

Meeting:	Cabinet
Meeting date:	21 September 2016
Title of report:	Communications Strategy 2016-2019
Report by:	Cabinet member economy and corporate services

Classification

Open

Key decision

This is a key decision because it is likely to be significant in terms of its effect on communities living or working in an area comprising one or more wards in the county.

Notice has been served in accordance with Part 3, Section 9 (Publicity in Connection with Key Decisions) of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012.

Wards affected

Countywide

Purpose

To approve the communications strategy with associated communication protocols for the period 2016-2019.

Recommendations

THAT:

- (a) the communications strategy 2016 to 2019 at appendix 1 to this report is approved; and**
- (b) the accompanying communication protocols at appendix 2 are approved.**

Alternative options

1. Continue working in current arrangements without a fit for purpose, current guiding strategy or accompanying protocols. This is not recommended as would result in an ad-hoc approach to communication and engagement with residents, businesses and partners.
2. To reduce the level and range of communication and engagement across the council knowing there is pressure on the budgets due to reduction in Government grant and

the need to focus resource on areas of high demand. This is not recommended at this time as would reduce the capacity of the organisation to engage during a period of change and development, with key activities and programmes being implemented over the next few years in line with the corporate plan.

Reasons for recommendations

3. It is important that the council communicates to residents and businesses with over 188,000 people living in the county and some 10,948 businesses in Herefordshire¹, each of which need a varying degree of interaction with the council and differing requirements.
4. The previous communications strategy covering 2010-2014, was formed at a point when Herefordshire Council was working in a close partnership with the then NHS Herefordshire. The proposed communication strategy has a greater emphasis on working with communities to deliver services and is a better reflection of the way to work in the changing financial climate. The strategy also identifies that engagement and communication is across service and the entire organisation, and not isolated to a communications team.
5. The strategy provides a framework for the council's communication, alongside the protocols and principles to help guard and mitigate risk. It also informs the organisation and supports it to become more efficient and effective.

Key considerations

6. The communication strategy will support delivery of the corporate plan approved by Council in February 2016, with outlined priorities and future delivery. The strategy also supports the council's need to become 'digital by default'- reflective of the changing way in which people communicate.
7. As well as communication and engagement with residents and businesses, the strategy addresses internal communication with the workforce and members, to aid a joint understanding of the issues being addressed by the authority, and new initiatives and service models being developed.
8. Whilst relaying the key council messages, the strategy supports communications based on type of message and the audience. This will assist effective engagement to; help manage expectations; provide information on service changes; and outline the rationale for council decisions. The improvements in channels of engagement aim to enable individuals and communities to source the information, which can reduce unnecessary contact with the council and where possible provide pre-emptive information and guidance.
9. The protocols outline the delivery of best practise communications and area reference point that both officers and members need to work towards.
10. Specific actions emerging from the strategy include:
 - Provide timely and engaging online news content from across the organisation
 - Improve web content for Herefordshire Council, linking to other public sector organisations
 - Use of insight and data to understand the needs and trends of service users and customers

¹ with a HR postcode via the MINT UK Database

- Refine the internal communications with employees and council members
- Bespoke media and social media training for designated spokespeople and online community managers
- Refreshed branding to better suit digital channels and replace existing branded documents
- Conduct brand audit and refresh public-facing and internal branded signage
- Produce locally relevant imaging and photo stock for corporate and service use

Community impact

11. There is much the council needs to communicate to the community and an equal amount that the community needs to say to the council. How that is done will vary between levels of need and particular audiences. Whilst a large proportion of our audience are online and increasing use of social media can reach a wide audience with target messages, there will be some requirement for more bespoke contact.
12. Figures from the Office of National Statistics show that 11% of the Herefordshire adult population have never been on the internet. This suggests that there is significant potential, and for many people an expectation, that the local population interact with the council online. This still leaves a proportion of people who do not interact on line and other mechanisms need to be considered to reach these people where via the media or specific service support. Due to diversity across the Herefordshire community, it is important that the council communicates effectively with the right people, at the right time, in the right way.
13. The communication strategy will help the local community understand the key council priorities, as approved in the corporate plan 2016/20. It is important for citizens of the county to know what the council does, and the areas the council needs to focus on. Sharing those priorities is fundamental to creating a joint understanding of the role, purpose, and functions of the council.
14. Targeted communications will be implemented using knowledge gathered through a range of readily available data tools, though with the potential of further data collection necessary to ensure the council can continue to support the best methods of communication.

Equality duty

15. The Equality Act 2010 established a positive obligation on local authorities to promote equality and to reduce discrimination in relation to any of the nine 'protected characteristics' (age; disability; gender reassignment; pregnancy and maternity; marriage and civil partnership; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation). In particular, the council must have 'due regard' to the Public Sector Equality Duty when taking any decisions on service changes. This requires effective, targeted communication to any of the groups who need access to services, are affected by service changes or who are the target for a campaign.
16. A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:
 - Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by or under this Act;
 - Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

17. Where a decision is likely to result in detrimental impact on any group with a protected characteristic it must be justified objectively. This means that attempts to mitigate the harm need to be explored. If the harm cannot be avoided, the decision maker must balance this detrimental impact against the strength of legitimate public need to pursue the service remodelling to deliver savings. Effective engagement is a pre-requisite, along with supporting information to find alternative suppliers or services.
18. The implementation of digital services will mainly affect the protected characteristic of age – especially older people. It is important to address any instances where engagement has been available online only to avoid discrimination toward this protected characteristic. This can be overcome through effective, targeted offline information.

Financial implications

19. The implementation of the strategy will be resourced from existing communication budgets in addition to the specific reserve which was set-aside in 2015/16. Current staffing budgets will provide for the necessary officer time. The existing communications budgets will also cover the following anticipated costs of supplies and services:

	£000
2016/17	53
2017/18	30
2018/19	30
Total	113

Legal implications

20. There is no legal requirement to have a communication or engagement strategy.

Risk management

Risks if the report is approved

21. Pressure on budget and staff capacity due to increased communications activity
Mitigation: Current actions contained within the budget; additional spend would be through additional income.
22. Internal communications are not undertaken to staff on new protocols and processes
Mitigation: Effective roll-out with presentations, workshops and new communications toolkit.
23. A whole council approach to effective communications – internal and external.
Mitigation: Commitment from senior managers and members on the roll-out of new protocols and principles. Communications team to lead on support at operational level with a whole organisation commitment to best practise communication and engagement.

Consultees

24. Insight has been gathered through existing data from Understanding Herefordshire survey, the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, internal staff surveys and the council's Hereford 2020 communications survey.

General Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed the strategy and protocols on 26 July 2016 and a further version of protocols on 5 September 2016. The following recommendations were made to inform cabinet's consideration of the communication strategy with associated communication protocols for the period 2016-2019:

- The use of a chat facility on the website should be pursued taking into account how an operator's time can most effectively be used.
This is hoped to be incorporated as part of the new website, although time scale for this part of the project is not yet confirmed.
- The opportunity for the community to interact on-line quickly and easily should be fully explored.
The new website puts the citizen at the heart of every process, it will aim to take as many processes online as possible and start a continued commitment to becoming 'digital by default'.
- Clarification be provided as to how it is intended to implement the "spend within our means" approach outlined in section 3 of the strategy at appendix 1: "making tough but necessary choices which will include ceasing to provide some services and working with communities to help them run services important to them";
This is an operational issue and will be addressed at service level so has not been included within the communications strategy.
- The wording of paragraph 5.13 of appendix 2 to the report relating to the access of the press to premises be reviewed and clarified.
The wording to reflect access to premises has been reworded to reflect access to restricted areas only, this can now be found in 6.13.
- In relation to paragraph 3.1 of the protocol further clarification was needed on when it was appropriate to use the word "Council" in communications when referring to such matters as Council policy and when further distinction was needed between a decision taken at full Council and a decision by an individual cabinet member or an officer.
This depends on the context and the role of the member. The protocol sets out (at para 3.1) a range of different roles and the context in which members may speak 'on behalf of the council'. If further clarification is needed based on individual circumstances, members should refer to the governance team.
- Paragraph 3.4 needed further clarification in particular regarding the role of local ward members.
Wording has been updated to reflect ward members position. If further clarification is needed based on individual circumstances, members should refer to the governance team.
- Paragraph 4.2 - greater clarity was needed on the application and operation of paragraph 4.2.
Wording has been updated to reflect committee chairman role. If further clarification is needed based on individual circumstances, members should refer to the governance team.

- Paragraph 4.5 also required consideration and clarification. Wording has been updated to reflect the role of Chairman as spokesperson for committees.
- An additional paragraph should be added providing guidance as to how members should approach communications as a council appointee to an outside body. This has been included in section 3.6.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Communication Strategy 2016 to 2019

Appendix 2. Communications Protocols and Principles

Background papers

None.