

Partnership Communications Strategy 2023/2027

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South & East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership



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Introduction

Communicating and engaging with our communities in a clear, concise and authentic voice plays a vital role for the Partnership. We want our residents and partners to be truly involved in and informed of **what we do**, **why we do it** and **what impact** our work has on the communities we work on behalf of.

This strategy sets out clear goals and objectives and details how we work as a communications team and the principles that underpin our work.

This document describes our approach to key communication principles: external communications, media management and internal communications – as well as how we will achieve our objectives and how we intend to measure them.

This is intended to be a 'live' document and will be regularly reviewed and held 'up to the light' for any future amendments or additions.

What we plan to do...



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- key focus on strategic communication and forward planning
- focus on proactive media opportunities involving local, regional and trade media
- the use of social media as an engagement and conversational tool – listening and engaging with our communities, rather than solely broadcast
- audience behaviours and insights as a fundamental tool for all our communication activity
- develop engaging content that's audience-focused
- working alongside colleagues in other departments to develop a compelling narrative on why people want to live and work across the sub-region and why businesses want to invest.

How we plan to do it...



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- Daily, early morning team sit-rep meetings which cover daily activities, media enquiries and on-going campaigns
- Weekly planning sessions with an emphasis on strategy and forward planning
- Continued Professional Development (CPD) by members of the team, coupled with individual training plans
- Embedding communications within Service Managers' network across the Partnership
- Deliver robust media training to senior Members and officers
- Acting as a single point of contact for strategic communications support and advice for senior officers and Members
- Exploring new technologies such as ChatGPT and emerging methods/theories such as behavioural psychology

How we are going to measure what we do?

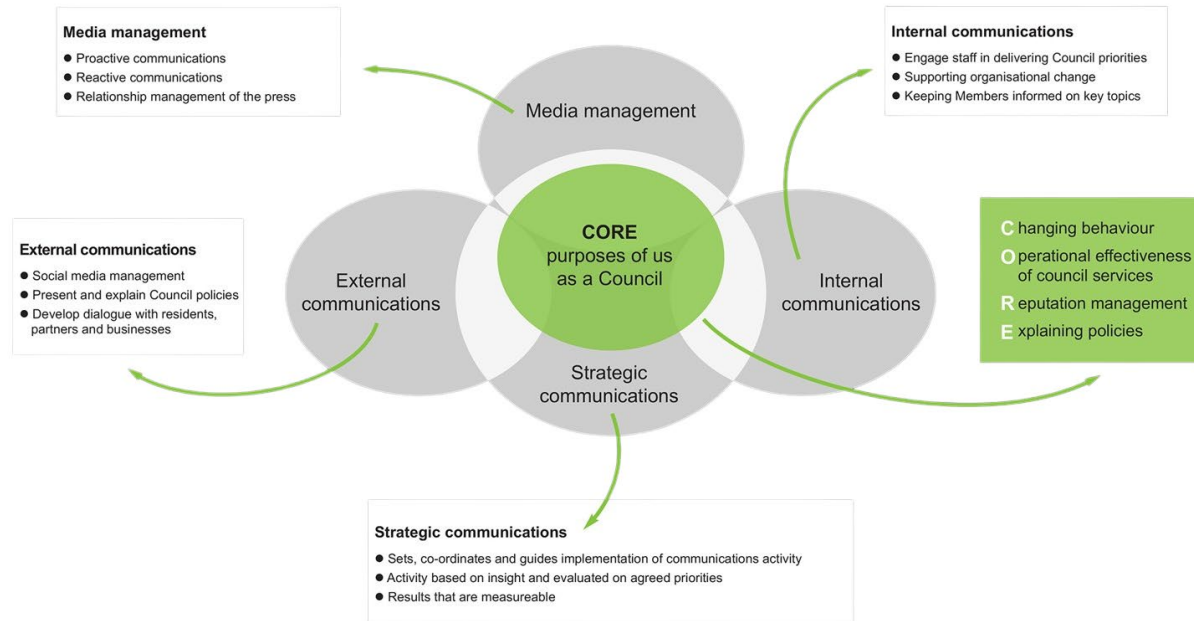


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- Monthly evaluation reports that cover social and press coverage
- Business impact assessment – how the work we do has had an effect on the effectiveness/improvement of council services
- Share success stories with staff via Partnership Update and monitor engagement
- Traditional engagement metrics across our social channels
- Work with the Partnership's Insights and Transformation team to conduct an annual resident satisfaction survey for all three Councils – with benchmarking recommendations from LGA.

Communications model*



* Based on the Modern Communications Model (MCOM2.0)



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Strategic communications

Strategic communication will sit at the heart of how the Communications Team will operate and support colleagues and elected Members.

Alongside other disciplines outlined in this strategy, strategic communication **sets, co-ordinates and guides** our communication activity.

To operate at a truly strategic level, the Communications Team must be part of the decision-making process, rather than a tactical consideration at the end of a project/campaign process.

By working collaboratively with our Members and officer colleagues, the Communications Team can deliver the **CORE** purpose communication model:

- C** – changing behaviour
- O** – operational effectiveness of services
- R** – reputation management of staff and Members
- E** – explanation of policies, actions and campaigns

Strategic communications

The four core functions of our approach are:

1. **Communication leadership**
2. **Horizon scanning**
3. **Insight**
4. **Evaluation**



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Strategic communications



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1. Communication leadership:

The Communications Team will:

- offer expertise, support and creative solutions to any project, campaign or initiative that requires communication, either internally or externally, so departments can successfully achieve their objectives as set out in the Annual Delivery Plan
- suggest an appropriate range of communication tools to successfully complete aims and objectives of a project
- prepare and provide comprehensive and robust communications plans for projects that require extensive communications support
- provide advice and insight to Members and senior officers as well as briefing notes for media interviews
- Make senior officers and lead Members aware of any emerging issues or risks that may have an effect on external or internal reputation.

Strategic communications



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2. Horizon scanning:

The Communications Team will:

- identify potential issues and risks that could have an impact on the reputation of the Partnership (and any one of its associated councils), its staff and Members by monitoring social media content, print media and online news websites
- identify potential media opportunities by developing relationships with local, regional and national media outlets, as well as proactively 'pitching' ideas to print media and online news websites
- monitor and continually 'stress test' our current communication channels in terms of worth and relevancy, as well as explore new methods and channels of communication
- work with departments and services to identify new communication methods, channels and resources to improve resident experience.

Strategic communications



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3. Insight:

The Communications Team will:

- collaborate regularly with colleagues to share and take away insights to better understand our audiences
- build an evidence base of what communications techniques work best with different audiences
- share our knowledge of audiences with departments to help shape and improve future campaigns
- continuously review, refine and improve communication messages and methods based on audience insights.

Strategic communications



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3. Evaluation:

The Communications Team will:

- set out clear aims and SMART objectives for each major communication project
- report via monthly evaluation reports starting July 2023 and constantly review our performance and delivery
- place insights and audience data at the heart of all our social and digital media output
- share our 'lessons learned' with colleagues and with wider local government communication teams via LGA and LGComms.

Media management

The three core functions of our approach are:

1. **Proactive media handling**
2. **Reactive media handling**
3. **Relationship management**



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Media management

Local, regional and trade media holds a vital role in the relationship between the Partnership, its residents and partner organisations. The media plays its part in creating public understanding of the Partnership's aims and ambitions and holds Member decisions to account. Therefore, the Communications Team need to explain and justify the Partnership's plans and aspirations accurately and timely.

In order for the Communications Team to proactively manage the media, clear direction, honesty and integrity need to be displayed by the team – not only in their relationships with the media, but officers and Members.

For the Communications Team to be successful in media management, close relationships and preferred methods of access need to be forged with senior officers and Members to meet the demands of an 24/7 news cycle.

Media management



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1. Proactive media handling:

The Communications Team will:

- place articles and stories with the media to get the best possible coverage and exposure
- speak regularly with reporters and broadcasters both locally, regionally and national trade to build a working knowledge of their interests and how they operate
- build a comprehensive media list of relevant titles and reporters/broadcasters to issue relevant and timely communications
- work with our key partners to build advocacy and support for any joint communications/announcements
- always look to maximise impact and coverage by the tactical use of our own channels, media deadlines and/or exclusives/embargoes
- hold regular press briefings and meetings with local and regional press colleagues

Media management



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1. Reactive media management:

The Communications Team will:

- monitor press and online media as well as relevant social media content to 'warn and inform' Members and colleagues
- evaluate news coverage and public sentiment to understand and pre-empt direction of stories which will be turned into insight and shared across teams
- anticipate possible media approaches and prepare responses beforehand
- engage with reporters/broadcasters verbally to shape stories and prevent or correct any inaccurate reporting
- challenge factually inaccurate reporting and discuss appropriate actions
- use our own social media channels to rebut inaccurate articles to 'set story straight'.

Media management



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1. Relationship management:

The Communications Team will:

- build trust and display honesty, authority and integrity when dealing with media
- provide media comment within an agreed timescale and treat all media enquiries with openness and transparency
- organise regular meetings with local, regional and trade press to discuss and identify any campaigns or future content that is mutually beneficial
- provide media training and comprehensive media briefings to Members so they are best prepared for media interviews
- stay up to speed with media trends and understand the approach and style of different reporters/journalists.



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External communications

External communications is about building and maintaining relationships with our residents and partner organisations.

This means fostering genuine two-way engagement so the Communications Team can filter throughout the Partnership what audiences are thinking, saying and doing. This will build a better picture and awareness of target audiences, therefore help the Partnership communicate its actions effectively.

True, two-way communication will also help create advocates in the long term, as well as trust and integrity.

Any effective external communication function isn't simply about getting our audiences to share our messages – it's also about listening to what they have to say

In addition, corporate communication channels will be used to announce all news and project updates, with officers asked to amplify/share.

External communication

The four core functions of our approach are:

1. **Listening**
2. **Dialogue**
3. **Awareness**
4. **Narrative**



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External communications

The methods of mass communication is constantly changing and evolving. Effective local government communication teams need to rely less on traditional methods – print media, advertising, etc. – and concentrate their efforts on communicating messages directly with their audiences.

We know that newspaper circulation is in decline, more people get their news via (untrusted) social media sources and that trust is declining in many key institutions. Many institutions via their social media channels are operating in an echo chamber and those who can cut through the noise, apply creative and strategic solutions to communication will have their voice heard.

The Partnership, along with its associated single councils, needs to be seen and to act as a ‘trusted voice’ in its conversations with residents, businesses and its partners. That’s why it’s imperative that our corporate channels are used as the primary source of information.

External communications



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1. Listening:

The Communications Team will:

- gather intelligence from a range of audiences and sources (including non-owned social media channels)
- work with departments to gather and share business intelligence and resident feedback/behaviours to shape content/campaigns/messaging
- Work with departments to understand their business needs and objectives and support them in the messaging and delivery



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External communications

2. Dialogue:

The Communications Team will:

- endeavour to engage our residents in open dialogue when responding to their comments and queries on social media
- seek opportunities to have dialogue and discussions with audiences away from our own 'owned' channels
- build and maintain positive and productive relationships with Members and officers and other external audiences such as the media
- mitigate criticism from residents and the media by challenging myths and misconceptions and being seen as a 'trusted voice', as well as acting upon positive and supportive voices
- continue to explore new ways of talking to our audiences.

External communications



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3. Awareness:

The Communications Team will:

- explain to our different audiences the Partnership's policies and initiatives in plain English and in messages that are easy to understand, shareable and accessible
- use pictorial-led communications and translation services for those audiences where English isn't their first language
- build awareness and understanding of our audiences by:
 - consulting (resident feedback, meetings with Members, stakeholder meetings/visits),
 - collaborating (joint planning/campaigning and press activities with partners),
 - informing (social media, press releases, statements, attributed quotes from Members, etc.)

External communications



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4. Narratives:

The Communications Team will:

- work to shape narratives to fit the growing and emerging trends and themes of the Partnership and the work it does
- weave relevant elements of the Partnership narrative into all external communications activity: press releases, Member attributed quotes, etc.
- work with Members and officers to develop specific narratives for each department.

Internal communication

The three core functions of our approach are:

1. **Strategic narrative**
2. **Employee voice**
3. **Integrity**



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Internal communications

Internal communications isn't about 'sending out stuff' – nor is it about 'trickle down' messaging from senior colleagues.

Internal communications is about mechanisms that engage staff in a way that motivates them, maximises their performance and delivers the Partnership's vision and Annual Delivery Plans as effectively as possible.

Effective internal communications also helps officers to see the connection between the jobs they do and the Partnership's wider strategy and ambition, as well as offer staff the ability for 'two-way' dialogue which drives better engagement.

We will also work with Members to find out what they would like to know more about and devise mechanisms so Members are fully kept up to date with what's happening at each of the sovereign councils and at a Partnership level.

Internal communications



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1. Strategic narrative:

The Communications Team will:

- work with departments via regular editorial board meetings to provide a strong strategic narrative about the organisation, with an emphasis around team collaboration on projects, promoting our values and behaviours and to raise awareness of staff benefits and resources such as employee assistance
- Work with SLT to deliver in-person briefings to staff across the three sites on strategic topics such as budgets, local government reorganisation and funding opportunities
- Work with Service Managers to make sure those employees without access to staff emails are kept informed of Partnership initiatives and employee benefits.

Internal communications



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2. Employee voice:

The Communications Team will:

- enable employee voices and opinions to be heard via a feedback mechanism in Partnership Update, online poll questions at All-Staff Briefing and face-to-face sessions with CEO and senior officers
- work with HR and Staff Forum to gauge employee sentiment and develop communication messages and campaigns that show that employees' thoughts, concerns and ideas are acted on.

Internal communications



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3. Integrity:

The Communications Team will:

- work with senior officers to develop an organisational integrity that enables staff to promote 'best practice' behaviours while having the ability to challenge negative behaviours, and promote ways for employees to seek help and advice on a range of professional and personal issues
- Develop messaging that display a "you asked, we did" narrative, with employee involvement at its heart.

How the Partnership can support



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- Senior officers and Members to champion and endorse the Communication Team's approach via this strategy
- Project leads to engage with the Communications Team early on with respect to comms and engagement plans
- Set out clear and SMART objectives with respect to any project that requires communications support
- Senior officers to amplify and share messaging from corporate channels rather than use Partnership resources and the work it undertakes to promote themselves or their teams individually on their own private channels
- Build in additional communications and/or engagement resource for any externally-funded project

Next steps/ timeline



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- Implementation of internal communications review (Q1)
- Partnership Communications Strategy approval (Q2)
- Partnership social media policy (Q3)
- Joint content strategy (Q3)