

# Communications Strategy 2022-2025

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**Safe, strong and connected  
Working together for the future of Herefordshire**

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## Context

Herefordshire Council's County Plan, adopted by the Council in February 2020, has a clear vision for the future of the county:

***Respecting our past, shaping our future - we will improve the sustainability, connectivity and wellbeing of our county by strengthening our communities, creating a thriving local economy and protecting and enhancing our environment.***

Since the County Plan was adopted the Covid pandemic has changed the world – but the vision for the county remains relevant. With the pandemic and other significant organisational changes, we must now refocus our vision, review our priorities and work with staff, residents, partners, communities and businesses to lead Herefordshire into the future with confidence.

The Local Government Association recommends that strategic communications should deliver:

- Leadership - clarity of purpose and commitment
- A distinctive brand
- A clear vision
- Authenticity to the local area
- A strategic approach to communications
- A corporately agreed, fully evaluated annual communications plan
- Communications activity based on research with robust evaluation
- Communications that are owned by everyone

This strategy is based on these principles of good strategic communications, outlining our overall approach to developing communications focused on the County Plan and establishing a framework for pro-active communications work over the coming period.

The County Plan has three key themes - **connectivity, wellbeing and sustainability**, which sit at the core of our policy making, planning and design for the future. These themes

form the basis of planned and proactive corporate communications work focusing on campaign-led activity, stakeholder engagement and internal communications.

## Objectives

The objectives of this strategy are to:

- Help our residents and stakeholders feel informed about council services and policies and how to engage with them.
- Ensure communications are co-ordinated, consistent, targeted and driven by insight so that communications is delivered at the right time, in the right way to the right people.
- Ensure the Council's role is understood and appreciated by residents, visitors, partners and businesses so they feel safe, supported and confident about the future.
- Develop pride - across internal and external audiences - in the Council's unique role in leading Herefordshire into the future with confidence, clarity and an inspiring vision for the future.
- Ensure all employees and Members are effectively supported with frequent, clear and consistent communications and updates.

## Our values

Communication is a shared responsibility and everyone has a part to play in supporting and delivering good communications for the organisation. The Communication Protocols and Principles, aligned with the principles in the County Plan, outline our collective approach - articulating the way we deliver communications across Herefordshire Council:

All of this underpins our **PEOPLE values**. Our values guide the way we act, what we say and how we think and aid us in making decisions:

**People** Treating people fairly, with compassion, respect and dignity

**Excellence** Striving for excellent services, care and quality of life in Herefordshire

**Openness** Being open, transparent and accountable

**Partnership** Working in partnership and with all our diverse communities

**Listening** Actively listening to, understanding and taking into account people's views and needs

**Environment** Protecting and promoting our outstanding natural environment and heritage for the benefit of all

We will only achieve our potential by every individual being involved in using the values and being guided by the principles to make improvements in how they work and how we work together.

## **Strategic approach**

A campaign-led approach will support planned, pro-active and focused communications work. Using Government Communications Service recommended approaches, a communications plan will be developed for each campaign so that specific key messaging, channels and audiences can be identified.

Each campaign will support at least one of the three key themes in the County Plan - **connectivity, wellbeing and sustainability**. Some examples are listed below:

### **Connectivity**

#### **Connecting people digitally and physically across communities, in local neighbourhoods and to the wider world**

Digital connectivity – supporting flexible working for staff, connecting rural communities

Connecting and supporting communities – especially tackling inequalities

Connecting with partners – parish councils, businesses

Connecting locally – supporting and promoting local, independent shops and businesses

### **Wellbeing**

#### **Help people feel safe, supported and to value Herefordshire and their community**

Supporting vulnerable people and communities and developing the strong community networks that have grown and flourished

Quality of life – appreciating what's special about Herefordshire as a place to live, work and visit

Helping people most impacted by pandemic (jobs/business/young people)

Nurturing and encouraging creativity and innovation

Welcoming visitors, promoting pride in Herefordshire and all it has to offer

### **Sustainability**

## **Pride in Hereford's unique and beautiful environment and rural heritage and tackling the climate challenge through new approaches to sustainability**

Tackling the climate and ecological emergency

Travel to work/school – encouraging more walking and cycling

Public transport – safe, accessible and connecting communities

Rural environment – supporting farming and rural communities

Shopping/buying/doing business in local neighbourhoods

### **Narrative**

Telling our story simply, effectively and truthfully has never been more important. A good story – our narrative – allows us to share our vision, key messages and plans with employees, residents and partners in a powerful and compelling way. It's a key tool for building consensus across an organisation – telling the tale of a past and present that everyone recognises, explaining current challenges and issues and outlining a future that people want to make happen.

A successful narrative will see everyone – members, managers and employees at all levels – telling the same story about the council to anyone who asks. Used pragmatically, it can help save time and energy, with our narrative used repeatedly across our communication and help guide strategic decision making.

A set of corporate key messages aligned to the themes in the County Plan and to reflect current corporate focus will be developed and reviewed quarterly to ensure they are relevant and supportive. Additional key messages will be developed for specific campaigns, delivering clear and consistent communications across all activity.

## **OUR NARRATIVE**

Helping the people of Herefordshire has never been more important.

The pandemic shone a new light on the vital frontline services we continued to deliver every day as the world locked down – a powerful reminder of the important work we do that usually goes unnoticed. As we look to the future those services will continue to be at the heart of all we do. Everyone who works for Herefordshire Council has a part to play in delivering a better future for the county and all our employees should feel supported, confident and able to do their best.

We're realistic about the scale of the challenges ahead and understand what has held us back in the past. The loss of government funding and rising costs of the services we deliver to Herefordshire people means we're facing tough choices about where to focus our resources. Inequalities in some of our neighbourhoods are stark and struggling communities need extra support. We will deliver better support to our most vulnerable children and their families, and we need new and stronger relationships with partners across the region, and beyond, to help us tackle the challenges our county faces.

We know that today, more than ever, it's important to connect people across communities - virtually and physically - locally and to the wider world. Our small population is spread over a large area of picturesque countryside. That means we have to work harder to reach people and our services have to travel further to reach the community. But it also means we have strong local networks across towns, villages and communities in a county where it feels like everybody knows everybody.

We will use our unique role as local leaders to help people feel safe, supported and proud of our county. We'll play our part in tackling the climate and ecological emergency through new approaches to sustainability. We will value our natural resources and take action to do all we can to protect them.

We will grow our towns and city centres into vibrant and attractive centres full of nature, for people to live in, work in and visit. We'll work in partnership with our communities, listening

to what our residents and businesses tell us is important, and use our learning, experience and understanding to shape what our county needs for a successful future.

We know that buying a home is a challenge for many in Herefordshire - both for availability and affordability and so we will ensure there are genuinely affordable homes available across the county. Our older residents are valued and more live here than in other areas, with 21,000 of these providing at least an hour a week of important, unpaid care for others. Herefordshire is also a county for families and provide the best of both worlds - the best of modern living mixed with unspoilt countryside and life away from the rat race. We will seek to create new, better jobs in emerging sectors such as the green economy and cyber security to attract new families.

We will focus our support on those who have nowhere else to go and ensure they receive the right help at the right time. A third of the jobs in the county pay less than the real living wage and more than 4,000 children in Herefordshire are in families who struggle to make ends meet. Keeping warm has a profound impact on health and wellbeing and across the county more than five times as many households are exposed to excess cold than the national average. We will ensure residents get help to make their homes warm, to keep people safe and well.

We will work closely with those who live and work here so we can deliver our vision at the heart of the County Plan which guides all we do: *Respecting our past, shaping our future - we will improve the sustainability, connectivity and wellbeing of our county by strengthening our communities, creating a thriving local economy and protecting and enhancing our environment.*

We face the future as a proud county with a rich heritage, strong, creative and connected communities, and an absolute commitment to build a better future for us all – so that everyone feels safe, supported and is proud to live here.

## Using our narrative

Our narrative will be used consistently across all our communications. We will do this by:

- Working with all staff so they understand the importance of sharing our story, can tell their own positive stories about the place and the Council and become advocates and ambassadors for our work
- Working with stakeholders so they support and share our story for us

## Audiences

Pro-active communications activity depends on effective targeting of audiences, ensuring resources are focused in the right way and using the communications channels specific audiences prefer.

Understanding audiences - who we are trying to reach and what we want them to do and then prioritising groups to create audiences based on similar characteristics (demography, geography, likely interest, sector), is a priority.

We will identify the ways in which our residents, businesses, visitors and partners prefer to get information about our work and use this insight to tailor the way we communicate and engage with our audiences. This will ensure communications campaigns are effectively resourced, use the right communications channels and are evaluated. We will use our existing insight and data and commission more research where needed.

Key audiences – to be expanded in specific campaign plans - will include:

Residents

Businesses (and business sector groups such as LEP, Chamber, NFU)

Members

Employees

Parish and town councils

Voluntary sector

Partners (NHS, Police, Fire)

Media

MPs

Government

## **Channels**

Effective communications relies on a mix of communications channels, including **media relations**, **direct communications** (leaflets, publications, digital and social media), **events** and **internal and partner communications** (working with employees and stakeholders to ensure everyone gets consistent, timely information).

### **Media relations**

Herefordshire has a strong print media presence across the county, particularly the Hereford Times (alongside other weekly newspapers across the area). There is a BBC radio station (shared with Worcestershire) and independent stations. Active partnerships with print and broadcast media through joint campaigns will help campaigns reach a key demographic (older residents without access to digital communications) and support important local businesses valued by residents, along with an important and valued local free press.

### **Events**

Herefordshire Council has established regular Parish summits which provide an opportunity for parish councillors to hear more about the council's approach and priorities. These will continue and will be supported by the Talk Community approach for effective local engagement. Business summits have also been established and will continue to help the local business community engage with the council's vision and activity as we create and deliver the 'Big Plan' and a place-based narrative and vision for Herefordshire. There are also service-specific and themed events which target specific audiences and sectors, and these continue to be an effective way to inform and engage our community.

### **Internal and partner communications.**

Our employees are our greatest asset, with an important role to play in sharing our story and advocating for the Council. We will ensure employees get the information they need to share our campaigns with friends, families and neighbours in their communities so they can act as a network of communicators across the county. We will adopt an employee-first, real-time approach, so employees hear about our communications plans, campaigns and news before external audiences. We will continue to recognise and highlight the achievements and importance of our frontline and key workers who have played such an important part in keeping vital services running during lockdown. Endorsement and active support for our campaigns from partners and stakeholders will be vital. We will work with our partners to provide them with the tools they need to support our campaigns – including briefings, developing toolkits of marketing collateral for their use and regular updates on activity. We will work in partnership with local social media news outlets and local community group pages when appropriate, recognising that there is no current industry regulation of social news channels.

### **Direct communications**

Councils increasingly use a range of communications tools and channels to talk directly to their audiences. These include social and digital media channels (website, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), e-newsletters, resident magazines and traditional tools like posters and leaflets. Campaigns will use a variety of direct communications channels, targeted to reach the right audiences, with a focus on the most cost-effective communications channels.

We will create an improved way of engaging digitally with residents via our website both through e-communications and customer accounts. We will use corporate communication tools to ensure consistency and a unified customer experience. This will also ensure we sufficiently address and adhere to the General Data Protection Regulation and Public Sector Accessibility Regulation requirements.

Our current devolved engagement model can lead to repetition or omission and we will establish a corporate approach and processes to help ensure our audiences are

communicated with effectively, and that there is opportunity evaluate and improve our communication and engagement activity.

We will continue to produce Herefordshire Now- the quarterly resident magazine from Herefordshire Council which provides news and information on services, activities and campaigns and is distributed to households.

## **Resources**

The corporate peer challenge outlined the need for a clear 'Herefordshire' narrative and a USP for the county. It also identified the need for the council to be proactive in communicating a vision for the county and to celebrate the good work it does, and what it has achieved, as it 'punches above its weight'. The LGA Communications Healthcheck in 2020 also identified the need for the strategic narrative, a corporate communications plan and a more proactive, campaign-based approach.

In response, the Communications Strategy 2022-2025 reflects the Government's Modern Communications Operating Model 2.0 approach to Communications. This identifies communication as one of the five main levers of government alongside legislation, regulation, taxation and spending. When done well, its contribution to delivering government policies is profound. This is supported by the Communication Plan, which sets out the priority campaigns and activities for the corporate Communication Team.

The Communications function will focus across four key areas as part of its CORE service:

- C Changing behaviours for the benefit of society
- O Operational effectiveness of local public services
- R Reputation of Herefordshire Council and responding in times of a crisis
- E Explanation of council policies and projects

Our communication practices need to constantly evolve, anticipate and keep pace with technological change, they need to be audience-focused and should demonstrate our effectiveness. This approach provides four disciplines with strategic communications at

the core- Media, Marketing, Internal Communications and External Affairs (Engagement). Strategic communication underpins each discipline and the service as a whole.

Within the core disciplines, our approach is supported by a number of professional practices that should be consistently applied including campaign-led approaches and the Government's OASIS (Objective, Audience insight, Strategy, Implementation, Scoring) communication plan template. While our professional communicators may have a primary specialism in one discipline (such as media, internal communications) and may also have advanced specialist skills (for example those working in insight and evaluation, design and digital roles), they should all seek to develop capability in all disciplines. An annual skills survey will help support technological changes, develop skills and drive continuous professional development within the team.

The current engagement approach is devolved to services and there are opportunities for services to align and improve the way in which we engage with our residents and stakeholders. We will develop and deliver a consistent digital-first approach to engaging with our stakeholders and ensure consistent messaging to our communities through these channels. A monthly meeting of engagement colleagues led by the Communications Team will inform and engage colleagues to ensure a joined-up approach and consistent messaging.

Delivering this strategy will call for dedicated time from the Communications Team, and workloads will be prioritised to support the development and delivery of campaigns supporting the strategy. This will only be adjusted in times of crisis when emergency communications are required e.g. global/national/ local emergency response, death of a member of the Royal family.

## **Links and interdependencies**

**Communication plan** - Outlines the campaign programme for the communications team and prioritises key campaigns and initiatives

**Communication protocols and principles** - provide guidance and support to Members and staff on their role and responsibility to deliver good communications effectively

**Individual communications plans and action plans** supporting key priorities for strategic projects and activities, aligned with the organisational communications plan. Some of these are already adopted and some are still emerging. This includes (but is not limited to):

- Workforce Communication Strategy
- Children's Improvement Communications Strategy
- Climate and Ecological Emergency Communications Strategy
- Talk Community Communications Strategy
- Active Travel Communications Strategy
- Herefordshire place-based communications strategy
- Economic Development Communications Strategy ('Big Plan')
- Climate Communications Strategy (in partnership)
- Tourism Communications Strategy (in partnership)

### **Insight & Evaluation**

All major campaigns and initiatives will be evaluated. We will use this to understand what works well and to identify areas we need to address, supporting an environment of continuous improvement across all our communications. A quarterly summary of activity will be shared with senior and political leadership, when the key messages will also be reviewed and updated.

A 'Who reads what' survey will be undertaken to understand the communication preferences of the community and to inform future campaign delivery. This will be undertaken every three years, to account for changes in communication technology.

### **Appendix:**

Communications protocols and principles