



Communications Strategy

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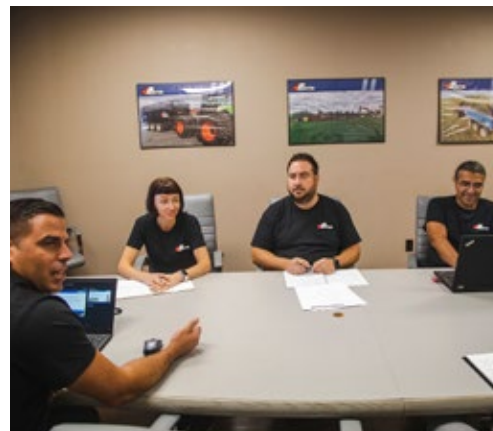
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1. Introduction

Middlesex County is a growing upper-tier municipality in Southwest Ontario with leaders who are proud of the organization's commitment to service, innovation, trust, fiscal responsibility, and the value that the organization offers its community.

In a rapidly evolving communications environment, communicating this value to residents, businesses and other key audiences has become challenging.

The decline of local media outlets has meant less dedicated coverage for County issues. In a complex public service delivery environment, there is confusion over “who does what” and the services provided by the County. There is a growing trend toward digital communications while traditional or print communications remains strategically important when reaching out to audiences in a rural context. Meanwhile, resident demands for responsive, real-time information continue to escalate.

An additional challenge is that Middlesex County is an upper-tier municipality, with programs, services, and facilities that may not be as familiar or immediate as those offered at the local level.

Middlesex County began its Communications Strategy in late 2021 to adapt to the changing municipal landscape, build a shared corporate vision, improve responsiveness, and prioritize activities and investments over a multi-year time-frame.

Phase 1 of the project identified research findings, including: an inventory of communications-related policies, procedures, and resources; communications channels currently in use; stakeholder consultations; and identification of the County's communications goals. Full results are available in Middlesex County Communications Strategy Project – Phase 1 Report.

The delivery of this Report marks the end of Phase 2 of the project, which is the Communications Strategy and associated work plans and resourcing recommendations.

The first few sections of this Report provide an overall shared vision and framework for Middlesex County communications by responding to the following questions:

- **Section 2.0 Communications Strategy Goals:** Why is Middlesex County developing a Communications Strategy?
- **Section 3.0 Target Audiences:** Who does Middlesex County need to communicate with to advance its goals?
- **Section 4.0 Message Framework:** What does Middlesex County need to communicate?

The balance of the Report provides proposed work plans for how Middlesex County should move forward. These work plans are developed based on the following categories:

- **Section 5.0 Advancing County Communications Goals:** Including building a foundation for corporate communications and strengthening coordination and continuous improvement with departmental communications.
- **Section 6.0 Enhancing Communications Channels:** Including websites, social media accounts, print products, e-newsletters, media relations, advertising and more.
- **Section 7.0 Supporting County Council:** Recognizing that elected officials are key partners in communicating the news, information, and achievements of Middlesex County.
- **Section 8.0 Resourcing County Communications:** Including recommendations regarding positions and non-salary financial allocations to enable the work described in this Report. These recommendations are intended for consideration during annual budget processes.

2. Communications Strategy Goals

why is Middlesex County creating a communications strategy?

The following 10 goals have been established as the basis for this Communications Strategy.

These goals are based on input and guidance from stakeholder groups, and were approved by the Senior Management Team in February 2022:

1. **Responsive communications:** Middlesex County issues timely, accurate, reliable, and relevant information on issues affecting the community such as Council decisions, program updates and service disruptions.
2. **County as the credible voice:** Middlesex County is the official voice for its operations, and the primary source of information that residents turn to for reliable, credible information on County activities and decisions.
3. **Proactive, integrated good news stories:** Middlesex County proactively tells compelling, integrated stories that build a positive reputation and brand for the organization.
4. **Trust and confidence in the County:** Middlesex County intentionally demonstrates high value for tax dollars and instills trust and confidence in its programs, services, and financial management practices.
5. **Two-way communications:** Middlesex County encourages two-way communications and engagement with agencies, partners, community groups, businesses, and residents to ensure decisions, policies, programs, and services reflect the specific needs and desires of the community.
6. **Public safety:** Together with its partners, Middlesex County ensures residents, businesses, visitors, and employees receive prompt, consistent, accurate, and ongoing public safety information during emergency events.
7. **Marketing to external audiences:** Middlesex County attracts investment, talent, and visitors through compelling, evidence-based partnerships and marketing to external audiences.
8. **Marketing-specific County programs and services:** Middlesex County issues targeted marketing to increase participation and use of County programs and services.

9. **Coordination with partners:** Middlesex County communications are coordinated with external partners – including local municipalities, funding partners, and local social services networks – on matters of mutual interest.

10. **Showcasing the larger community:** Middlesex County provides venues to showcase what the community has to offer residents.

Goals 1 through 5 focus on building a consistent, unified approach to County communications, telling the overall story of the County, and building centralized, consistent communications channels that audiences can rely on for up-to-date news and information. Work plans associated with these goals work toward building a centralized corporate communications function and are provided in Section 5.1 Building a Strong Foundation for Corporate Communications.

Goals 6 through 10 focus on improving coordination and advancing continuous improvement for existing communications efforts and connecting communications across County departments and with external partners. Work plans associated with these goals are provided in Section 5.2 Strengthening Coordination and Continuous Improvement for Departmental Communications

3. Target Audiences

who does the County need to communicate with?

To fulfill the goals outlined in the previous section, the following target audiences were identified for Middlesex County communications.¹

Specific sub-audiences within each category – along with communications channels that can help the County reach them – are described below. Specific work plan initiatives to strengthen communications channels are provided in Section 6.0 Enhancing Communications Channels.

3.1. Residents

Residents are Middlesex County's primary customer group and a large source of the organization's tax revenues, whether directly from property owners, or indirectly through rents.

Residents also represent the greatest proportion of the County's current or prospective clients and are the individuals that the organization and Members of Council are accountable to during and between election cycles.

The following resident sub-audiences have been identified to provide greater segmentation and strategic use of resources and communications channels when communicating with different types of residents.

3.1.1. LONG-TIME RESIDENTS

During stakeholder consultations, participants indicated that Middlesex County is home to residents who have resided in the community for a long duration, and some families have called Middlesex County home for generations.

Long-time residents tend to be more aware of how to access services, and events that occur on a regular basis. They need to be notified of changes to programs or service delivery and new program offerings and events.

Longtime residents are more likely to be aware of year-over-year property tax changes and may be interested in rationale for tax increases and the ongoing value provided by the County.

Sample Communications Channels: County-wide mail-outs, middlesex.ca, corporate social media accounts (with connections to other County websites and social accounts), e-newsletters and email

subscription databases, County presence at local festivals and events, print and radio advertising, local media coverage.

3.1.2. NEW RESIDENTS

The population of Middlesex County is growing and welcoming new residents and families at a faster rate than in the past.

By 2026, Middlesex County is expected to grow to a population of 89,500. By 2046, different scenarios are forecasting growth to a population between 96,300 and 115,000. Over the next 25 years, Middlesex County will see greater rates of growth than the previous 25 years.

New residents may not be as familiar with County services and amenities as long-time residents, and the County will need to consider intentional, targeted approaches to reach new residents.

The County may share its destination marketing materials with this audience given that new residents may not be as aware of the attractions and events the County has to offer.

Sample Communications Channels: County-wide mail-outs, targeted mail-outs in new subdivisions, digital signage and posters in libraries, social media accounts, geographically targeted digital advertising, County booths at community festivals and events, advertising County programs and services in municipal recreational facilities, middlesex.ca and connections to other County websites and social media accounts, visitmiddlesex.ca and associated social media accounts (to increase awareness of things to do in the community).

3.1.3. COMMUTERS

Of the working age population (15 to 65 years), 73.5 per cent travel outside of their municipality for work. While most commuters do so as the driver of a vehicle, the County is encouraging increased ridership on public transit. Transit stops and buses provide opportunities the County can target for advertising of its programs and services to individuals travelling to work, school, health care or shopping.

Sample Communications Channels: Mobile signs or billboard rentals on County arterial roads and highways², radio advertising, advertising at bus shelters and on buses.

¹ Employees are another important audience for Middlesex County. Internal communications strategies are being explored by the County independently from the Communications Strategy project.

² Depending on local sign by-laws.

3. Target Audiences

3.1.4. CURRENT AND PROSPECTIVE CLIENTS IN SOCIAL SERVICES

Middlesex County operates in a complex service delivery environment, particularly in the field of social services.

The City of London is the provincially designated Service Manager as it relates to housing for the City of London and Middlesex County. The responsibilities related to homelessness are delivered in the County through contracted service agreements with Middlesex County.

Under the Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014, the City of London is identified as the Service System Manager for Child Care and Early Years for London-Middlesex. Middlesex County has a contract with the City of London to deliver childcare services in the geographic area of the County of Middlesex, excluding the geographic area of the City of London.

Sample Communications Channels: City of London, social service networks, cross-program promotion and support through integrated, wraparound partnerships with community partners.

3.1.5. CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Nearly one quarter, or 24 per cent, of Middlesex County's population is under 20 years of age. This group has a large stake in decisions that affect the future state of Middlesex County such as community planning, sustainability, and financial strategies.

Children and youth are also an important audience as current and prospective clients who may use library programs, EarlyON (child and family centres), and potentially transit to get to school and employment. Children are also an important consideration in social service delivery, given that 11.2 per cent of children live in low-income households.

Sample Communications Channels: Partnerships with local school boards, cross-program promotion (for example, digital signage and posters in libraries), peer-to-peer networks (for example, youth councils, emerging social media platforms), digital engagement platforms, partnerships with youth-related community organizations, library.middlesex.ca and associated social media accounts, EarlyON social media accounts.

3.1.6. COMMUNITY GROUPS AND VOLUNTEERS

Community groups and local volunteer networks are important partners in spreading news and information about County programs and services, and an important audience to engage in two-way conversations as leaders represent the views of a larger constituency.

Sample Communications Channels: Council networks, festival and event engagements, e-newsletters and email subscription databases, direct engagement.

3.2. Local Businesses

As commercial and industrial property taxpayers, local businesses represent an additional customer group for Middlesex County, with interests in business development and support services, infrastructure and utilities, and overall planning and economic development activities of municipal governments.

Business size is the key criteria for segmentation of this audience, as described below. Middlesex County may consider segmentation by sector.

In the near-term, pressures on local businesses during COVID-19 is an additional consideration when communicating, engaging, and supporting the local business community.

3.2.1. SMALL BUSINESSES AND ENTREPRENEURS

More than three quarters of business operations in the County have 10 or fewer employees, with nearly half run by individuals or families without employees.

Sample Communications Channels: investinmiddlesex.ca and associated social media accounts, corporate calling programs, partnerships with Community Futures Middlesex and other small business service organizations, networks through local chambers of commerce and business improvement associations.

² Depending on local sign by-laws.

3. Target Audiences

3.2.2. MID-TO-LARGE BUSINESSES

For mid-to-large businesses, key sectors in Middlesex County include agribusiness, manufacturing, and tourism.

Sample Communications Channels: investinmiddlesex.ca and associated social media accounts, corporate calling programs, agricultural sector partnerships through Middlesex Federation of Agriculture, local and regional tourism networks, networks through local chambers of commerce and business improvement associations.

3.3. External Audiences

External audiences play an important role in the success of Middlesex County.

For example, outside investment and development creates employment opportunities and a diversified tax base. Attracting young families and talent promotes the long-term sustainability of the municipality and a workforce for local business and industry. Destination marketing encourages visitors to support the local tourism industry. Other external audiences include City of London residents and provincial or federal funding agencies.

3.1. PROSPECTIVE INVESTMENT AND BUSINESSES

Strategic objectives within Middlesex County's recent Economic Development Strategy Update require communications and marketing with prospective investment and business, which includes liaison and communications with site selectors and real estate networks. In particular, the Strategy sets an objective to attract investment in technology-based manufacturing, food production and agricultural technology.

Sample Communications Channels: Business readiness communications such as land availability and servicing information, investinmiddlesex.ca and associated social media accounts, trade show participation, regional and provincial economic development partnerships, paid features in business publications, e-newsletters and email subscription databases.

3.3.2. PROSPECTIVE TALENT

Middlesex County's Economic Development Strategy Update also includes the need to "entice talented workers and entrepreneurs to locate to the County, leveraging the rural pace of life and nearby urban amenities".

In addition to promoting the local lifestyle, Middlesex County also promotes existing job opportunities with local employers.

Suggested Communications Channels: workinmiddlesex.ca and associated social media accounts, investinmiddlesex.ca and associated social media accounts, regional workforce development partnerships, partnerships with post-secondary institutions and trades programs, e-newsletters and email subscription databases.

3.3.3. PROSPECTIVE VISITORS

Middlesex County is a designated regional Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) and supports tourism development and promotion.

The County offers all season tourism opportunities that are popular with residents from the City of London and other cities in Southwestern Ontario.

Sample Communications Channels: visitmiddlesex.ca and associated social media accounts, handstotable.ca and associated social media accounts, regional and provincial tourism partnerships, paid advertising and features in tourism publications, maps and guides, paid advertising and earned media in London Free Press and other nearby urban media outlets, influencer marketing.

3.3.4. CITY OF LONDON RESIDENTS

In addition to being day tourists of Middlesex County attractions, City of London residents are direct customers of the Middlesex-London Paramedic Service (MLPS).

Sample Communications Channels: mlems.ca and associated social media accounts, direct liaison with local businesses and institutions (Public Access Defibrillator (PAD) program), radio and print advertising, earned media and media releases, MLPS presence at community festivals and events.

3. Target Audiences

3.3.5. FUNDING AGENCIES

Like municipalities across Ontario, Middlesex County actively seeks external funding opportunities to create new programs or alleviate pressures on the local property tax base.

Targeted, compelling communications to provincial and federal governments and other funding agencies is important to ensure the County is successful in its case for external funding.

Sample Communications Channels: Funding application processes, advocacy through local representatives, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), local campaigns to raise community support.

3.4. Local Municipalities

In a complex government service delivery environment, residents are often unaware of how public services are delivered or who delivers them.

Partnerships with local municipalities are important to ensure residents and businesses can obtain the information and services they require while minimizing the need to navigate bureaucracies.

The following local municipalities are located within Middlesex County and are critical partners in County communications: Adelaide Metcalfe, LucanBiddulph, Middlesex Centre, Newbury, North Middlesex, Southwest Middlesex, Strathroy-Caradoc, and Thames Centre.

Sample Communications Channels: Elected officials on County Council, peer-to-peer administrative networks and working groups, advance notifications of upcoming County news, projects, and events, e-newsletters and email subscription databases.

3.5. Service Delivery Partners

Beyond partnerships with local area municipalities, there are other public and private agencies involved in delivering public services within Middlesex County.

These service delivery partners include the City of London and other public and private firms operating under third-party contracts with Middlesex County. Service delivery partners also include regulation agencies such as conservation authorities, utility companies and provincial ministries.

Sample Communications Channels: Formal contracts and correspondence, ongoing conversations / direct engagement at the administrative level.

3.6. Adjacent Communities

Senior administrators have indicated that adjacent communities are an additional audience for Middlesex County. Adjacent municipalities include the City of London, Municipality of Chatham-Kent, and the Counties of Lambton, Perth, Oxford, and Elgin.

Other adjacent communities include Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, Oneida Nation of the Thames, and Munsee-Delaware Nation. There may be additional Indigenous communities with an interest in County issues and may require a corporate framework for Indigenous consultation and engagement to facilitate listening and identification of issues of mutual interest.

Sample Communications Channels: Peer-to-peer staff networks, First Nations consultation and engagement, networking opportunities through administrative and elected local government organizations including, but not limited to: Ontario Good Roads Association (OGRA), Ontario Municipal Administrators' Association (OMMA), Rural Ontario Municipal Association (ROMA), e-newsletters and email subscription databases.

4. Message Framework

what does the County need to communicate?

In Phase 1 of the Communications Strategy, stakeholders were asked about the themes that drive the organization, and the messages Middlesex County would like to demonstrate with its target audiences.

Throughout the consultation process, stakeholders expressed that the County has achieved many results that serve as proof to the messages outlined below.

As demographics shift with new residents, and the local communications landscape continues to change, the County needs to be intentional about communicating its core messages with consistent reinforcement and demonstrated evidence.

The message framework described below is a reference for County Council, senior administrators, and County employees involved in communications activities. Wherever possible, the County's decisions, programs, and achievements should be framed as evidence of the messages stated below.³

The below framework is a starting point that Middlesex County can build on as further evidence of achievement grows and new opportunities to promote the County's achievements emerge.

4.1. Central Message

The following central message forms the basis for outgoing County communications. It is built on themes of innovation, value for money, lifestyle (including health, housing, safety, and wellbeing) and economic development.

It is consistent with both stakeholder feedback and foundational corporate plans like the 2021–2024 Strategic Plan, the Economic Development Strategy, and the Community Safety and Wellbeing Strategy.

"Middlesex County is an innovative, well-run organization offering high-value programs and services to the best community in which to live, visit, and do business in Southwestern Ontario".

³ It may not be possible to reinforce these messages in every outgoing communications. For example, highly operational communications such as public safety and service disruptions should avoid storytelling and take a direct approach.

4.2. Supporting Messages

The following supporting messages have been developed to support the central message.

Outgoing communications campaigns should be designed to communicate and provide evidence for one or more of the below supporting messages.

4.2.1. HIGH VALUE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

- **Message:** "Middlesex County offers high-value programs and services that residents and businesses can trust".
- **Target audiences:** Residents, local businesses, City of London residents (for MLPS services).
- **Examples of evidence to prove the message:** Outcome-based good news stories from operating departments (examples include EMS response times, library program testimonials, Community Transportation Program ridership, affordable housing partnerships, customer testimonials, etc.).
- **Examples of opportunities to reinforce the message:** Customer satisfaction surveys and testimonials, service awards, related national campaigns (for example, Emergency Preparedness Week (EP Week), Canada Road Safety Week, Ontario Public Library Week).

4.2.2. BEST-IN-CLASS FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

- **Message:** "Middlesex County is a well-run organization and a demonstrated leader in financial management".
- **Target audiences:** Residents, businesses, property owners, service delivery partners and local municipalities.
- **Examples of evidence to prove the message:** Third-party recognition (for example, Standard and Poor's (S&P) credit rating, awards through the Municipal Finance Officers' Association), favourable tax comparisons with other Ontario comparators, successful funding applications.
- **Examples of opportunities to reinforce the message:** Award announcements, funding announcements, budget engagement process, budget approval by Council.

4. Message Framework

4.2.3. LEADERSHIP AND INNOVATION

- **Message:** “Middlesex County is a leader in the field of municipal government and public sector service delivery”.
- **Target audiences:** Residents, businesses, prospective employees, local municipalities, service delivery partners, prospective businesses and investors.
- **Examples of evidence to prove the message:** Service modernization implementation results, third-party awards and recognition, successful funding applications, positive employee engagement results, health and safety policies, diversity and inclusion policies, employee testimonials.
- **Examples of opportunities to reinforce the message:** Employee recruitment postings, award announcements, days of significance and external campaigns (for example, Emergency Preparedness Week, Canada Road Safety Week, Bell Let’s Talk Day, Pride Month, Black History Month, National Day for Truth and Reconciliation).

4.2.4. EXCEPTIONAL PLACE TO DO BUSINESS

- **Message:** “Middlesex County offers competitive advantages and is committed to helping businesses locate, launch and grow in the community”.
- **Target audiences:** Existing and prospective businesses, entrepreneurs, site selectors, real estate networks.
- **Examples of evidence to prove the message:** Testimonials from existing businesses, business starts and growth statistics, land inventories and servicing data, incentive programs through Community Improvement Plans, labour force statistics, geographic information and transportation access, community attractiveness for prospective employees, available business development services.
- **Examples of opportunities to reinforce the message:** Corporate calling programs, trade show participation.

4.2.5. EXCEPTIONAL PLACE TO VISIT

- **Message:** “Middlesex County is a premiere four-season destination, with many options for local cuisine, culture, outdoor adventure, and shopping”.
- **Target audiences:** Prospective visitors.
- **Examples of evidence to prove the message:** Testimonials from visitors (for example, on TripAdvisor and other platforms), tourism businesses and attraction profiles, maps and guides that identify attractions.
- **Examples of opportunities to reinforce the message:** Industry publications, trade show participation, other destination marketing opportunities.

4.2.6. UNPARALLELED LIFESTYLE OPPORTUNITIES

- **Message:** “Middlesex County is a great place to call home, offering exceptional lifestyle, a wide variety of local attractions, and wonderful sense of community”.
- **Target audiences:** Residents (especially new residents and youth), prospective talent, prospective businesses.
- **Examples of evidence to prove the message:** Maps and guides that identify attractions, tourism businesses and attraction profiles.
- **Examples of opportunities to reinforce the message:** Staycation campaigns (particularly during international travel restrictions), “shop local” campaigns, pop-up booths at local events and festivals.

5. Advancing County Communications Goals

This section of the Report presents work plans that are specifically designed to advance Middlesex County's communications goals.

These work plans relate to building a foundation for strong corporate communications, and enhancing connections, coordination, and continuous improvement with departmental communications.

5.1. Building a Foundation for Strong Corporate Communications

Middlesex County does not currently have a dedicated corporate communications function. While there are employees supporting communications in various program areas, there is no designated accountability and insufficient resources allocated to overall coordination and unification of County communications.

The first five goals of Middlesex County's Communications Strategy require a dedicated corporate communications function to be successful.

The work plans outlined below are focused on addressing this issue by providing a starting point for a strong corporate communications function in Middlesex County. Associated resourcing recommendations are included in Section 8.0 Resourcing County Communications.

5.1.1. RESPONSIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Goal: Middlesex County issues timely, accurate, reliable, and relevant information on issues affecting the community such as Council decisions, program updates and service disruptions.

With increased use of digital media, there are increased expectations from residents, stakeholders, and Members of Council regarding responsive, real-time information from Middlesex County.

At present, Middlesex County has limited capacity to respond quickly, particularly when message development or responses to inquiries require a corporate position or coordination across program areas.

While employees involved in program communications are willing to assist, information-sharing, coordination, role clarity, and a shared message framework⁴ is required to ensure the organization can act instantaneously when urgent communications needs arise.

Year 1 Work Plan:

- Create a procedure for after-hours communications needs – recognizing the need to formalize on-call obligations, ensure appropriate work hours, and establish back-up

arrangements. Ensure after-hours expectations and procedures comply with Ontario's Working for Workers Act (Bill 27).

- Assign formal responsibility for preparing corporate positions, coordinating media responses, and supporting senior management to a designated junior communications resource (under the direction of the Legislative Services Manager) as described in Section 8.1 Staffing and Structure.
- Review job descriptions for all County employees involved in communications activities, ensuring all duties and expectations are formally included, particularly expectations for response times and after-hours obligations. Ensure compensation is commensurate with any job revisions.

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Develop communications service levels and products for Members of Council, to assist them as partners in disseminating accurate information about Middlesex County. Products include, but are not limited to, key messages for controversial issues, briefings, and media alerts. Further details are available in Section 7.0 Supporting County Council.

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Revise expectations for corporate communications employee(s) to attend Senior Management Team meetings to proactively identify and plan for communications issues.

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- N/A.

5.1.2. COUNTY AS THE CREDIBLE VOICE

Goal: Middlesex County is the official voice for its operations, and the primary source of information that residents turn to for reliable, credible information on County activities and decisions.

A significant challenge identified during the preparation of the Communications Strategy is that many of the County's audiences are obtaining news and information about the County's programs and services through secondary sources. As a result, some of the information may be inaccurate, biased, or dated.

Middlesex County can begin to strengthen its role as the primary information source by providing frequent content and strengthening channels to create easily identifiable places that audiences can turn to for credible, up-to-date information.

⁴ Provided in Section 4.0 Message Framework.

5. Advancing County Communications Goals

This process will also assist Members of Council and other partners in easily sharing County content throughout their networks.

Year 1 Work Plan:

- Redevelop the County's corporate website at middlesex.ca and build a content governance framework to ensure information is consistently presented and easy to navigate (see Section 6.2 Websites).
- Mandate attendance by corporate communications employee(s) at County Council meetings for the purposes of preparing a brief that describes Council decisions. Post to the County's website and distribute through social media accounts and email subscription databases.

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Identify local, regional, national, and global days of significance, and proactively coordinate a County response with the Warden, Members of Council, Chief Administrative Officer and relevant department heads.

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Ensure all external Middlesex County communications comply with standard Visual Identity Guidelines to ensure content is easily identifiable as credible, County-issued information (see Section 6.1 Visual Identity).

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- N/A.

5.1.3. PROACTIVE, INTEGRATED GOOD NEWS STORIES

Goal: Middlesex County proactively tells compelling, integrated stories that build a positive reputation and brand for the organization, consistent with its core messages.

Throughout stakeholder consultations, several participants expressed frustration that the accomplishments of Middlesex County are not well communicated and there is low awareness among County residents, businesses, partners, and other target audiences.

While some departments are resourced to communicate successes at an individual program or departmental level, there are currently no resources or framework dedicated to coordinating an overall narrative for Middlesex County.

Year 1 Work Plan:

- Leverage Section 3.0: Target Audiences and Section 4.0: Message Framework as the basis for developing County stories and strategically selecting communications channels.
- Assign a junior communications resource, under the direction of the Legislative Services Manager (see Section 8.1 Staffing and Structure), to collaborate across departments and ensure program messages are elevated to a corporate level narrative, where appropriate.

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Build an ongoing editorial calendar – in collaboration with all employees involved in communications activities – that includes anticipated announcements, events, program changes and major Council decisions. Leverage the calendar to provide tangible evidence of the County's core messages.⁵

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Proactively seek new opportunities to advance County messages through ongoing research of target publications and journalists and increasing corporate capacity for media pitches.
- Research and evaluate the potential of new County-owned communications channels, such as blogs, podcasts, or new social media channels, to advance the County's core messages with its target audiences.
- Encourage and provide tools and resources for administrative leaders to promote the County's work throughout their networks on personal communications channels such as LinkedIn.

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- Review the Use of Social Media Policy and investigate opportunities to encourage employees to share news and information about projects that they or their colleagues are leading.

⁵ Examples of days of significance include (but are not limited to): National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, Black History Month, Pride Month, Bell Let's Talk Day, Emergency Preparedness Week, and many others. Recommended responses may include a statement from the Warden on behalf of Council or examples of how the County is addressing the issue at an organizational level.

5. Advancing County Communications Goals

5.1.4. TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN THE COUNTY

Goal: Middlesex County intentionally demonstrates high value for tax dollars and instills trust and confidence in its programs, services, and financial management practices.

Leaders in Middlesex County are proud of the range and quality of services the organization offers residents and indicated the County has a strong tradition of sound financial management.

Due to limited local media coverage and the County being somewhat removed from local decision-making, residents and local stakeholders are not always aware of the value that the County provides. As such, the County needs to develop an intentional approach to communicating the value it offers, including comparatively high service levels, comparatively low taxes, or third-party evidence of service innovation and accountability.

Year 1 Work Plan:

- Create an “achievement-focused” lens for all external County communications ensuring that, wherever possible, outgoing communications emphasize actual or anticipated results rather than organizational activities.

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Create communications plans for major projects – particularly those cited in the Strategic Plan – to ensure the County is intentionally demonstrating value and follow-through on its commitments.
- Create and implement a communications plan for the County's annual budget process that demonstrates high value programs and services and best-in-class financial management.

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Develop a procedure for reporting external awards or internal achievements as potential evidence of service, accountability, innovation, and value.

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- N/A.

5.1.5. TWO-WAY COMMUNICATIONS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Goal: Middlesex County encourages two-way communications and engagement with agencies, partners, community groups, businesses, and residents to ensure decisions, policies, programs, and services reflect the specific needs and desires of the community.

As Middlesex County increases communications regarding its decisions, programs, services, and value, the organization has expressed a desire to open more two-way communications with residents, businesses, and community organizations.

While this work has begun among individual program areas with surveys, pop-up booths and other engagements, there are currently no consistent corporate-wide standards, channels, or services to provide consistent, coordinated engagement experiences for the County's audiences.

Year 1 Work Plan:

- Offer formal public engagement training opportunities to employees involved in communications and marketing activities and project managers involved in major infrastructure projects and planning issues.

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Develop a regular public engagement campaign to gather public feedback in the annual budget development and approval process.
- Identify other regular corporate initiatives or decisions that require two-way engagement with the public.
- Develop an inventory of community festivals and events that can be leveraged for in-person, two-way communications with the public.

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Create a designated digital space – tied to the County's corporate website – where individuals can learn about upcoming decisions and projects across the County's service areas, and exercise opportunities to participate.
- Produce a standard County presence (for example, popup banners, brochures and/or promotional merchandise) that can be used to generate interest and attention at community events and festivals.
- Implement a regular customer service satisfaction survey to hear public feedback and identify continuous improvement opportunities.

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- N/A.

5. Advancing County Communications Goals

5.2. Strengthening Coordination and Continuous Improvement for Departmental Communications

While Middlesex County lacks resources and capacity for communications at a corporate level, it has resources and accountability assigned to communications for individual program areas such as: Economic Development, Tourism, Library, Transit, EarlyON programming, and Middlesex-London Paramedic Service.

Communications activities assigned to specific program areas are performing relatively well. The foundation for these activities has already been established but could be strengthened through increased coordination and continuous improvement. A dedicated corporate communications function could help to facilitate these connections.

5.2.1. PUBLIC SAFETY

Goal: Together with its partners, Middlesex County ensures residents, businesses, and visitors receive prompt, consistent, accurate, and ongoing public safety information during emergency events.

Middlesex County's role in emergency management is unique compared to single and lower tier municipal governments as the County is not the jurisdiction that provides the first tier of emergency response.

First response is designated to the local municipality where an emergency incident takes place, with the County assuming responsibilities only when the emergency crosses a municipal boundary or emergency management demands exceed local capacity.

Notwithstanding the County's secondary role, emergency communications remain an important part of the Communications Strategy, as there are times when Middlesex County must be prepared to provide public safety information during emergency situations and crisis events.

Year 1 Work Plan:

- Develop and regularly update an Emergency Communications Plan as an appendix to Middlesex County's Emergency Response Plan.
- Assign primary and secondary responsibility for supporting communications during emergency events. Ensure designated individuals are formally recognized as having on-call responsibilities, and designate back-up resources in the event of illness or vacation.

- Prepare toolkits, templates, and media distribution lists – and ensure all employees involved in emergency communications have access – to facilitate rapid dissemination of information during an emergency.

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Include communications professionals in emergency simulations and tabletop exercises. Since Middlesex County's role begins with monitoring and supporting incidents in local municipalities, invite local communications professionals to participate.

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Transfer Public Information Officer (PIO) responsibilities under the Emergency Management Act to a senior level communications employee (see Section 8.1 Staffing and Structure).

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- N/A.

5.2.2. MARKETING TO EXTERNAL AUDIENCES

Goal: Middlesex County attracts investment, talent, and visitors through compelling, evidence-based partnerships and marketing to external audiences.

For its size and resources, Middlesex County demonstrates strong performance when marketing to external audiences. It has established consistent communications channels tailored to target audiences including investment and development, local businesses, prospective talent, and visitors.

The function is resourced with two dedicated positions and a position in a supporting role, and communications are regular, consistent, and issued in both digital and traditional formats.

Two additional external audiences were raised during stakeholder consultations that the County may consider adding to its external marketing efforts. The first is provincial and federal agencies (for advocacy opportunities), and the second is prospective County employees.

Year 1 Work Plan:

- N/A.

⁶ For example, International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) or similar programs.

5. Advancing County Communications Goals

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Provide recommendations to Human Resources and the Senior Management Team on external recruitment campaigns and ongoing communications targeted at prospective County talent in high demand industries.

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Include responsibilities for government relations when a senior corporate communications position is developed (see Section 8.1 Staffing and Structure).
- Explore interest in a joint advocacy program with local municipalities or other service partners.

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- N/A.

- Ensure responsibilities for program-specific marketing and communications are formalized within the County's job descriptions. Positions should require background and training in marketing and communications, with incumbents offered development opportunities where necessary to meet position requirements.

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Identify and resolve service areas in high need of program marketing that have insufficient resources. Explore shared positions across departments as a potential solution.

Year 3 Work Plan:

- N/A.

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- N/A.

5.2.3. MARKETING-SPECIFIC COUNTY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Goal: Middlesex County issues targeted marketing to increase participation and use of County programs and services.

Some of Middlesex County's service areas require targeted marketing to niche audiences to increase participation in their programs. Examples include increasing ridership during the transit pilot project, increasing uptake on public access defibrillators, outreach to families with children under five years for EarlyON programming, and increasing participation in library services.

Middlesex County has either formally or informally designated responsibility for program-specific marketing. To continue to build this function within County departments, it is recommended that the County formalize responsibilities where required, offer training and development, and build an internal support and coordination network.

Year 1 Work Plan:

- Provide the communications goals, core messages, and target audiences identified in this Report to departmental employees involved in communications to address requests for an overall corporate framework for their activities.
- Develop an internal Middlesex County communications working group to provide regular opportunities for employees in communications and marketing roles to share information, discuss challenges, build shared editorial calendars, and coordinate use of shared communications channels.

5.2.4. COORDINATION WITH PARTNERS

Goal: Middlesex County communications are coordinated with partners – including local municipalities, funding partners, and local social services networks – on matters of mutual interest.

In complex multi-jurisdictional service delivery environments, there is seldom widespread understanding of “who does what” across local audiences. Where audiences are shared, it makes sense for Middlesex County to coordinate its communications with service delivery partners.

Local municipalities are significant partners in delivering public services within Middlesex County. All local municipalities in Middlesex County were engaged during the development of the Communications Strategy.

During the consultation process, municipal partners expressed interest in ongoing information-sharing, training and development, joint advocacy opportunities, joint procurement of external communications platforms and services, and collaborating on back-up arrangements when communications professionals are unavailable.

5. Advancing County Communications Goals

Year 1 Work Plan:

- Confirm local municipalities' interest in creating a Communications Working Group comprised of municipal communications professionals. Develop Terms of Reference and a meeting schedule if interest exists.
- Develop a Communications Partnership Policy that identifies organizations permitted to participate in a reciprocal information posting on websites, social media accounts, and other communications channels. Identify limits on information-sharing to protect the County's brand and reputation.
- Designate corporate responsibility for ensuring compliance with communications and promotions provisions within funding agreements.

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Building on partnership success in the redevelopment of municipal websites, seek additional opportunities in joint procurement, such as mobile applications and media monitoring services.
- Explore interest in mutual service level agreements with local municipalities to ensure back-up coverage for communications services.
- Explore interest in shared communications services with municipalities that do not have designated communications resources.

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Connect with City of London communications professionals to assess interest in ongoing collaboration and information-sharing opportunities.

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- N/A.

5.2.5. SHOWCASING THE LARGER COMMUNITY

Goal: Middlesex County provides venues to showcase what the community has to offer residents.

Middlesex County is experiencing higher rates of growth than in the past, and this growth is projected to continue for at least 25 years.

This is resulting in an influx of new residents who may not be aware of all that Middlesex County has to offer. With travel restrictions associated with the global COVID-19 pandemic, there are opportunities to position the County's destination marketing to its residents or showcase new attractions or businesses to longstanding residents.

Year 1 Work Plan:

- Where relevant to local audiences (particularly new residents), share content on visitmiddlesex.ca to corporate social media accounts.

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Collaborate with Economic Development and Tourism employees to create content and identify channels to communicate Middlesex County attractions to local audiences.

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Develop a community calendar on the corporate website with guidelines and procedures that allow partners and community organizations to share information about local events.

Year 4+ Work Plan:

N/A.

6. Enhancing Communications Channels

Based on Middlesex County's communications goals, target audiences, and core messages, the development of the Communications Strategy included a review of the County's existing communications channels.

This review included:

- Visual identity.
- Websites.
- Social media accounts.
- E-newsletters.
- Print collateral and digital signage.
- Earned media and media relations policies and procedures.
- Paid media (advertising).
- Emerging channels, such as mobile applications, blogs, podcasts, and new social media platforms.

Work plans to strengthen existing channels, and potential new channels for consideration, are provided below. Key performance indicators that align with the County's communications goals are also provided.

6.1. Visual Identity

Standard Visual Identity Guidelines – consistently applied across all County print and digital collateral – are one of the biggest opportunities to connect the County's activities and create a brand that is clearly identifiable by target audiences.

Middlesex County lacks consistent rules and guidelines governing how the County's logo is used, and consistency on the look and feel of collateral, corporately and across the County's service areas.

Through its website redevelopment process, Middlesex County is identifying fonts and colours – these standards should be used as a starting point for Visual Identity Guidelines across all County communications.

6.1.1. VISUAL IDENTITY WORK PLAN

Year 1 Work Plan:

- Develop Visual Identity Guidelines for using the Middlesex County logo.

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Develop a brand manual for Middlesex County (using existing logo and message framework) that specifies brand colours, fonts, logo placement, etc.

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Conduct a brand review or audit.
- Initiate a procurement to create a list of Vendors of Record for creative services by all departments. Ensure Vendors of Record are aware of County Visual Identity Guidelines.

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- Pending results of the brand review, determine the need to procure a creative services agency to develop a rebrand for Middlesex County.
- Monitor corporate-wide expenditures on external creative services such as graphic design, photography and videography and assess a business case for internal staff resources.

6.1.2. VISUAL IDENTITY KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

- Corporate compliance with Visual Identity Guidelines.
- Brand recognition and awareness.

6. Enhancing Communications Channels

6.2. Websites

In most Canadian municipalities, digital communications have – or are quickly overtaking – traditional, analog channels as the primary vehicle for customers to access information, news, and services.

Municipal websites are of critical importance to digital communications as the place where customers turn for information of interest and the aim of all social media posts, digital communications, and online news sources is to drive traffic to websites. Websites need to be accessible, up-to-date, easy to navigate, and organized from the perspective of target audiences.

Middlesex County operates seven websites. Target audiences and current / recommended content associated with each of these websites are provided below.

6.2.1. CORPORATE WEBSITE (MIDDLESEX.CA)

The goal of the corporate website is to act as the official voice for Middlesex County for all digital communications, providing accurate, unbiased, up-to-date information on Council decisions, meetings, news, service disruptions and public safety information.

The corporate website is also the primary information channel for service areas that do not rely on program marketing and do not have dedicated websites. The corporate website provides a gateway for other websites operated by the County.

Primary audiences for the corporate website include residents, businesses, and prospective County employees.

The existing corporate website is currently not meeting these functions for the following reasons:

- Information is out-of-date or inconsistent across pages.
- Information is organized according to municipal departments, which is often not intuitive to target audiences.
- Organization of the homepage is cluttered with multiple menus, tiles and subscription options that do not align.
- While there are accountabilities for functionality and for individual pages, no one in the County is responsible for the overall content management and governance.
- Overall appearance is dated.

The County is in the process of working with a third-party provider to redevelop the corporate website. Staff have indicated that the recently redeveloped local municipal websites serve as a template for this work – this would help to resolve the navigation and clutter issues cited above.

6.2.2. EXTERNAL MARKETING WEBSITES

There are four County websites targeted at external audiences:

- Economic Development website (investinmiddlesex.ca) – This website promotes Middlesex County as a great place to invest, providing information and data including available land parcels, business parks, and incentive programs. Target audiences include prospective businesses, investors, developers, site selectors, and real estate agents.
- Talent attraction website (workinmiddlesex.ca) – This website connects local employers with job seekers and provides resources to aspiring entrepreneurs. Target audiences include prospective employees and entrepreneurs. The website is a partnership with Employment Ontario, Community Employment Choices, and Middlesex Workforce Development Partnership.
- Tourism website (visitmiddlesex.ca) – This website profiles local shops, restaurants, attractions, accommodations, and trip planning features. The target audience is prospective visitors with an aim to marketing and supporting the local tourism industry.
- Local producers project website (handstotable.ca) – This website promotes local producers and restaurateurs, managed in partnerships with Middlesex Federation of Agriculture, Middlesex-London Food Policy Council (MLFPC), Tourism Sarnia-Lambton Economic Partnership, Lambton Federation of Agriculture, and the Government of Ontario. The target audience is prospective visitors.

All the external marketing websites have been recently developed or redeveloped and do not have the navigation, organization, and functionality issues in the current corporate website. The Economic Development and Tourism department has assigned responsibility for content governance, content creation, posting, and performance of these websites.

Greater internal collaboration across communications employees will help to identify opportunities to share content of interest to other website audiences. For example, content that demonstrates innovation and good value for tax dollars – like awards and recognition, and tourism attractions – may also be of interest to local audiences.

6. Enhancing Communications Channels

6.2.3. PROGRAM MARKETING WEBSITES

Some Middlesex County departments require targeted communications to specific audiences to support promotion and marketing of programs and services.

Websites with this objective include:

- Middlesex Public Library (library.middlesex.ca) – This website provides information about library programs and services and links to the library catalogue, digital collections, and online courses. Target audiences are current and prospective library users and program participants including families, youth, and senior citizens. Middlesex County's EarlyON program relies on the library website for its programs and services for children aged 0 to 5 years and their families. Middlesex library is in the process of redeveloping its website with a vendor that specializes in library content management.
- Middlesex-London Paramedic Service (mlems.ca) – This website provides public safety and program information as well as content about the service and the paramedic profession. Target audiences include residents and businesses in Middlesex County and London, and individuals with an interest in pursuing a career in paramedicine.

6.2.4. COUNTY WEBSITES – WORK PLAN

While contracts are in place to redevelop or maintain the County's websites, and specific recommendations are outside of the scope of the Communications Strategy project, the following considerations are presented to ensure website redevelopment and maintenance aligns with the County's communications goals.

Year 1 Work Plan:

- Complete redevelopment of corporate website (middlesex.ca) with the following improvements:
 - Improve appearance and navigation, leveraging recently completed local municipal websites as a template.
 - Arrange menus and content organization by customer interests, which may not align with current departmental structures.
 - Create a "news" section, with content organized within the following categories: statements, media releases and service updates.

- Create increased capacity for digital service delivery and workflow management.
- Create increased capacity for customer satisfaction feedback to use for continuous improvement of website organization and functionality.

- Create a content governance framework that specifies authorities, accountabilities, and processes in posting to the corporate website.
- Complete redevelopment of library website (library.middlesex.ca) with the following improvements:
 - Integrate content for the Middlesex EarlyON program, with ease of access and use for the Program Manager.
- Initiate redevelopment of MiddlesexLondon Paramedic Service website.
- Collaborate on consistent framework for the collection of website analytics across all Middlesex County websites.

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Complete redevelopment of MiddlesexLondon Paramedic Service website.
- Collect analytics across all County websites according to the framework developed in year one, using 2023 as a baseline year.

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Consolidate website analytics reporting into a centralized reporting system.

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- Monitor growth of community transportation project (public transit) and assess the need for a dedicated website.

6.2.5. WEBSITE KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

- Increase in the average monthly or annual visits and unique visitors.
- Increase in the number of completed online service transactions.
- Average time on pages.
- Bounce rate (proportion of visitors who visit one page and leave).

6. Enhancing Communications Channels

6.3. Social Media Accounts

Middlesex County operates 27 social media accounts across five platforms. These accounts are described below, along with work plan initiatives to better connect and strengthen this channel.

6.3.1. FACEBOOK

There are six corporately-approved Facebook accounts for Middlesex County:

- Middlesex County Corporate Account (@CountyMiddlesex).
- Middlesex County Library (@MiddlesexCountyLibrary).
- Middlesex-London Paramedic Service (@MLPS911).
- Visit Middlesex (@visitMiddlesex).
- Invest in Middlesex (@investinmiddlesex).
- Middlesex EarlyON (@EarlyONMiddlesex).
- Visual identity enhancements– including brand guidelines and a centralized list of preferred vendors for creative services – will help to improve the quality and consistency of posts across the County's platforms.

The County should also work to grow the following on its corporate account through cross promotion on other accounts and promoting corporate social media platforms on other channels. Regular, consistent posts aimed at target audiences will also increase Facebook followers.

6.3.2. TWITTER

There are six corporately-approved Twitter accounts for Middlesex County:

- Middlesex County Corporate Account (@CountyMiddlesex).
- Middlesex County Library (@MXCountyLibrary).
- Middlesex-London Paramedic Service (@MLPS911).
- Visit Middlesex (@visitmiddlesex).
- Invest in Middlesex (@investinmiddlesex).
- Middlesex County Roads (@roadsmiddlesex).

It should be noted that the Middlesex County Roads account does not contain consistent, frequent posts and followers cannot rely on this account for up-to-date news, information, and notification of service disruptions.

6.3.3. INSTAGRAM

There are five corporately-approved Instagram accounts for Middlesex County:

- Middlesex County Corporate Account (@middlesexcounty).
- Middlesex County Library (@mxcountylibrary).
- Visit Middlesex County (@visitmiddlesex).
- Middlesex-London Paramedic Service (@MLPS911).
- Middlesex EarlyON (@middlesexearlyon).

As a primarily visual platform, consistent Visual Identity Guidelines are particularly important for the County's Instagram accounts.

The accounts should avoid text-heavy posts and leverage unique features of the platform such as carousels and stories. Instagram is a particularly good platform to acknowledge days of significance and how the County is advancing important causes.

6.3.4. LINKEDIN

There are four corporately-approved LinkedIn accounts for Middlesex County:

- Middlesex County Corporate Account.
- Invest in Middlesex – two accounts.
- Middlesex-London Paramedic Service Headquarters.
- While the corporate LinkedIn account is populated with information about Middlesex County, there are no posts or jobs available on the account. This is the same scenario for the Middlesex-London Paramedic Service account.
- For the Invest in Middlesex LinkedIn presence, the organization may consolidate the two accounts – 1 personal and 1 company – that are currently in use.

6. Enhancing Communications Channels

6.3.5. YOUTUBE

There are six corporately-approved YouTube channels for Middlesex County:

- Middlesex County Corporate Account.
- Middlesex County Library.
- Visit Middlesex.
- Invest in Middlesex.
- MiddlesexLondon Paramedic Service.
- Middlesex EarlyON.

It is anticipated that interest in the corporate YouTube channel will continue to grow as Council meetings are offered virtually. This provides an opportunity for the County to post video content that demonstrates value for money such as budget engagement videos, awards presentations, transit promotional videos and other corporate content that can also be posted across social media platforms.

Content on the MiddlesexLondon Paramedic Service account seems to be intended for internal audiences, and the service may consider restricting public access.

- Consistent Middlesex County “voice” as professional, yet fun and engaging.
- Rules for sharing and re-posting community content.
- Customer service standards for responding to comments.
- Standard code of conduct policy for community posts and consequences for violation.
- Analytics and reporting, including effectiveness in driving website traffic.

- Discontinue Middlesex County Roads twitter account and merge future content with the corporate Middlesex County account.
- Ensure all corporately-approved social media accounts are sufficiently resourced and assess the need for further consolidation of accounts.
- Reserve content on Middlesex-London Paramedic Service YouTube channel to internal audiences only for training purposes and change privacy settings accordingly.
- Set up corporate accounts on emerging platforms (such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and others) using the @middlesexcounty handle. Reserve for potential future County use and protect against misuse by non-County actors.

6.3.6. COUNTY SOCIAL MEDIA WORK PLAN

Year 1 Work Plan:

- Update Corporate Use of Social Media Policy to emphasize collaboration and connection across the County's social media accounts; include centralized approval for new accounts; update with appropriate contacts.
- Transition corporate ownership of the personal Use of Social Media Policy to Human Resources, alongside other disciplinary or code of conduct-oriented policies.
- Create guidelines for social media management across all platforms for use by Middlesex County content creators. Guidelines should include:
 - Posts should be prepared with the primary goal of driving traffic to a Middlesex County website(s).
 - Consistency in usernames and handles.
 - Recommended frequency of postings across platforms.
 - Use of images, videos, and other visual identity considerations.

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Procure a social media management tool/software to manage corporate accounts and pre-populate posts scheduled according to the organization's shared editorial calendar. Ensure the preferred tool becomes the corporate standard for County social media accounts.
- Hire a professional photographer to capture local attractions and events across all four seasons.
- Create a shared image bank for use by approved social media content creators across the corporation.
- Create an internal shared posting calendar to provide approved social media content creators greater opportunity to connect content.
- Position the corporate LinkedIn account as a primary communications channel for prospective County employees, with regular content on job postings, corporate achievements, and evidence of Middlesex County as a great place to work.
- Position the Middlesex-London Paramedic Service LinkedIn

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account as a primary communications channel for prospective employees and paramedics with regular content on job postings and promotional content. Also leverage the channel to reach out to County and London businesses regarding the Public Access Defibrillator program.

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Integrate response to customer service requests received on social media accounts into workflow management processes as part of a corporate customer service policy.
- Create a handbook for organizational leaders to encourage content sharing on personal accounts, particularly LinkedIn.
- Monitor growth of the Community Transportation Pilot Project and assess the need for dedicated transit social media accounts.

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- N/A.

6.3.7. SOCIAL MEDIA KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

- Average monthly posts.
- Year-over-year growth in followers and subscribers.
- Growth in vanity metrics such as reach, impressions and engagement.
- Growth in the number of website visits originated through social media platforms.

6.4. E-Newsletters and Email Databases

Some of the County's service areas create digital newsletters and maintain email subscriber lists.

- Middlesex Library issues a monthly digital newsletter to a subscriber list of approximately 350 accounts.
- EarlyON administrators issue email communications to a subscriber list of approximately 500 email accounts.
- The Economic Development and Tourism team administers an email database of over 2,000 email accounts.

Subscribers can opt into various types of e-newsletters according to

the content that is most relevant to their interests and needs.

6.4.1. E-NEWSLETTERS WORK PLAN

Year 1 Work Plan:

- Expand/consolidate subscriber options to allow audiences to choose from a range of County news, information, programs, and services.
- Update Middlesex County's Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality of Information Policy to include record-keeping of email databases.
- Collect and record express consent from subscribers to receive information and keep records consistent with Canada's Anti-Spam Legislation (CASL) and the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Personal Privacy Act (MFIPPA). Identify and resolve potential risks involved in current management of email databases.
- Provide training for all communications employees involved in the preparation and distribution of e-newsletters.

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Consider procuring an email marketing platform or services on a corporate-wide basis to manage County e-newsletters across departments.

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Grow the County's subscription database through booths and pop-up displays at community events.

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- N/A.

6.4.2. E-NEWSLETTERS PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Number of subscribers.
- Growth in the number of website visits originating from e-newsletters.

6. Enhancing Communications Channels

6.5. Print Collateral and Digital Signage

Several County service areas leverage print collateral for their communications and marketing needs. The Middlesex Library offers brochures for new cardholders and posters in its library branches.

EarlyON administrators also offer flyers and brochures, produced with assistance from local graphic designers. There are also periodic mail-outs to County residents, for example, EarlyON distributed an “Open for Business” mail-out when programs re-opened for in-person attendance.

The Economic Development and Tourism team leverages both print materials and branded merchandise. Examples include the Tourism Map, Investors Guide, Culinary Guide, and Trails Map. The team has a pop-up booth, signage, and promotional merchandise to support on-site participation at markets and events. A tourism rack is also available at County library sites through a partnership with the Middlesex Library.

Middlesex-London Paramedic Service prepares print collateral for service information and public education campaigns, for example, emergency preparedness information cards.

Middlesex County issued its first annual Warden’s “Year-in-Review” Report as a County-wide mail-out in January 2022. This publication is anticipated to continue in future years.

Digital signage is currently available in library branches, and the Middlesex Library leverages the signs to promote its programs, services, and events.

Other service areas have expressed interest in developing internal partnerships to share the use of this channel.

6.5.1. PRINT COLLATERAL AND DIGITAL SIGNAGE WORK PLAN

Year 1 Work Plan:

- Working with communications employees in operating departments, prepare a quarterly schedule of County-wide mail-outs and seek opportunities for coordination and postage cost reduction.
- Prepare a menu of suggested stories that align with the Strategic Plan and message framework for the Warden’s consideration in the annual Warden’s Report.

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Ensure all County print collateral adheres to standard Visual Identity Guidelines.
- Create an inventory of public facilities with opportunities to post and display print collateral.

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Create a corporate-wide procedure that governs the use and prioritization of digital signage opportunities.

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- Consider expanding digital signage to other public-facing County facilities.

6.5.2. PRINT COLLATERAL AND DIGITAL SIGNAGE KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

- Increase in relevant webpage visits following mail-outs or significant print campaigns.
- Savings realized through joint mail-outs or other collaborative marketing opportunities.

6.6. Earned Media (Media and Public Relations)

The County leverages local media outlets to communicate information about Council decisions, programs, and services. Corporate news releases are issued to local media lists on a periodic basis.

Middlesex-London Paramedic Service provides information and coordination with local media representatives, particularly for paramedic-related emergency incidents. The Economic Development and Tourism team uses news releases to promote events and for other occasions such as awards and new programs.

Greater coordination across the County’s earned media activities was cited as an opportunity to improve the County’s communications during employee consultations.

Organization of news stories is confusing, with “news” including meeting updates, job opportunities, brochures, media releases, statements, and service updates.

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Within media releases, media liaison often falls to a department head and there is no centralized resource responsible for County news coordination, response fact-checking, story pitching, and logging and managing media interactions.

6.6.1. EARNED MEDIA WORK PLAN

Year 1 Work Plan:

- Create a Media Relations Policy with centralized accountability for media interaction, prescribed response timelines, departmental fact-checking processes, and approval authorities.
- During corporate website redevelopment, create a “news” section of the website that clearly identifies and labels information under the following headings: “media releases”, “service updates”, and “public statements”. Transfer information regarding meeting updates to the Council section of the website, and job opportunities to the careers section of the website.
- Build standard corporate templates for media releases, service updates and public statements.
- Conduct a comprehensive review of media distribution lists to ensure all prospective outlets are included and contacts are up-to-date.

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Work with communications employees in operating departments and the Senior Management Team to prepare a rolling editorial calendar that pre-populates known announcements or events such as budget approval, project updates, service changes, community events, and days of significance. Update the editorial calendar as new communications opportunities and needs arise.
- Invest in a media monitoring service to assess how the County and its comparators are portrayed and assess news of relevance to County priorities. Review keywords on a quarterly basis.
- Create a list of approved County spokespeople based on topic areas. The list should include both staff (CAO and department heads) and Council (Warden and Committee Chairs).

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Create increased capacity for proactive media relations, with support for researching publications, topics of interest, journalist bios, and creating compelling pitches on behalf of Middlesex County.
- Build an ongoing media relations training program for all County spokespeople.

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- N/A.

6.6.2. EARNED MEDIA KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

- Proportion of County media releases and media pitches that result in media coverage.
- Tone of articles covering County issues and decisions.
- Alignment between media outlets covering County issues and the County’s target audiences.
- Average County response time for media inquiries.

6.7. Paid Media (Advertising)

County service areas pay for advertising in both traditional and digital formats. For example, both Middlesex Library and EarlyON leverage digital advertising on Facebook and Instagram, and Middlesex Library uses advertising spots on local radio stations. Economic Development and Tourism employees leverage a variety of paid advertising opportunities on traditional and digital channels.

While advertising is common practice for several service areas, there is no consistent, corporate-wide tracking for these expenses, and understanding the total value of current advertising was not feasible during the Communications Strategy project.

6.7.1. DIGITAL ADVERTISING

Digital advertising is often less costly than traditional forms of advertising and its effectiveness during communications campaigns is easier to track.

The first type of digital advertising is through online news publications. This is like advertising in print newspapers, except ads appear on the outlet’s online platform. Effectiveness of ads can be measured by clicks (provided by the outlet) or County website analytics.

Social media platforms also offer digital advertising opportunities for the County. There are several formats for ads that can be targeted based on audience age, interests, geographic location, and other criteria.

6. Enhancing Communications Channels

While not widely used in the public sector, some organizations establish partnerships with online influencers who have a large following within a target audience or demographic. While influencer partnerships can be effective at growing audiences and brand awareness, municipalities should proceed with caution as there have been concerns with transparent use of public sector funds.

6.7.2. TRADITIONAL ADVERTISING

Advertising through traditional channels provides opportunities to reach audiences that are not frequently online.

There are media outlets within the County that offer advertising. Print outlets include the Middlesex Banner, Dorchester Signpost and Strathroy Age Dispatch, and radio outlets include myFM radio in Strathroy.

Nearby in London, there are outlets that reach Middlesex County audiences that may be strategic for paid advertising including the London Free Press and radio stations such as CJBX Pure Country 93, CBCL Radio One, CHR Radio Western CIQM Virgin Radio, CKLO Classic Rock, CBBL CBC Music, CJBK ICI Premiere, CHJX Faith FM, CFPL Global News Radio 980, CIXX the X (Fanshawe College), and CJBK 1280 News Talk Radio. Nearby First Nations outlets, such as The Eagle FM – Oneida Radio, may also reach target audiences.

The County's decision to incur advertising expenses should be based on reach and circulation of outlets, and alignment with the County's target audiences.

Where communications are not time sensitive, and depending on regulations within sign by-laws, the County may consider advertising through mobile sign rentals and billboards on high traffic routes.

6.7.3. PAID MEDIA WORK PLAN

Year 1 Work Plan:

- N/A.

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Collect circulation data from local newspapers and radio stations to ensure alignment with target audiences and best value for Middlesex County advertising dollars. Share findings with all employees involved in communications activities.
- Create consistent, dedicated cost centres for corporate and departmental advertising expenses to allow for monitoring and tracking on an organization-wide basis.

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Continue to investigate and pursue news outlets and publications that reach target external audiences such as prospective employees, prospective visitors, target industries, site selectors and real estate agents.
- Assess corporate-wide advertising expenses and investigate opportunities for savings through bulk discounts and media buying.

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- N/A.

6.7.4. PAID MEDIA KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

- Growth in the number of website visits originating from paid digital platforms.
- Reach/circulation of traditional publications and alignment with target audiences.

6.8. Emerging Channels

Once the County has strengthened its existing communications channels, it may explore additional channels on new or emerging platforms.

Given resources and staff time associated with new or expanded communications channels and products, any decision to launch a new channel should be based on evidence that the County's core messages will reach one or more of its target audiences.

In preliminary discussions with Members of Council and local municipal representatives, there is interest in exploring a mobile application to reach residents. This channel has already been implemented in Thames Centre, and use continues to grow in the municipality.

It should be noted that a mobile application should go beyond communicating to providing service transactions, and its use should be integrated in a comprehensive Customer Service Strategy (including digital service delivery) for Middlesex County and should align with digital self-serve options on the new corporate website.

In time, Middlesex County may consider additional channels, such as blogs, podcasts, and other social media platforms such as TikTok, Snapchat, or other emerging channels.

6. Enhancing Communications Channels

6.8.1. EMERGING CHANNELS WORK PLAN

Year 1 Work Plan:

- Learn from local municipalities regarding their experience in implementing mobile applications as a communications tool.
- Identify opportunities to integrate digital service delivery in a mobile application.

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Explore interest in the joint procurement of municipal mobile application services with local municipalities.

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Research and evaluate the potential of new County-owned communications channels – such as blogs, podcasts, or new social media platforms – to advance the County’s core messages with its target audiences.

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- N/A.

6.8.2. EMERGING CHANNELS KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

- Mobile applications: growth in number of users, downloads, and service transactions.

7. Supporting County Council

Members of Council are important partners in communicating information, events, and achievements from Middlesex County.

As mayors and elected representatives of local municipalities, they provide important connections to the County's service delivery partners and are a critical conduit to reach residents and businesses in the communities in which they reside.

A sample of County Councillors, including the Warden and Past Warden, were engaged during the development of this Communications Strategy.

Much of their feedback is addressed throughout this Strategy, including:

- Avoiding a communications void through responsive, reliable, consistent information on the County's communications channels.
- Greater emphasis on communicating the overall story of Middlesex County while continuing to market individual programs and services.
- Leveraging informal networks and "word of mouth", for example, through community organizations, events and festivals.
- Encourage two-way communications with residents, businesses, and other stakeholders.

Some of the feedback related to the need to support County Councillors as communications partners, leverage the vast networks of County Councillors, and acknowledge that constituents look to the elected representatives for real-time information on issues that matter to them.

The work plan initiatives below are intended to provide clarity and support for Members of Council.

7.1. Supporting Council Work Plan

Year 1 Work Plan:

- Develop a "levels of service" document for Council that specifies communications support to be provided by the organization, including:
 - Notification of substantive media requests.
 - Key messages and planned tactics for controversial issues.
 - Notifications of "no response" to communications issues with a rationale (for examples, issue under litigation, issue

under the jurisdiction of a separate agency, etc.).

- Products and channels dedicated to Council news and decisions (for example, Council meeting briefs, Warden's Report, Council section on website, etc.).
- Policies and procedures for County sharing of content on Councillors' social media accounts.
- Recommendations to support Councillors' use of social media based on elections legislation.
- Guidelines and reminders for Council when speaking on County issues (for example, in-camera matters, official spokespeople, streamlined handling of media requests, etc.).

Year 2 Work Plan:

- Create a dedicated feedback channel for Councillors to report County communications concerns and suggestions. Report all feedback and how the administration is following up in quarterly reports to Council.

Year 3 Work Plan:

- Continue to monitor communications needs for County Council and consider adding additional Council-specific communications channels such as quarterly or twice annual ward-based newsletters.

Year 4+ Work Plan:

- Continue to monitor communications needs for County Council and consider allocating dedicated support, if necessary.

7.2. Supporting Council – Performance Measures

- Councillor overall satisfaction rates with County communications.
- Council engagement with County communications (for example, commenting or sharing social media posts, promoting e-newsletter subscriptions, etc.).
- Councillor satisfaction with internal communications and level of service provided to elected officials.

8. Resourcing County Communications

Middlesex County has limited existing staff and financial resources to strengthen its corporate communications channels, promote its key messages, and advance its communications goals.

From a staffing standpoint, few positions involved with communications require background and expertise in the communications field and some do not contain formal responsibilities. There are also limited budget allocations for external communications support.

Given that there are limited existing resources to enhance County communications, some net new resources are necessary. Recognizing the resource constraints for municipal governments, work plans provided in this Report seek to minimize requests for new resources, focusing on areas of greatest need and phasing in resources over time.

The following resourcing recommendations are provided to ensure Middlesex County has the resources to undertake the work plans identified in this Report and are intended for consideration during annual budget development processes. The resourcing recommendations are phased in immediate, short-term, medium-term, and long-term timelines, and are aligned with the timelines and workloads contained throughout the Communications Strategy.

8.1. Staffing and Structure

There are few employees within Middlesex County who are formally assigned responsibilities for communications within the organizational structure, and even fewer whose communications responsibilities comprise more than half of their roles.

The research phase found six positions with some communications accountabilities, only two of which had communications and marketing as a primary focus. Three positions held informal responsibilities for communications activities.

In the short-term, recognizing constraints associated with new positions, it is recommended that the County focus its efforts on securing positions that will be dedicated to strengthening its centralized corporate communications services, with some capacity to provide leadership for departmental communications employees and limited support and advisory services to departments without dedicated communications support.

For individual service areas with assigned responsibility, communications and marketing services perform relatively well, particularly where positions require formal background and training.

Communications needs within service areas should continue to be monitored and assessed to determine if net new resources are necessary. At the same time, there should be immediate attention to

improving capacity through greater interdepartmental coordination and training opportunities.

Year 1 Resourcing Recommendations:

- On-board a junior communications resource, reporting to the Legislative Services Manager, with responsibility for:
 - Supporting the CAO and Senior Management Team with corporate communications services.
 - Chairing and coordinating regular meetings with County employees involved in departmental coordination.
 - Building relationships with communications employees in local area municipalities.
 - Assisting department heads without dedicated communications resources.
 - Working with the Legislative Services Manager to implement the Year 1 and Year 2 work plans within this Report.
- Promote interdepartmental resource sharing, with opportunities identified through regular meetings of communications employees.
- Offer training and development for all employees involved in County communications, with emphasis on social media best practices, public engagement principles, and municipal communications conferences.

Year 2 Resourcing Recommendations:

- Monitor operational communications resources and determine if staffing levels within operating departments are sufficient and consistent with comparable municipalities.
- Determine if there is interest in shared communications services with partners who do not have dedicated resources, such as internal departments and local municipalities. Develop a business case and negotiate cost-sharing agreements for a new position(s) if interest exists.

Year 3 Resourcing Recommendations:

- Assess potential growth in communications needs and consider a new senior communications resource. Realign the junior communications resource and any other newly appointed corporate communications positions to report to this individual.

8. Resourcing County Communications

Year 4+ Resourcing Recommendations:

- Assess organization-wide expenses for external creative and graphic design services and determine whether in-house services would deliver better value for money.
- Continue to explore interest in shared specialized communications services (for example, graphic design, photography, media relations, social media management, after-hours services) with local municipalities, with staff resources provided by the County and cost-shared by partners.

8.2. Non-Salary Financial Resources

Middlesex County does not have clearly identifiable line items for communications, marketing, promotion, or advertising – beyond financial allocations for positions with communications and marketing responsibilities and contract costs for County websites.

Middlesex County incurs communications-related expenses, as program areas are involved in developing print collateral and mail-outs, as well as paid digital, print, and radio advertising. It is probable that these expenses are incurred within project budgets or other operational line items.

It is recommended that tracking processes be implemented for communications expenses across the organization to improve line-of-sight for expenditures on a corporate-wide basis.

When senior management has a clear sense of organization-wide expenses, they will be better able to assess whether internal partnerships or integration is possible within the budget, prior to requesting new resources.

Notwithstanding opportunities to leverage existing resources, Middlesex County is a relatively lean organization (from a communications perspective) and, if the organization is striving to becoming a leader in municipal communications, net new resources will be required. The recommendations below are provided to phase these investments in over time.

Year 1 Resourcing Recommendations:

- Develop standard operational budget cost centres to track communications, marketing, promotion, and advertising on an organization-wide basis, improving line-of-sight and accountability for senior management, and as a starting point for identifying efficiencies.
- Track postage costs for mail-out of County print collateral.
- Track organization-wide expenditures for creative services (graphic design, videography, photography) and assess opportunities for enhanced outcomes or cost efficiencies.
- Include an ongoing financial allocation for preparation and distribution of communications products and publications, such as the Warden's Report.
- Allocate funds for a one-time investment for professional photography services (summer and fall Middlesex County photos).

Year 2 Resourcing Recommendations:

- Allocate an ongoing financial investment of \$8,000 for a social media management tool, shared by content creators across the organization.
- Allocate an ongoing financial investment of \$15,000 for media monitoring services.
- Allocate funds for a one-time investment for professional photography services (winter and spring Middlesex County photos).

Year 3 Resourcing Recommendations:

- Allocate a \$30,000 one-time investment for a brand audit as recommended in Section 6.1.1 Visual Identity Work Plan.

Year 4+ Resourcing Recommendations:

- Further investments require monitoring and due diligence based on outcomes during years 1 through 3 of implementation.

9. Acknowledgments

The completion of this Communications Strategy was made possible by the leadership and guidance of Middlesex County and its service delivery partners.

Many thanks to the Legislative Services Manager and Chief Administrative Officer for overall direction during project management.

Thank you to the Senior Management Team for identifying operational communications needs and service arrangements specific to Middlesex County. These perspectives helped to ensure balance between the need for strategic, corporate storytelling and the day-to-day operational needs of departments and specific program areas within the Communications Strategy.

Thank you to employees involved in departmental communications activities including Economic Development and Tourism, Middlesex County Library, Middlesex-London Paramedic Service, EarlyON Program Manager, and the Community Transportation Pilot Project. Understanding challenges and opportunities from the perspectives of employees was a critical part of the process and contributed to the development of work plans in this Report.

Thank you to Members of Council, including the Warden, Past Warden, and representatives from communities with an increasing digital presence, for providing perspectives from elected officials during the development of the Communications Strategy.

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Boulevard Strategy Group was pleased to work with Middlesex County to prepare this Communications Strategy.

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