WEST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNCIL CABINET

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LEADER OF THE COUNCIL AND CABINET MEMBER FOR STRATEGY – COUNCILLOR JONATHAN NUNN

Report Title	WNC Communications & Engagement Strategy 2024-27
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List of Appendices

Appendix A – Draft WNC Communications and Engagement Strategy

1. Purpose of Report

1.1 This report introduces the Communications and Engagement Strategy for West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) for the period 2024-2027. It sets out the approach to developing and improving the organisation's communications and engagement activities and channels over the next three years in line with the changing communications needs of stakeholders, including residents of West Northamptonshire.

2.   Executive Summary

2.1   Effective communications and engagement play a crucial role in supporting the work, services, and strategies of West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) so that people living and working here understand what our organisation is working to achieve and how this will make a difference, as well as ensuring they are better informed, engaged and involved in shaping their communities.

2.2   It is important the Council has a clear and consistent plan to continuously develop and improve the way it communicates and engages with communities, partners, and employees. The Communications and Engagement Strategy 2024-27 sets out the approach for doing this over the next three years, building upon strong foundations already laid during the Council's first few years as a young unitary authority when it established and embedded a brand-new corporate communications service.

2.3   The Communications and Engagement Strategy will play an important role in how we meet our vision and outcomes for the Council, ensuring our activities and channels are aligned with our strategic priorities and support all teams in their delivery. It looks at how we can continue to make our communications more accessible and inclusive to communities, in line with their changing needs in an evolving media landscape. The strategy also sets out a one council approach for developing a communications culture of openness as our organisation continues to build public trust and increase transparency of public services during its formative years

3.   Recommendations

3.1   It is recommended that the Cabinet approve the Council's Communications and Engagement Strategy 2024-27 and supports its implementation across the organisation.

4.   Reason for Recommendations

- The Strategy provides the Council with a clear plan for further developing and improving its corporate communications channels and activities over the next three years to better inform, engage and involve residents, communities, partners, and colleagues at the earliest opportunities and in line with their evolving needs.
- It ensures the communications and engagement service, and activities are aligned with the Council's strategic vision and priorities to effectively support their delivery across the organisation.

5.   Report Background

5.1   During its first three years the Council has focused on establishing, developing and embedding a progressive new communications and engagement service, with the key priority of replacing the reactive, crisis-driven legacy communications with a proactive and positive new approach.
This work has been set against an ongoing backdrop of national challenges requiring significant local communications support – from the initial days of the Covid pandemic onto the Cost-of-Living

challenges, as well as extreme weather emergencies, the sad loss of our Queen and the ongoing financial pressures and increased demand for services.

5.2   In 2021/22 the initial focus following Day One was to establish and stabilise the Council's new communications channels, with an interim service structure and embedding new branding, channels and activities, working to rebuild public trust and reputation after Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).

5.3   In 2022/23 WNC's communications service was restructured following an LGA Peer Review, which recommended a progressive new team structure introducing new Communications and Engagement Business Partners to successfully foster trusted, partnerships with teams' council-wide, placing strategic comms at the heart of planning and decision-making. This along with incorporate consultation colleagues into the service and specialist roles in digital media, marketing, internal communications, reinforced the Council's ability to start strengthening and expanding its channels and activities.

5.4   During 2023/24, with a highly motivated team now appointed, the Council has seen a notable increase in proactive, forward-planned communications and continued channel growth including the significant expansion of social media activity, launch of fortnightly e-news, and publication of the new West Northants Life magazine. It also included the delivery of proactive, high-quality promotions for over 200 projects and activities from the Cost Living campaign to Northampton Regeneration proposals, alongside 362 news releases, 3,250 social media updates, and over 60 stakeholder briefings. Council consultations also saw a 133% increase in public participations this year, receiving 12,685 responses compared to 5,441 in 22/23.

5.5   The Council's in-house communications support offer was also developed, with the service providing graphic design and video production services, which have helped to save teams money and also generate £17k of income from external partners.

5.6   It is therefore timely for the Council to build upon these strong foundations with its first Communications and Engagement Strategy, to set out the next phase of developing and improving these channels and activities over a three-year-period.

6.   Issues and Choices

6.1   The Communications and Engagement Strategy (featured in Appendix A) enables the Council to:
- Set out its vision and future approach to developing the way it communicates and engages with communities, partners, and colleagues.
- Have clear objectives and priorities for further developing its communications and engagement activities and channels – what we want to achieve and why, how we will do it and what success will look like.
- Build positively on its first few years and the great progress already made to transform communications and establish a bold and progressive service.

6.2   It sets out a corporate communications vision to:
- Better inform, engage and involve our communities, colleagues and partners
- Increase awareness and improve understanding of everything our Council is doing and working to achieve for West Northamptonshire and why it matters
- Build public trust and increase transparency of public services whilst also protecting and enhancing our reputation
- Be inclusive and accessible to all, reflecting the diverse needs of our communities.
- Place comms and engagement at the heart of our organisational culture and service planning, supporting all teams in improving services and delivering objectives.
- Be innovative and evolving with the changing digital landscape and our residents' needs.

6.3   To support the Council in achieving this vision, the strategy reviews the progress that has been made so far towards developing and improving communications and engagement channels and activities and proposes how the organisation can build on this further over the next three years through the following key themes:

- *Developing our narrative* – how we tell our story of our organisation and place in all our communications to help everyone understand our purpose, goals, ambitions, and challenges
- *Corporate and Place Branding* – developing our visual identity and brand culture to build recognition, awareness and trust and open up fresh opportunities and investment for our area
- *Campaign planning* – ensuring our communications campaigns and activities proactively support the delivery our key organisational priorities over the next three years
- *Digital and social media development* – evolving our channels and content in line with the ever-changing needs of our communities
- *Media relations and managing the news agenda* – continuing to build and strengthen relationships and adapt with the changing media landscape
- *Consultation and engagement activities* – reviewing our approach to increase reach and ensure our residents and communities are engaged at the earliest opportunities.
- *Internal communications* – how we can continue to build a communications culture
- Audience and channel mapping – to ensure our communications channels and activities are tailored to the right audiences using the most accessible and convenient methods for them
- *Publications and other published content* – developing our content and reach and making our communications clearer and easier for residents to understand
- *Measuring our progress* – planning our next steps and ensuring we evaluate our activities for effectiveness.

6.4   The strategy looks at what communications channels and activities within each of these themes could be improved/developed in line with audience needs and what successful outcomes would be delivered by doing so. It will be supported by an action plan and timeline which will inform the Communications Team's annual Service Plan and other workplans by providing a clear direction of travel on what we need to do.

7   Implications

7.4 **Resources and Financial**

7.4.1 The Communications and Engagement Strategy will be delivered through the Communications Service in line with existing resource and budgets. However, should any additional funding be identified as part of the implementation of the strategy at a later date, this would be subject for consideration a future Cabinet meeting once quantified. There is scope for objectives within the strategy leading to future opportunities for efficiencies and income generation, for example around improving digital and marketing channels to reduce wider organisational spend.

7.5 **Legal**

7.5.1 There are no specific legal implications arising from the report. The strategy supports and aligns with the principles of the Government's Recommended Code of Practice for Local Authority Publicity that all communications should be lawful, cost effective, objective, even-handed, appropriate, have regard to equality and diversity and are issued with care particularly during periods of heightened sensitivity.

7.6 **Risk**

7.6.1 There are no significant risks arising from the proposed recommendations in this report. The Strategy provides a clear and consistent future plan for developing and improving external and internal communications that will enable the Council to better manage reputational risks that arise.

7.7 **Consultation and Communications**

7.7.1 The Strategy has been developed with the involvement of Communications Team colleagues and its objectives for developing channels and activities draw upon ongoing feedback and suggestions from stakeholders including colleagues, members, and customers such as social media users. Feedback from other platforms such as the Big Conversation and Staff Surveys have also helped the team to shape future priorities.

7.8 **Consideration by Overview and Scrutiny**

7.8.1 There are no implications for consideration by Overview and Scrutiny.

7.9 **Climate Impact**

7.9.1 The Strategy has a positive climate impact by exploring future opportunities around the continuing shift to digital and online channels by residents seeking news and information, which provides opportunities for greener, more cost-effective ways of communicating our messages.

7.10 **Community Impact**

7.10.1 The implementation of the Strategy will have a positive community impact by further developing our communications and consultations channels and activities to better inform, engage and involve our residents and increase and improve awareness, understanding and accessibility of the many services, projects and activities available to them.

8   Background Papers

8.4 None