



Communications Strategy

Draft #5 – March 2021

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Message from the Mayor

Content pending.

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Message from the Chief Administration Officer

Content pending.

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Message from the Community Communications Advisory Committee

Content pending.

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Introduction

The Town of The Blue Mountains is committed to engaging and listening to all residents and stakeholders, including full-time, part-time, seasonal, rural and urban, through a respectful, informed and ongoing dialogue. Business owners and visitors are important contributors to the conversation as well. This Communications Strategy lays the foundation for community engagement over the next four years.

With the assistance of the Community Communications Advisory Committee (CCAC), a public survey and online engagement session was conducted to help guide and inform this actionable Strategy that will encourage and strengthen communication amongst the Town of The Blue Mountains' many communities and staff.

The Strategy is a roadmap. Progress will be tracked and evaluated as each goal is achieved. Best practices embedded in the process will be applied to the next. Thus, the Strategy will provide a solid foundation for all future communication initiatives as it addresses a number of key challenges and opportunities, including:

- Simplifying content and focus on writing in plain language
- Improving customer service standards and response times
- Communicating early and often with a proactive approach
- Rebuilding the Town's website with a new and improved user experience
- Building a robust email database
- Enhancing the public survey process and experience
- Increasing Council and Staff face-to-face engagement with residents
- Leveraging social media
- Launching a quarterly, print and digital Town newsletter
- Clearly communicating Town priorities
- Prioritizing AODA Accessibility Compliance

The Strategy's four key objectives will be met through a variety of clearly mapped-out tactics. Together, the objectives and tactics will create a more meaningful and open relationship between residents, stakeholders and the Town – a relationship built on a foundation of respect, listening and active engagement.

In alignment with the 2020-2024 Corporate Strategic Plan, the Communications Strategy follows the Town's core operating values of achieving full transparency and accountability while aiming to support the communications goal set out by the Community Communications Advisory Committee, which is to foster ***'an engaged community in which every voice is heard.'***

Alignment with the Corporate Strategic Plan

The 2020-2024 Corporate Strategic Plan outlines four strategic priorities, which included a priority specific to communications and engagement. The Corporate Strategic Plan highlights the importance of enhancing communication efforts through a variety of tactics.

Corporate Strategic Plan Vision Statement

An approachable Council and Staff serving an engaged and well-informed community

1. Communication and Engagement

We will enhance communication and engagement between Town Staff, Town residents and stakeholders.

2. Organizational Excellence

We will continually seek out ways to improve the internal organization of Town Staff and the management of Town assets.

3. Community

We will protect and enhance the community feel and the character of the Town, while ensuring the responsible use of resources and restoration of nature.

4. Quality of Life

We will foster a high quality of life for full-time and part-time residents of all ages and stages, while welcoming visitors.

Communication Goal

The Communications Strategy is aligned with the Corporate Strategic Plan. The Strategy has a single goal that underscores the importance of listening and proactive communication that includes all residents in The Blue Mountains community.

An engaged community in which every voice is heard

Communication Objectives

The Communications Strategy is based on four objectives. The objectives are interdependent and linked to the Corporate Strategic Plan and its vision. The objectives were derived from the SWOT Analysis detailed on the next page.

As the Strategy is implemented and the objectives are realized, they will strengthen one another and collectively help achieve the communication goal.

Through establishing a strong communication baseline, the Town will enhance its presence and authority as being the primary source for information on Town news, which will help to address the spread and concern of misinformation. In addition, through strategic communication efforts that values and prioritizes flexibility, courtesy, and respect, the Town will foster a true culture of active listening and two-way engagement with the community.

The following chart details the objectives and how they will be realized:

Objectives	Means of Achievement
#1: Establish a communication baseline	Define standards against which progress will be measured
#2: Cultivate communication excellence	Consistently deliver all Town communication in a factual, transparent, relevant and timely manner.
#3: Develop creative content that enhances all communication activities	Bring creativity and innovation to all aspects of how the Town engages residents across all media platforms
#4: Foster engagement and uphold public trust	Actively listen and engage residents to instill public trust and confidence

SWOT Analysis

As a primary step, the Town and the Community Communications Advisory Committee conducted a SWOT analysis to evaluate and provide valuable insight and reflection into the current state of the Town's communications efforts.

A detailed chart showing the action items against each item in the SWOT Analysis has been included at the end of this document as Appendix B – Detailed SWOT Analysis.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Council and Staff dedicated to strengthening communication and public engagement• Clearly identified communication standards, protocols and workflow processes• Engaged Community Communications Advisory Committee• Engaged media and community email distribution lists	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of engagement and participation amongst hard-to-reach residents• Selective resident engagement with participation focused on specific topics of interest• Reliance on surveys as an engagement tool• Lack of face-to-face engagement with residents• Low number of email addresses
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase community engagement to foster transparency and public trust• Increase community involvement by engaging hard-to-reach residents• Make Communications Division part of all Town project and initiative planning• Leverage local knowledge and resident engagement to increase transparency• Increase communication with tourists and visitors• Explore new methods of public engagement• Leverage social media• Strengthen youth engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Audiences are inundated with communications and marketing from other organizations resulting in engagement fatigue• Misinformation on social media• Lack of understanding between different levels of government and their priorities and mandates• Unforeseen issues that impact project timelines and resources

Residents and Communities

The Town of The Blue Mountains is well-known as a community of communities that includes large rural areas, hamlets, agricultural villages and towns. Each community is home to a variety of residents from diverse backgrounds:

- Permanent Full-Time Residents
- Year-Round Part-Time Residents
- Seasonal Residents
- Tourists and Visitors
- Business Owners & Employees
- Groups, Associations and Service Clubs

The Town of The Blue Mountains is expected to see steady growth. In addition, there has been an unanticipated influx of new residents and visitors brought on from the COVID-19 pandemic. Through significant growth, understanding how various audiences receive and engage with information is even more critical in developing and delivering the Town's message and connecting with hard-to-reach audiences.

In addition, the Town communicates regularly with a variety of media outlets and government agencies.

Thus, the Town employs multiple tools and channels to deliver its messages and news. In the first year of the Strategy, research will be undertaken to provide insights into the best means of engaging each of the groups outlined above. Over the term of the Strategy, the learnings will be refined and built upon.

Our Accessibility Commitment

The Town of The Blue Mountains is committed to building an inclusive community, with all of its communication and engagement deliverables accessible to all residents. The Town also aims to ensure that all individuals have access to programs and services in a way that respects the dignity and independence of persons.

The Communication Division strives to ensure that accessibility standards are achieved in all communication material through ongoing staff training, proactive monitoring and scheduled evaluation and review.

The Town supports the goals of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and has in place established policies, practices and procedures that are consistent with AODA standards. These include accessible customer service, information and communication; employment; transportation and the design of public spaces, that are consistent with the core principles as outlined in the AODA- Dignity, Independence, Integration and Equal Opportunity.

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Communication Department Roles and Responsibilities

The Communication Division currently consists of three full-time staff members, with two additional full-time positions scheduled to start in July 2021. The Division reports to the Chief Administrative Officer and is responsible for leading the Town's communication efforts while supporting department-specific communication projects and activities.

Staff Position	Key Responsibilities
Manager of Communications & Economic Development	Leads the management of all external and internal communication efforts; seeks new means of community engagement; keeps the Strategic Plan up to date; leads the Town's Economic Development activities.
Communications & Economic Development Coordinator	Plans and implements external and internal communication efforts.
Communications Coordinator	Plans and implements external and internal communication efforts related to capital and municipal infrastructure projects.
Communications Coordinator <i>*Scheduled to start July 2021</i>	Plans and implements external and internal communication efforts related to planning and development projects.
Communications Assistant <i>*Scheduled to start July 2021</i>	Supports external and internal communication efforts.

The Communication Division plays the central role in the Town's communication efforts. The Division acts as the 'internal specialist' that helps various departments create and implement communication campaigns to engage and share news and information with residents and stakeholders. The Division is also responsible for supporting Town Departments with public engagement efforts, including surveys and public engagement sessions to ensure consistency of standard deliverables.

Day-to-day communication activities include:

- Strategic Communications
- Community Engagement, including staging Public Sessions and Townhall Meetings
- Media Relations
- Issues Management and Crisis Communications
- Website Management
- Social Media Management
- Advertising & Promotional Material
- Town Brand Standards

The Communication Divisions Toolkit

To meet the diverse needs of residents and stakeholders, the Town employs a number of communication tools and platforms. The list is subject to constant review and is modified as circumstances change or dictate.

The breadth of tools encourages flexibility. The tools can be used in a multitude of combinations – spontaneously or in a measured manner, depending on the need and to whom the message is being targeted. The list of tools currently being employed includes:

- Newspaper Advertisements
- Municipal Information Guide
- Tax Bill Newsletter
- Direct Mail
- Hand Delivered Notices
- Roadside Signage
- Town Website
- Social Media
- Email & Email Newsletters
- TV Screens
- Digital Advertising
- Press Releases
- Town Hall Meetings
- Public Information Centres & Public Meetings
- Surveys & Polls
- Focus Groups & Workshops

Town Website

The Town's website (www.thebluemountains.ca) serves as its primary communication tool and is often the first touchpoint for residents and stakeholders. The website is in the process of being rebuilt. The CCAC – and through it, the community at large – will be integral to the buildout as it takes place through 2021.

Upon relaunch, the website will:

- Improve the end-user experience;
- Feature a new and improved design and functionality;
- Employ streamlined and simplified site navigation;
- Improved content searchability;
- Full AODA accessibility and security compliance; and
- Enhanced and simplified staff processes.

Email Newsletters and E-Services

As the Town's website is under development, plans to improve the email newsletter and communication services will be implemented. Central to this is a professionally led campaign to build and maintain the Town's email address database. This is key to driving the traffic to the Town website.

Steps to Success

The Strategy's objectives will be achieved by following a number of clearly defined tactics over its five-year term. While the tactics are presented on a year-by-year basis, the Town recognizes the need for flexibility within the implementation of the plan.

All of the tactics are based on a combination of Staff and CCAC knowledge of the community and its residents, technology and its uses as a communication tool, respect for Town resources and best practices.

Having been put in place, each one of the tactics listed below will require Staff attention and resources.

2021 - Year One

1. Research and define resident/stakeholder personas to enable targeted engagement plans
2. Develop and implement Social Media strategy
3. Implement email address collection campaign
4. Launch quarterly, printed and mailed Town newsletter
5. Launch new corporate Town website
6. Evaluate public survey tool and engagement website
7. Establish standards for customer service
8. Develop communication work plans and review

2022 - Year Two

1. Hire research firm to assist with all Town surveys
2. Develop communication orientation package to onboard new staff and Council members
3. Develop department-specific explainer content (How To, Did You Know, Infographics, Videos)
4. Launch monthly e-newsletter
5. Develop issues management communications plan
6. Conduct Citizen Satisfaction survey as identified in the Corporate Strategic Plan

2023 - Year Three

1. Host monthly town hall community engagement sessions
2. Create new resident welcome package
3. Conduct media relations training for leadership & Council
4. Establish youth engagement opportunities through partnerships with local schools and other levels of government
5. Launch resident text message communications and emergency alert tool

2024 - Year Four

1. Launch municipal podcast to share news and information with residents
2. Launch pilot project with Town 'news boxes' located in high-traffic areas to assist with newsletter and Town survey distribution

2025 - Year Five

1. Purchase and improve use of digital screens/signage

Financial Operating Contingency

The following chart outlines the financial operating contingency that is required to implement the tactics outlined within the Strategy. The detailed financial breakdown of each tactic is included starting on page 18 within Appendix A: 2021 – 2025 Tactics and Deliverables.

It is important to highlight that many of the tactics contain ongoing costs that will be carried forward into future years to continue the delivery of the service. The cost of implementing each tactic was calculated based on the experience and understanding of staff and CCAC members, and through reviewing comparative projects and information provided by municipal partners.

These costs only represent a small percentage of the total annual communications budget for the Town. Consolidated communications costs are contained in the Town's annual budget. Changes are being implemented to improve the tracking and reporting of communications operating expenses and advertising expenses across Town departments.

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Total
One Time Cost	\$4,500	\$3,000	\$5,000	\$8,500	\$8,700	
Annual Addition	\$21,000	\$20,000	\$7,500	\$15,000	\$0	
Total *Includes one-time costs plus year-over-year annual additions	\$25,500	\$44,000	\$53,500	\$72,000	\$72,200	\$267,200

Measuring Success

To ensure the effectiveness of the Communications Strategy, each tactic will be tracked using the metrics below. At the end of the first year, results will be used to set a benchmark to track the success of communication efforts over the balance of the Strategy, assisting with the annual budget process and resource allocation.

Objective	Metrics
Establish a communications baseline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Email analytics (open rate and conversion rate) Number of email subscribers and average open/engagement rates Response time to resident inquiries Website analytics Social media analytics (i.e. engagement rate, impressions, likes/favourites, comments, shares/retweets, video views, optimal post times, number of followers/subscribers, traffic to website) Council/Committee/Meeting attendance Survey participation rate Identify opportunities for feedback Distribution of communication material/information Overall number of customer service inquiries Number of media releases Quantity of media coverage (i.e. number of news articles, radio segments, interviews, etc.) Number of phone inquiries to Town Staff Number of Town Hall in-person visits
Cultivate corporate communications excellence	
Develop creative content and enhance strategic communication efforts	
Foster engagement and uphold public trust	

Maintaining Progress

The following chart details how the Communication Department will work on its core responsibilities while assisting the other Town departments over the course of each year covered by this Strategy.

Timing	Action
Daily	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scan local media outlets for potential issues and coverage of Town happenings/events and send high-level update to members of SMT and Council (Daily News & Issues Scan) as necessary • Monitor social media accounts for resident inquiries/engagement and to ensure that the platforms are reaching target audiences effectively
Weekly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a high-level update on Town happenings through the weekly recap email subscribers • Staff website monitoring and updating information (i.e. top website pages, items prioritized on the homepage, urgent communication needs, etc.) • Communication Staff meetings to analyze the effectiveness of communication tools and strategic planning
Monthly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication Staff to meet with service area managers to ensure needs are being met and determine needs for improvement • Participating in monthly Community Communication Advisory Committee meeting to ensure communication needs are being met • Review Q&A document to assist staff in responding to public inquiries • Review website content, features and functionality, and menu navigation
Quarterly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting with Senior Management Team to provide an update on the progress of the Communication Strategy • Meeting with Town departments to ensure respective communication needs are being met • Update media and community distribution lists
Annually	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host annual meetings with each Town department to develop communication work plans • Review Town Notice Policy • Review use of online engagement tools • Local Media Review • Annual Communications Survey • Review Communications Strategy

Appendix A: 2021 – 2025 Tactics and Deliverables

The following section contains a detailed summary of each tactic. Using a variation of the RACI project management system (Responsible, Accountable, Consulting, Informing), each tactic details a specific deliverable date and estimated financial cost. In addition, each tactic details the department, division, committee or individual that is accountable, responsible or in a supporting role to oversee and guide the implementation of the tactic.

Legend

- CAO: Chief Administrative Officer
- CED: Communications and Economic Development Division
- CS: Community Services Department
- COUNCIL: Town of The Blue Mountains Council
- CCAC: Community Communications Advisory Committee
- ACC: Agricultural Advisory Committee

2021 Tactics

1. Research and define resident/stakeholder personas to enable targeted engagement plans

Accountable: CED		Responsible: CAO	Supporting: CCAC
Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved	
\$2,500	Q3 2021	Q4 2021	

2. Develop and implement social media strategy

Accountable: CED		Responsible: CAO	Supporting: CCAC
Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved	
\$2,000	Q1 2021	Q4 2021	

3. Implement email address collection campaign

Accountable: CED		Responsible: CAO	Supporting: CCAC
Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved	
Covered under 2020 CCAC Budget (\$25,000)	Q2 2021	Q4 2021	

4. Launch quarterly, printed and mailed Town newsletter

Accountable: CED

Responsible: CAO

Supporting: CCAC

Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
\$16,000 annually	Q3 2021	Quarterly

5. Launch new corporate Town website

Accountable: CED

Responsible: CAO

Supporting: CCAC

Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
\$110,000 approved in 2020 budget	Q1 2021	Q4 2021

6. Evaluate public survey tool and engagement website

Accountable: CED

Responsible: CAO

Supporting: CCAC

Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
\$0	Q2 2021	Q3 2021

7. Establish standards for customer service

Accountable: CAO

Responsible: COUNCIL

Supporting: SMT & CED

Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
\$0	Q2 2021	Q3 2021

8. Develop communication workplans and review

Accountable: CED

Responsible: CAO

Supporting: SMT

Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
\$0	Q2 2021	Q3 2021

2022 Tactics

1. Hire research firm to assist with all Town surveys

Accountable: CED	Responsible: CAO	Supporting: CCAC
Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
\$15,000 annually	Q2 2022	Q3 2022

2. Develop communications orientation package to onboard new staff and Council members

Accountable: CED	Responsible: CAO	Supporting: CCAC
Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
\$0	Q1 2022	Q3 2022

3. Develop general Town and department specific explainer content (ex- How to, Did you Know, Infographics, Videos, etc.)

Accountable: CED	Responsible: CAO	Supporting: CCAC
Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
\$5,000 annually	Q1 2022	Ongoing

4. Launch monthly e-newsletter

Accountable: CED	Responsible: CAO	Supporting: CCAC
Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
Software cost will be covered under website budget	Q1 2022	Monthly

5. Develop issues management communications plan

Accountable: CED	Responsible: CAO	Supporting: CCAC
Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
\$3,000	Q2 2022	Q3 2022

6. Conduct Citizen Satisfaction survey as identified in the Corporate Strategic Plan

Accountable: CED	Responsible: CAO	Supporting: CCAC
Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
Covered under CAO Budget	Q1 2022	Q1 2022

2023 Tactics

1. Host bi-monthly town hall community engagement sessions

Accountable: CED	Responsible: Council	Supporting: CCAC
Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
\$4,000 annually	Q1 2023	Bi-Monthly

2. Create new resident welcome package

Accountable: CED	Responsible: CAO	Supporting: CCAC & AAC
Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
\$2,500	Q1 2023	Q3 2023

3. Conduct media relations training for Senior Management Team and Council

Accountable: CED	Responsible: CAO	Supporting: CCAC
Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
\$2,500	Q1 2023	Every term of Council

4. Establish youth engagement opportunities through partnerships with local schools and other levels of government

Accountable: CED	Responsible: CAO	Supporting: CCAC
Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
\$0	Q1 2023	Q4 2023

5. Launch resident text message communications and emergency alert tool

Accountable: CED

Responsible: CAO

Supporting: CCAC

Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
\$3,500 annually	Q2 2023	Q4 2023

2024 Tactics

1. Launch municipal podcast to share news and information with residents

Accountable: CED

Responsible: CAO

Supporting: CCAC

Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
\$5,000	Q1 2024	Q4 2024

2. Launch pilot project with Town 'news boxes' located in high-traffic areas to assist with newsletter and Town survey distribution

Accountable: CED

Responsible: CAO

Supporting: CCAC

Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
\$3,500	Q1 2024	Q4 2024

2025 Tactics

1. Purchase and improve use of digital screens in Town facilities

Accountable: CED

Responsible: CAO

Supporting: CCAC & CS

Estimated Cost	Date Initiated	Date Achieved
\$8,700	Q1 2025	Q4 2025

Appendix B: Detailed SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Action Items
Council and Staff dedicated to strengthening communication and public engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase visibility • Enhance response times and standards • Continually improve and be proactive
Clearly identified communication standards, protocols and workflow processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share with public • Ensure staff trained
Engaged Community Communications Advisory Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage skills and experience • Deploy internally as needed • Seek out and act on advice
Engaged media and community email distribution lists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to develop partnerships • Leverage with breaking news or times of crisis

Weaknesses	Action Items
Lack of engagement and participation amongst hard-to-reach residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define resident personas • Use targeted communications (door hangers, direct mail, etc.) • Employ creativity (contests, photos, etc.) • Acknowledge that not all want to be engaged
Selective resident engagement with participation focused on specific topics of interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage participation • Ask “the engaged” to bring people along • Be forthright around deliverables
Reliance on surveys as an engagement tool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve survey tools and processes • Engage professional assistance
Lack of face-to-face engagement with residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue Town Hall meetings and community engagement sessions
Low number of email addresses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch email address collection campaign • Improve email system

Opportunities	Action Items
Improve and strengthen the Town Corporate Website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve design and layout • Focus on the end user experience • Ensure full accessibility compliance
Increase community engagement to foster transparency and public trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build email database and improve email subscription service • Launch printed and digital Town newsletters • Avoid use of “municipal-ese” and focus on plain language content • Strengthen public engagement website yourview.thebluemountains.ca
Increase community involvement by engaging hard-to-reach residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with local ski clubs, groups and associations to improve outreach
Make Communications Division part of all Town project and initiative planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen project planning and workplans

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide communications training to all Town staff • Proactive budgeting and resource allocation
Leverage local knowledge and resident engagement to increase transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek feedback • Encourage resident participation at Town gatherings
Increase communication with tourists and visitors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage exploreblue.ca • Leverage EDAC & Business Associations • Continue to work closely with regional tourism boards and associations
Explore new methods of public engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • News boxes / Suggestion boxes • Municipal podcast • Text messaging tool • Digital Screens in Municipal Facilities
Leverage social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft and execute detailed strategy • Leverage high level of community usage • Encourage ongoing feedback
Strengthen youth engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Work at Town Hall for a day” • In-school presentations by Council and Staff • Encourage participation from other levels of government

Threats	Action Items
Audiences are inundated with communications and marketing from other organizations resulting in engagement fatigue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make Town story more compelling • Demonstrate commitment • Encourage feedback
Misinformation on social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on the Town’s story • Be forthright and respond quickly • Focus on facts
Lack of understanding between different levels of government and their priorities and mandates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain what the Town does do • Share links to other levels of government • Host functions for provincial and federal representatives
Unforeseen issues that impact project timelines and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remain nimble and flexible within workplans and roles • Cross train staff • Develop issues management communications plan