

DRAFT COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY PAPER 2021

Summary: This draft communications strategy follows a review of the previous strategy which was last updated in 2017. Its main aims are to improve the reach and relevance of the Council's external and internal communications through its digital and other platforms - and to ensure the Council's interaction with external media is handled effectively.

Options considered: Not implementing the proposals outlined in this paper. This would however ensure continued slow/minimal audience growth for the Council's communication channels and therefore less effective reach for its messaging.

Conclusions: The Council is well-placed to substantially enhance its external communications reach and effectiveness by adopting a range of strategic recommendations made in the report. Reviewing current internal communications delivery and also graphic design provision would also be beneficial, as outlined in the paper.

Recommendations: **To review and comment on the draft communications strategy.**

Cabinet Member(s) Ward(s) affected

Cllr Sarah Butikofer All
Contact Officer, telephone number and email:

Joe Ferrari
Communications and PR Manager
01603 516040
Joe.ferrari@north-norfolk.gov.uk

1. Introduction

1.1 - Why we are here

- Enhance and protect the reputation of North Norfolk District Council
- Maximise the Council's ability to communicate effectively with the people of North Norfolk
- Promote and support the key objectives and achievements of the Council
- Maintain good professional working relationships with all key external media stakeholders
- Support officers and members in all Communications-related work
- Assist with communication of key corporate news to officers and members

1.2 – Key strategic objectives for next 12 months:

- 1) Build audience on NNDC-owned channels
- 2) Re-launch/reinvigorate Corporate Plan, its objectives and our delivery against those objectives
- 3) Establish appropriate balance between external and internal Communications
- 4) Answer all external media enquiries promptly, professionally and within deadlines where possible/practical
- 5) Build and improve relationships with key external media stakeholders who regularly cover the Council's activities
- 6) Improve coverage of regular/key Council meetings
- 7) Ensure our communications effectively support the Council's efforts to reassure, inform and protect residents and businesses during the on-going COVID crisis
- 8) Re-evaluate existing graphic design resourcing model

2. Main body of report

2.1 Build Audience

NNDC currently promotes its externally-facing news and messages through a combination of providing our own content on NNDC-owned channels and promotion to key media stakeholders.

These 'traditional' external media still remain an important source of disseminating news about our council due to their larger audiences. Although sales figures for local newspapers have seen a decline in recent years, they do enjoy healthy digital audiences through their websites and social media presences.

While sharing news with these external media stakeholders reaches a large audience and must therefore still a priority for the communications team on behalf of the Council, it is also important to robustly present the Council’s own news and views to as large an audience as possible via our own content-containing channels.

The larger the audiences we command on our website and social media channels, the greater our ‘reach’ will be, ensuring our messages reach as many of the local residents as possible.

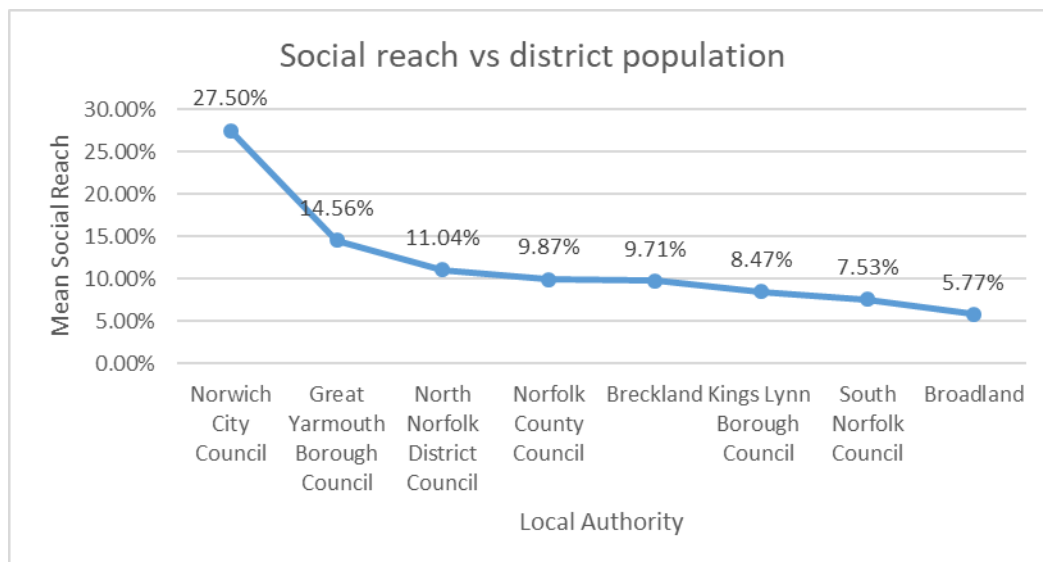
Due to the sometimes formal nature of local authority content and the fact that typically social channels are followed by a younger and more urbanised demographic, building large social audiences can be challenging for an organisation like North Norfolk District Council.

To counter this, it is vital to:

- Produce regular content, multiple times daily
- Significantly increase the use of video content
- Create engaging content, encouraging interaction wherever appropriate

In addition to our website, we are currently producing content on three main social channels, namely Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

With some sharp growth noted in the last eight months, our figures compare favourably to other Norfolk local authorities in terms of ‘reach’, as the following indicative figures illustrate:



It is vital we continue to build this local penetration/reach by providing quality, bespoke and pro-active content about the Council on these channels. By building our base digital audiences and by providing more engaging content to increase interactivity, we will significantly improve the Council’s ability to

communicate with a larger percentage of the District's population on a regular basis.

This in turn requires cultural internal understanding and acceptance that the labour-intensive work of producing and managing this content is a key priority for the communications team.

Proposed actions:

It is essential that we bend our efforts towards building the audiences on our digital channels, to ensure we reach many more of our residents and that our presentation of the Council's activities achieves more prominence in their understanding of our work.

To do this we need to:

- Strive to promote more engaging content on a daily basis – optimum four pieces of content on each social channel a day, two per day on the website and at least one weekly 'bespoke' feature highlighting the work of members and/or staff
- Improve the 'turnaround' of content internally so news appears as contemporaneously as possible
- Robustly increase video production to support key stories through investing in equipment and training
- Employ less formal and 'stuffy' language and tone in social posts wherever appropriate and encourage interactivity through online polls, 'what do you think?' messaging, Q&As, competitions etc.
- Challenge and change the existing internal culture of using our social channels as a factual 'noticeboard'
- Encourage all staff and members to follow our social platforms
- Vigorously promote our social channels on the website and similarly, use the social channels to push traffic to our website. Especially to support the Customer Service strategy of encouraging people to engage with the Council digitally where possible and appropriate.
- Use paid-for social promotion to boost audience for key posts in the public interest, eg around COVID
- Aim to increase base audiences by end of 2021 to the following:
 - Twitter: 10,000
 - Facebook: 6,000
 - Instagram: 4,000

Timescale: Immediate/On-going

2.2 Re-launch/reinvigorate Corporate Plan

The Council has a progressive, impactful Corporate Plan for the period covering 2019-2023. Effective public delivery of a finalised version of this plan on the website has been hampered by the understandable focus on responding to COVID since around March 2020.

While COVID remains of course a serious priority for the Council, it is important to reassure residents the 'normal' work of the Council also continues where possible and appropriate.

Work on the online PDF Corporate Plan brochure is nearing completion and this should be available to share publicly by January 21. This provides an opportunity to editorially revisit some of the core components of the Corporate Plan and produce some positive communications around our work in these areas – for example with progress on the tree-planting, or a video feature around people using the Electric Vehicle Charging Points installed in our district.

Proposed actions:

- Finalise work to complete the Corporate Plan brochure to enable us to present it digitally as a PDF page-turner and in print form where appropriate
- Use the launch of this finalised version as an opportunity to re-launch the Plan itself and its far-reaching aims and objectives, with engaging content including interviews with the Leader, portfolio holders responsible for delivery on each objective, key officers if appropriate
- Regularly update on progress against objectives, clearly referencing the Corporate Plan and linking back to the full Plan where appropriate

Timescale: January onwards

2.3 Establish appropriate balance between external and internal communications

In many instances this arguably can be described as an 'inward-looking' Council, sometimes appearing as focussed on communicating to colleagues as it is on the critical priority of improving the reach and relevance of the content we present to our residents and council-tax payers.

As part of its commitment to improving internal communications, the Council has in previous years invested into the development of an extremely comprehensive intranet service for its staff and members.

Due to the extensive nature of the intranet offering, with many sections of updatable content, and due to a previous cultural emphasis on internal communications, the not unreasonable expectation amongst those staff that

do use it is that it will be frequently updated. In practice this provides a challenge in terms of available resource.

The Council's main news is all robustly presented multiple times a day by the communications team on our social channels and the website and therefore does not need to be re-packaged for staff on to the intranet, using an entirely different content management system. They should instead be prompted by the clear and permanent buttons in the news section on the intranet to visit our externally-facing channels regularly to keep up to speed with our main news.

The intranet is, however, an appropriate space for key internally-facing corporate news, such as the recent organisational restructure, or COVID-prompted changes to NNDC working practices for example, and the Communications team should certainly continue to help facilitate this material appearing there.

The extensive well-being information for staff offered on the intranet could perhaps be provided and updated by the Human Resources department or by other departments and working groups as relevant under their direction.

The intranet overall currently falls between departments, with at times a shortage of clearly-defined and allocated resource to produce the work deemed necessary to populate it appropriately.

Proposed actions:

- Conduct a review of the current internal communications offerings, potentially involving Communications, HR and any other key internal stakeholders to establish an appropriate way forward. This review to include not just the intranet but also the current delivery of team briefings provided by the relevant team/departmental leaders. Consider an anonymous Survey Monkey poll of officers and members regarding the intranet
- Consider the re-establishment of 'departmental champions' to provide and upload staff-facing content about their teams on to the intranet, after review and sub-editing by the Communications team.
- Establish a holistic Council view as to what an appropriate level and methodology of communicating with staff is and establish what resource is necessary to provide this.

Timescale: January 2021

2.4 External media enquiries

This is a critical objective as though some external media stakeholders are experiencing traditional audience decline, they remain a vital way of sharing messages with the local population. Increasingly the local media includes a deadline in its requests for information or comment from the Council and though sometimes these can be demanding depending on the subject matter

and the level of detail in response required, we should strive to meet them wherever possible and practical.

To do this the communications team needs to pick up and pass on media requests as promptly as possible and immediately respond to the journalists to acknowledge receipt – and the colleagues then approached for assistance in responding to these requests by the communications team need to also promptly assist in constructing the appropriate responses in a timely fashion.

It is also vital as an organisation that all media requests which come into the Council via other routes (e.g. direct requests to members or officers) are ‘funnelled’ to the media team. This enables us as an organisation to have a clear overview of requests we receive, compile monitoring data illustrating external media interest in the Council and ensure an appropriate and co-ordinated response.

We should investigate the provision of training to key officers and members who are likely to be involved in broadcast media interviews, with some simple advice and key pointers as to how to deliver these interviews effectively.

Finally, the Communications team should ‘ramp up’ its support of members and officers whose work is likely to be impacted by a media enquiry. The team should commit to brief members and officers where practical and possible about any relevant media enquiries or pending Council statement that is likely to affect their ward, portfolio or area of the Council’s corporate activities.

Proposed actions:

- Review all current mechanisms for contacting the NNDC Communications team and re-share with all key external media and internally
- Remind all colleagues to pass on any external media enquiries they receive to the Communications team in the first instance, rather than attempting to answer them straight away themselves
- Ensure all media queries receive a prompt acknowledgement
- Strive to meet external media deadlines wherever possible and practical
- Improve support for members and officers with advanced warning of media enquiries/Council statements which will affect their area
- Investigate provision of training for members and officers likely to be involved in broadcast media interviews

- Create and maintain a record of all external media contacts which come into the Council
- Review, update and re-share the Council's media protocols, subject to approval by the relevant constitutional committee.

Timescale: Immediate/On-going

2.5 Build relationships with local media stakeholders

The Council and its key media-facing figures will always benefit from a productive relationship with media organisations whose journalists regularly cover the Council's news and activities. Due to resourcing changes over the years at key external media stakeholding organisations, the previous practice of having the same reporters regularly interacting face-to-face with the Council is no longer always the norm.

Requests for interviews/comment usually come in via email rather than telephone, often with a list of questions and a tight deadline for response.

This development has been further exacerbated by COVID discouraging face-to-face interactions and means building productive relationships can be challenging as the current newsgathering process is quite remote and detached.

By meeting with key editors and/or journalists in a 'pens down' setting, we can aim to constructively review and where practical and possible improve our day-to-day interaction with local media stakeholders.

The solution:

- Invite key local editors/reporters to an informal 'pens down' meeting at the Council, COVID regulations permitting, where we can exchange views with them about how we can improve the ways we interact.
- Aim to establish regular points of contact at each of the main local media organisations.

Timescale: January/when COVID regulations permit

2.6 Improve coverage of key council meetings

Due perhaps to limited resource in its recent history, the Communications team has not circulated as much content around matters dealt with/discussed in Full Council or its other key meetings as it might.

Although full reporting on meetings presents some resource challenges, this should be reviewed – particularly in light of the current public broadcast of these meetings due to COVID.

Proposed actions:

- Including benchmarking with the coverage of their meetings by other local authority communications teams, review the feasibility of covering our key meetings on our channels. Even a summary interview with the leader, CEO or relevant portfolio holder covering off the key points after a meeting would be an improvement.
- Aim to have reports of key stories from meetings published on the next working day wherever possible and practical.

Timescale: Immediate/On-going

2.7 Delivery of communications during the on-going COVID crisis

Broadly speaking our content delivery about COVID has been comprehensive, with key messages around public safety and financial/practical support available to residents and businesses delivered promptly. This is despite occasional challenges in contemporaneously obtaining full clarity around regular changes to guidelines and regulations etc.

However, as we are in another critical phase in the fight against the virus it remains vital that we continue to prioritise regular, reassuring and effective communication about COVID matters via our channels and the key external media.

Proposed actions:

- Continue to stay close to the Norfolk Resilience Forum communications group for sharing of appropriate central messaging and engaging digital assets
- Continue to encourage colleagues to approach with any COVID-related content which will assist the work of their departments in this area
- Continue to source or create regular video content at appropriate points during the on-going crisis

Timescale: Immediate/On-going

2.8 Re-evaluate the existing Graphic Design model

The Council currently out-sources most of its graphic design work to various agencies, having dispensed with in-house graphic design resources in 2019.

As a result, the Council is spending money with external graphic design agencies and, due to using more than one agency, sometimes loses consistency around the design work produced on its behalf.

Proposed actions:

Work up a job specification for an internal graphic designer post at appropriate salary grade (subject to internal review). This would provide us with an in-house resource offering better accessibility to departments seeking design support and consistency of design across the Council's output, without increasing our spend in this area.

Timescale: Recruit January/February 2021

3. Implications and Risks

The risk of adopting this strategy is minimal. Any changes to the content and tone of the Council's editorial output need to be managed responsibly and collaboratively to ensure there is no additional reputational risk.

4. Financial Implications and Risks

i) Video content

The strategy pre-supposes continued focus on and investment in improving video editorial output. This brings with it on-going requirement for investment in equipment and training for communications staff, but this is amply covered under the existing 2020-21 budget provision for the department.

ii) In-house graphic design provision

The recruitment of an in-house graphic designer, if approved and subject to the relevant discussion on grading, will necessitate expenditure on the requisite salary and overheads to finance the creation of a new position. However this is offset against existing council expenditure on external graphic design costs and also existing headroom in the Communications staffing budget, such that the creation of a new post would not require additional resources from the Council's existing budget.

5. Sustainability

The strategy calls for more robust editorial coverage and support of the Council's 2019-23 Corporate Plan, which includes a strong commitment to improved sustainability and environmental responsibility. In general the paper pre-supposes the Communications team will at all times robustly support the Council's policies and endeavours regarding sustainability.

6. Equality and Diversity

The strategy pre-supposes the Communications team will at all times robustly support the Council's policies and endeavours regarding equality and diversity.

7. Section 17 Crime and Disorder considerations

None.

Appendix 1

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity in England (2011)

As a public sector organisation the Council has a duty to follow the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity in England (2011). This revised code applies to all unitary, county and district councils in England and Wales.

The Code sets out the principles for publicity by local authorities, namely that publicity should:

- 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

In addition to our legal duty outlined above the Council will follow the principles of best practice, namely:

- Truthfulness
- Openness
- Transparency

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/recommended-code-of-practice-for-local-authority-publicity>