

CHESHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY

MEETING OF: CHESHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY
DATE: 14TH FEBRUARY 2024
REPORT OF: HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT
AUTHOR: MARK SHONE

SUBJECT: EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS AND
ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 2024-28

Purpose of Report

1. Members are asked to review and approve an External Communications and Engagement Strategy for the Service. The draft Strategy sets out a series of objectives to strengthen the way in which the Service will communicate and engage with the public and external stakeholders over the next four years.

Recommended:

- [1] that Members consider and approve the draft External Communications and Engagement Strategy for implementation from 1st April 2024.

Background

2. Prior to the corporate communications function transferring to Joint Corporate Services in 2016, Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service had a Corporate Communications Strategy and a separate Consultation and Engagement Strategy. The first covered all aspects of communications with internal and external audiences, and the second provided a framework for annual Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) consultations. Both strategies expired in 2015 and were not updated during the period of Blue Light Collaboration.
3. In February 2022, the communications function shared between the Service and Cheshire Constabulary was disaggregated and a new in-house Communications and Engagement Department was reinstated. The Department's remit has been broadened to include public affairs and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).
4. The launch of the new External Communications and Engagement Strategy coincides with the publication of the Service's new four-year Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP). It covers all aspects of external communications and engagement, including public and stakeholder consultation. Importantly, it also addresses the priorities set out in the new national Fire Standard for Communications and Engagement.

5. Work is underway separately on the development of an Internal Communications and Engagement Strategy, starting with an audit of existing channels and mechanisms during Q4 2023/24 as part of the 2023 Staff Survey feedback and action planning process. A draft strategy will be presented to the Service Leadership Team for consideration in Q1 2024/25.

Information

6. The draft External Communications and Engagement Strategy (attached to the report at Appendix 1) aims to provide a framework for the way in which the Service will talk, listen and respond to the public and its external stakeholders during the lifespan of the new CRMP. On pages 5-7 it lists the statutory and regulatory imperatives on the Service to communicate openly and transparently and discusses internal and external drivers for good communication and engagement.
7. A new values-led approach to external communications and engagement is proposed on page 8, with the aim of ensuring activity is strategic, professional, impactful and inclusive. These principles aim to strengthen the Service's brand and ensure consistency in the way it communicates and engages with people. Key to this will be the implementation of the communications industry-standard OASIS (objectives, audience, strategy, implementation and scoring) planning model.
8. Section 4 on page 9 maps the relative interest and influence of the Service's main external audiences and stakeholders, enabling communications and engagement activity to be prioritised accordingly. The list is not exhaustive and should remain dynamic throughout the life of the strategy.
9. Section 5 on page 10 lists the full range of communications and engagement tools available to the Service. Those that depend on face-to-face interaction are likely to have the greatest impact, while those that are one-way in nature are more appropriate for simple, factual communication. A distinction is made between paid-for channels such as advertising and non-paid methods such as media relations.
10. Pages 11-16 set out the external communications and engagement objectives for the next four years. There are three strategic objectives that directly support the delivery of the Service's vision and mission and enable it to meet its statutory communications obligations:
 - 1) Communicate messages that enable people to take action to keep themselves and others safe.
 - 2) Maintain public and stakeholder trust and confidence in us as a public service, partner and employer.
 - 3) Give people and partners a meaningful role in the delivery and development of our services.

11. Under each strategic objective, core activities are listed together with workstreams and actions to enable the Service to drive forward communications and engagement activities in these areas.
12. The draft Strategy concludes on page 17 by explaining how the Strategy will be delivered and how progress against its objectives will be measured and monitored. This will include an annual self-assessment against the Fire Standard for Communications and Engagement, which is included as an appendix to the draft Strategy for reference.

Financial Implications

13. It is anticipated that the draft Strategy can be delivered within the existing communications and events budgets. Requests for additional resources will be made through the priority based budgeting and annual budget bid processes if required.

Legal Implications

14. The Service has numerous communications and engagement obligations under the Fire and Rescue Framework for England, Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and Localism Act 2011. These are explained on page 4 of the draft Strategy.

Equality and Diversity Implications

15. Inclusive communication and engagement is one of the four key principles of the approach proposed in the draft strategy. The draft Strategy will be fully equality impact assessed prior to publication, as will any significant projects and campaigns to result from it.

Environmental Implications

16. The draft Strategy describes a continuing shift away from printed materials and promotional merchandise towards an approach that relies on two-way, digital engagement. This is more sustainable and less reliant on physical materials or resources.

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