

CHARLBURY TOWN COUNCIL

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

1. Foreword

Charlbury Town Council is committed to ensuring that the whole Council, and those who work in partnership with us, communicate effectively and efficiently with residents from all sections of our community.

Effective communication and engagement are critical if we are to deliver quality services and develop a two-way flow of information between the council and our key audiences. We want to ensure that our residents, local businesses, partners, staff, Elected Members and every other interested party is regularly informed, updated and engaged using a wide range of channels.

We are committed to being open, transparent and accountable in everything we do: communications play a key role in promoting this way of working.

The way we communicate as a society is rapidly changing and we need to ensure that the council is in step with these changes. The media landscape is also shifting from traditional media to the world of social and digital media, and we want to keep abreast of these developments.

Charlbury Town Council is working to become an innovative council and this communications strategy outlines our approach to ensure that we provide more direct and proactive communications with residents and communities.

2. Context

This communications strategy is designed to clearly set out the way the council communicates with a wide range of key audiences. It takes us from the reality of where we are now to the aspirations of the future. It is backed up by an action plan, which sets out the activities we need to achieve in order to meet the council's ambitions.

This strategy reflects the ongoing decline of traditional broadcast media and the steady growth of digital and social media as key channels for communication in the 21st century. We are no longer living in an 'age of deference' where the public respond to messages from authority figures. This is being replaced by an 'age of reference' where people look to their peer groups for information and are less reliant on established broadcast channels to deliver key messages. Social media has transformed the way people receive and share information. It can also be used effectively to engage with residents and other key stakeholders. This approach reflects the council's desire to ensure residents can engage with us in new, improved ways, using new technology as a preferred method of communication.

3. Council Plan & Strategic Ambitions

The Council Vision sets out the council's key strategic ambitions of:

- Ensuring that Town Council services are delivered efficiently, sustainably and cost-effectively to meet the needs of Charlbury residents.

- Delivering on our commitment to act on the climate and ecological emergencies by actively preparing Charlbury and its environment for a zero carbon, biodiverse and sustainable future.
- Engaging all the community by providing appropriate leadership, governance and inspiration in an open and transparent way.

Under these ambitions are a series of objectives that define how we will achieve our ambitions. This strategy supports these ambitions and reflects these objectives in its aims, priorities and actions. It also sets a corporate narrative and corresponding brand for each of these ambitions and key objectives.

4. Communications Aim & Priorities

4.1. Aim

The overall aim of this strategy is to;

“Develop consistently excellent, innovative and effective communications, to increase awareness of the council’s services and achievements and improve the reputation of the council.”

It underlines the council’s commitment to providing high quality, planned and consistent communications.

This Communication Strategy sets out a number of key changes to the way we will communicate. In summary, these include:

- More direct and proactive communications with residents and communities
- Tailoring the council’s communications and engagement to deliver more effective two-way communication
- Moving from fragmented communication to a more joined up approach
- Developing a number of plans, to further support this communication strategy
- A greater focus on positive and proactive media engagement
- Producing a campaigns plan; detailing communication campaigns and activity for the next twelve months forward planning

4.2. Priorities

In order to bring about the above changes and realise the strategic ambitions set out in The Council Plan, our priorities are:

Priority 1: Increase opportunities for people to engage with the council on issues and services that affect them by developing existing and new channels of communication

Priority 2: Promote and uphold the council’s reputation and image as an effective, efficient, innovative organisation that is focused on the public and their needs

Priority 3: Promote Charlbury, as a great place to live, work and visit

Priority 4: Ensure that all communication and engagement activities are consistent and co-ordinated across all channels to maximise impact and reach, ensure value for money and give maximum support to the council’s strategic priorities

Priority 5: Improve internal communications with:

- a. Staff and councillors – by enabling timely two-way communication, to ensure all feel valued and

are engaged on the priorities, activities and messages of the council, to enable them to carry out their roles to the best of their ability

5. Delivering the strategy

5.1. Who will deliver it?

Overall responsibility for the successful implementation of the communications strategy must rest with the Clerk and all Elected Members, as they are our ambassadors and play a crucial role in delivering the council's narrative.

The Communications Team will include:

Communications Working Group (Chair, Vice-Chair, Clerk) - will act for the council between meetings

Publications – responsible for designing and editing all communication materials with print arrangements overseen by the Clerk

Engagement Team – responsible for public engagement and consultation.

Management of digital communication channels, including social media and the council's website currently sits with the Town Clerk. Public consultation and engagement is facilitated by the Town Clerk and Members with the assistance of the Community Engagement Team.

5.2. Communication governance

Currently work is received and undertaken by the Communications Team through a number of mechanisms:

- Publications are checked by a Publications Group; all councillors are encouraged to produce input and advice on the desired outcome of materials
- All media statements on behalf of the council must be authorised by the clerk in liaison with the chair

5.3. Narrative

Our narrative, or key messages, support the council's ambitions and objectives as set out in The Council Strategy and Plan. The narratives below are a sample of the top-line messages that can be used for each objective/activity. Further messages are developed within individual communication plans.

Council Ambitions	Council Objectives	Narrative
Ensuring that Town Council services are delivered efficiently, sustainably and cost-effectively to meet the needs of Charlbury residents		

<p>Delivering on our commitment to act on the climate and ecological emergencies by actively preparing Charlbury and its environment for a zero carbon, biodiverse and sustainable future</p>		
<p>Engaging all of the community by providing appropriate leadership, governance and inspiration in an open and transparent way.</p>		

5.4. How we will communicate

The council intends to use a number of communication channels to reach its stakeholders, including;

- Websites – the Charlbury TC website and charlbury.info [to signpost to the CTC website]
- Our Facebook, Twitter profiles
- Signage
- Events and displays
- Reports and policy documents
- Council meetings and minutes

- Councillor surgeries [once resumed]
- Consultation in various formats as required

As well as enhancing existing communication channels, there is the opportunity to develop new ones that will enable the public to engage with the council in a variety of new ways. This will be kept under review.

5.5. Delivery

The work that will make this strategy happen over the next two years is outlined in a Communications Action Plan in Appendix A. Following on from this strategy will be overarching action plans within the area of;

- Internal Communications between councillor, clerk and volunteers engaged in different workstreams

6. Communication activity

6.1 Reactive media

Where requested, reactive media statements will be produced by the Chair with input from the Clerk, Vice-Chair and [where time allows] other councillors.

In order to be best placed to manage reactive media relations, the Communications Working Group will co-ordinate response to any media to ensure that media enquiries are dealt with efficiently and in an open and transparent manner.

6.2 Crisis and Emergency Communications

The Local Government Association (LGA) defines a 'crisis' as 'any action which is a significant threat to the health of your organisation. Emergency communications are concerned with public safety and can include floods, fire and terror attacks. Usually, emergency communications involve the co-ordination of a number of organisations, who will have the same goal in common, but different tasks at hand. There is a difference between crisis and emergency communications, but there is also great potential for overlap. The role of Charlbury Town Council will invariably be a supportive role.

In regard to emergency communications Charlbury Town Council is working on an Emergency Plan which aims to fulfil our role in working with organisations involved in communicating in the event of a major incident.

6.3 Digital Communications

We will use digital communication to ensure good engagement with residents, and to facilitate the wider sharing of information on services and issues that are most important to residents.

One way to ensure we do this effectively, is by using social media strategically – ensuring it is well researched, well planned, monitored and evaluated in a proportionate manner to ensure that it is working.

Increasing numbers of public bodies encourage people to ask questions, make enquiries and contact the organisation, in the first instance, through social media. We will have to monitor to ensure that

councillors and the clerk have the capacity required in order to deal with public enquiries on social media.

The Council's social media policy provides details of how this will be done.

6.4 Consultation & Engagement

Once the town council has published a strategy it will be important to engage with residents – when our plans are to inspire fundamental change across a wide range of issues. In this context a serious effort to involve and understand residents is needed. By bringing people in on decision-making, councils can get decisions right, manage expectations and improve relationships with residents.

Currently within Charlbury Town Council consultations are predominantly carried out on proposed changes to individual services, such as the 20mph speed limit. These are placed on the council website and social media provide a link to the page.

In addition, there have been larger consultation and engagement exercises recently involving the need for more detailed and complex communication, these are; the Neighbourhood Plan and the TRO. There will be the need for further consultation around the continuing defining of the roads, cycleways, EVs etc.

We aim to:

- Ensure that when we say we will engage with our communities, that this involves, where reasonably practicable, representatives from all parts of the town, of all backgrounds, considering the needs of vulnerable groups and those more difficult to reach, users of specific services, businesses, partner organisations and the media; and that inclusive and accessible communication needs be specifically addressed at the start of any consultation exercise.
- Recognise that different levels of consultation and engagement are appropriate in different circumstances, dependent on;
 - The purpose of the engagement
 - The stage in the project planning cycle at which engagement takes place
 - Those we are engaging with – recognising that different groups and individuals have different preferences

7. Monitoring & Evaluating

To ensure that we are achieving our communication priorities we will also monitor and evaluate them through various methods including conducting the following;

- Periodic residents' survey/public perception surveys
- Online and social media polls on specific elements of the strategy

Consultation and engagement work will be set out on a biannual Engagement Plan. This plan will cover a six-month lookahead period towards the end of which it will be reviewed and the following six months' work will be included. This is to ensure effective use of resources and encourage forward planning.

The Engagement Plan should include brief details on aims, objectives and outcomes of proposed activity together with budget and timings. This is to help focus on "why" the activity is needed instead of "what" activity will take place and to also assess the request against the council's objectives as set out in The Council Plan. All planned work must be agreed and approved by the Clerk and chair.

Appendix A – Communication Action Plan

2022/23		
2023/24		
		Develop links with specific groups and communities either individually or through forums such as the Youth Forum, or by alignment with our town-based partners, to enable further targeted engagement.