

Communications and Engagement Strategy 2026-2027

1. Introduction

City of York Council is committed to delivering clear, transparent, and engaging communication that align with its four core commitments set out in the Council Plan, 2023-2027, *One City for All*:

- Equalities and Human Rights
- Affordability
- Climate
- Health

This strategy outlines how the council will communicate effectively with residents, businesses, partners, community groups and stakeholders to support its core commitments, corporate priorities and ensure inclusivity, accessibility, and trust. It sets out how we embed principles of engagement into the corporate communications service and how we use communications to support the organisation's workforce priorities.

2. Vision and ambition

By 2027 we want the council's communications and engagement function to be seen as good practice nationally, and to be trusted locally by residents, business, key partners and the workforce. To do this we need to continue the focus on storytelling and audience insight to drive our proactive work, directly linked to the delivery of the council's strategic ambitions.

3. The role of the communications service within the council

Meaningful communication and engagement is central to the work of the council. It supports the following.

- **Policy development** by giving people opportunities to contribute and for the council to listen, act and learn.
- **Delivery of services** by ensuring people have the information they need about how to access services.
- **Community cohesion and our civic society** by helping to build trust and positive relationships with residents, businesses, partners and stakeholders.
- **Responding to emergencies** – as part of the council's duty to warn and inform under the Civil Contingencies Act and lead or support incident communications, with a 24/7 service.

- **Long-term ambitions for the city** through an effective story of our place as somewhere to invest, work and live.
- **Support behaviour change** – to prompt residents or businesses to think or act differently to support the long-term goals of the city, as set out in the council plan and city-wide long-term strategy.
- **Innovation, productivity and long-term transformation** through strategic workforce communications, helping the organisation to continue to meet its financial challenges. This also supports our external communications by creating advocates for external messages from within our own workforce. Over 70% of colleagues live within the city.

4. Public service communications standards

The way we approach our communications and engagement will be driven by industry standards for government communications. This means we will use Government Communication Service (GCS) frameworks for campaign planning, evaluation and to support behaviour change. A programme of supporting training and learning for the team, based on these standards, will be delivered during the period of this strategy.

- [OASIS campaign planning framework](#) (objectives, audience insight, strategy, implementation, scoring)
- [GCS evaluation life cycle](#) (measuring of outputs, outtakes and outcomes)
- [EAST behaviour change framework](#) (easy, attractive, social and timely communications)

To deliver effective engagement campaigns, the council will follow the [LGA Future Conversations model](#). This encourages a two-way conversation with different audience groups to shape services that respond to residents' needs.

The communications and engagement function will support the wider corporate objective around our neighbourhood model. For example, the communications and communities teams will work in partnership to understand key advocates and ways of engaging within individual communities.

5. A consistent approach to our council's brand

Over recent years, the council has developed different logos or brands for individual services or partnerships. This makes it difficult for residents to know what the council is responsible for, and what it isn't.

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The approach doesn't support public understanding of the range of services and support delivered by the council.

It risks proactive and innovative work being seen as separate from the council, whilst leaving core activities – such as the payment of council tax – with the authority's brand.

City of York Council will build a clear, consistent and recognisable visual identify across all the services it delivers, in line with best practice seen by organisations such as the NHS and Transport for London.

There may be exceptions, however. For services that operate within an environment where there is commercial competition, a strong identity outside the core council brand is an important part of the business model. This includes services such as fostering and registrars.

As a general rule, however, we will in principle aim to avoid creating any new separate logos or brands for services run directly by City of York Council. For key partnerships we may wish to consider a joint visual identity. This will be a decision of the Head of Communications and Engagement, in discussion with the relevant Head of Service or Chief Officer.

During the period of this plan we will refresh the council's style guide – with an emphasis on accessibility – with the aim of starting the process of a roll-out of updated guidance throughout the organisation.

6. A consistent approach to our tone of voice

In our public-facing communications and engagement we will have due regard for the council's existing managing customer relations policy and the poverty truth commission charter. This sets out how we will be respectful, friendly, honest and responsive. This includes when responding to social media posts.

In council-owned communication channels – including our social media and e-newsletters - we will use a Plain English approach, in line with standards in the gov.uk content design guidance standard. In summary:

- writing for nine-year olds (as per gov.uk guidance);
- talking 'to' people, not 'about' people;
- one thought, one sentence; and
- confident in what we're saying.

7. Supporting all our residents

We recognise that an approach based primarily on digital channels may risk excluding those without easy online access or skills. During the

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period of this strategy, we will continue to ensure these groups are considered. This could be through a number of different approaches.

- The potential reinstatement of some form of printed news and services update. There will be a budget implication for this.
- Effective use of printed channels delivered by others, such as local free magazines or circulars.
- Making best use of advocates, including better understanding seldom heard voices in the city, to help them to give information to non-digital audiences on behalf of the council. See page seven for seldom heard voices and appendix A for channel mapping.

8. What we need to deliver: supporting council objectives

During the period of this strategy, the corporate story should focus on the key narratives that bring together the council plan priorities and areas of focus. We will group these together as follows.

For each of these, we will develop an over-arching core narrative. This core narrative will be supported by a range of case studies demonstrating the impact of the things we're doing with our people, places, community groups, businesses, and partners, together with how we operate. These should be human-interest led where possible, focusing on the impacts of our actions in our communities.

Within these communications, we will be clear as to why the action or decision has taken place – ultimately linked to the council supporting a more affordable, sustainable, accessible and healthier place.

Core narrative theme – i.e. a single coherent story about...	Core commitments to reference	Council plan delivery priorities	Key work to be included in human interest case studies
Neighbourhoods	Equalities Affordability Health	Ensure every primary school child gets a free school meal New team of Neighbourhood Caretakers	Fostering Adoption York Hungry Minds Neighbourhood

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		<p>Build 100% affordable housing on council-owned land</p>	<p>Caretakers</p> <p>£500k investment in parks and open spaces</p> <p>Health trainers</p> <p>Delivery of key front-line services such as street cleaning, road maintenance.</p> <p>Affordable homes</p>
Transport and growth	Equalities Affordability Climate Health	<p>Bring well-paid jobs to York</p> <p>Accessible and sustainable city</p>	<p>Healthy places engagement</p> <p>Local Transport Strategy</p> <p>Bus Service Improvement plan</p> <p>Station Gateway</p> <p>Reimagining York Streets</p>

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			Movement and Place schemes
Net zero ambition, health and housing	Climate Health	Pledge: insulate 1000s of homes to cut bills and reduce carbon	Public health Ousewem Climate priority delivery plan outcomes

9. How we need to deliver: moving to a strategic model of communications

In delivering this work, communications is a strategic support to the work of the council, rather than a more traditional model of communications and engagement. These principles are set out here.

Traditional communications	Strategic communications
Reactive	Planned
Information	Narrative
Elite	Grounded
One dimensional	Audience specific
Tactical	Coordinated
Broadcast	Relationship building
Brand anarchy	Brand discipline
Repetitive	Consistent
Siloed	Corporate
Press focus	Multi-platform
Linear	Evaluating, changing, improving

Unresponsive to feedback	Listening and learning
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To achieve this, for the period 2026-27 the communications and engagement service will focus on three core strategic objectives as our first priorities.

Priority one – enhancing engagement

What we're aiming for	Actions we'll take to get there
Ensure residents feel heard and valued in service and policy development and the democratic decision-making process and involved in shaping the city's future.	<p>A map of seldom-heard voices to broaden inclusive engagement, linked to the council's neighbourhood model.</p> <p>Create a tiered approach to council consultations.</p> <p>Mapping digital advocates to support online community 'trusted channels'.</p>

Priority two – harness partner commitment to the city to support effective and accessible communications and engagement

What we're aiming for	Actions we'll take to get there
Ensure the council's story is part of wider city narratives.	Make strategic use of the existing York heads of communication group, to support city-wide communications and engagement work.

<p>Maximise engagement through an effective network of trusted channels in our community.</p> <p>The council leads the way in joined-up public service communications in the city.</p>	<p>Ensure workforce communications supports our colleagues being able to advocate for the council and the city.</p> <p>Deliver on emergency planning priorities.</p>
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Priority three - strategic use of the channels the council has direct control over

What we're aiming for	Actions we'll take to get there
<p>Focus on content that directly supports customer services and community priorities, to support an effective customer journey.</p> <p>Focusing on telling stories from a residents' and businesses' perspective where possible, with real people explaining the impact or benefit of actions taken in their own lives.</p> <p>Prioritising video content for digital channels where possible, as we know this maximises engagement.</p>	<p>Working closely with customer services and communities colleagues to build an annual plan of key customer issues.</p> <p>Channel mapping, to focus our resources on the channels that have the largest audience reach.</p> <p>Make more use of online and community advocates, expanding messaging reach.</p> <p>Consider officer colleagues leading some comms issues (i.e. content from the front line), where appropriate, to maximise the benefit of their existing links into others' networks and community contacts.</p>

10. When we need to deliver: implementation plan

This is a two-year plan. As such, the delivery of the work above will be structured as follows. We will share outcomes and key performance metrics through regular feedback to senior officers and the council's Executive. This helps to build a culture of continuous learning and development. It's also supported by the introduction of a structured learning and development programme within the team.

Our 2026 team priorities

Strategic objective	Focus of work	What success looks like
Engagement Partnerships	Effective communication partnerships (stage 1)	<p>Create working arrangements that facilitate effective day-to-day partnership working within comms to deal with emerging issues and emergency planning.</p> <p>Build strong working relationship with city partners, via heads of comms group, and build workplan that has mutual benefit for all partners' communications activity.</p>
Engagement Partnerships Owned channels	Updated digital communications approach	Channel mapping work to understand audiences and the best routes to engage.

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		<p>Make best possible use of advocates in online spaces.</p> <p>Primarily focus on video or image content as this drives biggest engagement.</p>
Engagement Owned channels	<p>Effective direct resident and media engagement</p>	<p>Review media protocols to ensure this still reflects the needs of the organisation, the team and the media.</p> <p>A focus on story telling.</p> <p>Structured engagement with key media and community contacts, to support long-term relationship building.</p> <p>Develop a coordinated content plan for e-newsletters.</p> <p>Updated style guide.</p>

Our 2027 team priorities

Strategic objective	Action	Ambition
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Engagement Partnerships	Effective communication partnerships (stage 2)	Lead on the creation of a multi-agency joint communication strategy around the ten-year city strategy priorities.
Engagement Partnerships Owned channels	Applying consistent standards to community engagement	<p>Develop an effective map of 'seldom heard voices' for the city, in partnership with Communities team.</p> <p>Create a tiered approach to council consultations to make best use of resources.</p> <p>Channel mapping to give proper analysis of audience engagement with owned and paid for media.</p> <p>Working with others, create a map of digital advocates and trusted channels based on geographic, demographic or special interest issues.</p>

11. Evaluation and continuous improvement

- Apply Government Communication Service (GCS) evaluation cycle principles across campaigns.

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- Work closely with services to establish final outcome measures, incorporating outtakes and outputs as core evaluation principles.
- Explore sentiment analysis tools for improved assessment of communication effectiveness.
- Link team targets, training, learning and development to the strategic communications plan.

12. Conclusion

This strategy positions City of York Council to deliver impactful, transparent, and resident-centred communication and engagement that aligns with key council priorities. Through strengthened partnerships, effective engagement, and structured workforce communications, this plan will enable the service to deliver an effective long-term approach for how to use communications and engagement to support the delivery of core services and long-term ambitions for the council.

Longer term, we want City of York Council communications to be seen as an example of industry best practice. This helps to raise the profile of the organisation within the local and regional government sector and with national government. This will directly support recruitment and retention of the best talent across the organisation, helping us to further improve for the people and the city we serve.