



# Hart District Council

## Content strategy 2022 – 2026

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## **Introduction**

This Content Strategy is written in conjunction with our Communications and Engagement Strategy.

It aims to help you in the planning, creation, delivery and governance of news, updates and information to our residents, councillors, businesses and other key partners as part of Hart District Council's goals and ambitions, set out within the Hart 2040 Vision and Corporate Plan.

It's a living document that will be reviewed during its lifetime.

## **Our aims**

This content strategy helps you get the right information to the right person at the right time, and for the right reasons.

This content strategy aims to help you ensure:

- Your content is linked directly to the council's aims and objectives
- Only effective, high-quality and priority content is published and maintained – reducing reputational risk and reducing resource requirements
- Content is fresh and is relevant and audited frequently to ensure outdated, or trivial content is removed
- That people have the appropriate skills and training to create effective media messages and additional training is provided to content editors for our website
- The council has a unified approach to content, and in so doing ensuring that whilst there may be many authors of material, it remains clearly from Hart District Council
- You understand your roles and responsibilities and those of others for those involved in content (communications, leaders and managers, content editors and officers signing-off content)
- You understand our brand and style guidelines for any publications we may do

## Objectives

**Corporate narrative:** We will develop the council narrative – the “why” of our organisation – is a fundamental element of a content strategy.

It defines an organisation’s purpose. It brings people together around that purpose. It directs action, and in a democracy, it gives people a marker against which a public body can be held to account. As part of our overall content strategy, the narrative:

- articulates where the organisation has come from and where it wants to be
- translates our corporate aims and planned-for outcomes into compelling and emotional language that engages our stakeholders’ hearts, as well as minds
- provides direction for what the council wants to achieve and how it behaves corporately and as individuals
- focuses the efforts of staff around a shared understanding of where the organisation is going and how they can contribute

**Connect with the audience:** We will know the audience we are communicating to and write with the audience in mind, using clear plain English

**Priority content:** We will prioritise important information and key content

**Quality not quantity:** We will be clear and concise

**Reduce avoidable contact via other channels:** We will aim to make sure people can find the information they are looking for first time

**Be inclusive:** We will make our content accessible

## Principles

One in five adults has a reading age of between nine and thirteen, so it is crucial that our communications are easy to understand.

That means being accurate and concise – but it also means being human. An open, authentic voice makes us much easier to connect with.

The council aims to have a consistent voice across the organisation. Our tone reflects the context of the communication, whether light hearted or serious.

Therefore, our principles are to be:

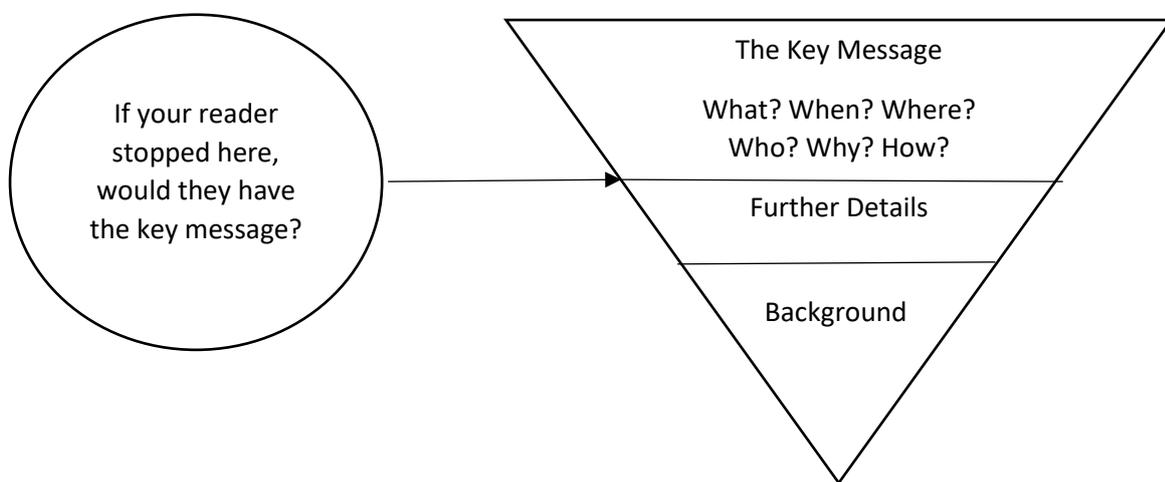
- Clear
- Consistent
- Authentic
- Positive
- Active (rather than passive language)
- Accessible

## How we get the message across

Having structured content is crucial as we need to make sure that we get the most important and useful information across to the reader as quickly as possible. To do this we can use the inverted pyramid of content.

This helps structure content to ensure that the essential information is communicated in the first two sentences.

The diagram (below) shows the inverted pyramid of content. The other important question to ask yourself is, so what? What is the message you are trying to communicate, what relevance does that have to the reader, what can they take from reading the content?



## How we will achieve this

The next section of the strategy breaks down our main channels of communication and provides guidance on how we can use content across our different platforms.

### **Writing for the website**

People read differently on the web than they do on paper. This means that the best approach when writing for the web is different from writing for print. People rarely read website pages word by word. Instead, they scan the page, picking out individual words and sentences.

Writing should be:

- Start with the reader in mind
- Using headings and sub-heading and short paragraphs

- Short and to the point (aim for sentences between 10-20 words)
- Objective (rather than promotional)
- Add bullets or numbers where appropriate
- Use links to other pages where needed (don't duplicate wording on the website)

Here are some practical steps to ensure your content is clear and compelling.

1. **Start with the reader in mind.** Ask yourself why they're visiting a page and what they want to find. Also, ask what things they wouldn't be interested in.
2. **Use six questions to help you decide what to include.** Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?
3. **Use plain English.** Imagine a typical resident. What terms would they use? Imagine that you are speaking to them when you write. Don't use technical language. Read the content out loud if it helps.
4. **Avoid over-long sentences.** The best way to do this is to limit yourself to one idea per sentence (this makes content much easier to write too). Aim for a sentence length between 10-20 words when writing for the web.
5. **Use the active voice, rather than the passive.** So rather than saying an area 'is being redeveloped', say, 'we are redeveloping' it.
6. **Structure your sentences logically, by putting the 'what' before the 'why'.** So don't write: 'If the council makes these changes now, it will immediately improve the service.' Instead, write: 'The council will immediately improve the service if it makes these changes now.'
7. **Use punctuation helpfully and accurately.** Punctuation may seem like a small thing, but it can make a world of difference.
8. **Be direct.** Use the word 'you' rather than 'residents' (e.g., you can recycle plastic bottles and cardboard in blue bins).
9. **Proofread.** Inaccuracies can easily be missed. Read the content out aloud, which makes it much easier to spot mistakes. Website content will be reviewed by a publisher before it goes live.
10. **Links.** Links can be extremely helpful if directing the site visitor to relevant information. But be careful not to splatter your web pages with links for the sake of it. This can alienate the site visitor from the content they require. We will only signpost to other Government websites, or approved organisations such as the NHS or Police.

## Writing for social media

We use the following social media channels to reach residents, businesses, partners and other stakeholders across the district and beyond.

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- LinkedIn
- YouTube
- WhatsApp

This list is not fixed and we will review existing and explore new platforms during the lifetime of this strategy.

### Basic principles of social media:

It may be the same authority but councillors, officers, and the organisation will often use social media in distinct ways. However, there are a set of ten principles that run as a golden thread.

1. **Be human.** Be approachable in your language and tone.
2. **Be engaging.** Respond to questions and talk back when you can move the conversation on or help.
3. **Be professional.** Remember that you are representing your authority.
4. **Be positive.** Use social media as a promotional tool. Shout about our successes, showcase the positive work we are doing on behalf of our community.
5. **Share and say where it came from.** You can share what others have posted but it is polite to acknowledge and attribute where this has come from.
6. **Go to where people engage.** If the section of the population you want to connect with are on a particular platform, join that platform. Go to the forum or group where they are likely to be. People don't need permission to use it and they are likely to organise themselves into groups without asking permission.
7. **You can't control, only contribute.** You cannot stop conversation amongst residents. You can only contribute to it.
8. **Content is king.** By creating sharable and engaging content you can contribute to the conversation and be heard. Make sure you use engaging imagery and videos alongside the message.
9. **Be authentic.** Don't try and pretend to be something you are not, and don't use social media as a tool for propaganda.

10. **Be strategic.** Plan ahead – who do you want to engage with, why and how? What do you want to achieve? This should be a simple plan, it may just even be in your head, but have a plan for what you want to achieve.

## Writing a press release

Writing press releases is arguably more important in today's online world than in the days where they were just sent to the press. We're no longer solely interested in winning over journalists. We can now tell our story to a range of audiences through the website and social media using press releases.

Why write a press release?

- **We set the tone** – if there is more than one side to a story – and there usually is – whoever tells the story first has the advantage as others are forced to respond to that version.
- **The format encourages clarity and brevity** – press releases follow a formula with the most important information at the top, a paragraph or two of explanation (the who, what, when, where, why, how), and a quote or two from key players in the story. As a writer, you are encouraged to do that in under 400 words.
- **The media amplify our story** – winning coverage for our news stories allows them to be amplified to a much larger audience than we can reach ourselves, which is why the communications team keep an up-to-date media contact list to send the releases to.

The five essential ingredients to a press release:

1. **News** – is it new or surprising (otherwise, why are you writing it)?
2. **Date** – news, like bread, needs to be consumed while fresh
3. **Objectivity** – write like a journalist on the outside (e.g., 'Council leads the way on new...')
4. **Opinion** – objective, adjective-free news can seem dull and lacking in colour and personality. Inject these by allowing a human to express an opinion about the news. But do try to retain the 'outside in' perspective, otherwise all your PR quotations will begin, 'We are delighted to announce...'. Rather than thinking about what the council thinks about the announcement, ask yourself what the announcement means to the groups affected (e.g., the food pantry will support families struggling to manage budgets by providing food at affordable prices'). Always include at least one quotation and say who it's from (name and title). Journalists may not lift your quotation, but they may ask to speak to the spokesperson. Remember that the purpose of a news release is not to appear word-for-word in the media, but to help a journalist to do their job.
5. **Contact details** – you want a journalist to follow up on your release. So always provide contact details of a member of the communications team who can answer questions and provide access to spokespeople, photographs etc.

## Writing for Hart News

Hart News is a publication that is sent to all households twice a year. It's an opportunity to tell our story, promote the work of the council and provide updates on a range of services we are delivering to meet the needs of our community.

We want to adopt a new tone, one focussing on great community stories, celebrating the work of the council, and promoting the services we deliver.

To do this we need to follow these guidelines:

**What is the story?** Don't write an article for the sake of it. What are you trying to communicate?

**Be positive.** Hart News provides the council with an opportunity to say what we are doing bigger, bolder, brighter and better than we have done before.

**Speak directly to your reader.** We know that the audience is our residents, so break it down. Who are you trying to connect with? A parent, child, older person, someone who may need mental health support, someone struggling to pay their bills? Get into the mind of the reader.

**Be concise.** Keep sentences short and don't ramble on. Remember to use the content pyramid to structure your content. Signpost the reader to more information on a website, or telephone number, if it's needed.

## Writing letters

**Use the right tone:** Tone is important in all content, but especially in letters as it will project your attitude to the reader. Although you can't hear it, it has the same effect as it has when you speak to someone.

**Keep it simple:** Sometimes we have a statutory duty to write letter, such as planning application notification, however this doesn't mean that we have to use technical language. Keep the language you use simple.

**Start with the main message:** Start the letter with the main message that you need to get across.

**Use pronouns:** Refer to the reader as 'you' (but not if it sounds accusatory or insulting), instead use the wording 'we'.

**Check your spelling and grammar:** Read the content out aloud, which makes it much easier to spot mistakes. Have a colleague read the copy before you publish it, where possible.

## Writing emails

**Subject lines are important:** Make sure the email subject is relevant to the email you are sending.

**Get the point across:** Keep it brief and make sure you cover the important information first.

**Watch your tone:** Yes, emails are seen to be more informal than letters, however this doesn't mean that you can go crazy with exclamation marks, emojis or inflammatory words.

**Include a signature:** Always sign off an email, please refer to the email signature

**Use CC and BCC appropriately:** If you're sending the same email to a group of people and they haven't given their consent for their email address to be shared always BCC them in.

## Implementing the strategy – roles and responsibilities

We are all responsible for content that we produce, however we need to have some controls to manage it. The table below breaks responsibilities into four roles.

Role	Responsibility
Leaders (Cabinet and senior-level officers)	Provide the sign-off for communication plans, press releases, statements, etc.
Communications (led by the Communications & Engagement Manager)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Develop the Communication &amp; Engagement strategy for the council (including a content strategy)</li><li>• Write/film content for website, press releases and other publications</li><li>• Provide good-practice advice to leaders, members, and officers</li><li>• The primary contact for matters relating to website content</li><li>• Managing relationships with content suppliers (e.g., web developers)</li><li>• Develop and provide training for content editors</li><li>• Approve and publish content provided by content editors</li></ul>
Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide sign-off from content from officers</li></ul>

Content editors and officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write and edit content related to their service area or project (often subject matter experts)</li> <li>• Ensure content is up-to-date and fit for purpose</li> <li>• Following good-practice advice provided by the communications team to ensure that the council's tone of voice and brand identity is adhered to</li> </ul>
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## **Resources and professional development**

Creating content happens across the whole of the council. With this in mind, all officers and councillors should embody the strategy to deliver effective communications to our audience.

Professional development and regular training will be provided to officers and councillors by the communications team and external organisations.

Website content editors will attend regular quarterly meetings where training will be provide by the Communications team.

### **Strategy contact:**

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This document was last reviewed on: 8 November 2021