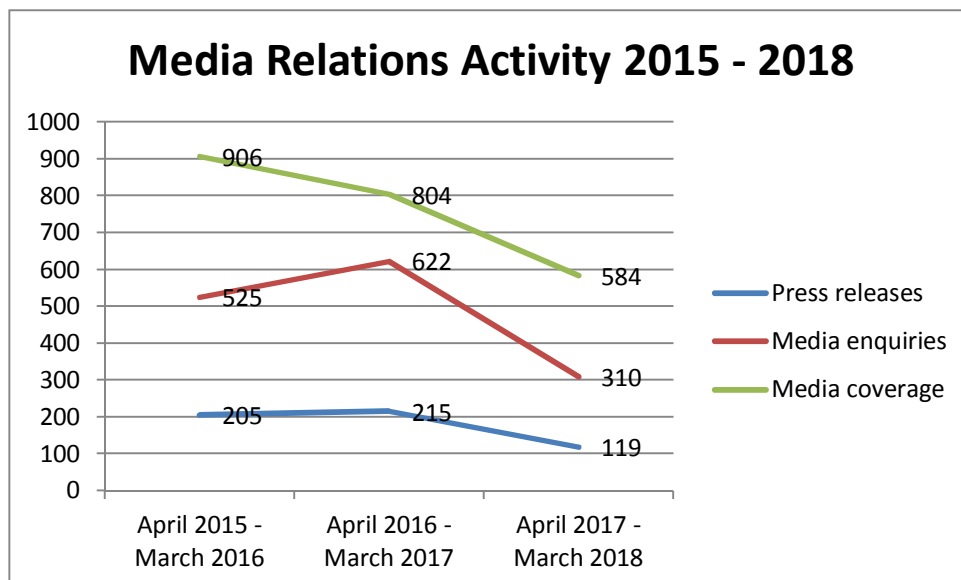
The District Wide Survey also found that those who have seen a copy of the residents magazine 'Outlook' are significantly more likely than those who have not, to be satisfied with the Council overall (77% cf. 69%). This suggests that the more informed people feel about the work of the Council, the more satisfied they are.

This research is valuable to help with understanding where we need to focus on building our communications efforts – namely around building on our reputation with residents and ensuring we are reaching as wide an audience as possible with our messages.

3, REVIEW OF LAST STRATEGY PERIOD 2014-2018

Media Relations: In 2015 we developed a media relations protocol which sets out how we work with the media and what they can expect from us. This is published on our website: www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/customer-services/publications-and-consultations/media-relations-protocol

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.

The number of press releases being issued has also dropped significantly. The main reason for this is that due to pressure on finances, the Council can no longer do all of the activities which it used to. For example due to lack of resource, we no longer put on as many of the

play activities we used to e.g. Play Rangers, or events such as Community reassurance events, or waste roadshows and Waste electrical recycling events.

Also of note is that while the Comet does still have good circulation locally, 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. While the local press remain important to the Council, we can no longer be as reliant on them to help communicate our messages and we therefore need to be concentrating our efforts on reaching residents by different mechanisms.

Social media: In recent years, we have seen a marked shift in how residents communicate and interact with the Council, with interaction with our social media channels constantly increasing. We now have almost 10,000 followers on Twitter and over 1,500 on Facebook. We have developed a social media strategy and social media policy (attached as Appendix B) which sets out our approach to managing social media and also gives the public an overview of how we manage and respond to contact on social media. The policy will be published on our website. We also introduced Hootsuite – software to help us effectively manage our presence on social media and capture useful analytics data.

Website: In 2015 we redeveloped the Council's website, deleting approximately one-third of the content, simplifying the language and making the layout easier to navigate. We have also worked on developing our online offer, so that people can readily pay for, apply for, or report a problem with a service. During this strategy period, responsibility for the website was transferred to Communications from IT, given its vital role as a communications channel.

New Channels: In Autumn 2018 we introduced two new digital channels to help communicate our messages to a wider audience. NH Now, is the Council's new digital magazine, which will be published three times a year at alternate times to Outlook magazine and promoted page by page via social media. @NorthHerts is the Council's new e-bulletin service. Subscribers can receive email alerts on topics of interest to them including waste and recycling, events, North Hertfordshire Museum, jobs and careers and Active North Herts. The e-alerts system will allow us to communicate messages in a timely manner without being tied to a particular publication schedule.

Internal Communications: The Council's quarterly staff magazine and monthly corporate cascade briefing were replaced in 2016 with a single monthly magazine for staff, which is sent via email to all staff. Over 200 people view the magazine each month, with 2,185 page

views for the October edition. To improve visibility of senior management, monthly staff briefings were also introduced in January 2018.

Corporate Identity: Corporate identity guidelines were produced and distributed to all staff in October 2014. The document covers use of logos and the look and feel of all of our communications including emails, letters, presentations etc. It also contains advice on language to ensure it is professional and consistent across the organisation. These will be reviewed and refreshed during the next strategy period.

3. OUR COMMUNICATIONS PRINCIPLES

Our communications will be:

- Honest, accurate and transparent
- Carried out in line with relevant legislation and the Council's own communications protocols and guidance
- Accessible and tailored to meet the needs of a wide cross-section of the community
- Delivered using multiple channels e.g. media, social media, web, print
- Two-way
- Cost-effective
- Developed in line with our corporate style and identity guidelines

4. OUR COMMUNICATION AIMS

- To enhance the reputation of the Council by proactively positioning ourselves as a community leader, promoting both the work of the Council and celebrating everything that makes North Hertfordshire a great place to live, work and prosper.
- To ensure that the information we communicate is timely, accurate, responsive and relevant to the audience we are communicating to.
- To maintain a strong and consistent brand identity for the Council
- To strive for balanced reporting about the Council's policies, decisions and procedures
- To retain a committed and motivated workforce by implementing a programme of effective internal communications

5. AUDIENCES

Our key audiences include:

- North Hertfordshire residents
- Those working in / visitors to the District
- Community groups including charities and voluntary organisations
- Local businesses and potential investors, including BIDS and LEPs
- Councillors
- Council staff
- Town and Parish Councils
- Neighbouring district authorities and Hertfordshire County Council
- Partner organisations e.g. Herts Constabulary, Herts Fire and Rescue Service
- Housing Associations e.g. settle, Howard Cottage
- Central Government departments
- Print, online and broadcast media
- Social media influencers

6. OUR STRATEGIC APPROACH FOR 2019 – 2023

There are two core themes to the Communications Strategy approach:

- **Positive and Proactive**
- **Digital First**

Positive and Proactive

Our core objective for the next five years is to focus on improving our reputation and restoring public confidence in the Council. In order to do this we need to position ourselves as community champions, promoting and celebrating all that is good about North Hertfordshire, the people, community groups, businesses and place, as well as our own work.

Over the last year, much of the work of the communications team has focused on managing the Council's reputation with regards the new waste and recycling contract. A core component of this strategy is to re-focus our effort on delivering positive and engaging communications, across a range of channels. We will do this by:

Changing the narrative: In our new digital magazine, NH Now, we adopt a new tone – focusing on great community stories, celebrating what is great about North Herts, the people, the parks and open spaces, the towns and villages. We will also adopt this approach across other channels e.g. on social media we will engage with community groups and promote the places and people that make North Herts a great place. We will maintain a proactive PR calendar, which focuses on engaging content which can be repurposed across a range of channels. As part of this work we will continue to work alongside the Council’s Economic Development Officer to identify opportunities for promoting North Hertfordshire to businesses and visitors.

While there is clearly an important place for traditional corporate communications and to inform residents about our work and performance, given the decline in satisfaction levels among residents and the decline of traditional print media, we also need to think of new ways of being seen as a positive community leader.

Developing campaigns – We will develop campaigns around specific themes and focus our communications efforts on those areas. For example, we could look at campaigns around priorities for the Council such as channel shift, health and well-being and environmental issues such as reducing use of plastics.

Entering into awards – We will proactively seek out opportunities across the Council for entering into awards. The Communications team will assist service areas by offering help with writing award entries and promoting achievements if shortlisted, or if we win. We have in the past had some success, particularly with waste and green space awards, but there is scope to expand this across other services

Working with the media – There is clearly still a place for working with the local press as opinion influencers and we will continue to maintain good working relationships with them. As part of the Strategy we will also pursue opportunities for opinion pieces, for example in the Local Government trade press or in service specific trade press. The Council has an opportunity using these sorts of pieces to position itself as a thought leader on local and national issues. We will also organise regular media training for Cabinet members to ensure they are equipped with the skills needed to act as spokesmen for the Council.

Photo Rangers: We have recently recruited Photo Rangers – officers in the Council who are willing to take photos while out and about in the district that we can use in our social media and traditional communications activity. The aim of this initiative is to show the breadth of what the Council does and also show off the best parts of the district. We hope

that this initiative will also get Council staff engaged, wanting to show off the great work they do. This could also potentially be expanded to include NHDC Councillors if there is interest.

Developing our filming offer - One area which could have a positive effect on the Council's image and reputation as well as generate income, is to develop our filming offer. In particular, Hitchin town centre is fast becoming a popular location for filming, however there are also our parks and open spaces and other properties such as Hitchin Town Hall which have the potential to be used for filming. As part of the Strategy we will build up a location library i.e. pictures of assets which location managers can readily access online when looking for a venue. We will also develop a filming policy and an indicative schedule of charges for filming.

Developing our consultation offer - Although the consultation strategy is covered separately, it is worth mentioning here, as the way the Council consults (or is perceived to consult) has also had a significant impact on its reputation in recent years. 2017 DWS results found that 41% of people disagree that the Council makes an effort to find out what local people want and 32% of people disagree that the Council fully involves or consults residents on important issues. While there are numerous reasons for these results, such as the decision to introduce a charge of garden waste, they prove an important barometer of public opinion.

One area under consideration to help improve our consultation activity is the expansion of the Council's Citizens Panel – a group of people willing to take part in surveys which we carry out. There is scope for building membership to the panel and using them more regularly, consulting them in a light-touch way on issues affecting them, to help people feel engaged with the Council. Membership of the panel could then be promoted via our usual communications channels. There may well also be other mechanisms we can look at, including digital focus groups and offering advice on wording and structure of consultations for service specific consultations.

Digital First

We will continue to utilise a range of channels to reach a wide audience, however in line with our channel shift strategy and with how many people now expect to receive communications, we will always try and adopt a 'digital first' approach.

A growing number of our residents use social media and expect to engage with us – both in terms of service requests and general communications. Social media will continue to

signpost residents to the council's website where additional information and advice will be hosted and services can be accessed or requests raised.

We will enhance our digital communications by:

Extending our range of channels - Work on this has already started with the introduction of the new NH Now digital magazine in October 2018 and the introduction of the e-bulletin service, @NorthHerts. Both channels will allow us to reach new audiences and in particular, the e-bulletin service will mean we can adopt a very flexible and timely approach to sending messages out. We will focus on building our subscriber base for @NorthHerts and building awareness of NH Now through targeted social media activity.

Devise engaging content: In the world of digital communication we cannot just rely on a simple piece of written communication to get our messages across. We will be building on the types of content we can offer, including videos, animations, infographics etc.

Improving engagement on social media: Our new Social Media Strategy sets out how we manage social media and during this Strategy period, the importance of social media will grow further. As well as engaging with customers who now want to use social media for their service requests etc, we intend to build positive engagement by developing specific campaigns on social media and encourage people to have a two-way conversation with us.

We already receive positive engagement around some of our social media activity e.g. we put together a calendar of summer activities which were going on in North Hertfordshire (not just Council activities) and this was well received. We have also promoted similar activities in the past including recycling tips at Christmas and fly-tipping campaigns. These themed proactive posts work very well and so we will look at expanding that side of our social media, as well as devising campaigns and engaging multi-media content.

Enhancing our website offer – we will introduce a Find My Nearest facility on the website and expand and refine our e-forms. We will also consider introducing options such as web chat and AI technology, through our corporate channel shift project. We will also consider the introduction of website advertising to help generate income, as long as this does not compromise the integrity of the content on the site.

Putting in place appropriate resource: To ensure we are maximising the opportunities available to us from our digital channels, we have secured temporary Strategic Priorities funding for our e-news bulletin service, our digital magazine and a new Digital Media and Engagement Officer.

7. EVALUATING OUR COMMUNICATIONS

The Communications Strategy is expected to help enable the following outcomes:

- Well informed and engaged residents who feel listened to and respected
- Recognition and improved perception of the Council and its services among residents and our other key audiences
- Pride in North Hertfordshire as a place to live, work and visit

We evaluate our communications in a number of ways:

Media monitoring - We operate a media monitoring system which records all press releases, media enquiries and media coverage for the Council. We monitor both the quantity and quality of media coverage. For example we consider an item's tone and the Council's share of voice in any coverage. Media monitoring reports are regularly presented to Senior Management Team.

Social media monitoring - We use social media monitoring software 'Hootsuite' to manage our presence on social media and to provide useful analytics data. This information is currently reported to Senior Management Team and a monthly summary is also provided in What the Media Says – a round up of media coverage, distributed to all Councillors and senior management. It is also proposed to include information on social media interactions alongside the Customer Service Manager's reports to Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Comments, compliments and complaints.

Website analytics - We use Google Analytics to record and analyse visitor traffic across the NHDC website, intranet and additional sub-sites. Analytics data is used to monitor demand and usage of content and provide reports for service areas. This can be used to adjust or update content to ensure it fully meets the needs of visiting users.

We use Google analytics to monitor the performance of our website.

Reputation surveys - The District Wide Survey measures overall satisfaction with the Council as well as trends in how well informed people feel about the Council. It also tracks satisfaction with the Council's Outlook magazine. We will continue to use the results of the survey to identify changing trends in customer behaviour and aspirations so that we can adapt our communications accordingly.

We conduct a survey of staff every two years which includes a section on our internal communications. We will use the results of the survey to gain feedback on the effectiveness of our communications and identify emerging channels.

Benchmarking data and sharing best practice - We subscribe to a national local authority communications group which provides a forum for sharing best practice and annual benchmarking data. It is a useful forum for testing ideas and understanding the local government communications landscape. The Communications Manager also regularly attends a Hertfordshire communications group for all 10 districts and Herts County Council. The purpose of the group is to identify any cross-county communications issues, share best practice and identify joint working opportunities.

8. CONTACT OFFICER

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