

## **Appendix 17. East Sussex Environment Strategy – communication and engagement**

Everyone ‘owns’ the county’s environment and we should position the environment strategy as public property, not something which belongs to any one organisation or group. This will recognise the passion and effort that many citizens already bring to environmental improvement, but also welcome involvement from newcomers with a range of different motivations.

This approach also recognises the lack of trust that many people place in official bodies: government is not best-placed to visibly inspire public action and there is often public scepticism about the commitment or methods of large organisations in this sphere.

A more productive approach for large organisations is an enabling one: offering tools, prompts, information, introductions and resources to help people take positive action together on the environment. This approach would also involve creating a collaborative process for establishing the precise goals against which the people of East Sussex can measure our collective progress on the environment.

The East Sussex environment strategy is well-configured for this approach. The five pillars of activity frame the issues clearly and the focus on practical improvement will help define some of the pragmatic actions which individuals and businesses could take and which would support the strategy’s aims.

We know our audiences will be very diverse. There are many citizens committed to environmental action and their passion and energy are essential assets: however, we must also be sure to involve people who are uncommitted or even initially hostile as ultimate success depends on everyone taking action, even if they have different motivations.

We also recognise that partners will have their own strategies and approaches for environmental success which they will continue to pursue. A collective approach need not be a monolithic approach.

Four main components are recommended for our communications and engagement strategy:

### **1. Agree an approach to branding**

This is a cause with multiple owners and requires an identity that can work for the entire population and not any one group or interest. It is important to position the issue as flexibly as possible, therefore using a brand (or brands) which is local, recognisable and simple and which local partners can draw on when they want to.

There are two possible approaches: using existing brands or creating a new ‘umbrella’ brand.

#### ***(a) Use existing brands***

*This approach would recognise the many streams of environmental work already under way and position the activity from the environment strategy within them. Each partner organisation has its own branding and, in some cases such as water companies, these are consumer-focused. In addition, there already exists collective organisation/branding around particular areas of environmental activity: Sussex Air for air quality; Sussex Local Nature Partnership for natural capital; Your Energy Sussex which relates to climate change.*

*Using these existing brands would be simple and low-cost. Potential disadvantages could be that they feel too 'official' for citizen activism and are on a Sussex-wide, rather than East Sussex, footprint.*

***(b) Develop a new 'umbrella' brand***

*A fresh and effective brand could help bring impetus and recognition to the new order of environmental work being undertaken across East Sussex. This common brand would aim to reflect the strategy's themes of 'pace and scale' and the fact that both individuals and organisations have a role in environmental action. It would express a common and non-technical language in which to talk about the issues and find a simple common logo and strapline as badges for the brand. It could provide the environment board with an identity for broad public engagement and communication.*

*Each partner organisation could then position its own activities beneath this 'umbrella' brand. As examples, a local authority could position its drive towards carbon zero as an action which supports the East Sussex strategy: a water company could do the same with a local initiative to reduce water consumption, a wildlife group could frame its annual volunteer month as part of the county-wide effort. In every case, each partner could continue to use its existing brand, but could put the stamp of the umbrella brand on relevant projects or activity.*

*Potential disadvantages of this approach might be that greater resources would be needed and that it may be hard to reach collective agreement on a fresh brand.*

Deciding which of these two approaches is preferred may depend on the ultimate vision behind the environment strategy: Is the primary intention to manage and interlock the environmental work different public bodies are doing to better support behaviour change or is it to visibly motivate that behaviour change and bring people together in East Sussex?

If resources allow, it may be useful to commission advice from a branding consultant.

## **2. Devise a programme of public engagement**

There is no transformation without public support. A public conversation about the environmental imperatives for East Sussex would help understand residents' feelings and priorities about their environment and inform some of the actions and activities to come. It would also gauge the types of personal commitment they see themselves ready to make and discover what practical tools or information they would find most useful. It could start to help build networks among people who would like to do more.

One way of conducting this engagement would be with structured, automated conversations on social media. This uses software which invites people to respond to a few questions on their preferred platform (such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) in an exchange which feels more like a conversation than conducting a survey and which removes the need to go to a dedicated consultation website. Other local authorities have begun successfully trialling this method and it would suit a lighter-touch and less institutional approach. These conversations yield information about how engaged residents feel with these issues and what they see as priorities. Residents are

also asked if they would like to get more involved and if they do they can be re-contacted with specific invitations and introductions to groups, so helping to expand networks of environmental action.

Another engagement method is citizen assemblies which are increasingly being used on climate change to understand the range of people's views and to build consensus on possible action. (For example, Camden conducted an assembly with a cross-section of 50 residents which recommended 19 actions the council has now adopted. A national citizens' assembly is also being convened on climate change).

Both these methods demand resources, but may widen the conversation to people not closely engaged in environmental issues.

Engagement would also make use of the established customer networks that partners already have in East Sussex (for example, through water supply or refuse collection).

Engagement would be a continuous process that runs through specific projects as well as through the environment strategy as a whole.

### **3. Build communications around a series of milestones**

Narrative about environmental risk inevitably tends to deal with medium and longer-term horizons – to 2030, 2040 and 2050. These target dates are a source of disagreement in themselves and they may also seem hopelessly distant to an individual actor who wants to have an effect now.

The environment strategy has the clear ambition of setting local environmental targets which can be measured each year and it will also develop immediate actions for the next two years.

All communications activity should be pinned to these short-term goals so that people will be motivated to act and can quickly see the results of their efforts.

This would allow a series of timed projects or campaigns under the five different strands of the strategy, or even an annual theme which rotates between them. A year of action, or regular sprints to a specific goal, are more likely to be compelling than a vaguer pledge to long-term action. They will however also supply a series of milestones along the way to the strategy's long-term aims.

### **4. Always be local not global**

Environmental challenges are both global and local, but there is already a profusion of international advocacy and action which attracts the already-motivated.

Our communication should always focus on local action and not simply re-broadcast national or international messages. We should focus on events and programmes in the county, whether it is local beach clean-ups, car-free days, action meetings, local business and professional networks. In some cases this will help concentrate energies and resources at local level, but it could also be a way to reach people who have not yet been motivated to act or who are not sure how to.

Local offers and advice on how to save money always have a chance of resonating with people, no matter their stance on environmental issues. Some people may change their behaviour through conviction and persuasion. Others may respond better to incentives, or tips for embedding a habit in

their daily routine or through the pressure of visible social norms. Behavioural insight suggests people are more likely to change their actions as a result of being shown how many of their peers or neighbours have already done so, than they are by official calls to action, which may cause resentment or simply be ignored.

And environmental improvement means not just greater global sustainability, but also an improved quality of life which is experienced locally and can be celebrated locally.

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### **Next steps and action plan**

We should not hard-launch public communication at this stage. First we need to settle on the branding approach for this initiative, await fuller details of the priority actions for the next two years which the environment board and its partners are identifying, and scope our ambitions for public engagement.

This suggests the launch of an East Sussex environment initiative in late 2020 or early 2021. It is the start of citizen involvement, rather than completion of the strategy, which should trigger public communication and engagement.

Until then, it would be more productive to focus on communication among partners so a plan for public communication and engagement (and how to resource it: the work is considerable) is agreed.

#### *An outline timetable for communications and engagement work*

April-May	Agree how communications work will be divided and resourced
April-June	Agree an East Sussex environmental brand ( <i>commissioning consultant advice if possible</i> )
April-August	Scope and develop public engagement programme
May onward	Programme of partner communication to mark adoption of strategy and share next steps.
Late 2020	Public launch of East Sussex environmental initiative
2020/2021	Campaigning and reporting initial success of the strategy's individual projects