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| Document Title            | Communications Strategy |

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| Date          | 17/01/18                           |

|                      |          |
|----------------------|----------|
| For Office Use Only: |          |
| Library Reference    | 12/18    |
| Date Received        | 18/01/18 |
| Bulletin             | Jan 18   |

East Lothian Council's **vision** is for an even more prosperous, safe and sustainable East Lothian, with a dynamic and thriving economy, that enables our people and communities to flourish.

Our Communication Strategy informs how we engage with the public.

The following strategy sets out actions which will be taken from 2017-22 to support, and demonstrate, working as a council towards a common vision for East Lothian.

# BACKGROUND

East Lothian residents benefit from high-quality council services. Demographics and an increasing population suggest there will continue to be high demand for these services in a challenging financial climate.

The council's vision is for *East Lothian to be even more prosperous, safe and sustainable with a dynamic economy, that enables our people and communities to flourish.*

The council's overarching objective is '*reducing inequalities within and across our communities*'.

The themes and objectives of the East Lothian Council Plan 2017–22 are:

- GROWING OUR **ECONOMY**
- GROWING OUR **PEOPLE**
- GROWING OUR **COMMUNITIES**
- GROWING OUR **CAPACITY**

The council therefore requires a strategy to ensure it achieves improvements in both its internal and external communications. This will enable the council to demonstrate its effectiveness in responding to the many challenges faced while engaging with, and delivering services to, residents and service users.

For support and advice contact [communications@eastlothian.gov.uk](mailto:communications@eastlothian.gov.uk)

# 1 COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY 2017–22

This Communications Strategy sets out actions which will be taken to support the council in working towards a common vision for East Lothian.

Since devising our previous Communications Strategy in 2012, there has been a major shift in the communications landscape. While traditional journalism remains an influential driver in determining both the local and national agenda, there is now an increased choice of multimedia channels from which to access information. This means people have become increasingly sophisticated in how they engage with and scrutinise businesses and public organisations.

The communications landscape continues to evolve and, with limited resources, teams across the public sector face challenges in adapting to the pace of change while engaging effectively with those they serve.

There are, however, significant opportunities. East Lothian Council's Communications (Comms) Team has a vital role to play in ensuring residents and communities are better informed, engaged and empowered.

In 2017–22, the Comms Team will provide an integrated communications service to support the Senior Management Team (SMT), Elected Members and Service Areas in working towards council priorities. With a proactive approach and strategic planning at its core, the Comms Team will deliver a strategy geared towards achieving improved awareness of the council's activities and increased customer satisfaction.

In doing so, we can raise residents' perceptions of East Lothian Council's value and excellence in providing high-quality services upon which they depend, while maintaining a relentless focus on building an even more successful and sustainable county.

Key to this are the council's employees. The strategy recognises the role which strong and effective internal communications can have in supporting a motivated and engaged workforce, in which everyone feels trusted and understands how their role contributes to achieving a shared council vision.

PROMOTING EXCELLENCE | MAINTAINING TRUST

## 2 AIMS & OBJECTIVES

The Comms Team will deliver increasingly strategic communications planning and effective engagement with key internal and external audiences – including council employees, local residents, organisations and partner organisations.

Our key aims and objectives are to:

- **Promote greater awareness and understanding of the council's vision, values and priorities.**
- **Enhance the council's reputation by ensuring residents, communities and stakeholders understand its aims and objectives and are kept informed of developments through the most accessible and appropriate formats of communication.**
- **Produce communications materials which are accessible, consistently use simple, clear language and are produced in a cost-effective manner.**
- **Provide a 'one-stop shop' for Service Areas to highlight and meet communication priorities.**
- **Deliver effective internal engagement with Service Areas to ensure effective communications forward planning is embedded in the organisation and that the value of the Comms Team in helping to achieve the council's vision is visible and widely understood.**
- **Help council employees be better informed of council priorities and understand how their role, regardless of the grade or location, contributes to the vision.**
- **Assist in the 'change journey'.**
- **Work constructively with the media to ensure that the council's priorities and work is understood and its successes promoted appropriately.**
- **Work in partnership with key agencies and stakeholders to promote East Lothian as a dynamic, successful place in which to live, work and visit.**

## 3 KEY AUDIENCES

Our key audiences include:

- Local residents
- Service users
- Council employees
- Councillors
- Other elected representatives (MPs, MSPs)
- Community Councils and other local groups
- The third sector
- The media
- Partner organisations
- The business community
- Schools and young people
- Tourists and visitors
- National government

Our strategy for engaging with audiences is based on the three 'key pillars' of good communication:

- **Information** Providing the right information at the right time in the right way
- **Reputation** Recognising that effective communication is fundamental to protecting the council's reputation as an organisation
- **Participation** Encouraging people to become more involved in local decision-making

## 4 COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING

The Comms Team will place an increased focus on improving the planning and co-ordination of communications activity. The responsibility for this at a strategic level sits with the Team Manager, who will ensure that the team works with Service Areas to understand and develop communications priorities. Each Comms Adviser will be allocated to a particular Service Area(s) to deliver on agreed strategies and plans.

What we will do:

- **Circulate a monthly forward planner and dashboard.**  
These documents will be sent to the SMT monthly. The planner will provide visibility on planned communications activities, as well as external events or publications with implications for the council. This will give the SMT improved insight into communications priorities and help focus minds on activities which need to be captured in the planner. Accompanying the forward planner will be a dashboard, providing a high level evaluation of communications activity in the preceding month – measuring successes and identifying areas for improvement.
- **Representation at CMT/SMT.**  
To support the forward planning process, the Team Manager should have a regular slot at CMT meetings. This will facilitate a discussion based on the forward planner and dashboard and help the Team Manager confirm the communications priorities of Service Areas. The Team Manager will also attend SMT meetings to build and maintain relationships with colleagues from across the council.
- **One-to-one engagement with CMT and Administration.**  
The Team Manager will meet the Chief Executive on a fortnightly basis to discuss and receive feedback on communications priorities. For the same purpose regular engagement should take place with the Depute Chief Executives, Heads of Service, Service Managers and Administration Members as required.
- **Full monthly Comms Team meeting.**  
To discuss team objectives and priorities. A short, weekly team briefing will also be held to discuss immediate priorities and challenges. This will be in addition to regular one-to-one meetings between team members as required.
- **A Core Brief on key messages will be maintained by the Comms Team.**  
The aim of this is to provide consistency of messaging across the council.



## 5 MEDIA RELATIONS & CAMPAIGNING

While print sales have continued to fall in recent years, newspapers remain influential. East Lothian's main weekly newspaper has a print circulation of around 10,000 while its stories can be read more widely online and shared through social media. Regional and national media (print, online and broadcast) have a varying level of interest in East Lothian issues, however, at a time of significant growth and change locally, maintaining relationships with editors is important to raise awareness of the council's challenges and priorities. It also presents an opportunity to demonstrate that East Lothian Council is an innovative local authority with employees who work towards our common vision and demonstrate our values as set out in *The East Lothian Way*.



What we will do:

- **Engagement with newsdesks.**  
The Team Manager, supported by Comms Advisers as required, will meet frequently with editors from the main local media outlets and maintain dialogue with the regional and national media. This will provide context to ensure journalists have a good understanding of the council's activities and challenges.
- **Better packaging of news and promotional activity.**  
It is no longer sufficient to simply issue a news release stating the council's position. We must ensure news releases are packaged with quotes from the relevant council spokesperson as well as third party comments where appropriate. These should be complemented by increased use of pictures, videos, infographics and digital communications. These stories should be captured and presented in the forward planner, agreed with the Team Manager. Responsibility for producing such news stories will sit with the relevant Comms Adviser, supported by team colleagues as required – utilising expertise in graphic design, videoing, digital and photography.

- **Work with Service Areas to identify and plan co-ordinated campaigns to achieve council priorities.**  
These will utilise a mix of platforms as appropriate to reach target audiences on a variety of subjects – for example to encourage recycling or to support the objectives of transformation projects (such as online payments). These activities will be captured in the forward planner, as described above.
- **Work closely with relevant Service Areas to seek opportunities to promote East Lothian as a great place in which to live, work and visit – adding value to the Visit East Lothian brand.**



## 6 SOCIAL MEDIA

The council is now able to engage with thousands of people every day through its social media channels. There are opportunities to be more creative and engaging. Social media amplifies the views of individuals and can be used to hold public organisations to account. When used inappropriately it can have serious reputational implications for individuals and organisations.

What we will do:

- **Develop our social media policy.**  
The council has a number of social media channels. There are 'corporate' accounts maintained by the Comms Team while schools and other departments such as Economic Development and John Gray Centre operate their own autonomous accounts. They are largely used proactively to share information on council news, services and campaigns. Our social media policy will be developed to set out the governance arrangements for these accounts, provide clarity on expectations and also a code of practice for employees to follow.
- **Develop a customer-focused approach to social media.**  
Residents and customers increasingly see social media as a tool to ask questions of organisations or report service issues. Working with Customer Service, we will develop an agreed policy which enables social media to be used as an official customer service tool. While the Comms Team will continue to hold responsibility for the coordination of social media, this will enable customer enquiries to be dealt with in a consistent manner to those received via telephone/email etc. This will provide additional choice for residents in how they engage with the council.
- **Promote the essential role of council workers.**  
Social media content is most effective when it shows the human side or personality of an organisation. We will frequently feature council workers on social media channels, using pictures and videos to introduce the worker, explain their role and how it contributes to the council's vision. This will help raise awareness of the council's essential role and value.
- **Continue to develop meaningful and engaging content.**  
We will create more visual content such as infographics, which can be posted on social media channels to engage with residents and service users on the benefits of council services. We also intend to make increased use of video features – for example story of the week.
- **Pilot the use of Facebook advertising to deliver targeted campaigns on council services.**  
Helping to get our message across effectively or provide relevant information in an appealing and accessible format.
- **Stay abreast with and, where possible, anticipate developments.**  
The rapid growth of social media has seen platforms emerge and disappear (eg Vine), while others such as Twitter and Facebook have become increasingly successful. We will maintain a focus on understanding emerging channels – advising on their implications for the council and how service delivery may need to be adapted.



## 7 EMPLOYEE/INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

There is a direct link between high-quality internal communications and an engaged, informed and motivated workforce which understands the organisation's vision. The council's mix of office and frontline employees poses a number of challenges in maintaining internal communication channels which work for everyone. However, there are a number of actions which, supported by managers and team leaders, can enhance the flow of information between employees.

What we will do:

- **Carry out an employee communications audit to gauge opinion on the quality, effectiveness and reach of our internal platforms.**
- **Ensure the council's vision, values and priorities have clear visibility throughout the organisation.** We will produce dynamic content for staff which helps employees understand how all roles contribute to achieving the shared council vision.
- **Continue to develop the monthly e-magazine.** *Inform* was introduced in December 2016 as a replacement for Team Talk and eNews. Feedback to date has been generally very positive and we will continue to generate a variety of engaging content, news and features which improve employee understanding of what is happening in the council. As there are likely to be stories which need to be communicated within a shorter timeframe, we will, on a weekly basis, signpost staff to stories through Inform Updates. We will continue to issue eAlerts to communicate standalone or urgent information – such as IT or resilience issues.
- **Develop new ways of engaging with staff who have no or limited access to email or computers.** This includes exploring whether there are innovative ways of making Inform accessible within offices/depots (eg through the HR and Payroll project) or making use of screens/monitors within depots. We will support managers in providing hard to reach staff/frontline workers with information on important news items.
- **Support wider organisational development initiatives with colleagues in Corporate Policy and Improvement and HR.** We will explore development of a LearnPro module for new recruits on internal communications.

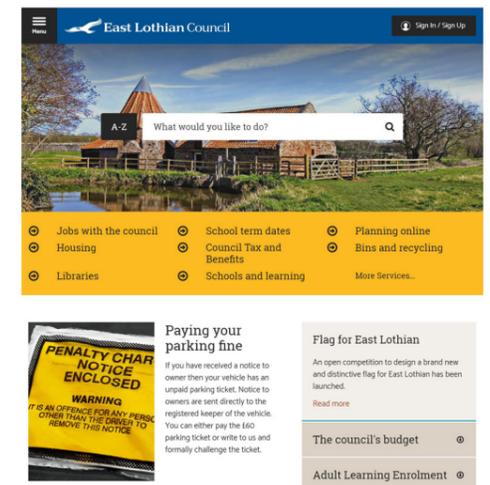


## 8 WEBSITE & DIGITAL

The council website is a popular source of information for residents and service users. It is also becoming a customer service tool which is used to pay for an increased number of services. As mobile devices continue to develop, the council needs to ensure that its website is fit for purpose. A project is underway which will see the council website re-launched in early 2018. As well as improved functionality the new website will be increasingly accessible to people using mobile handheld devices. The new website supports the wider objectives of the Transformation programme which seeks to expand digital services and help the council become increasingly efficient.

What we will do:

- **Roll out a new, responsive and customer-facing website for the benefit of East Lothian residents.**
- **Produce strategies for the website, intranet and council apps and development plans consistent with the overall aims of the Council Plan, as well as the council's customer contact and communications strategies.**
- **Collaborate with the council's web steering group to produce an annual development plan for the corporate website, taking account of current and future customer needs, technological developments and legislative and regulatory requirements.**
- **Ensure the website is appropriately maintained and content refreshed, working alongside trained *Web Editors* and *Web Champions* in each Service Area.**
- **Ensure web content is written to a high standard in the interests of accessibility.**
- **Oversee the ongoing maintenance of the Content Management System used to maintain the website and intranet.**
- **Ensure that the guidelines, protocols and standards for producing and publishing content on the website and intranet are consistent with the council's brand guidelines and accessibility standards.**
- **Develop training programmes to raise awareness of web and intranet developments, relevant legislation and working practices and to manage site content.**
- **Prepare reports on website use and conduct quality assurance checks and benchmarking to ensure the council's website keeps pace with developments in local government.**
- **Support the council's wider digital transformation agenda for the benefit of residents and customers. This includes providing expertise as part of project teams.**



## 9 BRAND, DESIGN & PUBLICATIONS

While there is an increased focus on digital channels, physical resources including newspapers, leaflets, posters and display continue to provide a useful means of informing residents and service users. Ensuring information is available in a range of accessible formats avoids exclusion. The Comms Team provides design support accordingly for Service Areas. The Comms Team continues to support Service Areas with the production of publications for bespoke audiences such as Buzz and Homefront. Led by the Comms Team, the council continues to produce Living – its newspaper for residents – which is distributed to all 47,000 households in East Lothian. Subject to the availability of resources, it is recommended that distribution of Living continues in 2017–22.

As digital communications further develop it will be necessary to review whether printed publications remain the best way of reaching target audiences. Providing content in different ways has potential cost and other transformative benefits.

What we will do:

- **Work closely with Service Areas to understand their publications and design requirements.**  
We will advise on whether a printed publication such as a leaflet or brochure is the best way of getting a message across, or whether a digital option should be considered instead.
- **Produce a council newspaper.**  
Subject to availability of sufficient resources, we will continue the council newspaper, *Living*, as the most direct way of reaching all households. We will explore advertising opportunities as a way of raising income to support its continuation.
- **Explore creative solutions.**  
Advice and support to Service Areas on how high-quality creative solutions can add value to projects and initiatives.
- **Deliver a comprehensive design service.**  
Produce professional graphic design materials which can be used in new and innovative ways to reach audiences such as infographics for social media, the website and video. This will help add value and scope to communication initiatives.
- **Develop brand guidelines.**  
We will develop a new identity system to ensure a consistent style to cross-council publications, both in terms of aesthetics and language.
- **Develop an image library.**  
We will build a stock of high-quality photographs to support comms projects across the council.
- **Develop a digital asset management system.**



## 10 TEAM DEVELOPMENT

To deliver the aims of the strategy and stay at the forefront of good practice, all Comms Team members should have regular learning, development and training opportunities. These will be identified through the annual PRD process.

We want to sustain an environment where team members are able to share knowledge and learn from each. We want to give team members the opportunity to hear about experiences of delivering successful campaigns in other organisations – for example through the Scottish local authority comms group, membership of Creative Exchange and events, other networking opportunities and courses organised by bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Public Relations.

## 11 MEASUREMENT, EVALUATION & IMPLEMENTATION

The council's communications activities need to be evaluated like any other service. Where possible, communications targets should link to service improvement targets. Residents' surveys, focus groups, feedback and evaluation of media coverage are all key measurement tools in assessing the success of our strategy.

We will routinely measure the balance of positive, negative and neutral media coverage and highlight which platforms and channels have worked effectively. We will produce a monthly dashboard to evaluate communications activity. This will encompass all forms of communication techniques – media relations, social media, digital and internal communications. As required, we will provide an evaluation of specific communications activity to identify its effectiveness and any learning points for the future. This will provide evidence of how communications work can support the achievement of council priorities.

A timetable will be developed and regularly reviewed in order to deliver the objectives of this Communications Strategy.

## 12 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this Communications Strategy is to set out the aims and high level actions which will be taken from 2017–22 to support and demonstrate the effectiveness of the council in working towards its vision for the benefit of East Lothian residents. It recognises that the communications landscape continues to evolve, which requires an agile and responsive Comms Team.

There are many opportunities for the Comms Team to ensure employees, residents and other stakeholders are better informed and engaged with the activities of the council.

This strategy will enable the Comms Team to become increasingly strategic and multi-disciplinary. It will also ensure the Comms Team is positioned to support the council's overall objectives and demonstrate its effectiveness in a challenging climate.

More generally, it will help ensure East Lothian Council is trusted both within and outwith the county as a provider of high-quality public services.

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