Communications Strategy
2016-2020

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Herefordshire Council

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Introduction

Good communication and engagement can create a positive experience for those who interact with the council. It helps residents, employees, partners, and the media understand Herefordshire Council's objectives, values, services, challenges and achievements.

There are over 188,000 people living in the county and there are around 11,000[1] registered businesses in Herefordshire. Effective communication and engagement should be a two way process where information and views are shared. It is only by working collaboratively with residents, and across the public, private, education and voluntary sectors that Herefordshire can sustain what is important and be a vibrant, sustainable county.

A communications strategy

Herefordshire Council is a very different organisation from what it was only a few years ago. Its roles and responsibilities have shifted - it is a smaller organisation yet it has needed to respond to the increasing demands of the most vulnerable in the community. We will need to work more closely with communities to support the services valuable to them. This will enable the council to focus more on its priorities: Helping people remain safe, healthy, and independent, giving children a great start in life, and supporting economic growth for the county.

The county is influenced by global and national events, advances in technology, Government policies, and trends that affect how we live our lives. Against a background of continuous change, communication becomes increasingly important - especially considering the role of the council as a community leader responsible for long-term development and charged with bringing together the work of different organisations.

The communications strategy is driven by the priorities, services and activity outlined in the corporate plan. Whilst the focus is on the work of the council, there will be strong links to other organisations to create a single voice for the county.

Herefordshire Council needs to communicate, engage and align with a wide range of stakeholders, including residents, businesses and charities, as well as other public sector services. By providing efficient and effective engagement the council can improve local understanding, perception and involvement. It can respond in a crisis, share information and inform on future developments, explaining why certain things have to be done in a particular way, working with our community and workforce to share the right messages, at the right time, in the right way.

Councillor DG Harlow
Cabinet Member Economy and Corporate Services

[1]MINT UK database

What we do

Vision
People, organisations and businesses working together to bring sustainable prosperity and well-being for all, in the outstanding natural environment of Herefordshire.

Priorities

→ Enable residents to live safe, healthy and independent lives

→ Keep children and young people safe and give them a great start in life

→ Support the growth of our economy

→ Secure better services, quality of life and value for money

Values
Herefordshire Council's PEOPLE values guide and shape our culture and services.

People: Treating people fairly, with compassion, respect and dignity

Excellence: Striving for excellence, and the appropriate quality of service, care and life in Herefordshire

Openness: Being open, transparent and accountable

Partnership: Working in partnership and with all our diverse communities

Listening: Actively listening to, understanding and taking into account people's views and needs

Environment: Protecting and promoting our outstanding natural environment and heritage for the benefit of all

Audience:

Herefordshire Council has a wide range of audiences and stakeholders. It is important that we target communications to the right audience, so that we communicate with the right people at the right time, in the right way.

These include:

- **businesses current and future**
- **Government**
- **Councillors**
- **local and national charities**
- **public sector partners**
- **funders**
- **the media**
- **employees**
- **city, town and parish councils**
- **local residents, including groups e.g. children, youth, adults, carers, employers and parents**

Key messages

The key messages are the values which illustrate how the council uses its resources and focuses its energy to meet its priorities.

1. Empower the local community

Helping the local community stay independent and resilient, and providing them with the tools needed to independently resolve their issues is key. This approach gives ownership and responsibility to individuals, families and the community, whilst enabling the council to assign resources to areas of high need. By challenging perception on who holds the power and responsibility, and by providing tools for people to help themselves, we will:

- Provide individuals and families with the right information and direction to resolve local issues
- Reduce the necessity to contact the council by enabling people to access council services via self-service
- As much as possible put the control of people's care in their own, or their family's hands
- Encourage feedback on how things could be improved and provide supportive processes
- Provide local opportunity through community ownership of assets and direct delivery of other services previously operated or supported by the council.

2. Deliver priority services

With decreasing levels of funding due to reductions in Government grants, the council will prioritise the delivery of services. It will meet statutory services obligations and provide services that people cannot access through any other means. The council will focus its effort and funding to:

- Protect residents and provide care for the extremely vulnerable within the community

- Help residents take responsibility for their health and wellbeing, and to look after others in their family and community
- Provide education and skills to give young people a good start in life
- Provide infrastructure and services to facilitate business and growth opportunities
- Take responsibility for statutory services and those functions essential to living and working in the county, e.g. road maintenance, waste collection, street cleaning
- Be clear on areas of responsibility and when other organisations can take the lead

3. Spend within our means

The council has to make difficult decisions to balance its budget and protect service delivery in the future. This means managing spend carefully, ensuring value for money and reducing borrowing. Through partnership working, the council and others will share knowledge and resources knowing that through collaboration more can be achieved. This includes:

- Creating effective partnerships across the voluntary, community, business and public sectors to drive innovation and achieve savings
- Making tough but necessary choices which will include ceasing to provide some services
- Working with communities to help them run services important to them
- Being transparent over our expenditure
- Ensuring value for money and test costs through procurement processes
- Working more collaboratively with partner organisations
- Identifying opportunities and generating income to help sustain services
- Reducing debt but also investing in schemes that can create a long-term financial return.

Communication and engagement objectives

There is much the council needs to communicate to the community and an equal amount that the community needs to share with the council. How that is done will vary between levels of need and particular audiences. Whilst the website can reach a mass audience and an increasing strategic use of social media can reach a wide audience with target messages, there will be some requirement for more bespoke engagement.

When engaging with audiences the council aims to:
- Centre on the citizen and operate as a joined-up organisation
- Encourage two-way dialogue with residents
- Celebrate success and innovation of our workforce, residents, businesses and organisations
- Help people feel informed and proud of living in Herefordshire
- Support employees, members and partner organisations to act as proud local ambassadors for the council's work
- Be clear, open and honest without creating a negative impact on other people, services or partners

The following ten objectives will help guide and inform our communication and engagement activity:

1. Ensure we communicate effectively, taking into account diversity and accessibility needs
2. Use the most cost-effective method of communicating and engaging relevant to the audience
3. Promote the council as a trusted and approachable organisation focused on the public and their needs
4. Strengthen the reputation of Herefordshire Council with a focus on shared understanding of priorities and objectives.
5. Build and maintain a professional corporate identity for consistent and co-ordinated use throughout the organisation and by third-party providers
6. Work with public sector partners to ensure effective sharing of information during emergency or high-risk situations
7. Communicate council decisions, news, events, plans and major announcements
8. Assist elected members and council employees to be ambassadors for council services and initiatives
9. Improve communication and engagement and skills within the council
10. Be a responsible and communicative employer, by retaining a skilled, productive workforce and create a reputation as an employer of choice.

Delivering our objectives

Some people, organisations and businesses interact with the council regularly, however it is important that communication and engagement reaches the whole community, to be fair and transparent to all. To ensure a wide reach, a range of channels and techniques will be used.

Media and PR

There is a need to maximise the opportunities to use the media to communicate messages to a wide audience. These include:
- Media releases based on news stories and features
- Be proactive and pre-emptive when it is clear a decision or approach may be controversial
- Respond to inaccurate information or misleading interpretation of the facts
- Support media releases with good quality photographs to help draw attention and increase the likelihood of a feature being used
- Develop responsive and positive relations with the media which will ultimately help in communicating to local residents.

Websites and mobile app

Digital is increasingly becoming people's preferred method of communication and engagement. This is reflected in the council's aim for its website to become the preferred point of customer contact. As part of the digital strategy, the web team will ensure:
- Website content is engaging, accessible and accurate,
- Opportunities for the community to interact on-line quickly and easily to perform key activities such as making payments, returning forms, arranging appointments and completing applications

- The website and its functionality is fully mobile responsive
- That an app is developed to improve engagement that provides a good customer experience and integrates easily to allow engagement with services

Social media

Social media provides a quick and easy way for the public to receive information and engage with the council. The insight and ability to target specific audiences provides opportunities to support campaigns and key messages. The communications team will:
- Grow our social media communities to assist the fast and effective sharing of news in emergency situations
- Monitor the engagement and channel feedback to services to help prove and improve levels of service
- Manage and support council social media community managers to use social media and technology more efficiently and effectively.

Campaigns

The council, often in partnership with others, will run specific campaigns that bring together a number of communication tools that raise awareness and engagement in an issue. This will specifically focus on the priorities of the council, but also promotion of the county as a place of investment by funders, national government and the private sector. Specific campaigns include public health promotion, the 2020 vision for Hereford, digital inclusion and fostering and adoption.

Internal communications

Good internal communication is important to inform staff of roles and responsibilities, changes to their employment and work environment, and to involve them in shaping services to improve delivery and meet budget reductions.

Both members and employees should be inspired and engaged by the commitment to make Herefordshire a great place to live, work and learn, supported by regular reminders of the difference the council, and they, make to people's lives. Employees and members of Herefordshire Council are natural ambassadors and advocates for the council's work. We will:

- Provide improved communications and engagement channels for employees and councillors, to support access and flow of information to help promote the key council messages and priorities and support in wider communication and engagement

- Keep employees and councillors informed of latest council news and provide sources for further information
- Provide and promote communication and engagement protocols and principles and other supporting documents.

Design and print

As the news and media landscape changes and services engage with new technology, more focus will be on creating infographics, social media and shareable digital content. A brand refresh will coincide with the roll out of the digital strategy. Some services will be supported to create sub-brands to identify and promote services or campaigns.

Print is a decreasing communication tool, often costly and untargeted. However, particular demographics linked to targeted campaigns may mean print has a part to play.

Commissioned services and contractors

In the role of the council as a commissioner, it is important that communication responsibilities and objectives are articulated at the procurement stage. Effective partnership branding can benefit all parties creating an understanding of providers and enhancing reputations. Working with commissioned services to identify partnerships and opportunities will help present an identifiable presence.

Consultations

Herefordshire Council will adhere to the Government principles to be more effective in consulting the public and to help avoid consultation fatigue. The council will use more digital methods to help involve a wider group of consultees at an earlier stage in the policy forming process. The use of technology, clear language and plain English in consultation documents will help the public engage, contribute their views.

Advertising and sponsorship

Advertising and sponsorship can provide a revenue income stream and will be accepted where relevant to the service and not detrimental to the customer experience. The council will establish mutually supportive relationships with other organisations in the public, private and charity sector to collaborate on reaching audiences - this means the council in certain circumstances will also place adverts.

Brand and reputation management

A brand is built and affirmed every time the customer has contact with the council, and needs to be consistently delivered across all platforms, online and in person. The brand can also affirm the roles and responsibilities of the council, communicating the wide range of services the council runs and supports.

A brand refresh and roll-out supports the commitment to the digital strategy and helps ensure consistency both online and off-line. Specific venues and services could benefit from a dedicated brand identity to help market more effectively for wider promotion and income generation (e.g. the museum venues).

The council has a duty, often a legal obligation, to conduct activities that are sometimes unpopular – especially in areas of social services and budget saving, as well as enforcement of planning, licensing and environmental controls. These are necessary roles to ensure the law is followed, communities are protected and the quality of environment which Herefordshire enjoys is retained. Some decisions affect the reputation of the council and have a negative impact on other services. In such instances the justification for the action needs to be explained and communicated.

Channel shift

The council interacts with many members of the community face-to-face and/or over the telephone. Many of these interactions could be converted into online interactions, this would make us and the services more efficient, effective and available 24/7. Whilst there will always be the need to conduct some services via face to face and telephone contact, such as social services and safeguarding, we will prioritise and aim to achieve channel shift by improving the functionality, design and content of the website and prioritise digital communications such as email, social media and mobile apps.

Research and insight

Understanding the needs of a diverse community is important to inform how the council operates and changes services to meet changing needs. A range of mechanisms and tools can be used, including the sharing of information and data, research, and consultation results to form a comprehensive and accurate view of the needs, trends and aspiration of local people and businesses.

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