

REPORT TO: Cabinet

MEETING DATE: 8 November 2022

BY: Executive Director for Council Resources

SUBJECT: Communication Strategy

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To seek approval of the Communication Strategy 2022.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 Cabinet is recommended to:
- i. Approve the Communication Strategy 2022.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Communication Strategy sets out the broad approach and actions which will be taken to engage with local communities about the work of the East Lothian Council. It summarises how the Council will make effective use of communications channels and platforms to promote important public information and campaigns in relation to essential services.
- 3.2 It aims to support delivery of the Council Plan 2022-27 with a particular focus on its vision for an even more prosperous, safe and sustainable East Lothian, with a dynamic and thriving economy, that enables our people and communities to flourish.
- 3.3 It aims to build on work of the Communications Team since publication of the last strategy in 2017 whilst contributing to maintaining and developing good communications practice across the Council.

4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The Communication Strategy will not impact directly on existing policies but can assist with future policy development and promotion.

5 INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 5.1 The subject of this report does not affect the wellbeing of the community or have a significant impact on equality, the environment or economy.

6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Financial – The Communication Strategy will be delivered within existing financial resources.
- 6.2 Personnel - The Communications Team, supported by colleagues in other Services as required, will play a lead role in delivering the strategy.
- 6.3 Other - None

7 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 7.1 None.

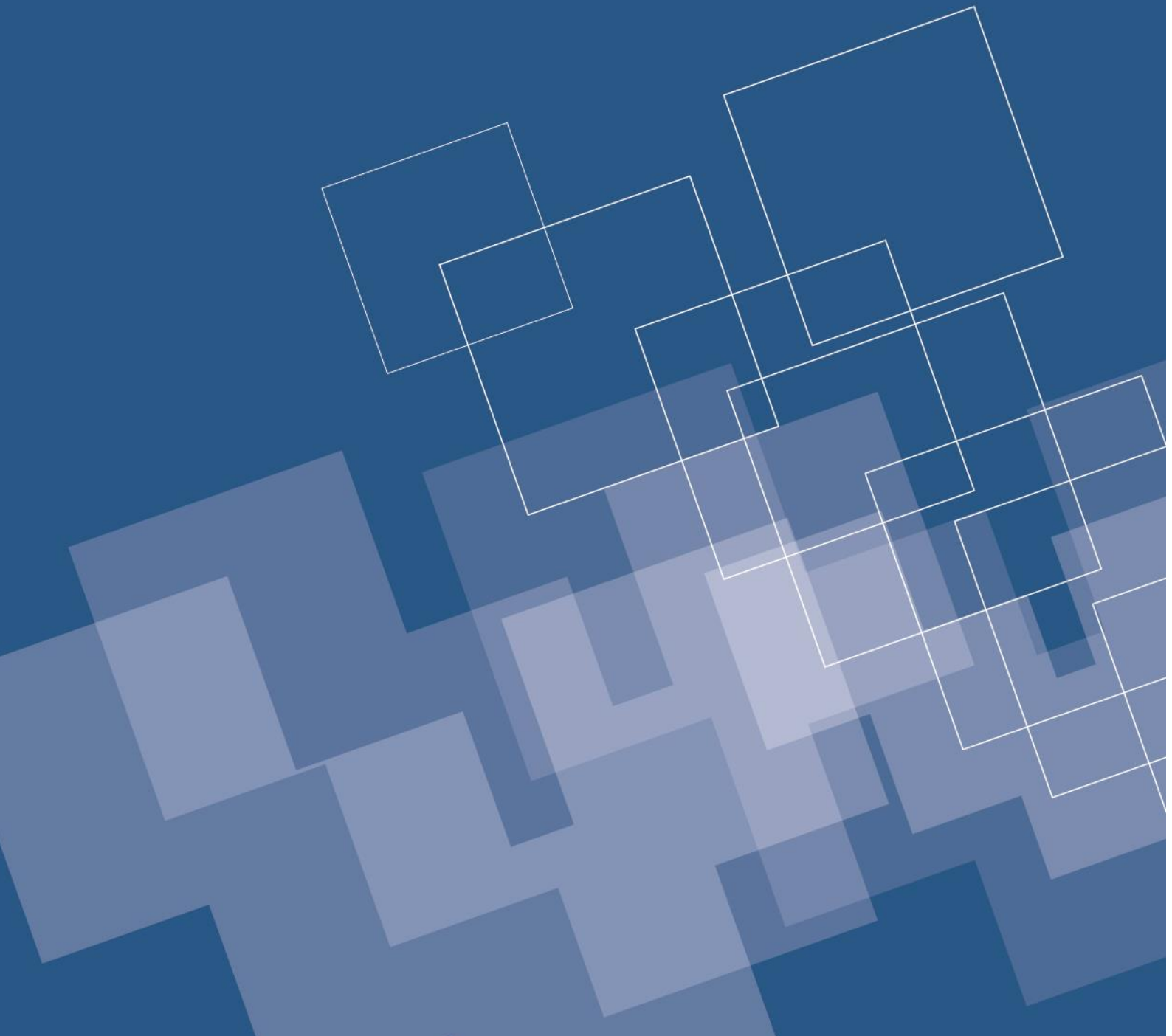
Appendix 1 – Communication Strategy 2022

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DATE	5 October 2022

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY 2022-27



Enabling access to information for local residents, partners and community groups; from council services to news, initiatives, events and opportunities.



East Lothian Council's Communication Strategy 2022-27

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Introduction

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.

The council provides a variety of important services upon which almost every resident of East Lothian relies, at least to some extent.

Our Communication Strategy sets out the broad approach and actions we will take to engage with local communities whilst enabling residents to be well informed about the work of the council and to help make a difference in their area.

Since the last strategy was published in 2017, the council has continued to maximise opportunities arising from an increasingly multimedia landscape.

As well as seeking to maintain and build upon strong links with media and press organisations, we have continued to ramp up the council's social media presence and make use of digital platforms so that the council can connect audiences with relevant information at the right time and in the right place. Key pieces of work have included:

- The launch of a new council website
- A significant increase in social media engagement levels
- The publication of council brand guidelines, helping to ensure there is a consistent style, look and feel to council publications and digital assets
- In-house video production and editing in support of key projects
- Developing new employee communication methods and techniques
- Positive news coverage and campaigns from around the council – including work to protect and enhance the environment, develop the school estate, support the local economy, deliver new council housing and assist communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

About us

The council has a small, in-house Communications Team with expertise in writing and editing, media relations, social media, graphic design, content design, web development, public and employee communications. The team provides advice and support for council services on a range of issues. Some of its work is not always visible yet adds considerable value in helping council services develop projects, construct messaging, cascade information and engage effectively.

The team has shown its adaptability and willingness to develop, both prior to and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, acquiring new skills and adopting an increasingly multi-disciplinary approach through the likes of video production, photography and using new programmes or software to produce digital assets. Offering these skills internally can be cost-effective for the council, as it can minimise the need to outsource projects for specialist support – such as graphic design.

In May 2022, the team welcomed team members with specific responsibility for communications work in support of the East Lothian Health and Social Care Partnership.

Despite resourcing and capacity constraints which currently face much of the public sector, there is a very strong basis to build upon as we look ahead to the next five years.

Our aims and objectives

The Communications Team will provide joined up strategic and operational support which is firmly aligned with the overarching objectives of the Council Plan 2022-27:

- Recovery and renewal and invest in regeneration and a sustainable future
- Reduce poverty and support our communities to tackle inequality and social exclusion
- Respond to the climate and ecological emergency and meet our net zero climate change targets.

As well as helping residents to be engaged with and informed about the work of the council, the Communication Strategy also aims to directly contribute to delivering on the priorities highlighted in the Council Plan.

For example, successful promotion of opportunities to develop skills can improve employability of the workforce which in doing so, can help address challenges associated with economic recovery and inequality.

Also, the rollout of improved connectivity and promotion of opportunities to engage with services digitally/online, can make a direct contribution to the success of the council's digital transformation programme – which helps us operate increasingly efficiently and re-invest in frontline services.

The successful recruitment of foster carers, encouraged by effective promotion/recruitment campaigns, can contribute to better outcomes for young people.

Another opportunity is promoting opportunities for communities and individual residents to take simple steps that can 'make a difference' to help address the challenges of climate change, protect East Lothian's environment and in doing so contribute to a more sustainable county.

With an increased focus on strategic communications, effective forward planning and highlighting the role and value of the Communications Team throughout the organisation, we aim to:

- Deliver integrated, joined-up communications delivery in support of the Council Plan and Council Management Team (CMT) priorities
- Promote the council's vision, values and objectives to our workforce and throughout local communities. This includes work to grow the local economy, deliver quality affordable housing, tackle climate change, improve the environment, support vulnerable people, give children the best possible start in life and to enhance the school estate
- Produce communications materials which are accessible, consistently use simple, clear language and are produced in a cost-effective manner
- Enhance the council's reputation by using the right channels and communication methods to promote council news stories, events and consultations
- Maximise opportunities which harness new and increasingly effective communications tools, ensuring the council can reach audiences in the right way at the right time
- Play a leading contribution to the council's Digital Strategy. This includes contributing to an accessible, customer-focused website which serves as a gateway to other online services, helping the council to become increasingly effective and efficient, and as a valuable source of information to the public and partners
- Ensure East Lothian Council employees are fully informed regarding the work of the council and the transformation agenda. This includes maintaining a suite of internal communication

channels that enable employees to be updated and engaged on key developments and change projects, as well as being able to access the information and resources required to fulfil their roles effectively and to promote good health and wellbeing amongst the workforce.

Key audiences

Our approach to engaging is based on 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.

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 approach to tailoring communications output/materials for these audiences is based on:

1. **Enabling-Leading-Caring (our council values)**

Building awareness of the council's vision, values and key priorities, and promoting local services to our communities. Ensuring employees are kept informed and understand their role in delivering services and meeting our priorities such as improving the local environment and tackling climate change.

2. **Publicity, reputation & engagement**

Developing clear, consistent, accessible, inclusive and engaging materials which promote services and share initiatives to our communities in a positive, sustainable and trustworthy manner.

3. **Best value**

By employing a primarily in-house, multi-platform, end-to-end approach to facilitate our work, we deliver a professional cost-effective, efficient, agile communications service.

4. Partnership working

We work in partnership with stakeholders to promote East Lothian as a dynamic and successful place in which to live, work and visit.

How we will plan our communications effectively

The Communications Team will maintain a forward planner setting out the news stories, campaigns and activities which will be delivered in support of Council Plan priorities.

Each entry in the forward planner will describe at least one 'key message' drawn from the 'overarching objectives' referenced above or key themes of the Council Plan:

- Grow our Economy/Prosperous – Increase sustainable and inclusive economic growth as the basis for a more prosperous East Lothian
- Grow our People/Fair – Give our children the best start in life and protect vulnerable and older people
- Grow our Communities/Community Minded – Give people a real say in the decisions that matter most and provide communities with the infrastructure and environment that will allow them to flourish
- Growing our Capacity – Deliver excellent services as effectively and efficiently as possible within our limited resources.

The news stories, campaigns and activities which are prioritised by the Communications Team must have a clear link to and be rooted in the objectives of the Council Plan.

To ensure there is a clear and consistent approach, the planner will regularly be reviewed by the Communications Manager and Head of Corporate Support, in consultation with the CMT.

Regular circulation of the planner amongst the wider Senior Management Team (SMT) will ensure that the communications activities being prioritised are visible to all. Planning effectively can ensure the council's message and position is clearly articulated and properly represented.

The way in which we deliver communications and messages will be reviewed regularly, with metrics such as social media engagement levels, website usage and press coverage evaluated and reported on.

A Communications Adviser will be assigned to all council services/departments. This means there will be a clear, single point of contact for services to collaborate with the Communications Team on priority activities. Where required, the Communications Adviser will draw upon other resources within the team – such as website development and graphic design – to deliver a co-ordinated, integrated service.

The Communications Manager, supported by team colleagues, will engage proactively with Service Managers and the CMT to plan ahead and develop successful campaigns. As required, team members will attend CMT and SMT meetings to discuss key issues, work together and help raise the profile of the team within the wider organisation.

How we will present a clear and consistent brand

Our Communication Strategy informs how we engage with the public, and our brand guidelines manage how we present this engagement.

A consistent approach to style, structure and tone across all communication environments is key to sharing, engaging and informing successfully. The components of our brand's identity system facilitate this approach; delivering clear, positive, recognisable, accessible and consistent engagement which support the council vision and reflect our values.

Our brand guidelines provide information on the use of these components; from the council logo, to colour palette, font family and hierarchy, statutory requirements, house style, imagery, signposting, social media and digital assets, correspondence, language, print, vehicle livery and promotional goods.

Looking ahead to the 2022-27 period, we expect the use of digital channels to continue to increase. Depending on the setting and audience, printed materials such as leaflets, posters and display items still fulfil an important role in informing residents and service users, alongside our digital assets.

Ensuring information is available in a range of accessible formats is required in order to avoid exclusion.

We will:

- Provide a comprehensive, in-house graphic design and creative advisory service for projects which are linked to key Communications Team activities and Council Plan priorities
- Advise services on the best format in which to deliver information – depending on the objectives and audiences of the project – exploring creative solutions which add value and help bring communications campaigns to life
- Continue to develop our brand guidelines, ensuring we maintain a clear identity system delivering a consistent style to cross-council publications, both in terms of aesthetics and language
- Build an image library and asset management system for resources, comprising a stock of high-quality photographs in support of communications objectives.
- Review and refresh guidance for employees on how to write/present public information or internal documents, accessibility and style.

How we will communicate with our employees

East Lothian Council's greatest strength is its people. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the extent to which council employees are versatile, resilient and willing to go the extra mile to adapt to challenging situations with a firm eye on the bigger picture – to deliver essential services to the people of East Lothian.

With more than 4,000 employees working in a variety of roles in different locations around East Lothian, there is a need to ensure that our people are informed, engaged and motivated to deliver on council priorities and have the opportunity to have their voices heard in achieving our shared council vision.

We need to recognise that the unique nature of council services, and the different and increasingly flexible ways in which our employees work, requires a dynamic and flexible approach. While many employees are regular users of computer systems and easily able to access information, others delivering frontline services and/or working within communities need and expect internal communications to be accessible in different ways.

By delivering effective communications to our employees, we can ensure everyone is updated on developments within the organisation and continue to play an effective role in shaping delivery.

Our employee communications output is based on our council values – Enabling, Leading and Caring.

Our output will promote the **behaviours** employees are actively encouraged to demonstrate in support of these values:

- **WORK TOGETHER**
- **BE THE BEST WE CAN BE**
- **INITIATE & EMBRACE CHANGE**
- **MAKE THINGS HAPPEN**
- **BE CUSTOMER FOCUSED**

We will:

- 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
- Produce dynamic content for staff which helps employees understand how all roles contribute to achieving the shared council vision
- Continue to develop our e-magazine, **Inform**, which contains a variety of content and is accessible to all employees regardless of their location, on work or personal devices
- Work with the Healthy Working Lives team to promote positive wellbeing and practical support for employees
- Recognising flexible ways of working, we will develop new methods for CMT and managers to engage with employees and maintain visibility – for example through the use of online 'town hall' meetings, Microsoft Teams and video content where appropriate
- Support services in making information/resources available for employees via the intranet, particularly in the context of hybrid working
- Explore new ways of improving the flow of information between managers throughout the council
- Collaborate with services to celebrate the successes and achievements of council employees through initiatives which recognise and reward excellence.

How we will develop our council website and intranet

The council website has always been a valuable source of information for local residents, service users, community organisations and partners. In 2021, we had more than 9m page views – an 8.5% increase on 2020 and 168% more than in 2019.

In recent years, the website has become an increasingly popular gateway for people to transact with the council and access/use our online services – for example to report a pothole, order new recycling boxes or to pay a bill.

The current website was launched in Spring 2018, with a focus on being more accessible and mobile responsive. Two thirds of all users now view the council website on a mobile device.

While the current website continues to serve the council well, it is recognised that we must maintain the pace of development to support the council's Digital Strategy and to keep up with the changing technological landscape.

The success of the council website has a critical role to play as it signposts to online services maintained by other council departments – such as myeastlothian, the new customer platform.

As highlighted earlier, the rollout of improved connectivity and promotion of opportunities to engage with services digitally/online, can make a direct contribution to the success of the council's digital transformation programme – which helps us operate increasingly efficiently and re-invest in frontline services.

The council's intranet is largely a resource where useful information about council policies and procedures is stored. It also signposts to other resources such as the staff directory and myHR. With the rollout of other digital projects in the council to improve information storage and flow between employees and teams, it is important to ensure that the intranet continues to be relevant and has a clear purpose.

We will:

- Continue working with our current website and service provider in the medium term pending longer term consideration of the council's website requirements
- Instigate a new website steering group comprising internal stakeholders and customer representation, taking account of current and future customer needs, technological developments and legislative and regulatory requirements
- Work with the steering group on a 'road map' which identifies the council's future web needs, aligned with the rollout of the new Digital Strategy and transformation programme to inform future procurement requirements
- Work alongside trained web editors and champions in each council service to maintain the website and keep the content up-to-date
- Ensure web content is written to a high standard and audited regularly
- Oversee the ongoing maintenance of the content management system used to maintain the website and intranet
- Ensure that the guidelines, protocols and standards for publishing content on the website and intranet are consistent with the council's brand guidelines and current accessibility regulations
- Ensure that the intranet enables employees to access key information in relation to council policy and support for staff

- Progress with an Intranet Development Strategy to ensure that future intranet requirements are progressed in line with initiatives under the council’s Digital Strategy which improve information storing and sharing internally
- 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
- Maintain close links with the IT development team to ensure the smooth integration of myeastlothian, the new customer platform, via the corporate website.

How we will work with journalists and the media

Although the way in which some people receive their news has evolved in recent years, many East Lothian residents rely on media (including newspapers, websites, radio and TV) for news and information about local issues and council services.

In some respects, it is easier than ever before for people to read local news stories. For example, newspapers publish many of their stories online and signpost to these via social media, which in turn can be shared by people with their friends and amongst online groups.

That’s why working with journalists and the media is one of the most important aspects of the work of the Communications Team.

In 2021, the Communications Team dealt with more than 900 media enquiries. The number of media enquiries has remained broadly consistent in recent years.

While we receive a large number of such media enquiries (from local, regional and national outlets), the proactive issuing of news stories helps to ensure that news organisations – and in turn local residents and communities – are up-to-date with the latest developments from East Lothian Council. It also helps to contextualise some of the challenges and constraints facing the council, as well as highlighting ways in which it is working to build on improvements to services. Almost 300 such stories were issued in 2021 – an increase of 40% on the previous year.

We will:

- Continue to work constructively with journalists from local media organisations, maintaining positive relationships and being approachable
- By using the communications forward planner, develop proactive news stories aligned to the priorities of the Council Plan – for example news releases/briefings complemented by quotes from the relevant council spokesperson as well as third party comments where appropriate; use of pictures, videos, infographics and digital communications
- Offer advice to council officers on the media environment and how to position stories
- Provide a reactive service to respond to media enquiries during office hours.

How we will make effective use of social media

Social media enables individuals or organisations to share information, ideas and comment through online or web-based networks and communities. It allows people to express themselves, build a direct audience or community, and make new connections. It can help bring people together, both at a local level and across boundaries. This can be beneficial in terms of building awareness of issues where there is a common interest and to exchange thoughts on topics of relevance or concern.

The ways in which people engage with social media has continued to evolve in recent years, with it becoming easier to access various platforms through use of mobile phones and other hand-held devices.

East Lothian Council has continued to experience growth in the number of people engaging with its social media channels. In 2021, we shared more than 1,000 posts on both Twitter and Facebook – reaching a combined audience of 33m people. This means it has become a very effective way of getting information to people (both local residents and even further afield) in a very direct and personal manner.

The value of social media has often been underlined during times of crisis, such as severe winter weather and during the COVID-19 lockdown when we have been able to share important public information quickly.

We will:

- Devise a new council social media policy as a framework which sets out how social media should be used appropriately across East Lothian Council to help achieve council priorities and articulate our vision. The policy will set out best practice principles which help the council communicate effectively with local communities and stakeholders, helping us to share information about key news stories, events, campaigns and consultations which are focused on creating a more prosperous East Lothian
- Continue to develop the council's main corporate social media channels (including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube) whilst exploring opportunities to capitalise on new and emerging platforms which have the potential to reach an even wider audience
- Expand use of LinkedIn to promote council services appropriately through professional networks
- Provide advice and support to autonomous, departmental social media accounts as well as schools, in line with the updated social media policy, ensuring these are aligned with Council Plan priorities
- Using the communications forward planner, we will use existing corporate social media channels to promote council news stories, campaigns, events and consultations to the widest possible audience
- Work with Customer Services to agree a co-ordinated approach to the handling of customer service enquiries via social media channels
- To show the human side of the council and underline its essential role and value, we will regularly profile council employees on social media as part of our 'Meet Us' feature, using pictures or video to introduce the worker and highlight how their role contributes to achievement of the Council Plan.

How we will develop new, innovative ways of communicating

While communications teams are continuing to make a transition to increased use of digital technology and channels, there can still be a place for traditional formats including print. For many years the council published a regular newspaper for residents, highlighting important news and service related-information.

We will:

- Work with services to assess requirements for printed publications to reach local residents, such as Homefront magazine for tenants
- Continue to develop our approach to use of video production, exploring opportunities for learning and development, to ensure video content can be generated where it adds extra value for internal and external audiences
- Maximise available technology and software for video production, e-newsletters, social media and graphic design.

A mixed approach – and being able to determine the right and most accessible format of communication to target the relevant audience – is needed and, depending on service requirements, we will keep the need for printed material (such as a resident newspaper) under review.

How we will evaluate the effectiveness of communications work

Our communication activities need to be evaluated like any other service. Doing so means we can demonstrate how an effective Communication Strategy supports the achievement of Council Plan priorities and enhanced reputation.

We will:

- Ensure that, where possible, communication goals are linked to service improvement targets
- Use residents' surveys, focus groups, feedback and evaluation of media coverage as key measurement tools in assessing the success of our strategy
- Measure the balance of positive, negative and neutral media coverage as well as social media messaging and sentiment, to highlight which platforms and channels have worked effectively
- Produce reports measuring the outcome of activities/projects which have received communications support – for example attendance at events, consultation participation or behaviour change
- Report regularly to CMT on the success or otherwise of communications activity.

Conclusion

This Communication Strategy has set out the high level aims and approach which will be taken during 2022-27 in support of East Lothian Council's vision for an even more prosperous, safe and sustainable East Lothian, with a dynamic and thriving economy, that enables our people and communities to flourish.

The strategy recognises that the communications landscape continues to evolve, requiring flexible approaches and a responsive Communications Team who will work to help employees, residents and other stakeholders be informed and engaged regarding the activities of East Lothian Council.

In doing so the Communications Team will become increasingly strategic and multi-disciplinary, working to maintain East Lothian Council's reputation as a high-performing local authority.

