



Northumberland
county

10-year Communications Master Plan

2023-2033

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Land acknowledgment

We respectfully acknowledge that Northumberland County is located on the Mississauga Anishinabeg territory and is the traditional territory of the Mississauga Anishinabeg.

Northumberland County respectfully acknowledges that the Mississauga Nation are the collective stewards and caretakers of these lands and waters in perpetuity, and that they continue to maintain this responsibility to ensure their health and integrity for generations to come.

Our commitment to accessibility

Northumberland County is committed to ensuring that people of all ages and abilities enjoy the same opportunities as they live, work, visit and invest in our community. The County is guided by the four core principles of dignity, independence, integration and equal opportunity, and supports the full inclusion of persons as set out in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA). This document is available in an alternative format, upon request.

Special thanks

Northumberland County's Communications Master Plan is the result of a comprehensive process involving input from residents and stakeholders, backed by quantitative and qualitative research. It was shaped through a collaborative effort involving members of Northumberland County Council, the County's Senior Leadership Team and staff, stakeholders and community partners, and the Northumberland community. Northumberland County would like to thank all those who participated in this process for your engagement and input.

Thank you

County Council

Warden Brian Ostrander, Deputy Warden Olena Hankivsky, Councillors Lucas Cleveland, Bob Crate, Scott Jibb, John Logel, and Mandy Martin

Senior Leadership Team

Jennifer Moore, Chief Administrative Officer; Lisa Ainsworth, Director of Corporate Services; Dan Borowec, Director of Economic Development, Planning, & Strategic Initiatives; Susan Brown, Chief of Northumberland Paramedics; Dwayne Campbell, Acting Director of Planning and Economic Development; Kate Campbell, Director of Communications and IT; Glenn Dees, Director of Health and Human Services; Lisa Horne, Director of Community and Social Services; Denise Marshall, Director of Public Works; Darrell Mast, County Solicitor

Communications Team

Scott Berry, Communications Officer, Capital Projects; Jennifer Hardy-Parr, Grant Writer; Cara Timmermans, Specialist, Digital and Document Accessibility; Shayna Tinson, Manager of Communications & Creative Services

Northumberland County Staff

140 employees who submitted a completed internal communications survey

Northumberland Member Municipality Communications Leads

Emily Cartlidge, Deputy Clerk (former), Township of Hamilton (current Clerk, Township of Alnwick/Haldimand); Kara Euale, Communications Manager, Town of Cobourg; Holly Grant, CAO, Township of Cramahe; Nicole Hamilton, Deputy Clerk, Township of Cramahe; Ben Hagerman, Manager of Economic Development and Communications, Municipality of Brighton; Kate Ingram, Communications Manager, Municipality of Port Hope; Kira Mees, Community Development Manager, Municipality of Trent Hills; Jennifer Steen, Coordinator, Parks, Recreation and Culture, Township of Alnwick/Haldimand

Northumberland Community Members

637 community members who submitted a completed communications survey

Sector Stakeholders

Darla Price, Northumberland Manufacturers' Association Executive Director; Maggie Darling, Northumberland United Way Communications & Impact Director (former); Rev. Wanda Stride, Trinity – St. Andrew's United Church, Brighton Minister; Rev. Neil Ellis, Transition House Shelter Board Chair (former); Madelaine Currelly, Community Training and Development Centre CEO; Anthony Dew, Stalwood Homes General Manager; Ann Newell, Watton Employment Services Executive Director; Mark DeJong, Northumberland Federation of Agriculture President (former)

Local Media

Pete Fisher, Today's Northumberland; Sarah Hyatt, Northumberland News (former); Rob Washburn, Consider This Northumberland (Northumberland 89.7); Sue Dickens, Trent Hills Now (former)

Comparator and Leading Municipalities

York Region: Patrick Casey, Director of Corporate Communications, Andrea Griepsma, Manager of Digital, Design & PR, Jennifer Mitchell, Manager of Corporate Communications; **Town of East Gwillimbury:** Meeta Gandhi, General Manager of Corporate Services; **City of Calgary, Alberta:** Heather Hastie, Manager of Communications; **City of Wentzville, Missouri:** Kara Roberson, Strategic Communications Officer; **City of Guelph:** Tara Sprigg, Director of Communications (former), Laura Mousseau, Manager of Communications (former); **City of Mississauga:** Ivana Di Mello, Director of Communications (former)

Communications Consultant – Redbrick Communications

Brian Lambie, President; Andrea Montgomery, Vice President; Farah Tayabali, Vice President

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“
Communications
Excellence ... [is] using
communications to manage
relationships with diverse
stakeholders/audiences to
achieve mutual understanding,
realize organizational goals,
and serve the public interest.
”

- Canadian Public
Relations Society

This is the first Communications Master Plan for Northumberland County. It comes at a time of significant post-pandemic change and evolution in media, technology, social need, government policy and funding, and public sentiment.

The purpose of this Master Plan is to build more inclusive and effective public services and greater trust in local government by fostering a community that is informed about County services, and engaged in shaping municipal priorities, policies, and programs. As such, this plan is for all staff across the municipality who engage and interact with those we serve. It is also for the community.

The development of this Master Plan is identified as a key action under Pillar 1 of Northumberland County's 2023-2027 Community Strategic Plan. It is based on communications research, trends and current pressures, municipal best practices, and input from internal and external stakeholders. While it spans a 10-year horizon, we recognize the world will not look the same in 2033 as it does today. As such, this plan is a guiding document. The vision and guiding principles identified here will root our work and give us a clear line of sight to strive toward, even when we may need to change course and adapt.



Northumberland County's 2023-2027 Community Strategic Plan Pillars



Innovate for service excellence



Ignite Economic Opportunity



Foster a thriving Community



Propel Sustainable Growth



Champion a Vibrant Future

Specifically, this Master Plan will:

- **Reinforce the County's commitment** to placing residents at the centre of all communications, taking into account how they receive, interact with, and share municipal information.
- **Improve accessibility and inclusion** by providing a framework for how we engage and communicate with diverse audiences.
- **Help the County measure** and understand how well our communication efforts are working.
- **Set a five-year implementation plan** of concrete actions that are aligned with the priorities of the Community Strategic plan.
- **Equip the Communications Department with a roadmap for technology and training** that will ensure the team has the tools and skills required to be strategic partners.
- **Build trust in municipal government** through an integrated approach to resident experience that conveys care for residents; competence, reliability, and quality in service delivery; and commitment to open and honest communication.

This plan is about uniting the County team in our shared responsibility as County ambassadors. It is about strengthening partnerships, recognizing we can do more and better when we combine efforts and leverage strengths. It is also about the future and readiness for change. It will inform future investments and ensure the Communications Department continues to deliver the highest value and quality for the County and the public.



Background

Northumberland County is located on the traditional territory of the Mississauga Anishinaabeg. It is situated on the outer ring of the eastern region of the Greater Golden Horseshoe and consists of seven area municipalities.

Our population is growing, changing, and aging. Northumberland is projected to increase from approximately 89,000 (2021) people to 122,000 by the year 2051. The average age of the population is 48, with nearly 30% being 65 year of age or older¹. From 2016 to 2021, the county saw a 77% increase in new Canadians moving to the area².

As an upper-tier level of municipal government, Northumberland County has over 685 staff delivering a range of services from waste management, social and family services, long-term care, and paramedic services, to economic development, land use planning, natural and cultural heritage services, court services, and roads and asset management. Like many municipalities in Ontario, the County is facing increasing pressures related to housing and homelessness, opioid use, and increasing accountabilities for health and wellbeing as government funding models change and local needs grow.

Key drivers in Northumberland's economy are manufacturing, agriculture, food processing and tourism. The county is known for its outdoor beauty, waterways, rolling hills, beautiful downtown areas, and historic towns and villages.

¹ [Statistics Canada Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population, Northumberland County](#)

² [Northumberland County 2023-2027 Community Strategic Plan](#)

Population at a glance

29%

of population are seniors¹

77%

increase in New Canadians moving to Northumberland from 2016 to 2021²

94%

of residents know English¹

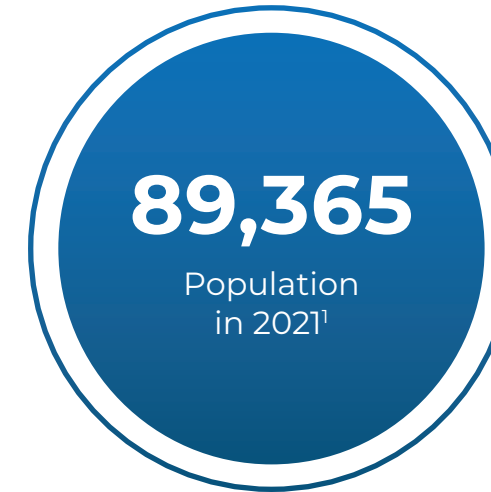
27%

increase in population projected by 2051

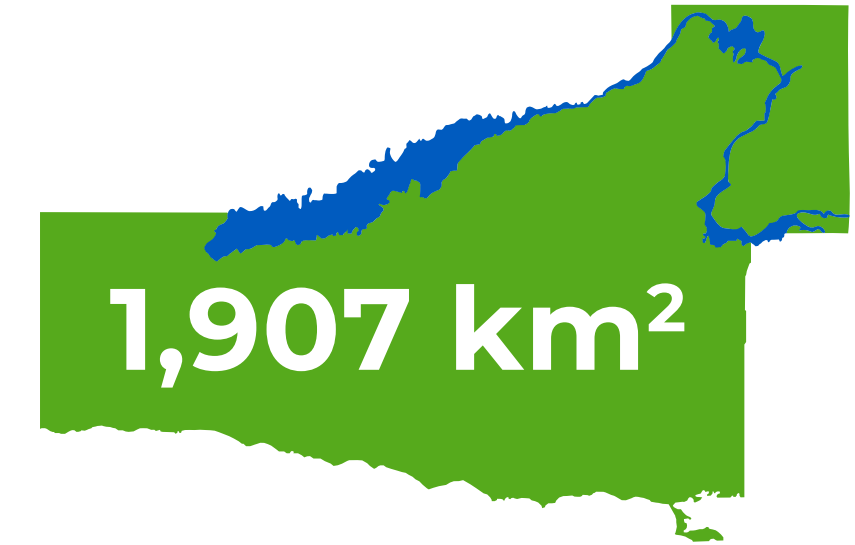
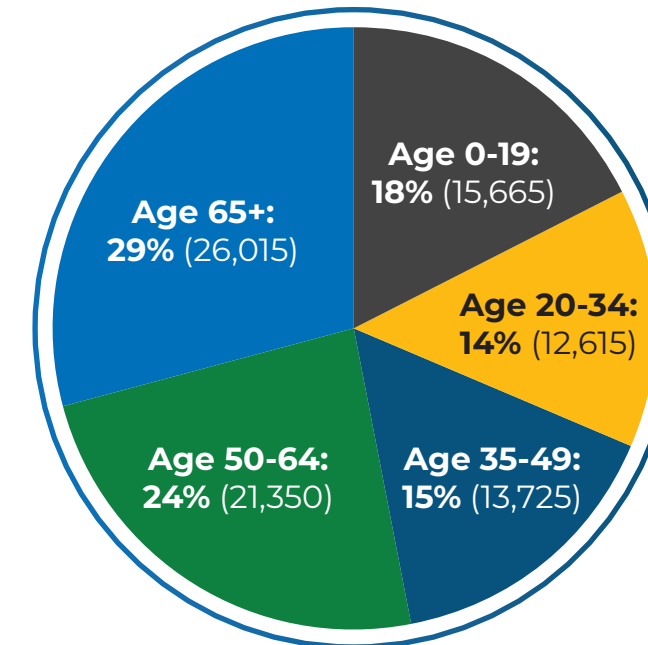
44.7%

of population has a post-secondary degree, certificate or diploma²

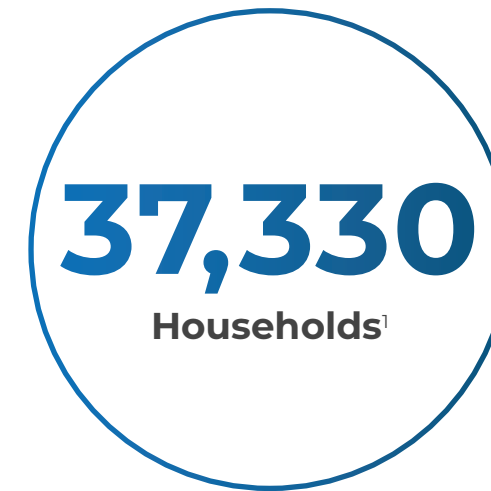
Our Northumberland



Population by age¹



Spans seven municipalities, bordered by Port Hope to the west, Brighton to east, and Trent Hills/Rice Lake to the north.



Since Northumberland County established a formal corporate communications department in 2013, the municipality has significantly advanced two-way communication with residents.

Continuous improvement

The department is focused on continuous improvement. Our team has adopted comprehensive content management strategies, enhanced social media governance, information accessibility protocols, and brand reputation practices.

Individuals have sought membership with professional associations like the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), the Association of Registered Graphic Designers (RGD), and the Municipal Information Systems Association (MISA) to help keep us at the forefront of emerging trends and technological advancements.

Team members have also achieved industry designations and/or certifications such as:

- Certified Communications Management Professional (CMP®)
- Registered Graphic Designer (RGD)
- Lean Six Sigma Yellow Belt
- Certificate in Public Participation by the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2)

“... It shows you are interested in your residents and want them to feel involved and that their opinion counts.”

- Community respondent to survey about municipal communications in Northumberland, September 2023

Learning and development

In 2024, all staff of the Communications Department were trained in Group Facilitation Methods, as well as use of the new powerful Google Analytics 4 platform for enhanced digital marketing reporting and analytics. The Department also coordinates training to help staff across the organization develop and enhance their media and communication skills, including media spokesperson training, social media training, and content accessibility training.

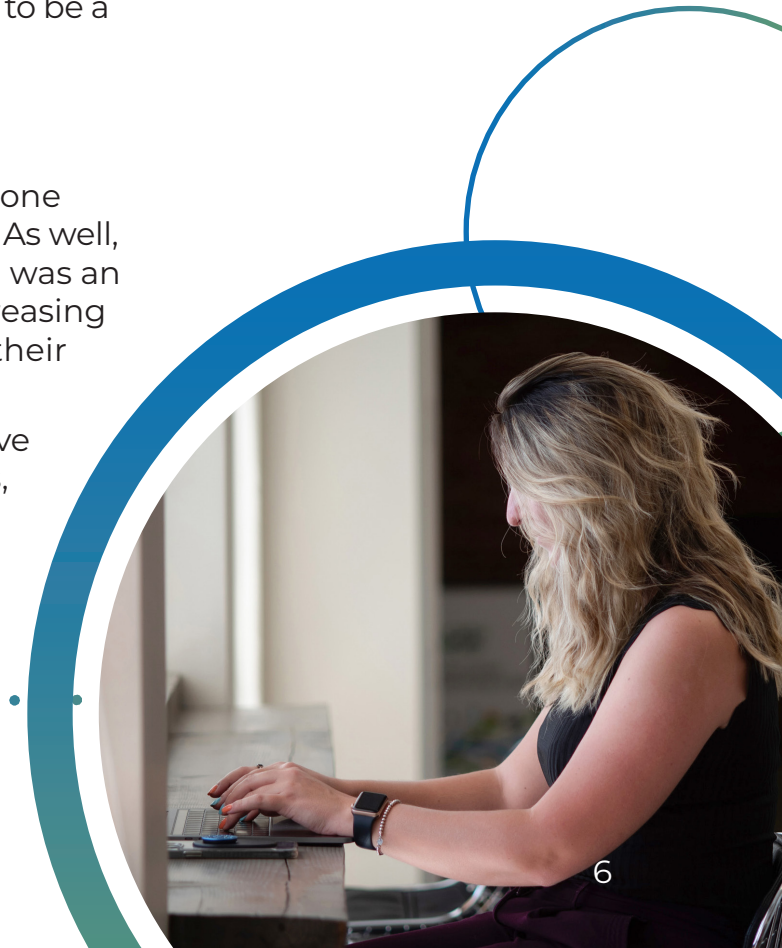
Fostering community conversations

Our team has successfully fostered robust two-way communication channels, ensuring transparent and responsive interactions between the County and its residents. Our progressive approach has not only strengthened Northumberland County's public relations efforts but also reinforced the organization's Mission to be a best practices leader in County government.

Addressing challenges

The County continues to face challenges reaching all residents. More than one third of Northumberland residents have limited to no internet connectivity. As well, local communities have recently lost their weekly print newspapers, which was an important source of accurate information. This is in an environment of increasing public expectation to be consulted and engaged in meaningful ways by their local government.

Efforts continue with service providers and government partners to improve local broadband and overcome barriers to ensuring residents, businesses, partners and key stakeholders have consistent access to important municipal information, updates and engagement opportunities.



Our approach

Vision

An informed, engaged, and welcoming community.

Mission

To enhance resident experience with municipal government through exceptional communications that build trust, encourage participation, and promote inclusion.

Guiding principles

People first

We place the resident at the centre of all our decisions and communications, delivering timely, accurate information on the channels, devices, and platforms that our community members prefer. We embrace diversity and ensure that all voices are heard and represented in our communications.

Excellence

We stay informed of industry best practices and emerging trends, striving for the highest standards of quality and professionalism in every aspect of our work. We set SMART goals, measure progress, evaluate outcomes, and apply what we've learned to drive results.

Agility

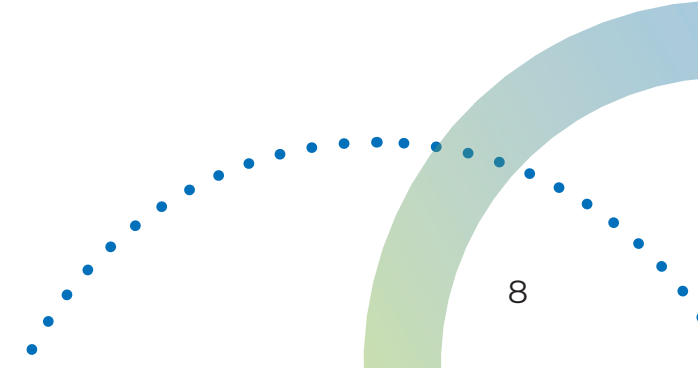
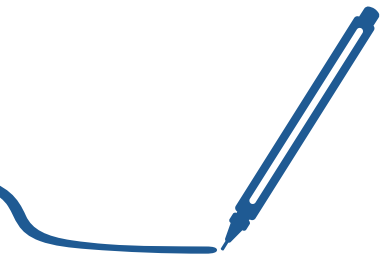
We are flexible and adaptive, ready to respond to the evolving needs of the organization and our community. We cultivate creativity, innovate and experiment to find fresh approaches to communication challenges and to reach target audiences effectively.

Integrity

We uphold honesty, accuracy, ethical behavior, and trustworthiness in all our interactions. We prioritize openness and accountability, uniting the whole County team in our shared responsibility as County ambassadors.

Partnership

We work together with internal clients, member municipalities, agency partners, Indigenous communities, and others to achieve common goals and enhance community outcomes. We maintain curiosity, fostering a culture of listening and learning, always open to different perspectives and new ways to improve our reach and impact.



The Communications Department is responsible for effectively sharing timely and accurate County information and meaningfully engaging with Northumberland staff and the community – including businesses, partners and key stakeholders. The Department's roles and responsibilities span four key areas.

Corporate and executive communications



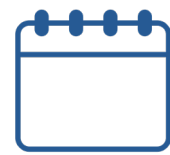
Communications strategy and planning



Media relations and issue management



Emergency communications



Event management and speech writing



Employee communications

Public affairs



Grant writing



Community engagement



Legislative compliance



Ad-hoc support for municipal & community partners

Digital experience



Website operations and governance



Social media corporate accounts and standards



Information accessibility



Analytics and reporting

Marketing and creative services



Graphic design and multimedia



Advertising and campaign management



Brand strategy



Northumberland County's Communications Department currently consists of five staff, which includes two positions not often found on municipal communications teams. We have a dedicated grant writer to help lessen the tax burden on local residents by increasing the County's access to potential external funding for major projects. We also have a dedicated role to ensure the County adheres to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act in all documents we produce that are publicly available.

Our current team complement



Director, Communications & Information Technology

Leads and manages the complete operation of the Communications and Information Technology teams.

- Directs strategic planning
- Oversees digital transformation
- Protects the County's reputation
- Leads issues management
- Manages media relations



Manager, Communications & Creative Services

Manages communications, marketing and creative services.

- Oversees the County's brand identity
- Produces all creative content
- Manages the organization's content accessibility and marketing strategies
- Leads development and implementation of marketing and communications campaigns



Grant Writer

Maximizes opportunities to secure funding from other levels of government and external sources, and leads corporate initiatives for enhancing municipal services.

- Researches funding opportunities
- Provides strategic guidance and prepares funding proposals
- Cultivates funder relationships
- Develops strategies and action plans to capitalize on opportunities identified by the organization and coordinates cross-departmental collaboration



Communications Officer, Capital Projects

Increases awareness and understanding of capital projects and improves access to municipal services.

- Supports strategic planning
- Develops communications plans and products
- Cultivates community engagement
- Fosters positive Indigenous Relations
- Supports media relations



Specialist, Digital & Document Accessibility

Leads accessibility and inclusion communications efforts for the organization.

- Develops and manages processes to ensure the County's compliance with legislated information and communication accessibility requirements
- Leads document accessibility training, auditing, and remediation
- Coordinates initiatives to promote inclusivity in County services and the community

The research framework for this Plan included inputs that are both qualitative and quantitative. The Plan was developed using feedback from many groups and individuals within Northumberland County, as well as input from municipal communications leaders across the province and beyond. Where input came through one-on-one interviews, group discussions, and open-ended survey responses, a framework was used to identify and analyze patterns and establish structured themes, as findings.

The Plan is also rooted in objective, important and timely insights from studies and expertise from recognized leaders in the fields of public relations and communications, and statistical information gathered from the County's digital channels, as well as staff and public survey results.

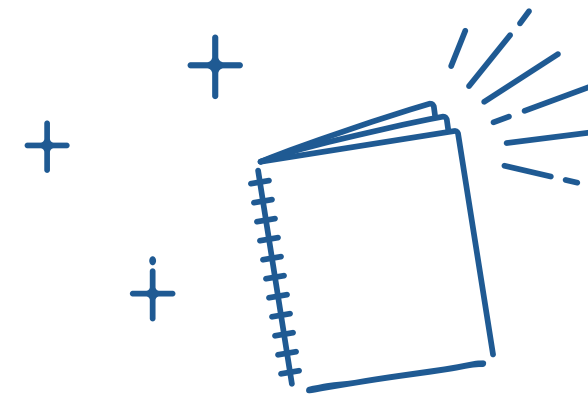
The findings from this research were consolidated under key themes, analyzed against best practices, and assessed against a communications maturity model for municipalities. This analysis led to the strategic pillars, goals and actions identified in this plan.

Inputs and engagement

Plan inputs included the following internal and external sources.

Internal

- Individual interviews with each member of County Council & the Chief Administrative Officer
- Group interviews with the County's senior leadership team
- Staff survey results (140 responses)
- A review of internal strategic documents, including the County's:
 - *2023-2027 Community Strategic Plan*
 - *2022 Annual Report*
 - *2024-2026 Communications Business Plan and Budget*
 - *2023 Communications Master Plan Budget Issue Paper*
- Review of Communications Department's services inventory, job descriptions, planning templates and guides
- Review of sample communications plans, marketing materials, and KPI reports
- Corporate channel review of the County's approach to digital communications: website and social media channels, including Northumberland.ca, Join In Northumberland, Facebook, X, and LinkedIn
- Digital analytics for the County's website and social media channels



External

- Meeting with eight different sector leaders in the community
- Consultation with Communications leads for each Northumberland municipality
- Interviews with four members of the local media (print, online, radio)
- Public survey results (637 responses)
- Interviews with Communications leaders in six comparator and leading municipalities (four in Ontario, one in Alberta, one in the United States)
- Secondary research into industry trends and best practices including thought leadership from Edelman Communications, Deloitte, International Association of Business Communicators, International Association for Public Participation, the Canadian Public Relations Society, the Beryl Institute, and more
- Environmental scan of 10 municipal corporate communications plans
- Sector insights from Redbrick Communications' 22 years working in the municipal sector

Ensure that every household has access to opportunities to give input.

- Community respondent to survey about municipal communications in Northumberland, September 2023

Findings

Below is a high-level summary of the input and insight gathered through the previously-noted activities.

General overarching themes

Below is a high-level summary of findings from the best practice research and the Master Plan consultation process. While learnings emerged from each input, the insights fall under the following five overarching key themes.

- Communications teams must be adaptable and innovative.
 - Keeping up with a changing landscape and tools
 - Finding new ways to reach audiences
 - Staying current on changing social media algorithms
- Authentic storytelling builds trust.
 - Strengthening community connection with local government
 - Engaging audiences and broadening reach
 - Combatting negativity and misinformation through human stories
 - Differentiating municipal from other levels of government
- The County can't do it alone.
 - Needing to partner and collaborate
 - Drawing in and inviting other voices to strengthen messaging and help amplify reach of important information and good news
- Meaningful listening and engaging matters.
 - Meeting residents' growing expectations to have a voice
 - Focusing efforts for better decision making
- Demands on communicators are increasing.
 - Strengthening internal processes, protocols and visibility
 - Building capacity and competency
 - Focusing on highest value strategic work

A changing communications landscape

- Trust in government and government leaders continues to be in decline in Canada (down two points in 2024 from 2023 based on Edelman's Trust Barometer)¹.
- Along with the decline of traditional media, in Canada, we are seeing some growing distrust of media, which is more recent.
- The public generally trusts their own research, meaning they have the greatest trust in their own search engine searches when seeking general news and information.
- Communities are experiencing greater polarization, misinformation and information overload. There is also a rise in the spread of disinformation.
- The pace of change is getting faster related to technology, the use of Artificial Intelligence tools, evolving social channels, and increasing customer service expectations.
- The face of communities is changing as a result of growth, resident relocations following the pandemic and federal immigration policies.
- Communications teams require a broader cross-section of skillsets, such as data management and analysis, digital marketing, publication and video design, accessibility tools, and change communications.

Stakeholder insights

County Council

- The County's Communications team is well respected and achieves high-quality work despite limited resources and capacity.
- The dwindling media landscape makes it harder to reach the public.
- There is need to foster greater public trust and confidence in the face of more polarization and misinformation.
- The public expects information how and when they want to receive it, with people appearing less inclined to proactively seek out information about government activity.
- There is a general lack of understanding around which level of government is responsible for which services.
- Public interest in engagement tends to be low.



Changing media landscapes

On September 15, 2023, Metroland Media group stopped printing 71 community newspapers across Ontario, including Northumberland News – moving to an online-only model.

County staff

- Most staff are informed by all-staff emails, managers, or word of mouth.
- Staff would like improved cross-departmental communication.
- Staff desire greater engagement and understanding of how their feedback is used when they are engaged.
- Survey respondents feel seniors, the homeless, new residents & youth are the hardest to reach audiences.
- There are opportunities to tell more engaging, authentic stories about County services and to get ahead of emerging issues.

Northumberland member municipality communications leads

- Member municipalities face challenges engaging the community, especially in person. Online surveys work best.
- Correcting misinformation is one of the biggest challenges they face.
- Lack of media sources makes it more difficult to inform the broad community.
- They see value in greater collaboration with the County and joint promotion and strategic planning.

Media

- Overall, they have a positive relationship with the County.
- They feel the pressures of a changing media landscape with fewer resources and new business models.
- They need as much advanced notice as possible for upcoming events or stories to cover.
- Media prefer access to subject matter experts, when possible, in addition to elected officials.

Sector stakeholders

- They value the direct relationships they have with County staff.
- They do not perceive social media as a reliable source of information given each channel's algorithms, but recognize it can be good for some information sharing.
- They encourage greater coordination between the County and member municipalities.
- They would like more positive community-based stories shared using a variety of channels.
- They want to ensure all voices have an opportunity to be heard, especially those most impacted by a decision.

Comparator and leading municipalities

- High-functioning Communications teams are investing in digital story telling and tools, and public engagement.
- Communications teams need to be adaptable and agile.
- They recognize the value of robust internal communications but do not always have the bandwidth.
- All are experiencing greater spread of misinformation and distrust.
- With declining media, they recognize the need to function more as a newsroom.
- Effective communications must be audience centric to have impact.
- Good policies and processes help elevate communications and issues management response.
- Based on nine municipalities with populations ranging from 82,000 to 150,000, the average number of Communications full-time equivalents is seven.²

Community

- The website is hard to navigate and they want more engaging content on social media.
- They desire simple communications and ways to engage with and contact the County/local municipality.
- They want less reliance on digital communications. The community would prefer hard copy notices and newsletters or emails.
- The public would like comments and questions answered on social media.
- Survey respondents want to be engaged, especially rural respondents, and to learn more about opportunities and how their feedback is being used.

² Data is based on the composition of communications teams from the following municipalities: City of Guelph, Town of Whitby, Town of Milton, City of St. Catherines, City of Pickering, City of Waterloo, City of Brantford, Town of Newmarket, Town of Caledon. Data is from research conducted from 2021-2023 and may not reflect current state.

Community's top information sources

64%
Facebook

49%
local newspapers*

47%
municipal website

However, they **trust** the County website (71%) more than media coverage (50%) or the County's Facebook page (45%).

**survey was conducted before Metroland announced the shutdown of print community newspapers*

Internal analysis

Strengths

- Communications leadership and the team are highly respected for their efforts and the quality of their work. The team has grown over time, and seeks to deliver value with every project.
- The Communications director sits at senior most table and drives a strategic approach tied to organizational goals and the priorities identified in the 2023-2027 Community Strategic Plan.
- The municipal voice is strong and the Communications team continuously looks for ways to enhance this voice by being creative, proactive and by anticipating the needs of staff, council and the community.
- Communications has established a strong foundation on which to build, with most foundational policies and processes in place.
- The Communications team strives to measure, achieve and report back results against KPIs. They have created report-back dashboards to demonstrate the value and impact of their work, an area that many municipalities struggle with.
- Individual professional development plans exist for the team, with annual group training arranged based on core competency development for the department.
- The County is a leader in information and communication accessibility, with staff resources, policies and processes in place to ensure legislative compliance and continuous enhancement of organizational capacity.
- Marketing campaigns are becoming more sophisticated, increasingly using engaging visuals and messaging (e.g., 'Communications is always changing' campaign) along with a mix of marketing tools and channels, and enhanced metrics and reporting.



Challenges

- The County's current communications department consists of five team members, of which only 2.5 are professional communications resources. The additional roles (Grant Writer and Digital & Document Accessibility Specialist), while they complement efforts, support corporate priorities. As a result, the team is stretched and it is more challenging to keep up with demand, meet the organization's needs across 25 business units, monitor and manage reputation, use multiple, varied communications channels, and effectively inform and engage the community.
- The Communications sector is rapidly changing. Government communicators must be prepared to address trends such as the decline of traditional newsrooms, the prevalence of misinformation/disinformation, integration of disruptive technologies, and enhanced use of – and ethics related to – data. Diverse skillsets will be needed on the Communications team. A team approach to training and development will be required.
- Municipalities need to balance budget priorities and, with rising costs, they are struggling to keep tax increases manageable. This will be a key factor in decision making when considering investments in communications, community engagement, training and development.
- Based on internal feedback, there is a need to strengthen organizational listening and response (internal and external).
- Staff identified word of mouth as one of their main sources of information, which is not reliable. Staff want more timely and frequent information. Strengthening internal communications can help more staff become ambassadors for the County.
- Cross-departmental information sharing needs improvement and could help with consistent and more coordinated messaging, especially with customer service.
- Communications technology and tools are needed to monitor, listen, respond and measure. Some gaps exist.
- Improved clarity of roles, responsibilities and processes related to the County's community engagement approach is required.

External analysis

Opportunities

- Connections and collaboration with local municipalities are strong, with a commitment to continue strengthening ties and reach of messaging.
- The County has a strong Community Strategic Plan that can guide storytelling and the sharing of accomplishments.
- Community engagement efforts are strengthening, including inviting key stakeholders to the table and working to consistently close the loop. Community survey respondents said they are motivated to engage on issues they care about or directly impact them. There are opportunities to better position consultations in ways that resonate with the community and create actionable insights from the learnings.
- The County is working toward developing an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion framework and policies, which will help further guide and inform the County's related communications positioning.
- The County has rich stories to tell and with which to engage others, including the strength of partnerships and collaboration on key priorities like health and housing. Opportunities exist to increase positive storytelling by leveraging layers of information (from "quick and dirty" to greater detail).
- 60% of community survey respondents are on Facebook, but only 50% of those follow the County. There is an opportunity to promote the County's channels and increase reach.
- For the past five years, Facebook has consistently been the top source of traffic to the County's website by far. There is opportunity to further leverage that channel—such as more use of video – to expand reach and information sharing. Other area municipalities also drive traffic, though to a lesser degree; this could be expanded.
- Digital transformation is progressing across County operations, which will ultimately support improved client experience with County services.



Risks

- Trust in governments continues to decline while polarization is on the rise in Canada, and this is challenging for municipalities to manage and counter. Focusing on resident experience with the County, including targeted content customized for the channel and the audience, along with engaging diverse voices, will be essential to build trust and confidence in municipal programs and services.
- Polarization at upper levels of government is trickling down to the municipal level and has an impact on local, social debate.
- More than one third of residents in the County have limited to no internet connectivity. The closing of Metroland print community newspapers is a significant loss, especially since 49% of community survey respondents said they get municipal information from local papers. With a broad and diverse audience, it is a challenge to find the right level of information for the right audiences using the right channels.
- Northumberland is on the edge of a larger media market. Local municipal coverage is challenging to garner.
- Understanding of roles and responsibilities of each level of government is not well understood – leads to confusion / frustration.
- People are inundated with information and less likely to be proactive in seeking out information. Expectations are high for municipalities to reach residents in ways that work for the community (i.e., have the information come to them).
- Mis- and disinformation continue to spread, especially on Facebook community channels, which are a highly accessed source of information. Municipalities have challenges to stay ahead of the curve, and foster constructive engagement and discourse.
- Social media channels and their algorithms continue to change. It is challenging to keep up and ensure the County is reaching target audiences with these channels.
- Complicated stories, such as homelessness, growth, and preparing for change, are challenging to tell, have resonate, and influence opinions. Different audiences want different things. There are pressures from other levels of government.



Redbrick Communications' Municipal Communications Maturity Index

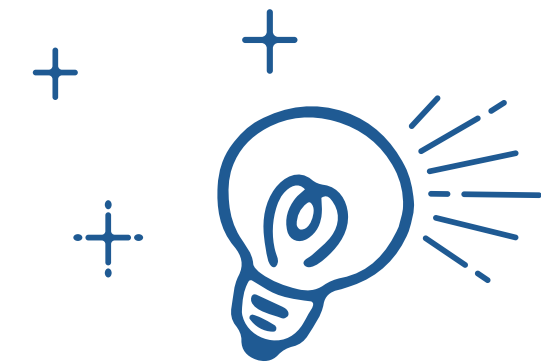
Northumberland County engaged Redbrick Communications Inc. for this project because of their depth of experience working within the sector. They have also developed a maturity index customized for municipal communications, to use as an assessment tool. Leveraging a maturity model was a key ask by the County for the development of this Master Plan.

What is a maturity index?

Maturity models offer a non-biased approach to measuring an organization's current state against a best practice state. As such, they are used for continuous improvement and can provide a roadmap to growth and greater effectiveness.

How is maturity measured?

Redbrick's index is based on a review of other business and public relations maturity models, communications capability frameworks, and current municipal best practice and future trends. It measures five levels of organizational maturity against five capability measures. It is a valuable assessment tool that has informed this Master Plan and strategic conversations with decision makers at the County.



The Chief Communication Officer provides 'horizontality' to strategy development, much like the CEO. Other C-suite members have a vertical perspective.

- Terry Flynn, Director
Master of Communications
Management,
McMaster University



Municipal Communications Maturity Index: Northumberland County

Maturity Indicator	1. Side Hustler	2. Doer	3. Ally	4. Strategist	5. Partner
Organizational structure and competency	Fractured and off the side of the desk; under resourced, limited skills and/or training; no access to the senior leadership team	Limited dedicated resource(s); emerging training/development; report to manager or director with limited to no access to the senior leadership team	Resourcing for service level expectations; some training/development; duo reporting to CAO and other	Strong alignment to service objectives; sufficient resources and varied skillsets to meet needs; development plans in place; report to CAO with seat at senior table	Sufficient complement for entire organization's communications needs; multidisciplinary; function is equal partner and integrated at senior table; embedded continuous improvement
Northumberland's rating				●	
Strategic business purpose	No Corporate Communications strategy (internal or external); tactical	Minimal involvement in business strategy and decision making	Alignment with business strategy and customer service emerging; consulted for some key decisions	Function aligned with overall strategy, customer service; Corporate Communications strategy followed, including for public engagement	Value Creator: involved in and advise on all business strategy, integrated with customer service
Northumberland's rating				●	
Organizational accountability and processes	No processes; no KPIs or use of analytics/data; no standards nor clear roles or confidence in communications	Some standardized processes and service level standards; minimal KPIs, use of analytics and reporting; emerging confidence in communications; some collaboration with departments	Processes are standardized, basic service standards in place; some analytics/data and reporting; regular collaboration; some confidence in communications	KPIs tracked; often data driven with regular reporting; continuous improvement; expected collaboration and high confidence in communications	Advanced analytics and reporting and KPIs; demonstrated impact to business goals; standardized/streamlined processes; clear roles; built in collaboration
Northumberland's rating				●	
Operational investment and backing	No budget, tools not automated; no flexibility to take innovative approaches	Minimal budget, basic tools; limited to no flexibility to take innovative approaches	Some budget and automation; emerging use of communications/marketing tools; some flexibility to take innovative approaches	Centralized budget, more advanced business tools in place; often innovative	Centrally owned and managed budget for all municipal communications; proactive adoption of new tools; always seek innovative approaches
Northumberland's rating				●	
Community building, accessibility and inclusivity	Reactive issues management with no communications involvement; no focus on strategic relationship building or on accessible/inclusive communications*	Some involvement in issues management and strategic relationships; some accessible and inclusive communications	Often involved in issues management and strategic relationships; communications are often accessible and inclusive	Always consulted for issues management and guiding strategic relationships; communications are always accessible and inclusive	Communications has influence and guides ethical response and strategic relationships; accessible and inclusive approach across the organization
Northumberland's rating			●		

*Accessible and inclusive communications mean the use of plain language, visual storytelling, following AODA guidelines and inclusivity best practices / language demonstrating a welcoming workplace/community

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Summary

As an organization, Northumberland County's approach and understanding of the strategic value Communications can bring to a municipality is more mature and progressive than many.

The Communications team is well respected across each department and offers a strategic voice for leadership. They work collaboratively with departments and seek to deliver the highest value to meet municipal goals and reach target audiences.

Increasing the team's current complement and looking for opportunities to build out strategic skillsets toward a more multidisciplinary team, along with standardizing workflow, KPIs and reporting will further elevate the function.

As trust in government declines, the media landscape wanes, and municipal strategies for diversity, equity and inclusion continue to mature, the County will need to continue its work to foster an integrated approach to resident experience and to demonstrate transparency, accountability and inclusivity to staff and the community.

Breakdown by indicator

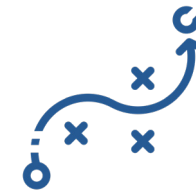


Organizational structure and competency

The County's team reports directly to the CAO and the director has a seat at the senior most table.

When considering the team's current capacity, compared to other municipalities of their population size, and as a growing community, Northumberland's team would benefit from one to two additional full-time positions to ensure a sufficient complement to meet the entire organization's communications needs. Current professional development plans are in place and focus on individual Communications staff. A team focus has recently been applied, with annual group training arranged based on core competency development for the department.

As a next step, focusing individual and department professional development on ensuring proficiency with increasingly sophisticated communications and analytics tools, while also advancing organizational communications competencies, will help the County as a whole deliver communications excellence.



Strategic business purpose

The team's work is highly aligned with the County's strategic objectives and focused on bringing the highest value to each department. Policies and processes are in place to guide their work and ensure they are working collaboratively with each program area.

This Master Plan will help root and direct the team's efforts over the coming years. Strengthening the County's processes, planning, coordination and approaches to community engagement will be an important next step.



Organizational accountability and processes

The County's team is results oriented, with a growth mindset. Whenever possible they use data to shape decisions, target the appropriate audiences and report to leadership. Some standard KPIs for Communications are in place, with an opportunity to enhance and align with the County's new Community Strategic Plan and this 10-year Master Plan.



Operational investment and backing

The organization has invested in the usual tools for graphic design, social media monitoring, community engagement and project management. The team is supported to use innovative approaches to reach audiences and have a general central budget for staffing and corporate projects. As digital transformation progresses across the organization, this will enable further integration of communications with customer service delivery.



Community building, accessibility and inclusion

By matter of course, the County's Communications team is consulted and relied on as a trusted advisor for issues management. They also inform strategic relationships.

Communications messaging is typically plain language, visuals are strong with some use of video (an area that could be enhanced). The organization is working toward developing its Equity, Diversity and Inclusion framework and policies. This is an important area for improvement to ensure there are sufficient structures and capacity to demonstrate a cross-organizational commitment to inclusivity.

Three key communications pillars emerged from the research findings that will inform next steps and future planning for Northumberland County's communications and community engagement.

These pillars build on the strong foundation already in place at the County, align with the Mission and Vision for our department, and represent the target outcomes of this Master Plan – what we will work to advance throughout the life of this plan.



Focus

- A deeper focus on communications across the organization, ensuring greater collaboration and understanding of everyone's role as an ambassador enhancing resident experience with the County
- Supporting the Communications team to achieve the highest professional standard and deliver value



Partner

- A greater emphasis on partnership building
- Inviting in, listening to and engaging more audiences in meaningful ways, including staff
- Involving more voices to share and strengthen County information and value



Innovate

- A flexible approach to adapt to changing needs and expectations
- Establishing new ways to communicate, engage and tell stories
- Leveraging new tools and approaches to increase reach and engagement
- Sharing authentic, human stories that resonate



Focus

Goal 1: Embed an organizational communications mindset

Trust in governments is declining. Polarization is increasing. Municipalities are struggling to authentically demonstrate their value and combat misinformation. Communications excellence is achieved through building trusting relationships, which cannot and does not fall to one team.

Communications excellence is achieved by the whole organization. All staff have a role as a communicator, whether they interact with other internal staff, with elected officials, stakeholders, partners, or members of the community. In every interaction, staff represent who the municipality is, what it stands for, and how it delivers value to those it serves, shaping an individual's experience with the County. Staff therefore play a key role in enhancing resident experience and building trust.

As such, the first goal in this Master Plan and under this pillar is to build a culture of ownership and responsibility for the success of Northumberland County's communications. For example, staff can proactively share information and updates with the Communications team, confirm facts, help broaden the reach of the County's messages through their networks, listen and report back with community input to inform approaches.

Embedding this mindset across the organization will go far in elevating resident experience with our organization, and our ability as a municipality to build greater trust with those we serve.

What this looks like...

- Teams across the organization understand their responsibilities related to communications and positive resident experience.
- Staff are clear about the expectations, standards and processes for inter-department and communications collaboration.
- The Communications team is visible and consistently engaged early in projects.

Goal 2: Build strategic communications capacity

The world of communications is changing, as are community expectations of local government. This means that municipal communications teams and approaches cannot remain static. They need the right people with varying skillsets, ready to adapt to changing landscapes.

In a time of growing misinformation, and a general feeling of information overload, municipalities also need the ability to communicate quickly and provide layers of information that are easy to digest and access for those who want more details.

Building off Goal 1, when organizations understand the value of communications, they ensure sufficient resources are in place. They are flexible to adopt new tools. They engage in partnerships that expand mutual reach and impact. They have the ability to effectively monitor and respond to emerging trends.

Northumberland, to date, has built a strong, strategic Communications team. Continued investment in communications, with a focus on building a multidisciplinary team, will further the team's ability to deliver strategic value.

What this looks like...

- The Communications team has sufficient resources to meet the entire organization's needs and are effectively set up to communicate quickly.
- The team has access to the necessary tools and technologies to support effective and efficient communications.
- Communications team members' skillsets continue to evolve as they have access to and pursue professional development.
- Communications competencies are increased across the organization, in all departments.
- The County has a mindset of continuous improvement. We review and evaluate our success, and adjust as needed based on our learning.

Goal 3: Align all communications to the County's strategic business purpose

The pace of change is getting faster. The daily delivery of municipal programs and services is demanding, broad in scope, and increasing in complexity. It is common to see communications efforts weighted heavily on meeting daily operational needs and messaging, and less on providing strategic value that advances organizational goals.

The County recently invested in completing its 2023-2027 Community Strategic Plan. The municipality sought a wide range of voices and heard from a variety of stakeholders who told the County what matters to them and where they want to see Northumberland focus in the coming years.

The Community Strategic Plan is a foundational document. It provides a framework for Council and staff to inform strategies, actions, resources, and decision making. It identifies a commitment to integrate leading-edge technologies over the coming years. And it positions communications and engagement as a core goal.

As this Master Plan is implemented, the Communications team and the organization will keep coming back to what the County has committed to the community with the goal to ensure that all communications efforts are focused on the highest priority actions and initiatives that move the County closer to achieving goals.

What this looks like...

- This Master Plan is reviewed and consistently aligned with other corporate plans and strategies.
- All communications efforts and achievements tie back to corporate objectives.
- The County invests in opportunities to better understand our audiences to ensure a research-based approach that informs customized, audience-centric communications.





Partner

Goal 4: Engage networks for shared insight

As our community evolves, it is crucial that our communication strategies adapt to reach and engage a diverse range of voices. It is common for municipalities to have a group of people who consistently engage with local government; we value such feedback and also recognize there are many others from whom we do not hear.

Building and maintaining community trust requires an approach that demonstrates genuine care for residents, excellence in service delivery, and a commitment to transparent communication. Our communications efforts must be inclusive, research-based, timely, and focused on achieving tangible results. By doing so, we aim to ensure everyone feels their input is valued and that they have an equal opportunity to participate.

Through this Master Plan, we commit to strengthening collaboration with existing networks of staff and partners while embracing new voices. We have plans to strengthen our strategic partnerships and our advocacy to address and advance community needs and interests.

Through the County's Community Strategic Plan and our communications, we will build on our capacity and ability to tell the County's story to all who have a stake in our success and for all whom we serve. We will look for opportunities to further demonstrate the County's vision to bring together people, partnerships, and possibilities for a strong and vibrant Northumberland.

What this looks like...

- The County expands the methods and opportunities it uses to seek input from the community.
- Staff have access to the information they need, when they need it. They feel valued and heard, and report an improvement in organizational listening and timely information sharing.
- Communications leads in each municipality come together to formalize a network for regular and purposeful collaboration. This network is a gateway to share best practices, local data, and lessons learned for continuous improvement of communications and community engagement, expanded audience reach, and enhanced resident experience with municipal government.
- The County actively cultivates trusted collaboration with Indigenous residents and neighbouring First Nations communities.
- The County proactively reaches out and demonstrates its commitment to partnership-building with equity-seeking groups to amplify its ability to communicate with a range of audiences and stakeholders.

Goal 5: Enhance community experience with the County

The community is an important partner with the municipality. As taxpayers and residents, community members are impacted everyday by local decisions. They do and should have a voice in local government decision making.

Many communities have become more vocal in demanding to have a stronger voice in local government decision making. They expect more opportunities to have a say, in ways that are easy for them to access and participate. This means that municipalities are expanding beyond traditional engagement tactics, such as in-person Public Information Centres, where they are seeing a decline in attendance, and are looking for new ways to engage and hear from the public.

In addition, as seen in the research with comparable municipalities and those who have leading communications teams, more and more towns, cities, regions and counties are recognizing the need to improve their efforts and resourcing related to community engagement. Some municipalities have hired dedicated community management specialists, or created public engagement teams. Some are investing and expanding staff training in this area, and creating corporate strategies.

Through the County's Community Strategic Plan, Northumberland recognizes the need to foster a community that is engaged in shaping municipal priorities, policies and programs.

What this looks like...

- The County publicly establishes and declares its commitment to meaningful community engagement.
- Community engagement standards, policies and processes are in place and understood across the organization.
- Staff leading community engagement initiatives have the competencies and capacity they need to lead them effectively.
- The County expands the methods and opportunities it uses to seek input from the community.
- County staff consistently close the loop with the community, sharing how input was used to influence a decision or direction.
- Communications is embedded as part of corporate-wide initiatives, such as customer service, Reconciliation with Indigenous communities, and Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility (IDEA) commitments.



Innovate

Goal 6: Broaden the reach and effectiveness of County communications

Reaching a broad range of audiences has become increasingly more difficult at a time when traditional media is in decline and there is great reliance on internet connectivity to access information and share input. Audiences are busy and inundated daily with information. Governments cannot rely on passive tools like websites to share information. Nor can they rely on traditional means of engagement to hear from as many people as possible. They need to find creative and innovative solutions to break through the noise.

The recent closing of Metroland print local newspapers has left a significant gap in the community's access to accurate information. The County continues to work with radio, broadcast, and online news outlets serving the community. We are also seeking new ways to be our own newsroom. We recognize we will need to be flexible and ready to experiment with new approaches so our community is aware of how their taxpayer dollars are being used and can play a role in informing our priorities and the decisions we make.

What this looks like...

- We actively and regularly seek out and learn from industry and sector leaders to improve our practices.
- We are flexible and adaptable to try new ways to reach and engage our audiences.
- We are audience-centric in our approach. We consistently evaluate our success, and adapt our efforts to align with how our audiences receive, interact with, and share municipal information.
- The Communications team plans for digital transformation, trying new tools and maximizing digital and data resources and practices to expand reach, build awareness, encourage participation, and promote inclusion.

Goal 7: Strengthen the story

As humans, we are drawn to stories. They connect and bring us together. They can build trust. Our staff and the community have told us they want to share and hear more of the positive local stories that make Northumberland County a great place to live, play, work and visit. They want to hear about the people that are making a difference, and we want to celebrate our staff, their accomplishments, and show the good work the County delivers every day.

At the same time, how stories are told has evolved. More channels are emerging, with social media continuing to be a powerful tool. It has demonstrated the power of visual and video storytelling. It has also shown the power of simple, easy-to-understand information – stories people are more likely to share with their friends.

What this looks like...

- The County focuses on sharing human, authentic stories that resonate and build trust.
- Our corporate website anchors our stories, connecting the County's vision with the community's voice, fostering awareness, understanding, transparency, and engagement.
- The Communications team focuses on visual and video storytelling when appropriate and leverages the strengths of each corporate channel to deliver content that is most relevant and useful to the audience.
- The County has a positive relationship with media, and partners with them to increase accurate and timely coverage on the stories that matter to residents.



2023-2027 Action Plan



Our Action Plan

The following Action Plan details how Northumberland County will achieve the goals set under each pillar in this Master Plan.

Prioritizing adaptability

As indicated earlier in this plan, the communications landscape continues to evolve. As such, so may these actions over time.

The County's Communications team will remain flexible and adaptable. We will regularly monitor and review progress, and adjust accordingly as part of annual business planning processes.





Focus

Goal 1: Embed an organizational communications mindset

Objective	Action	Partners	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
Articulate a Communications vision for the organization	Affirm the Communications vision, mission, and goals through County Council endorsement	Council		✓			
Raise awareness of the Communications Master Plan across every department	Organize a cross-department 'road show' presentation and distribute a resource booklet on communications practices, policies, and supports	All County Departments		✓	✓		
Improve cross-departmental information sharing	Establish cyclical CAO Town Halls for management, with resources for staff communications	Office of the CAO; All County Departments	✓				
Expand the use of data to drive more efficient and effective operations	Expand organization-wide tracking of key performance metrics and deliver public-facing dashboard	All County Departments		✓			
Strengthen onboarding processes to orient new County employees to corporate communications culture	Establish a process and materials, including brand and communications protocols and baseline training	Corporate Services			✓		
Enhance consistency and professionalism of written content and promote inclusive writing practices across the organization	Develop a County Writing Style Guide to help staff maintain a consistent style, voice, and tone across written communications, web content and documentation	N/A		✓			

Objective	Action	Partners	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
Update the communications policy framework	Develop and implement an updated Communications Policy Framework addressing areas such as advertising, media relations, issues management, social media, and content accessibility	N/A		✓	✓		
Improve the organization's ability to anticipate and respond to issues, reducing the likelihood of escalation	Update the County's Issues Management Policy and framework, and improve employees' understanding of their role in the process through roll-out of tools and training	All County Departments			✓		
Strengthen emergency preparedness	Lead cross-departmental review and update of crisis communications plans to ensure alignment with the County's Hazard Identification & Risk Analysis	N/A			✓		



Goal 2: Build strategic communications capacity

Objective	Action	Partners	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
Assess Communications team composition and resources to ensure responsive and agile structure and capacity to meet organizational demand	Align proposals for changes to team structure with the organization's multi-year budget cycle	N/A	✓				✓
Invest in specialized skill development to ensure the Communications team remains well positioned to employ increasingly sophisticated tools and tactics	Establish and maintain a professional development program for the Communications Department aligned with IABC's Global Standard for the Communications Profession and integrating best practices for municipal communications leadership.	Corporate Services			✓		

Objective	Action	Partners	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
Improve communications capacity across departments, equipping staff to leverage best practices and tools	Formalize a competency training program for staff (e.g., outcomes-focused program development, media relations, issues management, content accessibility, social media)	Corporate Services; All County Departments				✓	
Regularly assess the state of local municipal communications based on benchmarks	Partner with member municipalities to design and deliver annual community communications survey and assess results for trends and opportunities to enhance practices	Member municipalities	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓



Goal 3: Align all communications to the County's strategic business purpose

Objective	Action	Partners	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
Deliver regular reporting to County Council on the effectiveness of corporate communications activities	Implement quarterly and annual reporting on communications-related business outcomes based on industry-leading UK Government Communication Service Evaluation Framework	N/A	✓				
Leverage outcomes-focused project models to maximize success in securing grant funding from other levels of government/external sources	Monitor for and identify grant opportunities, and coordinate interdepartmental collaboration on applications, to secure investment in County programs and services	All County Departments	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Establish process to identify annual communications priorities for each business unit	Create an annual corporate communications project calendar	All County Departments		✓	✓	✓	✓
Promote a single tone of voice for County-wide marketing and promotions	Launch an internal County Marketing Working Group to align and leverage marketing strategies and opportunities	Waste, Economic Development, Tourism Departments			✓		

Objective	Action	Partners	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
Increase use of audience research and analytics to better understand current community priorities	Coordinate a County-wide market research program for enhanced municipal decision-making (e.g., satisfaction surveys, pulse checks)	County Senior Leadership Team					✓
Annually review the status of the Communications Master Plan	Fulfill the Plan's recommendations, incorporating into the County's budget and business planning processes	N/A		✓	✓	✓	✓
Reaffirm and renew the Communications Master Plan in alignment with the strategic direction of the organization	Develop a new five-year action plan for the next phase of County communications	N/A					✓



Partner

Goal 4: Engage networks for shared insight

Objective	Action	Partners	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
Strengthen the County's employee culture through a more effective employee communications program	Create an Internal Communications Strategy, including undertaking an employee communications audit to assess and recommend new approaches for consistently seeking feedback, sharing information, and demonstrating how feedback is used	All County Departments				✓	
Strengthen collaboration with member municipalities	Formalize an Inter-Municipal Communications network and establish protocols for sharing lessons learned, local data, and joint project planning	Member municipalities	✓	✓			
Support the County's meaningful engagement, cultural learning and understanding, and respectful action towards reconciliation with Indigenous communities	Develop an Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation Action Plan in consultation with Indigenous communities	Office of the CAO		✓	✓		

Objective	Action	Partners	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
Ensure the County remains responsive and inclusive in addressing the needs of increasingly diverse community members, stakeholders, and staff as the community grows and changes	Establish an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion framework in consultation with equity-deserving groups and the broader community.	All County Departments		✓	✓	✓	
Promote a welcoming and inclusive community by raising awareness of cultural, societal, historic and religious dates of significance	Establish a Commemorative Dates Policy and annual calendar	N/A		✓			
Explore opportunities to enhance dialogue between residents and the County, ensuring community concerns are heard, addressed, and integrated into local government decisions	Consider creating round table community groups in each municipality to engage periodically, sharing their insights with the County and communicating municipal updates and consultation opportunities back with their networks	N/A				✓	



Goal 5: Enhance community experience with the County

Objective	Action	Partners	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
Amplify the County's messaging with a range of audiences and stakeholders	Build stronger and more robust relationships with key influencers, stakeholders, and community partners to expand opportunities to engage with community members and share information	External Partners	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Create consistent community engagement practices across the organization	Formalize a community engagement framework based on the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum and best practices, and roll out training and toolkits to staff	All County Departments			✓		
Increase public participation in shaping municipal priorities, policies, and programs	Improve coordination of consultation efforts across County business units to make it easier and more efficient for residents to engage on multiple topics of interest, and balance the use of traditional consultation methods (e.g. public meetings, surveys) with more collaborative methods (online forums, committees) to best suit the situation	N/A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Objective	Action	Partners	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
Build specific strategic actions to evaluate, address and improve resident experience with County programs and services	Create a Client Experience Strategy for the County, leveraging leading experience frameworks from other industries such as The Beryl Institute's Experience Framework for healthcare	All County Departments					✓
Create protocols for two-way lines of communication between Communications and the County's Customer Care Representatives	Formalize process for providing Customer Care Representatives with notices and key messaging to support response to public inquiries, and for Customer Care Representatives to share insights with Communications based on public interactions	Corporate Services		✓			



Goal 6: Broaden effectiveness and reach of County communications

Objective	Action	Partners	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
Ensure a coordinated approach to continuous and effective communication with key audiences	Implement a County-wide content schedule and annually develop core County campaigns	All County Departments			✓		
Ensure content is created and distributed in a data-driven, coordinated, and customer-centric manner, maintaining consistency, accuracy, and quality across all departments	Develop a content governance model for County communications	All County Departments				✓	
Enhance the impact and strategic effectiveness of the County's use of social media	Redevelop the County's social media strategy, including implementing recommendations from 2024 channel audit	N/A			✓		
Increase reach and awareness of County communications via social media	Enhance marketing of current social media channels, and evaluate and expand social media channels to reach target audiences (prioritizing LinkedIn and Instagram)	N/A	✓	✓	✓		
Enhance and strengthen the County's digital marketing practices	Adopt new techniques and solutions in areas such as enhanced data-driven marketing, social media marketing optimization, email marketing, and digital publications	N/A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Objective	Action	Partners	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
Strengthen standards for/management of the County brand	Implement a Brand Standards Guide, Logo Use Policy and a Digital Asset Management solution to improve consistent use of approved County logos, brand elements and imagery	N/A		✓			
Explore new mediums for sharing engaging content with audiences	Consider a municipal magazine to fill declining print media gap; a 'Municipal Minute' video podcast; and expanded use of roadside signage	Member Municipalities		✓	✓	✓	
Increase the use and effectiveness of targeted content	Develop marketing content based on audience personas to help deliver content that will be most relevant and useful to target audiences	N/A		✓			



Goal 7: Strengthen the story

Objective	Action	Partners	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
Revamp Northumberland.ca	Oversee a website redesign project to modernize the corporate site, emphasizing community story-telling, ensuring straightforward language and simple navigation, and focusing on mobile-first based on trends in community access.	N/A		✓	✓		
Leverage the reach and power of video to reinforce messaging and boost engagement	Create a 'Video' strategy, identifying community and organizational story ideas/priorities and budget	N/A				✓	
Surface and promote good news stories and the staff behind these stories	Establish simple processes for staff to share department accomplishments and good news stories, and feature these on corporate channels to demonstrate County staff care and expertise, as well as taxpayer value	All County Departments			✓		

Objective	Action	Partners	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
Showcase the County's workplace culture, values, and success stories to attract and retain top talent	Enhance the County's brand visibility and reputation with prospective employees through a renewed Recruitment Marketing Strategy	All County Departments	✓	✓			
Enhance the County's media relations strategy	Implement cyclical and ad-hoc media briefings to ensure local reporters have access to the information they need for accurate and timely coverage of County services and initiatives	Local Media		✓	✓		

Measuring our success

The County's progress in achieving the goals identified in this Master Plan will be monitored, measured and evaluated along the way. The Communications team will report back to Council and the community on a regular basis through quarterly and annual reporting, and we will make adjustments as needed based on lessons learned, outcomes achieved, and other influencing factors over time.

Several tactics will be used to evaluate success. These will include, but are not limited to:

- Completion of activities identified in the Action Plan
- Feedback from internal staff and Council
- Feedback from the community, partners & key stakeholders, including member municipalities
- Website and social media growth and analytics
- Media coverage: quantity, tone and alignment with County key messages
- Public engagement participation and feedback from participants

Through an annual Municipal Communications Survey, we will also track three performance indicators, the results of which will be made available via the County's Corporate Performance Dashboard:

- Per cent of residents who say the County has communicated well about its services, programs, policies, and plans
- Per cent of residents who say that information provided by the County is clear and easy to understand
- Per cent of positive and neutral media coverage

Additional metrics will be monitored as plans unfold.

Looking ahead

Northumberland County's Communications team is committed to delivering high-quality, strategic and innovative content. Over the past 10 years, we have built a solid foundation based on trust across all departments. Internal partners engage the Communications team for advice and counsel and to produce collateral that is engaging and focused on achieving business goals. County leadership recognizes the importance of effective communications, and have made it a priority for the organization.

At a time when the communications landscape is changing rapidly, community expectations are increasing and trust in government bodies is waning, it is challenging for any municipal team to keep up. The goals of this 10-year Master Plan – a first of its kind for the County – are to foster a more informed and engaged community, and to elevate the County's communications efforts, its ability to deliver greater value, and to tell a stronger, positive municipal story.

The Plan sets a clear vision and mission that will root the municipality over time. The guiding principles will steer the work of the team and ensure all communications from the County meet the highest standards of quality and ethics. The three pillars and their corresponding goals establish an efficient structure that reflects what we learned from the research.

Developing this Master Plan achieves one of the actions identified in the County's Strategic Plan, and it will go a long way to strengthening communications and engagement from the County with its community for years to come.

Below are the many secondary sources reviewed during the research phase for the development of this Master Plan:

- The Beryl Institute. [The Beryl Institute Experience Framework](#). August 22, 2018. Accessed April 11, 2024.
- Canadian Public Relations Society. [Code of Professional Standards](#). Accessed October 6, 2023.
- City of Dryden, Ontario. [City of Dryden Communications Plan 2023-2025](#). February 2, 2023. Accessed March 5, 2024.
- City of Greater Sudbury, Ontario. [Connecting You, Connecting Us: Communications Strategic Plan 2018-2020](#). Accessed March 5, 2024.
- City of Guelph, Ontario. [One City. One Voice. Shared Purpose: Strategic communications and community engagement plan \(2022-2026\)](#). Accessed September 25, 2023.
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