

Communications strategy 2026 – 2031: summary



Context

The world around us is changing, including the way people get, consume and interact with information, this means that we need to consider how our communications function reflects the changing landscape around us. Against this backdrop, effective responsive and agile communication is the lifeblood of any thriving organisation. We believe that clear, inclusive, and proactive communication can enhance our efforts to raise the profile of the Trust, promote success stories, and contribute to the overall well-being of our colleagues and patients. It should help us build a narrative about our Trust that is supported by our advocates and ambassadors, our new vision should build in the need for user-generated content as well as more traditional corporate communications and stakeholder engagement.

By integrating internal and external stakeholders, this strategy is designed to ensure that every voice is heard and that our communication practices support the Trust's vision to be an outstanding provider of healthcare, research and education, and a great place to work.

Our strategy revolves around three key pillars: organisation awareness, internal communications with a focus on our people and patients, and community (and broader stakeholder) engagement. These pillars are essential to ensuring our Trust is responsive, innovative, and trusted.

We recognise that the move towards new ways of working will not happen overnight. We need to consider our current capacity, capability and available resource to deliver on our outcome-focused ambitions. This strategy will be regularly reviewed and fine-tuned based on insights from audits and evaluations to ensure it remains effective and relevant. This is a five year strategy, with a mid-point review date expected to be April 2028.

Aims and objectives

- **Organisation awareness:** Build and maintain trust among our audiences by focusing on proactive communications and promoting success stories. This includes effective stakeholder engagement and a greater focus on proactively working with key local influencers and communities
- **Internal communication alignment:** Strengthen internal communication efforts to align with the Trust's own mission and priorities, improving staff engagement and clarity. This includes making greater use of our colleagues as our ambassadors, looking for opportunities for them to be our storytellers and brand ambassadors – internally and externally
- **Operational efficiency:** Deliver a communication model that strikes a balance between proactive and reactive approaches, reinforcing a multi-channel framework. This means taking time to audit and reflect on the effectiveness of our current communications channels
- **Collaborative working:** Foster collaboration with place-based and regional communications teams to reduce duplication and maximise resources. To contribute to or lead place-based communications projects and initiatives
- **Staff engagement:** Work closely with HR and OD teams to support the People Plan, improve staff engagement, and highlight why the Trust is a great place to work
- **Reporting and metrics:** Develop an effective reporting mechanism, including a performance dashboard with industry-standard metrics
- **Accessibility:** Maintain a focus on accessible communications, ensuring the needs of all stakeholders are met

Outcomes and high-level deliverables

Outcomes:

- A demonstrably proactive approach to communications with a focus on prioritisation and core business
- Improved organisational awareness across key stakeholders and partners (baseline to be established)
- Improved colleague involvement and experience, with increased frequency of user-generated content and resources
- Closer links with the HR and OD teams to support the People Plan, embed Thrive, improve staff engagement and highlight how the trust is a great place to work
- Improved internal communication channels with clear lines of cascade
- Increased and improved engagement with place-based communications and involvement projects
- An evidence and evaluation-led function that demonstrates return on investment

High-level deliverables:

- A review and audit of existing communication channels and an analysis of new opportunities
- A reporting dashboard that demonstrates effectiveness of function
- Continued professional development of team with the aim of achieving the PRCA Communications Management Standard accreditation

Pillar one

Organisational awareness and brand positioning

To develop an effective organisational awareness approach that underpins our brand proposition, there are a number of deliverables under this pillar that we would look to focus our resource on:

- **Strategic communications** - having a communications strategy, with agreed communications plans for key activities so that we can balance proactive and reactive communications opportunities and challenges, supported by an effective forward plan
- **Stakeholder database and management** - develop an effective stakeholder database that can support proactive and reactive activities; conduct stakeholder mapping to understand our stakeholders' interests and needs, taking into consideration their varying degrees of interest and influence when communication channels are being set up
- **Media** - Continue to foster clear, consistent, and proactive media engagement on both local and national levels
- **Communications audit** - assess the effectiveness of current communication channels and resources, to develop and refresh our approach supported by ongoing evaluation and monitoring through a reporting dashboard
- **Digital and social media** - grow the Trust's social media audience, represent the Trust as a modern and digitally engaged organisation, use digital channels to provide staff, patients and other audiences with clear information which is convenient and easy to access
- **Brand centre** - we will develop an online brand centre to ensure we consistently apply our brand across all our communication channels

Pillar two

Our people and our patients

We will focus our colleague communications around the four key areas of the NHS People Plan – looking after our people, belonging in the NHS, growing for the future and new ways of working and delivering care. In doing so we will highlight how our Trust is a great place to work and showcase how our service is continually improving. External communications will promote success stories and illustrate outstanding patient care and support.

- Use insight from our colleagues to understand what matters to them and communicate this in a way that is most effective for them
- Get the basics right - review the availability of basic information such as up-to-date contact lists and organisation structure charts
- Review our internal channels and resurrect a regular factual business briefing (eg: "Team Brief") with clear lines of cascade
- Develop a range of storytellers and ambassadors that become the faces of our Trust and our connection to internal and external stakeholders
- Establish an editorial group of colleagues to help forward plan Let's Talk with a mix of human interest stories, lifestyle pages and corporate news
- Promote training, career development opportunities and success stories to foster a culture of continuous learning and growth
- Share patient success stories and testimonials: highlight patient experiences, successful outcomes, and compassionate care to demonstrate our commitment to patients
- Provide clear patient information which is accessible, easy to find and considers the needs of all our communities

Pillar three

Community engagement and relations

Our organisational awareness and brand positioning needs to be complemented by an effective community engagement and community relations programme which will support other key areas, such as the work of our charity and research teams. Our community engagement and community relations programme will include the below.

- **Community insights:** Work with our place partners - including the VCSE, local authority and university - to use existing and new opportunities to better understand our communities
- **Patient experience groups:** Work closely with patient experience groups to demonstrate how community feedback shapes our services. It is important that we recognise and reflect any poor experiences of care and adopt a trauma-informed approach when communicating with any people or their families who have experienced any form of harm or trauma
- **Outreach:** Rebuild connections and strengthen outreach efforts by connecting Trust colleagues with community members, promoting stories that highlight the positive impact of our services. This includes working closely with VCSE partners to build connections with local community groups such as through the Reach In, Reach Out initiative
- **Educational partnerships:** Establish closer links with local education providers, creating internship opportunities to engage the next generation of healthcare professionals and benefit from fresh perspectives that can help shape our communications approaches, channels and messages

One team approach: Trust and place-based teams (eg providers, local authority)

To reduce duplication and maximise resource our strategy will contribute to place ambitions as below:

- Developing an effective approach to shared campaigns
- Setting up a shared forward plan
- Responding to public health emergencies
- Creating a space for personal and professional development
- Skills sharing across teams

Evaluation and monitoring

Our strategy will be outcome-focused using industry standard metrics to demonstrate effectiveness of delivery and opportunities for change, at a minimum we will:

- Produce a quarterly dashboard on performance and achievements
- Carry out an audit of communications channels, assess their effectiveness and analyse new opportunities
- Carry out surveys, focus groups and pulse checks
- Benchmark our performance against similar sized trusts, looking for opportunities to participate in peer review

Factors that could impact on delivery

- Change of public policies or legal guidance
- Change in government and future direction of travel
- Wider issues affecting health and care eg: satisfaction with the NHS/care services
- Public health emergencies or crisis as evidenced during Covid resulting in reallocation of resources
- Availability of Trust and place-based communications resource (people and budget)