East Sussex
County Council

Communications and Engagement Plan

East Sussex Outbreak Control – COVID-19

March 2021 (version 4)

Communications and engagement plan

This communications plan supports the Outbreak Control Plan for East Sussex and sits within the governance framework identified.

Communications will be co-ordinated with national government, Public Health England and East Sussex partner organisations, including regional NHS and district and borough councils. Through the Sussex Resilience Forum, we'll align communications planning with neighbouring authorities and prepare to act jointly in the event of 'cross-border' outbreaks.

The communications approach for East Sussex includes both digital and non-digital engagement tactics to ensure messaging can be targeted at residents and businesses within hours of a notification of a local outbreak. It will draw on existing communication networks (including among schools, care homes, GPs and other community services) to help achieve this.

Close attention must be paid to how specific groups will be reached using online and offline channels, including how residents can be targeted by their locality (home or work) and/or their profession. Our planning includes specific consideration of how to reach at-risk or potentially marginalised groups, including the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) community, shielded groups, the homeless, digitally excluded, people with learning disabilities, people with impaired vision or hearing and gypsy/Roma/traveller communities.

To deliver messaging effectively, the communications team will work not only with the Operational Cell but also monitor Government advice to provide real-time updates on the test and trace service and signpost people to the correct Government sources to gain information.

This plan will be updated as required.

Priorities for communications and engagement

- Secure public trust in outbreak planning and response
- Ensure communication networks and systems are in place to rapidly warn and inform all residents of necessary restrictions in the event of any local outbreaks.
- Increase public understanding of evolving national and local guidance on health protection, testing and tracing. Emphasise our collective responsibility for restricting the virus.
- Ensure all partners in East Sussex (and more widely when relevant) are kept informed of, and involved in, developments in engagement and communication. Work effectively with partners across Sussex while recognising different parts of the county will at times have differing approaches.

Secure public trust in outbreak planning and response

Align local communication with national strategies, messaging, branding and scientific advice, especially the test and trace programme.

Transparency. We will publish the outbreak plan and its summary, make it easy to find and keep it updated as it evolves. We will publicise weekly surveillance reports and other publicly available reports. Meetings of the Health and Well-Being Board will be broadcast live and publicised. We will publish a single point of contact for queries. In the event of an outbreak, we will share data and analysis as widely as reasonably possible (personal data will remain confidential).

Early contact with all relevant partners and stakeholders to share the initial outbreak plan and details of operational arrangements.

General public messaging at this stage should continue to focus on national health and prevention advice and on raising awareness of the test and trace programme. This is more important than public familiarity with the outbreak plan and its processes. We'll mention the plan to help reassure residents about the public health measures in place, but it will not be our top line.

Ensure expert leaders (including Director of Public Health) are visible and lead public communication.

Messaging will be short, plain, non-technical and align with government guidance. It will stress the collective responsibility for managing Covid-19 and the role all of us can play. It will emphasise the relatively low infection rates in East Sussex but recognise the risk of localised outbreak.

In the event of an outbreak, involve local members (county, district and borough, town and parish) in amplifying and sharing public messaging among their communities.

In the event of an outbreak, cascade latest messaging and offer communications support to local influencers/community leaders.

Ensure communication networks and systems are in place to rapidly warn and inform all residents and businesses

Identify mechanisms for rapid, mass communication with general audiences, including resident email, social media and broadcast media). Make use of existing communication networks, including distribution via schools, GPs, care providers and community groups. Prepare print and distribution capacity for potential rapid deployment of non-digital channels, including posters, leaflet delivery and outdoor ads.

Identify additional mechanisms for communication with potentially disadvantaged and/or harder-to-reach parts of the community (cross-checking with high-risk locations and communities identified in the outbreak plan). Build and maintain contacts register. Prepare for flexible targeted communication including digital advertising, direct mail and door drops in the event of localised outbreaks.

Ensure operational cell has permanent communications representation and 24-hour on-call capability. Communications team will prepare for an immediate 'stand-up' if an outbreak is notified.

Be ready for flexible response from 'county-wide' to level of premises, street or town. Prepare communications templates accordingly.

Increase public understanding of evolving national and local guidance on health protection

Use existing channels now to increase promotion of national guidance on health protection (including vaccination), testing and test and trace procedures.

Increase frequency of regular communications (e.g. residents' newsletter) in the event of a local outbreak or new national restrictions.

Field trusted spokespeople on broadcast media during outbreaks to reassure and share public advice

Work effectively with partners across Sussex while recognising we may have differing approaches

Share planning and maintain regular contacts with partners and neighbours through East Sussex conference calls, the SRF, other joint forums and one-to-one contact.

Use partner/member newsletter to give regular updates on developing outbreak situations to wide group of partners/stakeholders. Encourage sign-up to relevant public and partner newsletters now.

Identify communications monitoring capacity (e.g. close media and social media monitoring) to help understand and respond to public response during an outbreak

Co-operate closely on cross-border outbreaks should they occur.

Communications protocol

The communications team at East Sussex County Council provides communications support to the Operational Cell for East Sussex and joins it as required. Contact with communications teams of partner organisations is maintained through several means, including the Sussex Resilience Forum, East Sussex Care and Health Communications Group. This communications plan and its annexes has been shared with all partner organisations and will be re-circulated when each new version is published. It will also be available on Resilience Direct.

The introduction of national tiers (Medium, High and Very High alert levels) replaced the existing local escalation framework and means that movement of East Sussex between tiers will be a decision taken in consultation with national government and public health. National lockdown restrictions currently apply.

If particular local precautions or restrictions are being considered by DPH and national government, the ESCC communications service will stand up a dedicated outbreak team from its staff to alert all residents and businesses and to keep them updated on the situation and the actions they should follow. This will also involve setting up regular meetings with partners' communications teams to ensure joint planning, sharing of appropriate data, messaging, communications products and updates. We will also work with communications teams at national government from the point that a move to a higher tier is suggested.

If an outbreak is cross-border, either within different parts of Sussex or with other neighbouring counties, the communications cell should be established and chaired by the local authority where the outbreak is most intense but will include all relevant partners.

Communications contacts at East Sussex County Council

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Communications and engagement action plan

Immediate

- Publish outbreak plan and keep it publicly updated.
- Alert partner organisations and stakeholders to the outbreak plan and how it will be implemented.
- Arrange appropriate communication slots (including media interviews and online messaging) for Director of Public Health and other relevant leaders.
- Increase sharing of government public safety guidance on Covid-19, especially explanation of the test and trace model
- Check and collate existing ESCC distribution networks (such as to schools and care providers) identifying owners and distribution methods.
- Assess specific communications needs of at-risk, disadvantaged or 'hard-to-reach' groups. Identify appropriate tactical responses for each case and collate effective networks/contacts.
- Pre-design templates for digital and print communication products. Pre-design template messaging.
- Identify most rapid options for print and distribution of hard copy communications such as postcards, leaflets and posters and agree plan with printers and distributors for urgent projects

In an outbreak

- Stand up the outbreak team within communications
- Alert partners
- Use broadcast media, social media (paid and organic), email networks, telephone contacts, website alerts and content for immediate public information. Additionally, use text alerts and intranet/yammer updates for ESCC members and staff.
- Institute daily update email briefings and data displays.
- Institute daily media briefing
- Institute dedicated social media monitoring
- Establish conference call with communications partners (as required)

Post outbreak

- Share/broadcast end of outbreak (when confirmed) via all channels
- Issue public thanks for management of the outbreak. Emphasise possibility of further outbreaks and need for public vigilance
- Emphasise possibility of further outbreaks and need for public vigilance
- Continue to share and publish data and analysis from the outbreak.
- Conduct evaluation of communications effort and refine approach for the future