

COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Cabinet Member(s): Cllr Dennis Knowles, Cabinet Member for Community Wellbeing

Responsible Officer: Jane Lewis, Communications & Engagement Manager

Reason for Report: The purpose of this report is to provide members with the revised Communication and Engagement Strategy and an update on the achievements made since the last strategy, which was approved in 2018.

Recommendation: To recommend to Cabinet the content of the revised Communication and Engagement Strategy and Media and Social Media Policy.

Financial Implications: The majority of the proposed actions can be implemented with the existing Communication staff (subject to the vacant post being filled). Should the Council wish to implement larger scale communication changes or engagement methods, this would involve additional costs. Any costs identified within the attached action plan would be accompanied by a costed and approved business case.

Budget and Policy Framework: This is a review of the existing Communication and Engagement Strategy.

Legal Implications: To ensure that all communication and methods of consultation are compliant with Data Protection/GDPR (and any other relevant laws) and that they support the Council's single equality scheme.

Risk Assessment: Failure to engage with the Council's stakeholders could mean the Council's actions and objectives are not understood.

Equality Impact Assessment: Any consultation and communication channels would be arranged in such a way as to enable engagement by all members of the community.

Relationship to Corporate Plan: To ensure that our customers, staff, members and stakeholders are informed and engaged with Council services and news through appropriate and varied channels.

Impact on Climate Change: The Communication and Engagement Strategy includes work to support the Council's ambition to become carbon neutral by 2030.

1.0 Introduction/Background

1.1 The current Communication and Engagement Strategy was written in 2018 and was due to be revised late 2020. It was delayed until Spring 2021 due to the Covid pandemic.

1.2 Before the revision to the 2021 strategy was completed a working group was formed to discuss community engagement. The group agreed the revised action plan was fit for purpose.

- 1.3 An internal audit of the social media function was also carried out in 2020. As a result of some the recommendations made, the Communications team will be leading on further support and co-ordination around the corporate wide approach to social media.
- 1.4 The Communications Team currently consists of the Communication and Engagement Manager (part time 22.5 hrs per week) and a Communications Officer (part time 32 hours per week). The work of this team includes social media, media relations, internal communication, engagement, graphic design and digital content.
- 1.5 A full time post within the team is currently vacant and being advertised. Until that time resources remain stretched, particularly at a time when the team is supporting the Council's work around its Covid response, the upcoming Census and elections, ensuring the Council's current website complies with accessibility legislation, as well as day-to-day work supporting services and maintaining media and social media channels.

2.0 **Covid Pandemic**

- 2.1 Much of the team's work in 2020 inevitably had to stray from our plans in order to support the Council's work responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. This Covid related work centred around working closely with partners to ensure a Devon-wide approach to dealing with the outbreak, as well as shared messaging between the relevant agencies. The team also communicated regularly with all parishes and shared national assets released by both the NHS and Public Health England regularly.
- 2.2 Before the pandemic was upon us the team had made progress improving engagement, in line with the community engagement action plan which approved in 2018.
- 2.3 Key highlights are below and a full table shows the evaluation against the 2018 objectives in *figure 1 and figure 2*.
- 2.4 Subscribers to our email subscription service have increased by 141%, followers to our Facebook social media page have grown by 82% since 2018.
- 2.5 Improved use of video and graphics for the public content, made possible now that we have a trained graphic designer within the team.
- 2.6 A quarterly e-newsletter was launched.
- 2.7 We supported many services with surveys to interact with the public including – budget setting, customer interaction, new build home owners.

Figure 1

External communication objective as set out in 2018 action plan	Evaluation
Produce newsletter for residents	First edition published in 2019. Now have 700 subscribers for this single topic.
Increase Gov Delivery sign up	Sept 2018 - 3,664 subscribers Sept 2019 - 6,046 subscribers Sept 2020 - 8,830 subscribers
Grow social media presence	Sept 2018 - 1,622 Facebook followers Sept 2019 - 2,182 Facebook followers Sept 2020 - 2,948 Facebook followers. Twitter – figures currently not available
Increase Council generated news content	Communications officers were assigned portfolios and the Communication Manager was added to Phoenix Portal so now sees reports before they are in the public domain. However, resourcing has meant we have not been able to act on this. The five day calling in period also limits the ability of the Council to share news stories before the press themselves who may attend the meetings.
Create joint campaigns with local media	Two “return to our town centre campaigns” run by the Economic Development team via paid for adverts were launched.
Support the business transformation project	The Communications team supported the Customer First team when the Council stopped taking cashless payments. The team is also supporting Customer First with a Customer Interaction survey.
Launch annual residents survey	There have been numerous surveys the Communications team has been part of, such as a budget setting survey, and we are mindful of survey fatigue. There is currently a customer interaction survey which is live and running until March.

	Any annual survey needs to be resourced and budgeted for appropriately. Members also need to be mindful that any questions do not lead to false hope about future funding for desirable projects
Launch a new community panel/recruit community champions	This project has not begun.
Improve work with town and parishes	Better liaison with Member Services, particularly the Parish Liaison Officer. There was considerably more contact between the Communications Team and parishes during the height of the first lockdown when there were many messages, and literature shared.
Create a database of social media groups to utilise	Stakeholder list created and available on Sharepoint for other teams to access.
Work with national campaigns to engage the younger electorate and future electorate	Covid and resourcing issues has meant these projects have been put on hold. However, the team has supported numerous national events such as National Apprenticeship Week and the LGAs Our Day.
Engage with hard to reach groups	This is being led by Catherine Yandle. (The third forum took place in Dec 2020).

Figure 2

Internal communication objective as set out in 2018 action plan		Evaluation
Create a more interactive staff newsletter		A number of polls have been circulated to staff regarding the frequency of the Link. Results showed staff prefer it to remain weekly. A small group of staff was also formed to look into a new format for the Link. However, web development and comms resourcing means the new

	system has not been developed as yet.
Improve communication liaison with staff Impact Group	Launched in Autumn 2019 with 16 representatives from across the Council departments and held each quarter since. Topics covered include Evolve, staff retention, benefits.
Support internal projects such as Evolve	Received positive feedback from L&D over Evolve launch. Supported with booklet, leaflet, articles, video and artwork.
Explore options to create a more user friendly intranet	Not started – long term project.
Explore internal social media options	This was explored previously but put on hold following data scandals in the news at the time. However, now that many staff are working from home it may be the time to explore this again.

3.0 Working Group

- 3.1 In November 2020 the Community PDG agreed that a working group would be formed to review the MDDC Communication and Engagement Strategy. The desired outcome was to ensure an effective Communications and Engagement Strategy that considers new and innovative ways of engaging customers.

The Working Group comprised of Cllr J Berry (Chairman), Cllr Mrs E Andrews and Cllr B Holdman. The Working Group considered the effectiveness of the strategy and any further initiatives needed to increase community engagement. Discussion took place around: the progress since the 2018 strategy; concern with regard to reaching people who did not use the internet; how Members should be engaging with their residents as well as the Council; and training available for Members on how to better communicate with residents.

The Communications and Engagement Strategy and Action Plan was reviewed by the Working Group and recommended approval subject to a reference being added to the Strategy of the Protocol on Member/Officer Relations (page 164 of the Constitution).

4.0 Staff Survey

- 4.1 Staff are asked to complete an anonymous staff survey annually. In addition, in 2020 a Covid19 specific staff survey was sent out.

5.0 Websites

5.1 Since the last Communication Strategy was completed in 2018 new websites have been created by our Web Developer. These include the Culm Garden Village site and more recently a Climate Resilience website has been started. This climate website, which is not yet live, uses a newer version of Umbraco (Umbraco 8). This will help the Council with the future development of its corporate website as using this version allows improved graphics which meet accessibility criteria.

6.0 Conclusion

6.1 Despite the pandemic and changes to staffing within the team the service has managed to achieve the majority of the actions set out in the previous strategy. In addition the Communications team has continually supported services across the Council with many ad hoc projects, often at short notice.

6.2 The team is now looking to support the Council with its Covid recovery activities and future national projects such as the 2021 Census. The team will also be continuing to improve engagement, both internally with staff, and externally with the public, and has clear objectives as to how to achieve this within the existing Communications team and budget.

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Circulation of the Report: Cabinet Member, Corporate Manager, Leadership Team