**MHA+ Communications Strategy 2020/21**

The Communications Strategy for the new Midlands Highway Alliance Plus (MHA+) sets out the Alliance’s plans for communicating with its key internal and external audiences over the next 12 months and how communications will support the delivery of other key strategies and developments.

The Executive Board of MHA+ is asked to:

a) Comment on the Communications Strategy

b) Approve the strategy, subject to any suggested changes or revisions.

**1. Executive Summary**

The new Midlands Highway Alliance Plus is the amalgamation of the Midlands Highway Alliance & MSIG and the West Midlands Highway Alliance to form one membership organisation to be launched in April 2020. The new Alliance offers the combined benefits of the three organisations; to help its members seek efficiency savings through collaboration, share best practice and promote networking opportunities. It also offers procurement savings through access to framework agreements through tiered membership.

All existing members of WMHA, MHA & MSIG are eligible to be members of the new Alliance. Membership will also be open to any authority in the country wishing to join.

Strategic governance of the Alliance is provided by a director-level Executive Board and a Programme Board. The Programme Board will assist the Executive Board in the governance of the Alliance and promote and facilitate networking and the sharing best practice. The Executive Board, assisted by the Programme Board, will set and review high level performance targets and the implementation of the Alliance Annual Business Plan. The new Alliance is self-funding through its membership fees and operates independently. Currently, Leicestershire County Council acts as the lead authority for the Midlands Highways Alliance and employs a number of funded posts as outlined in the Business Plan. Paid Officer time is also funded by the MSIG part of the Alliance which is currently hosted by Derbyshire County Council.

This strategy sets out how communications and engagement activities will support MHA+ from February 2020 to end of March 2021 to focus on:

* Launching the new Alliance and its benefits to members
* Using different media and messages so that there is proactive communication taking place every month, observing the rules of GDPR.
* Using surveys and polls to be utilised to generate more publicity. E.g. “15 authorities agree not enough investment is being put into roads compared to HS2”
* Thought leadership and links with wider issues on the national horizon of a strategic nature using the expert knowledge of the group
* Developing articles and case studies demonstrating to share best practice and innovation
* Using appropriate language that will vary according to the audience and the different groups.

In summary, a great deal of the communications carried out externally already use digital channels. This strategy continues to build on the success and growing reputation of all three alliances to reach out to a wider audience. The development of a new website will be reviewed and optimised with additional social media channels implemented. There will also be more focus on placing features and case studies in national and industry media particularly highlighting our innovations and sharing of best practice. This will help to build and cement our reputation across a much wider audience as a leading player in key areas.

This strategy includes a much greater focus on stakeholder and partner engagement and communications with a proactive approach to building collaborative partnerships

This strategy has been designed to meet the needs of a challenging and changeable environment and will be regularly reviewed to ensure it is meeting the needs of the Alliance.

**2. Introduction and context**

Communications is a core function for the Alliance to support the Business Plan with a strong programme of activities. This strategy builds on, and also encompasses, the previous communications strategy agreed by the MHA & MSIG Executive Board in 2019, but recognises that the Alliance is a reformation of the WMHA, MHA & MSIG forming a new Alliance. The emphasis therefore for the Communications Strategy is the launch of the new Alliance to promote its benefits for the highways sector and attract membership for the alliance to be self-funding.

Core to the Communications Strategy is the expectation and recognition that the Alliance will need to embrace social media and other digital platforms as a core channel of communication and interaction through Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn.

**3. Vision and Objectives**

Communications is a constantly evolving and innovating field and the Alliance will need to use the most effective means and channels of communication and engagement. Through effective communications and engagement, MHA + can influence, inspire, explain, collaborate and enhance our reputation and support the delivery of the Alliance’s vision, strategic objectives and five year plan which is explained in the Business Plan.

**4. Communications and Engagement Objectives**

1. Provide robust, engaging methods of communication to enable the Alliance to achieve its vision, corporate objectives and strategic plans.
2. To continue to engage members and stakeholders through timely and relevant communications.
3. Reach out to multiple audiences in a cost effective way by maximising use of online and digital communications channels.
4. To evaluate and measure the effectiveness of all communications and engagement and adapt and innovate when necessary.

**These objectives will be met by:**

1. Delivering a PR and communication plan to launch the new alliance to generate awareness of the new combined Alliance and its benefits to attract sustainable membership.
2. Implementing an ongoing programme of communication using a variety of different media to engage members and to keep them informed of events and activities taking place in the new MHA in order to share best practice, provide networking opportunities and increase opportunities for collaborative working.
3. Promoting the brand and partnership of the new Alliance on a national basis, especially with the Department for Transport as an exemplar of best practice with industry recognition.
4. Promoting and increase attendance and participation (i.e. not necessarily attendance in person, this could include Skype sessions for discussion and sharing of info etc.) for groups, events, meetings and task groups.
5. Launch and promotion of case studies, best practice and new products – for example, adding MSIG’s log of efficiencies and benefits as mini/bite sized case studies.
6. Identifying ways we can continually improve our communication methods to both engage new and retain existing members.
7. Promoting the achievements of the new Alliance through combined channels of communications and media: e.g. social media, the annual event, annual report, website and newsletters etc.

**5. Key Messages**

* The new MHA+ is an exemplar Alliance, leading the way in public services for sharing and promoting best practice leading to efficiencies and procurement savings and a better customer experience of the highway sector.
* The new MHA+ is committed to collaborative working and sharing best practice to expand the alliance.
* Membership offers real benefits to the public sector by:
  + Introducing a number of enhancements by incorporating MSIG and WMHA into the new Alliance. These additional features include; the use of Light Peer Reviews, the integral nature of CQC and the NHT Network for benchmarking metrics on a national basis with other Local Authorities and access to specialist highways-related online discussion forums.
  + Delivering value for money via providing real opportunities for economies of scale and cost savings, whilst providing a first-class quality service to residents and all highway users
  + improving the speed of design and delivery of highway schemes
  + sharing skills and expertise
  + offering quality, trusted resources for the design and delivery of schemes and training opportunities by working with the private sector through a series of established framework contracts
  + Succession Planning in the form of apprenticeships and graduates into the industry

**5. Audience and stakeholders**

Public Sector:

• Highway authorities (shire and unitary)

• Councils’ elected members (CMR’s, Portfolio Holders, Leaders of Councils, Divisional Members), MP’s and DfT civil servants and Government Ministers

• Influencers and decision makers for procurement

• Individuals working directly on projects i.e. engineers.

• Educational establishments – such as the Leicestershire Education Development Council

• Local Government Association

• Sector groups and other alliances such as ADEPT, UKRLG, LCRIG and SWHA etc.

Media:

• Trade press

• National Gov media

• National, regional and Local press

• Skills / Education media

• MSF2 & MSF3 Contractors

• Current Term Maintenance contractors

• New Contractors

• Sub-contractors

• Consultants

• Skills sector

• Highways Industry

• Construction Skills

• Professional services providers

• Utilities

• NHT/APSE/RAC/ALARM (AIA) – i.e. Industry benchmarking groups

Other:

• Public

• Other related groups on a project basis e.g. residents associations.

**6. Communication channels:**

• Events, including main annual event in June 2020

• Workshops

• Media relations and press releases

• Project meetings & task group meetings

• New MHA+ website

• E-newsletters/bulletins

• Social media channels (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and LinkedIn)

• Annual report

• Case studies

• Briefing notes (photo opportunities)

• Efficiencies and benefits log

• Promotional materials where required

• Attendance and speaking at national and regional conferences and groups such as UKRLG, ADEPT, FHRC etc

• Develop the use of polls and surveys

Currently there are three separate websites reflecting the three former organisations. These will need to be consolidated and relaunched into a new website for the new Alliance using a phased approach and as a separate website project. There is the opportunity to rationalise these websites by using the same website platform as used by the NHT Network which has the functionality for public access and closed user group access protected by password security. The new website will need to:

• Be easy and intuitive to navigate

• Have an appointed person to be responsible for managing the content and its refresh

• Be an integral part of the Communications Strategy and Plan

• Retain all key features currently available to members of MHA, WMHA & MSIG

• Have the functionality to create a resource library.

• A member login private area

Social media such as twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube continue to change how everyone accesses and shares information and these channels will need to be reviewed and embraced by the Alliance. These channels can provide an excellent platform for showcasing achievements, best practice and key messages.

Evaluation and investment in a mailing platform would allow the Alliance to be able to promote messages across a range of channels using its website and social media channels including email across a single platform.

**7.Communication Priorities**

• Agreement of the new logo and strapline by February 2020

* Amalgamation with WMHA by April 2020

• Launch of new MHA website by March 2021

• PR launch of new Alliance in April 2020

• Annual report(s) published by the end June 2020

• Annual event – TBC in June

• Awards – enter and promote any awards received directly by the MHA- and their involvement in awards received by partners

• Improve engagement with MHA members through e-newsletters and event updates • Continued promotion of the Learning Management System (LMS)

• Develop the new MHA’s social media presence via Twitter and new LinkedIn page

• Developing case studies

• Business Plan – publicised in March 2020

• Development and expansion of Skills Community including LMS and training courses

• Review of technology such as CRM and mass mailing software for profiling database and emailing communications.

**8. Resources**

**Funded Posts:**

* Leics CC: Communications Officer support (2 days per week)
* Leics CC: Design support (jobs charged directly)
* Leics CC: MHA
* Derbyshire CC: MSIG

Voluntary Assistance offered by Adele Clarkson at Worcestershire County Council, together with various participation of resources from all member authorities from time to time.

**9. Metrics and Evaluation**

Evaluation should be regarded as an integral and continuous stage in the communications process and is vital if we are to understand what works and what doesn’t and whether our messages are reaching the right audiences. Evaluation also helps to:

* focus effort; keeping the important in perspective.
* demonstrates effectiveness; showing the value of good communications.
* ensures efficiency; so investment is used where needed.
* enables continuous improvement; helping us become better communicators.

The strategy’s activities will need to be evaluated to ensure that the emphasis and agreed priorities

have delivered by measuring the:

• Number of membership sign-up to the new Alliance (new and existing members)

• Annual conference attendance

• Attendance figures for meetings, events and task groups.

• Number of users engaging with work stream leads specifically for documents or searching on SharePoint

• Number of case studies completed and downloaded

• Response to annual questionnaire/survey or focus group meeting

• Launch of monthly email newsletter using mass mailing software.

• Number of discussion board items posted and replies received

• Web statistics for the new website

• Engagement with e-bulletin, click-throughs

• Potential use of CRM to evaluate database of membership

• Press coverage

• Number of emails sent and opened

Feedback:

• Feedback/surveys after events

• Case study participation