



Northern Ireland Ambulance Service
Health and Social Care Trust



NIAS Communications and Engagement Strategy - 2026



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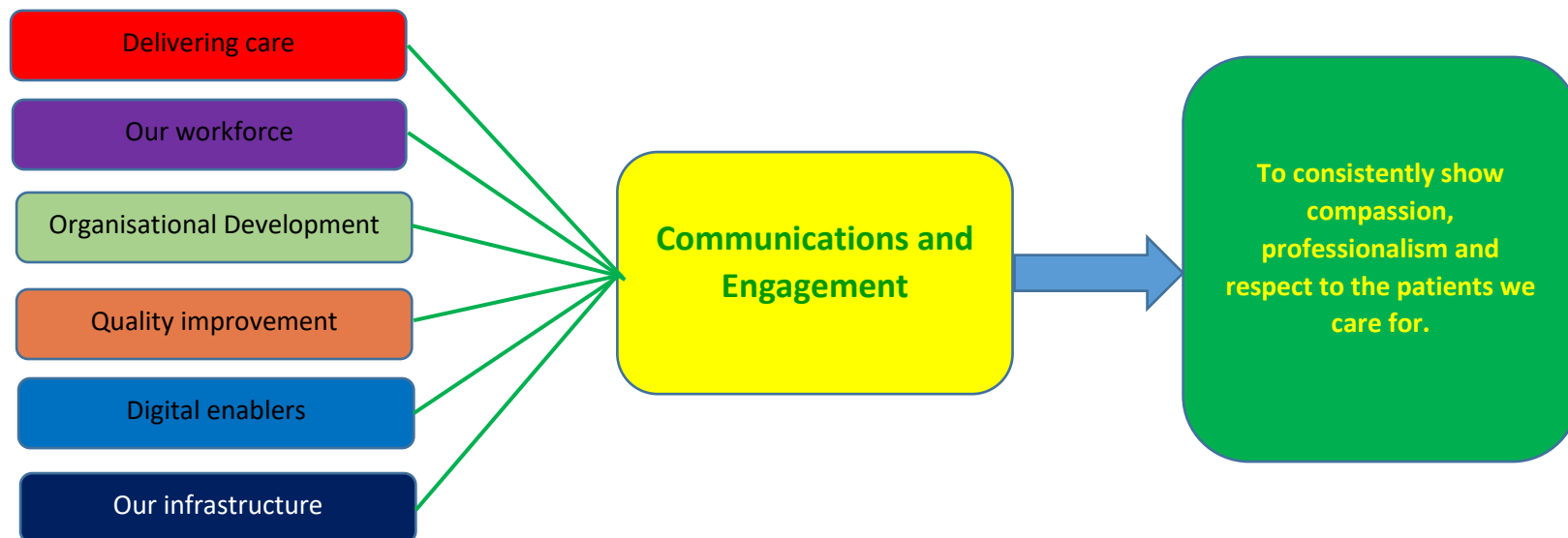
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Executive Summary

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service launched “***Caring today, planning for tomorrow – Our Strategy to transform: 2020 – 2026***” in March 2020.

Our Communication and Engagement Objectives align to the goals of Our Strategy to Transform and Communications and engagement has been identified as one of seven areas of priority for transformation. However, it is unique in that the delivery of the other priority areas, all require significant communications and engagement strategies, specific to each, to facilitate progress in the required elements of change and innovation. Changing circumstances and risk management require that we continually need to adapt and remain dynamic while we strive to deliver our mission – to consistently show compassion, professionalism and respect to the patients we care for.

Each of the other six priority areas will have the autonomy to develop bespoke communications and engagement strategies to ensure the effective delivery of their specific objectives, making use of the corporate communications and engagement strategy as a best practice template, where appropriate.



The continued practice of embedding Communications and Engagement principles across all NIAS activities will facilitate a shift in organisational culture. The strategy will engage staff and stakeholders to work together in effectively transforming NIAS to meet changing population health needs.

The Communications and Engagement Strategy will focus on four key areas:

1. stakeholder engagement
2. internal communications
3. media management
4. public health,

Applying proven “success factors” which facilitate high-performing communication and engagement with partners across all activities undertaken by, or on behalf of, NIAS. The factors to be applied in this regard are:

1. Embed a strategic approach to communications and engagement
2. Adopt a systematic approach to building a sustainable and effective relationship with internal and external partners/stakeholders
3. Develop a shared vision and narrative to deliver common goals
4. Embed open, transparent and two-way engagement
5. Develop communications and engagement leadership, capacity and expertise.

The rationale for the adoption of these proven success factors is detailed in Appendix 1

In summary, the desired outcomes from our Communications and Engagement Strategy are:

- ✓ Provision of services that are informed by the needs of service users
- ✓ Improved trust, legitimacy and reputation in the community
- ✓ Persuade and support staff and stakeholders to work together to transform NIAS to meet population health needs

- ✓ Everyone in NIAS will play their part in communicating to colleagues, patients and communities
- ✓ Staff will feel motivated, empowered and involved

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service launched its “**Strategy to Transform: Caring today, planning for tomorrow**” in March 2020. The strategy identifies who we are, what we do, our role in health and social care system and the challenges that we face in ensuring we deliver a quality service that is safe and seeks to constantly improve

We now find ourselves at the beginning of an intense period of organisational transformation which will shape how we care for patients; how we care for and develop our staff and, importantly, how we interact with partners in the community we serve and in the health and social care system.

As we move forward, we do so with a mission “**to consistently show compassion, professionalism and respect to the patients we care for**”. We will deliver this by putting into practice, on a daily basis and in all our interactions, those values and behaviours which will set our staff apart, namely working together, excellence, openness and honesty and compassion which will be delivered alongside an organisational cultural programme.

Key to the delivery of organisational cultural change is a robust communications and engagement strategy. This strategy will underpin and facilitate change, through the promotion of best practice communications and engagement, with particular emphasis on processes of co-production and co-design.

Purpose and aims

The Communications and Engagement Strategy 2021-26 focusses on the NIAS approach to communications and engagement with key stakeholders, with particular emphasis on our workforce, our patients, carers, Trade Unions, partners within Health and Social Care, the media and political representatives. It will ensure that robust communications and engagement systems are in place to promote a much greater degree of partnership working than before, taking into account our direction of travel relating to co-production for future service delivery.

It will promote a culture of communications, engagement and involvement within, and external to NIAS, and to detail how the delivery of NIAS vision and values will be supported through communications and engagement.

This strategy aims to place communication and engagement at the centre of all we do, and enable a greater understanding of how effective communications and engagement can;

- Support a leadership approach which is effective, ethical and collective and which places greater emphasis on engaging with partners and stakeholders as equals
- Evidence that NIAS has clinical excellence at the heart of our organisation
- Demonstrate progress towards a delivery model, the purpose of which is to ensure the most appropriate response to the sickest patients in the quickest time and thereby promoting better understanding of decision making
- Enable staff to feel motivated, empowered and involved
- Facilitate positive adjustments in behaviour and perceptions internally and externally and thereby influencing the culture of the organisation
- Assist in the achievement of strategic aims.

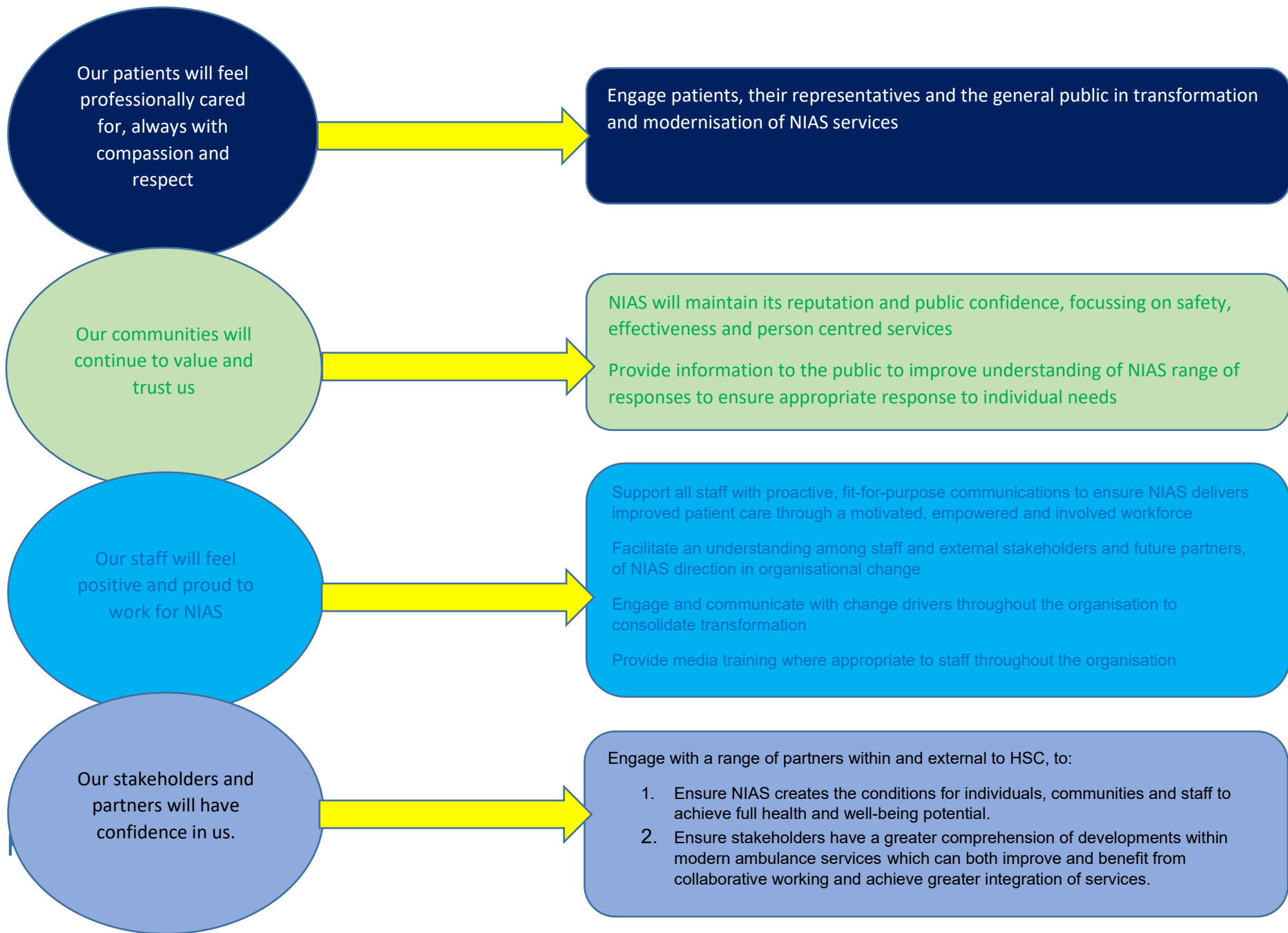
Communication and Engagement Objectives

All communications and engagement activity should be aligned to, and reflect, the goals of Our Strategy to Transform and reflect the central role NIAS occupies within the broader HSC system¹.

Our objectives are, that through communications and engagement:

- Our patients will feel professionally cared for, always with compassion and respect
- Our communities will continue to value and trust us
- Our staff will feel positive and proud to work for NIAS
- Our stakeholders and partners will have confidence in us.

To deliver these objectives NIAS will actively engage with these four main stakeholders groups in processes which are meaningful and effective. NIAS will make use of communications channels which are most accessible to each, seeking, particularly, to utilise advances in digital communications



The Communications and Engagement Strategy. Annual activity plans will be approved by Trust Board and delivered by 2026 in line with our “*Strategy to Transform*”. Plans to implement changes will be endorsed by SMT and progress in delivery will be monitored by Trust Board.

Monitoring of the plan will include but will not be restricted to;

- Communications survey results
- Communications forum feedback
- Social media and digital communications metrics (hits, likes, views etc.)
- Media monitoring
- Partner/Stakeholder feedback
- Progress reports to SEMT
- Trust Board assurance framework;

and will be delivered through annual communications plans monitored through the performance framework process. An overview of the content of these plans is attached at Appendix 2.

Measurement of success

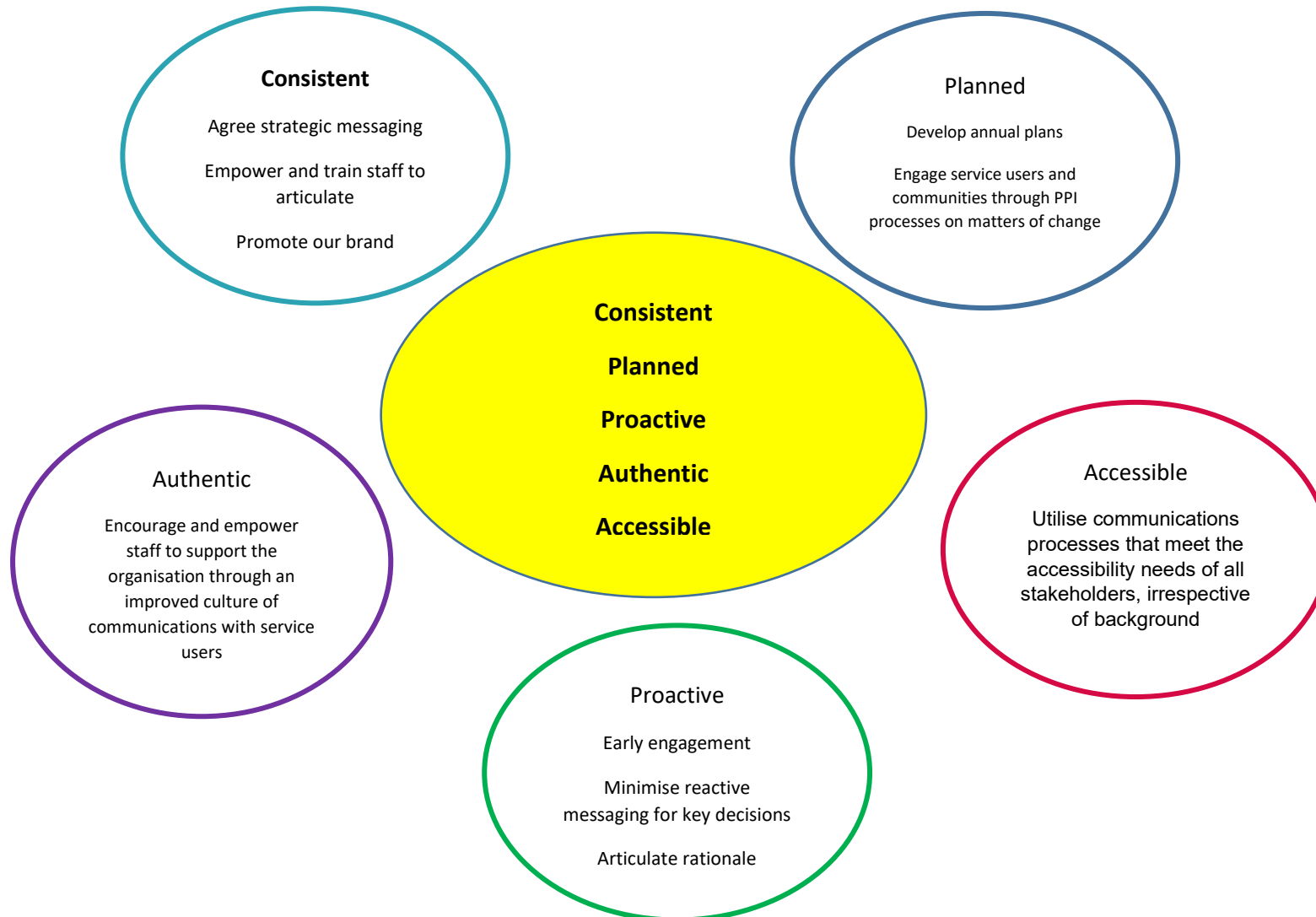
- Internal Communications – a cultural change can be difficult to measure in a quantifiable way.
The Trust will make use of communications survey results relating to communications as a baseline from which to measure progress towards an improved communications culture. The establishment of focus groups and the development of staff

engagement plans will enable qualitative intelligence to be gathered in relation to how staff feel engaged, informed and have a voice which is being listened to.

- External stakeholders – an approach will be developed to gather external stakeholder satisfaction data which will take account of the constraints which may be experienced through use of various communication channels and which will chart a course for managing these constraints in a way which improves communications.
- Social media metrics will be key to gauging the reach of communications, internally (whatsapp) and externally (public facing social media). Subsequent Communication Surveys will point to the success of the strategy in terms of the numbers of those who engage with the survey and their satisfaction views expressed within, compared directly with the similar results from the initial survey.

Principles and approach to communications.

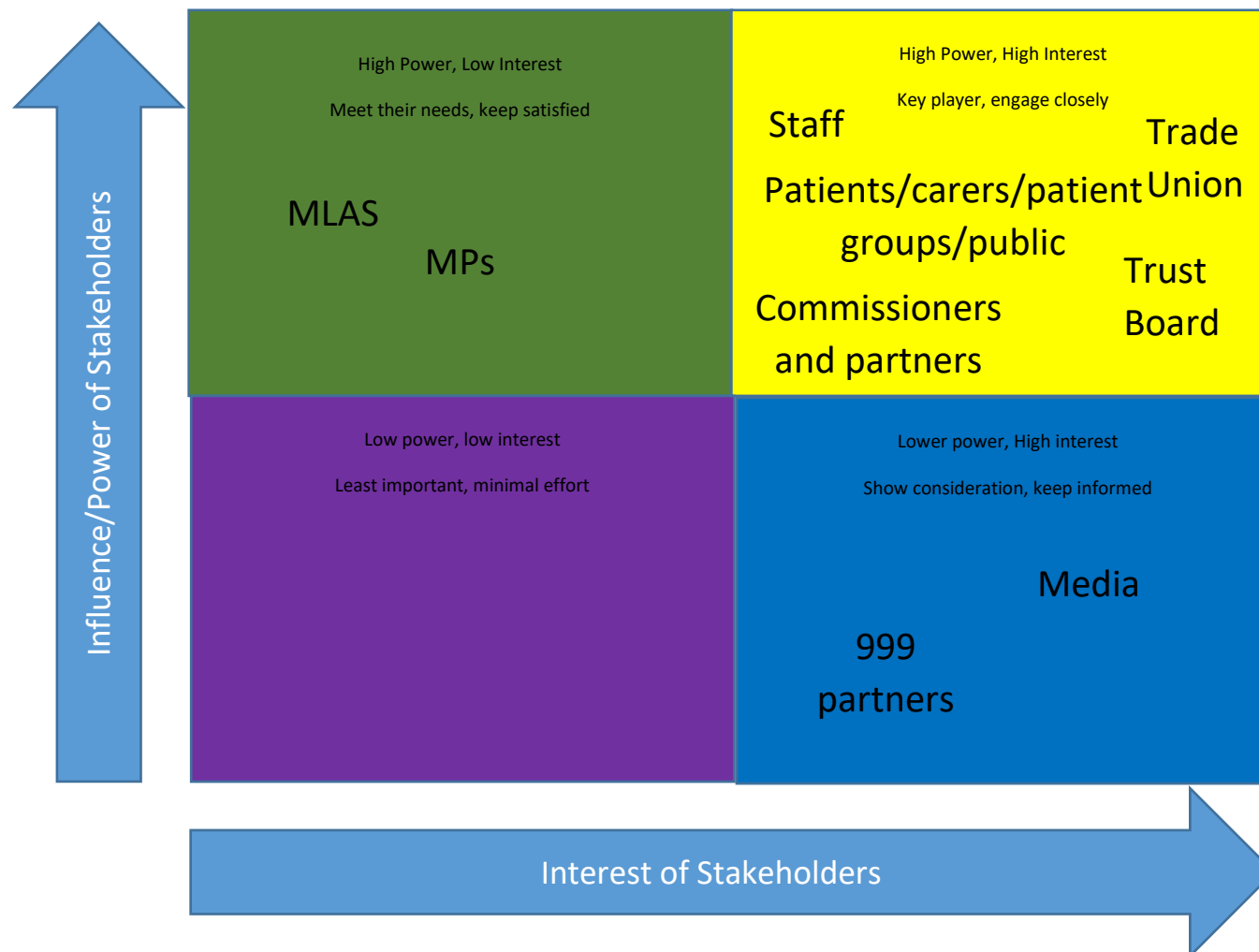
To achieve our communications and engagement objectives, NIAS communications will be:



Audience segmentation and stakeholders

The Trust has identified a number of key stakeholder groups each with different needs and interests in NIAS. Our communications will be tailored to best suit their requirements. Our Strategy to Transform has identified four particular points of focus for communications and engagement, each with a number of key stakeholders as identified below:

Stakeholder Power/Influence Matrix



Communications Channels

The Trust makes use of a number of communications channels to engage with internal and external stakeholders. The table below outlines each of those channels with a brief summary of its delivery and identification of the audience.

Channel	Summary	Audience
Face to face		
Staff events	Various events including, but not exclusively, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior manager workshops • Staff focus groups • TU engagement • Annual awards ceremony • Staff engagement sessions 	Internal
Committee meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust Board meetings • Regular Trust Board sub committees 	Public/Staff/Patients & carers
Internal groups and committees	Wide range of established internal groups and committees tasked with improving patient care through models of co-production and co-design	Public/Staff/Patients & carers
External groups and committees	Wide range of established ambulance and HSC fora along with other emergency services and inter departmental fora	Commissioners/ partners/UK ambulance/999 services
Listening events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient events under PPI and Patient Engagement work streams • Political representative engagement • HSC QI Network • NICON 	Public/Patients and carers Political reps HSC Partners
Online/digital		
Trust website	The Trusts website which hosts corporate information, published information e.g. Trust Board papers and Annual Reports, news and relevant external info.	External
Sharepoint	The Trusts intranet (SharePoint) has been upgraded to encourage greater use by staff	Internal
Social media	Corporate presence on most popular social media platforms to promote the work of the Trust	External
Email	The most used/overused method of communication within the Trust.	All audiences

Written		
Annual Report	Corporate publication	External
Annual Quality Report	Corporate publication	External
Board Papers	Corporate publication to service public Trust Board meetings	External
Internal newsheets	These include; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NIAS news • C Ex Updates • Daily Updates 	Internal
Media releases/ statements	Reactive and proactive engagement with local, regional and, at times, national media outlets re; emerging issues	External
Public Information leaflets	A range of public information leaflets	External

Roles and Responsibilities

Communication and Engagement is the responsibility of all within the Trust and, as such, every member of staff has a role to play in the implementation of the Communications and Engagement Strategy to ensure the development of a positive communications and engagement culture within the Trust and with other partners. Communications engagement impacts on our reputation and public confidence in the organisation.

The Senior Management Team will promote and support the aims and objectives of the Communications and Engagement Strategy through their engagement with staff, patients and other stakeholders.

The Director of Planning, Performance and Corporate Services will be the lead Director for Communications and Engagement within the Trust, reporting on same at organisational and Trust Board level.

The Media and Communications Manager will take lead responsibility for facilitating and promoting good communications within the Trust. The Media and Communications Manager will also be responsible for the provision of professional advice and support to the Board and other Trust representatives.

The Media and Communications Manager will be responsible for the implementation, monitoring and review of the strategy.

Specific responsibilities

All Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To maintain an awareness of key issues affecting the Trust • Communicate suggestions for service/operational or strategic changes where appropriate • Engage in communications training as appropriate • To seek relevant information from line managers • Highlight areas of concern to line managers or Media and Communications Manager • To participate in suggestion and feedback schemes • To make use of communication processes provided by the Trust. • To participate in available internal communications and staff engagement opportunities • To ensure that all communications is produced and delivered to an excellent standard • To refrain from inappropriate communication which is likely to damage the reputation of, or to undermine public confidence in, the Trust
Trust Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Endorsing and adopting the Communications Strategy and supporting communications activities • Ensuring that clear channels of communications with the Trust's stakeholders have been established • Establishing/reviewing appropriate processes to ensure that such channels operate effectively in practice and are embedded within Trust activities and culture
Chief Executive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To oversee the embedding of a strategic approach to communications and engagement • To develop key organisational messages with the management team and to ensure consistent support for their dissemination • To reinforce the role of communications and engagement as a key management tool and competency • To lead by example in terms of consistently being a communications role model making time required for effective communications and engagement with internal and external stakeholders

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To lead at Board level in the implementation and monitoring of communications and engagement processes • To give confidence to the communications and engagement process • Act as spokesperson for the Trust as required, working with Media and Communications Manager on all official statements to, and interviews with, the media.
Chair of Trust Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To represent the views of the Board to the general public as per Northern Ireland Ambulance Service HSC Trust Management Statement section 3.8.2
Directors and managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To promote a strategic approach to communications and engagement • To promote and ensure effective systems are in place for two-way staff communication and engagement within area of responsibility, including ensuring that information is cascaded effectively • To lead by example in terms of consistently being a communications and engagement leader/role model, making time required for effective communications and engagement with internal and external stakeholders • To ensure that key issues are communicated to relevant staff in a manner which is timely and accurate • To seek the guidance of the Media and Communications Manager when communicating corporate messages and in the use of the most appropriate process. • Act as spokesperson for the Trust as required, working with Media and Communications Manager on all official statements to, and interviews with, the media. • To ensure consistency in style of communications • To ensure that opportunities for feedback are afforded to all staff.

**Media and
Communications
Manager**

- Provide expert advice on communications and engagement issues to projects and teams across the Trust
- Promote best practice in communications and engagement to all parts of the Trust and lead on identifying innovation to facilitate improvement
- Manage production of core publications and events
- Manage Trust visual identity
- Ensure processes are in place to respond to media queries and to provide communications and engagement support during Major Incidents
- Ensure effective channels are in place to communicate and engage with all stakeholders and to regularly evaluate same.

Monitoring/Evaluation

Monitoring of the plan will include but will not be restricted to;

- Communications survey results
- Communications forum feedback
- Social media and digital communications metrics (hits, likes, views etc.)
- Media monitoring
- Partner/Stakeholder feedback
- Progress reports to SEMT
- Trust Board assurance framework;

and will be delivered through annual communications plans monitored through the performance framework process. An overview of the content of these plans is attached at **Appendix 2**.

APPENDIX 1 – Success factors

The “*NIAS Communications and Engagement Strategy; 2021-2026*” will seek to build on five established factors of success:

1. Embed a strategic approach to communications and engagement.

“Communications and engagement” is a strategic function; delivering an assurance that the voices of patients, the public and staff are heard and that they are involved right at the very beginning.

Delivering success in partnership requires that communications and engagement are placed at the heart of decision-making and system transformation. In practical terms, this means that communications and engagement specialists should be involved in strategy development and implementation, included in conversations at an early stage and embedded into system transformation workstreams.

The strategic value of communications and engagement functions is often recognized in moments of crisis but quickly shifted to being seen as purely operational once the crisis has been resolved.

Ignoring the strategic contribution of communications and engagement runs the risk of undermining the ability to deliver transformative changes

2. Adopt systematic approaches to continuous relationship building.

To make these partnerships work, it is critical to recognise the strategic importance of relationship building among the partners and the influencing skills required of leaders at all levels.

Delivering success requires building strong relationships on a planned, systematic and continuous basis. Part of the answer here is getting governance and co-production processes right so that all can see clearly how decisions are made – transparency breeds trust.

Relationship building and influencing skills are critical. Engagement and communication leaders often have good experience, knowledge and expertise to help leaders across the system do this successfully.

3. Develop a shared vision and narrative and make it real.

A compelling narrative that partners buy into and which is well understood and supported by the public and staff is among the hallmarks of a successful organisation. A shared narrative and vision is a 'must-do' for effective communication and engagement at organisational level.

There should be one story and many messengers. It is important for all partnerships, and staff within them, to have responsibility for owning and communicating the narrative and making it relevant.

It is a key deliverable that the narrative should be made to stick, demonstrating through action that it is real. Communicating intention is one thing but stories of hope matter and staff in particular want to know they are doing the things that will make a difference. Articulating stories that demonstrate steady improvements in the lives of service users, communities and staff is among the most important roles that communications and engagement leaders play.

4. Embed open, transparent and two-way engagement approaches

NIAS, like all HSC bodies, belongs to the communities and the people we serve. History shows that health and care plans often succeed or fail on the strength of their engagement with staff and communities. A criticism exists for only engaging with the public on a piecemeal basis – about a particular service for example. This cycle needs to be broken and with a model of continuous engagement adopted.

A broad and strategic engagement strategy is important to build confidence and trust. This should encompass a focus on transparency and the provision of clear public information about visions, plans and progress.

It should involve working in partnership with local patient fora and the voluntary and community sector, politicians and local councilors; designing services in partnership with service users, carers and staff; reaching out to the unengaged, particular Section 75 groups.

Staff are often cited as the key audience and steps should be taken to ensure they understand the collective ambition. Using the collective experience and insight of staff to drive transformation is essential – they know what works. While leaders recognise the benefit of bringing these voices to the fore, more remains to be done at every level.

Staff are also citizens of their local communities – they have both a professional and personal stake in how services are run. They will play a key role in the public’s understanding of what is going on across the health and care system

Innovative processes will be key in delivering the communications and engagement strategy as one size never fits all - enabling people to be part of the conversation, decision and solutions is mission critical to the task of transformation.

5. Develop engagement and communication leadership capacity and expertise (take from boardroom)

Partnership communications and engagement is a complex, multifaceted task, requiring excellent leadership. The need is for strategic thinkers, strong relationship builders and expert story tellers that understand the nuances and commitments required to contribute to and sustain effective partnership working.

The task is to ensure that the right resource is in place across the partnership regardless of where the capacity and expertise formally sits.

It is important to develop the structure and resourcing of both functions and networks, ensuring roles are clear and that they have the right leadership, capacity and expertise. This should include strategic thinkers, strong relationship builders and expert story tellers that understand the nuances and commitments that are required to contribute to and sustain effective partnership working.

Diversity of thought and leadership will be critical in these roles.

The adoption of these factors into all that we do as part of our “planning for tomorrow” will enable NIAS to build effective partnerships, providing greater opportunity in achieving the aim of joined up care and, ultimately improved population health.

The key message is that communication and engagement are key enablers of partnership working playing a key role in achieving stronger relationships, more open and transparent ways of working, greater trust, more engaged staff and, ultimately, better outcomes for the public.

APPENDIX 2 – Strategy delivery through communications and engagement plans

The Communications and Engagement Strategy 2021 – 26 will be delivered through detailed annual plans agreed by the Director of Planning, Performance and Corporate Services and the Media and Communications Manager. These plans will contain developmental plans of how, when and to whom we will communicate key messages relating to NIAS. The plans will retain a degree of dynamism to facilitate accelerated progress, or otherwise of each of the identified work-streams. The plans will be centred around key messages aimed at:

- Promoting corporate developments including successful implementation of elements of “Strategy to Transform”

- Promoting NIAS achievements across our range of services
- Raising the profile of workforce developments and performance activity
- Raising awareness of community and stakeholder engagement
- Profiling increased use of ACPs as alternative to ED attendance
- Enhance public awareness of NIAS commitment to clinical excellence

These key messages will be delivered through a number of projects or initiatives designed to assist the process of embedding a culture of communications and engagement as detailed below for Year 1 with each annual plan building upon the success of its predecessor.

Initiative	Timescale	Implementation process
Staff briefing	Year 1	The SMT of the Trust has committed to the implementation of an interactive staff briefing to include details on Operational news; clinical updates; health and safety and SOP introduction or updates. After an initial period of bedding-in, the views of staff will be sought as to the effectiveness of this as a communications tool and comments taken on board to make the briefing more accessible
Digital platforms as communications channels	Year 1	1. Work will be undertaken in the first quarter of the year to develop a social media strategy which will deliver a real time opportunity for staff to engage.

		<p>Greater use will be made of social media channels, existing and additional as appropriate, with opportunities for staff involvement as Trust social media activists.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Continually monitor and review the Trust's website to ensure that it is up to date and relevant and a trusted source of information. 3. Upgrade Trust's Sharepoint site following which it will be continually monitored and reviewed to ensure that it is up to date and relevant and a trusted source of information.
Stakeholder engagement	Year 1	<p>As NIAS seeks greater opportunities to adopt a more meaningful partnership approach involving key stakeholders in terms of designing future services, and improving existing service delivery, it is important that communications processes are in place to ensure regular flow of information. Urgent consideration will be given to how best a regular bulletin can be developed which highlights examples of best practice in terms of clinical excellence and partnership working.</p>
Internal Communications	Year 1	<p>To deliver meaningful staff engagement on a partnership basis a Communications Forum will be established to consider, propose and review internal communications on a regular identified basis,</p>

APPENDIX 3 Strategic Context:

Health and Social Care in NI

NIAS continues to operate within an ever changing healthcare environment where developments within acute services and urgent care impact directly on our ability to deliver a sustainable service.

In October 2016, a report commissioned by DoH and delivered by the **“Expert Panel”** was published under the title of **“Systems not Structures: Changing Health and Social Care”**. The Minister of Health then launched a 10 year plan in response to the report. **“Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together”** is a vision of healthcare which puts the patient at the centre of services, providing them and, importantly, staff with a voice in the change programme like never before through a system of co-production. To deliver as part of the HSC system and as an individual organisation NIAS has embraced the vision outlined in this strategy.

These changes are happening at a time when NIAS is implementing its strategy to transform. Much work has been undertaken which has identified the requirement for increased staffing levels to deliver on the year-on-year increases in demand. The most significant development within our transformation journey to date has been the introduction of a new Clinical Response Model which was introduced in 2019, following an extensive consultation and engagement process.

To seek to embed and maintain the highest standards of communications and engagement is a particularly important undertaking during periods of organisational change in order to facilitate an understanding of the Trusts direction among staff and external stakeholders and future partners.

During times of transition, it is also imperative that NIAS maintains its reputation and public confidence in the Service. The foundation of both are based on public interaction with our representatives, particularly, but not exclusively, our frontline staff. Supporting all staff with a proactive, fit-for-purpose communications and engagement strategy will deliver a platform for delivering

improved patient care through a motivated, empowered and involved workforce which is assured that its voice is one of those being heard in the planning phases of changes to service delivery.

As such, the Communications and Engagement Strategy, in recognising the importance of culture as perhaps the singularly most important asset for corporate communications, will seek to support the delivery of the Trust's vision and values as delivered through the collective leadership programme and co-production approaches envisaged within Strategy to Transform.

The priorities and objectives of the **NIAS Communications and Engagement Strategy** will remain aligned to:

- *The Northern Ireland Programme for Government (2016-21) which contains strategic outcomes, touching on every aspect of government, including, of particular relevance to NIAS, the attainment of good health within confident and peaceful communities*
- *Making Life Better 2012-23 which aims to create the conditions for individuals and communities to achieve full health and well-being potential*
- *Quality 2020 which provided an agenda on safety, effectiveness and person centred services which has informed our Strategy to Transform*
- *Health and Wellbeing 2026; Delivering Together, which delivers on the recommendations emanating from the 2014 Donaldson Report (The Right Time, The Right Place) and the 2016 Bengoa Report (Systems not Structures), challenges all providers across the HSC system to work together and with other partners, external to HSC, to support people to stay well, ; physically mentally and emotionally while providing more treatment and care in the community setting.*
- *No More Silos 2020 which focusses on a greater integration of services based on lessons learned from the HSC response to the Covid19 Pandemic,*
- *The O'Hara Report (Report of the Inquiry into Hyponatraemia- Related Deaths" Recommendation 72 which recommends Trust Board scrutiny of written external communication*
- *Francis Report 2013 recommendations re openness, transparency and candour requirements on all Health Trusts*

Our priorities and objectives will dynamically align themselves to future strategic developments within HSC.