

# External Communications Strategy 2023-2026



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# 1. Introduction

Effective communication is crucial to project our ambitions to our staff, customers and stakeholders and involving them in how we operate and deliver our services in support of achieving these aims.

The aim of this strategy is to align our communications objectives to the corporate priorities of the council and ensure that our brand represents a forward thinking and ambitious authority that is commercially minded and focussed on delivering excellent services to our citizens.

We believe that customers who are informed about our services and benefits view the council in a more positive way, than those who are not so informed. Our communication is underpinned by letting customers know what we are doing for them, what they get for their money and who is responsible for the services they use. This strategy illustrates our aim to consistently deliver effective communications to our customers.

Good communication is the responsibility of all of our officers, staff and elected councillors, supported by the communications team, whose primary function is to communicate the council's business as defined in the [Corporate Plan](#).

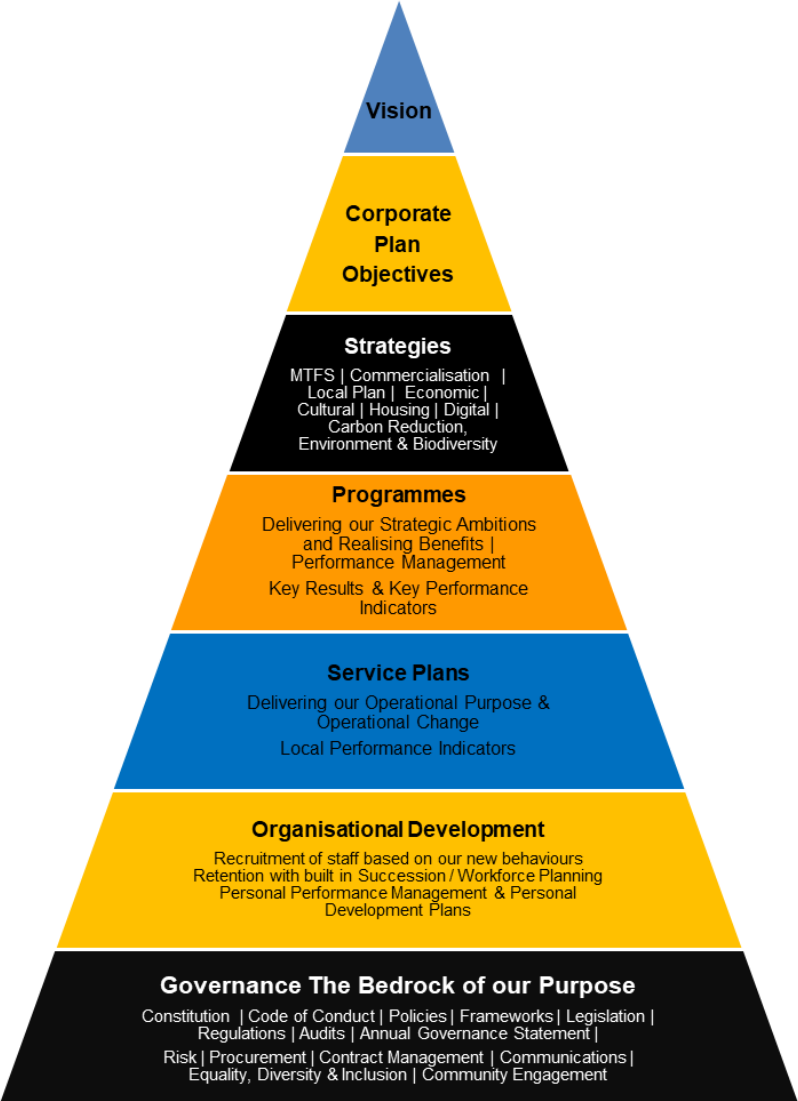
These priorities set within our Corporate Plan state:

- We achieve financial security
- We become focused on delivering the best for our Customers
- Our environment is cherished and protected; and
- We plan for North Devon's Future

Sitting below the Corporate Plan we have our Performance Management Framework and aligned to that, this strategy is a key component to ensure that we listening to, learning from and acting on feedback from our citizens and customers, as this is an important element within our framework. We want to learn from what works well and how we can further develop good practice but equally, we need to be able to identify when we are not getting things right and we need to know what to do to make a positive change.



In the pyramid on the following page you will see that communications forms one of the bedrocks of our organisation. Communications should flow freely throughout the organisation, communicating not only our successes but also when things aren't going so well and what we plan to do to get things back on track.



## **2. Our approach**

It is important that all services and functions within the council know the importance of communications and proactively promoting their services, whilst ensuring our brand is consistent and clear in all communications.

The communications team works closely and collaboratively with our services to plan proactive communication and engagement activities as well as providing support to the Corporate and Community Services team with community engagement.

In our campaigns we understand our customers and organise them into defined audience groups. We use that knowledge to inform what and how we communicate. Audience led communication, using the appropriate channel with digital channels explored and exploited is used wherever possible.

Good evaluation is central to the approach of the communications team and Webmaster. Outcomes are monitored and meaningful evaluation of campaigns is conducted to help us refine the methods and approach for future communications. This ensures our approach begins and ends with the customer.

### **3. Shifts in our communication strategy**

1. We have accelerated our shift towards digital and online communications. We continue to improve the customer journey on our website, supporting the digital by design programme, and keep content accessible, fresh and updated.
2. We continue to seek new and innovative ways of engaging with our customers through evolving digital channels. We prioritise the promotion of a digital first approach which meets the requirements of our audience whilst providing efficiencies to the authority.
3. Whilst our main focus is on digital communications we still use the more traditional channels so no audience is excluded. We ensure our communications campaigns are inclusive and utilise multiple channels of communication and engagement for everyone.

#### **4. Our communication objectives**

- Promote the council's brand consistently
- Enhance and promote the reputation, image and beliefs of the council
- Be proactive in communications
- Provide inclusive and accessible communications
- Provide clear, regular, reliable, timely and accurate communications using a multi-channel approach, centred around digital first
- Ensure all staff understand the corporate priorities, brand and how their role contributes to the overall aims of the council
- Ensure councillors are kept informed and engaged



## 5. Our communication principles

Through all communications we ensure:

- we are customer-focused, informative and positive, actively promoting local democracy, and involving our residents and businesses in decision-making where possible
- the messages we send are transparent, consistent, accurate, clear and timely and in keeping with the councils' vision
- we provide an open, professional, fair and efficient service to our media where we are honest and proactive
- we support and protect the reputation of the council, the officers and the councillors
- our communication is legal and adheres to the [Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity](#) (published in March 2011)

## **6. Our audiences**

Our audiences include everyone we communicate with, through any channel or medium. This includes:

- Officers and staff members
- Elected councillors
- Businesses
- Residents and prospective residents
- Tourists and visitors
- Neighbouring authorities
- Partners
- Organisations and groups
- Media
- MPs
- Parish and Town Councils

## 7. Our Communication channels

It is important that our communications campaigns include a multi-prong approach communicate key messages to ensure all audiences get the chance to see it and engage with us. We apply the most appropriate methods at the most appropriate time, to deliver the best outcome for the target audience.

We communicate with residents and external audiences through a variety of channels including:

### Digital

- **Social media**

We aim to create engaging and innovative content that drives engagement and pushes people towards our digital channels. We aim to focus on increasing the positive image and attributes of the council.

We have corporate accounts and we run social media for certain council-owned property such as the Pannier Market, as well as creating accounts for campaigns where appropriate. Our official sites are listed on [North Devon Council run social channels](#).

Social media provides us with the two-way opportunity to directly engage with our customers. We treat direct messages in the same way as an email or phone call and, where appropriate and necessary, we will respond to comments on posts.

We monitor the performance of our presence to ensure we are producing relevant and timely content.

We continually explore new forms of social media and functions within the accounts we have to keep up to date with trends and suitable methods for our audiences.

- **Social media acceptable use policy**

To ensure our accounts stay safe and are used appropriately we follow acceptable use guidelines:

- We engage with people through many digital channels
- We welcome comments on our social media pages and understand that people have differing views on many issues. We will not, however, condone any swearing, abuse or discriminative posts
- We review all comments made on our sites. If comments violate our social media code of conduct policy, we may delete, hide, report or block them
- Comments should be related to the posted topic for the council's social media page or post

- Our social media accounts are not open to comments promoting or opposing any person campaigning for election to a political office
- We will remove inflammatory, obscene or profane content and ban or block those who spread comments that (are):
  - defamatory, misleading or false
  - abusive or threatening – this includes swearing
  - unnecessarily name council staff or workers
  - obscene, profane or sexually oriented
  - discriminatory in any way
  - promoting illegal activity
  - promoting individual products or services
  - the same message posted multiple times, otherwise known as 'spamming'
  - controversial, irrelevant and off topic messages otherwise known as 'trolling'

- **Hate and harassment**

Personal attacks of any kind, or offensive comments that target or disparage any ethnic, racial, age, or religious group, gender, sexual orientation or disability status are prohibited, and may be reported. Hate and harassment can take the form of criminal or non-criminal behaviour, and can include offensive comments or images on social media or text messages. We will remove or block any contributions or contributors who post hate-related messages on our accounts. Where required, we may screenshot the posts and send them to the police for investigation.

- **Hours**

Our social media pages are monitored between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday. We aim to respond to direct messages within one working day.

We signpost customers with urgent queries to our [Contact Us page](#).

- **Website**

Our website is at the heart of our digital offering, giving people the chance to self-serve 24 hours a day as well as giving them up to date and relevant information about services.

We ensure the website is clear, easy to navigate and accessible. A lot of transactions are 'grudge' transactions such as paying for a service, a bill or a fine and so we need to make that transaction simple and quick.

Our digital by design and customer focus programmes are working towards streamlining our web content and ensuring all information is accessible.

- **E-Bulletins**

We provide category-specific information to subscribed audiences. As well as providing information on services and campaigns, the bulletins aim to push people towards the website to carry out transactions by using call to action tactics, such as buttons and web links.

## **Traditional**

- **Local media**

Local media provides a number of channels to help us promote our services and engage with our audiences. Both local newspapers have a strong digital presence, particularly on social media. The Gazette has changed its focus to promoting more positive stories and we have built a strong partnership approach with them which we will continue to nurture.

Where appropriate, we use The Voice, our community-based local radio station. Their output is community based and they have more talk time than the more commercial stations. This gives us opportunities to speak on air about important services and campaigns.

Advertising can help us reach a wider audience, however it is an expensive option. This will only be used when we feel it will provide the most value.

- **Printed materials**

Physical materials provide an opportunity to display the council's brand as well as giving valuable information to audiences. They are a way of reaching our non-digital audiences and can be in the form of:

- Letters
- Posters
- Leaflets
- Flyers
- Stickers
- Postcards
- Pop-up banners
- Bollard covers
- Murals
- Signage

All printed materials will be designed by our in-house graphic designer to ensure they meet our brand guidelines or, if using an external agency, our brand guidelines will be provided and strict adherence to them will form part of the brief.

## **Community events and face to face**

Face to face interaction is one of the most effective ways to engage with people, although it is resource intensive. Careful planning and consideration is required on when to organise or attend community events.

We attend the annual North Devon Show in a branded marquee with visual displays and staff from a range of services present.

We attend the annual North Devon Homes summer fayre, which provides an opportunity for us to engage with a specific audience on issues that might particularly affect them as well.

We have a communications asset pack suitable for attendance at recruitment fayres and any ad-hoc pop-up events. Pop-up events held in our assets, like Green Lanes and the Barnstaple Pannier Market could prove beneficial when we want to direct messages directly into our communities or for public consultation.

Good communication is the responsibility of all of our staff therefore adopting an approach where everyone, including those out and about (wardens and operational staff etc.) represent the council's brand and values and communicate key messages and aims where appropriate.

## **Parish forums**

We hold parish forums to engage with parish and town councils and relay key messages. These forums allow our officers the opportunity to discuss projects, plan and services. We previously held one or two a year in person on an annual basis but more recently have been held virtually. Links to forthcoming events, agendas, minutes and presentations that may be of interest to town and parish councillors can be found on our [parish events webpage](#) and you can [subscribe for updates](#).

## **Pre-election period**

The pre-election period, formerly known as purdah, is the term used to describe the period between the time an election is announced and the date the election or referendum is held. There are specific restrictions on communication activity during this time. During these periods, we will not issue any publicity which seeks to influence voters, we will ensure that publicity relating to policies and proposals from central government is balanced and factually accurate, and we must comply with laws which prohibit political advertising on television or radio. More information on how we will communicate during the pre-election period can be found on the [Local Government Association website](#).

## **Community engagement strategy**

This Community Engagement Strategy is currently being reviewed and will be published on the Council's website in due course

## Our assets

Our assets, such as Green Lanes, Barnstaple Pannier Market, our fleet of vehicles litter bins and public toilets, can be used to promote the council's messages and aims.

## Public Meetings

In 2014 the Government introduced new rights by the Openness of Local Government Bodies 2014, which would enable members of the public to know how decisions are made.

We support the principle of transparency and openness and the new rights which allow use of modern technology and communication methods such as [filming and audio-recording](#) to report the proceedings of council meetings where necessary. We upload recordings of our meetings to our [YouTube channel](#).

All communication must be lawful and the following laws may apply to our communications activities:

- Local Government Acts 1972 and 1986 as well as the updated Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity published in March 2011.

These state all our publicity must:

- be lawful
- be cost-effective
- be objective
- be even-handed
- be appropriate
- have regard to equality and diversity
- be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.
- [Data Protection Act 1998](#) (individuals rights over personal information)
- [Freedom of Information Act 2000](#) (the right to obtain information held by public authorities)
- laws of defamation - slander (the spoken word) and libel (written)
- Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This strategy is also complemented by a number of policies and protocols, all managed by the communications team:

- Social media guidelines
- Branding guidelines
- Crisis communications plan

## 8. Media Protocol

Our communications team adhere to our Media Protocol for working with the media. Our communications team must be contacted for all:

- press releases, statements and photograph calls concerning the business of the council
- comments or statements about matters relating to the business of the

### ***What we will not tolerate***

Our [Customer Charter](#) defines how we will communicate with our customers and what they can expect from all our staff. In addition to this, there are points on what we expect from our customer when communicating with us.

It is reasonable for us to expect our customers to:

- be polite, courteous, non-abusive and non-threatening at all times
- treat staff and other customers with respect and not behave in an anti-social manner
- not be under the influence of alcohol or drugs
- never resort to physical violence or commit illegal acts on our premises
- not behave in a way that exposes themselves and others to risk
- provide all relevant documentation/information when they visit us comply with all our reasonable requests



## 9. Accessibility

We are committed to providing quality services for all our customers and ensuring there is no discrimination when we deliver our services. We will do our best to provide access to information and services to suit everybody's needs. For people with physical or language barriers, we will try to provide extra help, such as:

- ensuring our information is available in appropriate formats (for example, on audio tape, in Braille, or in large print) on request
- providing a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter, if necessary
- offering to provide an interpreter for anyone who needs it
- providing a portable induction loop if necessary
- provide our documents in a language other than English, upon request
- using the Type talk telephone service
- Ensuring that our website, and electronic documents, are accessible to those using screen readers or assistive technology.

This is a live document and in line with the ethos of this document can be continuously improved at any time.