

Sevenoaks District Council

Communications Strategy



Communications Strategy

This strategy sets out how the Council will effectively communicate with its residents, local businesses, stakeholders, staff and Members, especially during a time of change in governance arrangements and an internal management restructure.

The Strategy is reviewed annually by the Council's Management Team and updated as necessary to reflect emerging issues, shifting priorities and developments in best practice.

We are always interested in ways to improve our approach to communications and welcome your suggestions.

Contact us

Communications Team
Sevenoaks District Council
Argyle Road
Sevenoaks
Kent TN13 1HG

01732 227000
communications@sevenoaks.gov.uk

Publication details

Purpose of the Communications Strategy

To ensure that the Council communicates the right information to its customers, its staff and its members, at the right time and in an effective and cost efficient manner.

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April 2013

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1. Background & Introduction

Introduction

The Communications Strategy sets out Sevenoaks District Council's approach to communications and as an appendix details the agreed work plan for 2013/14.

Reviewed annually, this Strategy and work plan builds on the achievements of the previous Corporate Communications Objectives and Work Plan which, following an external review of the communications service in 2010, introduced improved ways of working.

The on going improvements in service delivery and the successful completion of previous work plans has resulted in a more focused and proactive output and higher resident satisfaction with the Council.

Council Vision & Promises

The Council's Communications service has one common goal - to improve the reputation of the Council by implicitly and explicitly communicating the Council Vision and promises – its corporate narrative.

The vision of the District Council can be summarised as:

“Pride in the District of Sevenoaks by working with the Community as a whole, to sustain and develop a fair, safe and thriving local economy.”

The Council's promises are to:

- Provide value for money;
- Work in partnership to keep the District of Sevenoaks safe;
- Continue to collect rubbish efficiently and effectively;
- Protect the Green Belt; and

Support and develop the local economy.

The principal aim of this Strategy is to set a clear framework that enables the Council to effectively communicate activity against these promises and work undertaken to deliver the vision for the District.

In a time of unprecedented financial pressure and further budget cuts expected, the Communications Team is there to support the Council in being transparent and explaining what service changes it is making and why. To reassure that statutory and high priorities are being defended and delivered well in a period of financial recession, it is important to build trust with local people and community leaders.

2. Communications at Sevenoaks District Council

The Communications Team

Responsibility for Communications falls within the Portfolio for Strategy & Performance. Cllr Peter Fleming, the Leader of the Council is the current Portfolio Holder.

The Communications Team has been reduced in size since 2010 and is now regarded as the smallest team in the County for the responsibilities it holds.

Under the senior management restructure Communications will be part of the Transformation & Strategy team from 1 August 2013, having been part of the Housing & Communications team since 2010.

The team comprises:

- 1 FTE Communications Manager;
- 1 FTE Graduate Communications Trainee;
- 0.2FTE Policy and Communications Assistant; and
- Graduate Interns on an ad-hoc basis.

The Communications Team is supported by a Corporate Communications Group. The Group meets 6 times a year, acting in a planned and proactive way to deal with communication issues and advise and support Management Team and other staff about relevant matters.

Task and finish groups are occasionally formed to support individual projects or to review and improve communications activity across the Council.

Our Responsibilities

Main responsibilities of the team include:

- Management of the Council website;
- Production and editing of In Shape, the Council's resident magazine;
- Management of the Council's social media presence on Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest & Linked In;
- Media relations;
- Campaigns & marketing; and
- Internal communications.

Management of the staff intranet will also transfer to the Communications Team during 2013/14.

Value for money services

The Communications Team is determined to deliver a low cost, high quality communications service to the Council.

Reductions have been made in staffing levels, partnership working is being delivered through the new Council website and opportunities to maximise income through advertising space are continually explored.

We are committed to:

- Working smarter;
- Maximising capacity;
- Sharing resources;
- Shared working across organisations;
- Partnership working;
- Raising income;
- Bidding for external funding; and
- Empowering, involving and informing residents to support savings elsewhere in the Council.

2. Communications at Sevenoaks District Council (continued)

Working with Members

All roles within the Communications Team are apolitical.

The team will only advise Members on media relations and will not suggest content for media releases.

The democratic mandate (elected Members) is what makes Local Government different among public services. The Communications Team tells the Council's story to the media and acts as an advocate for the local community.

The Communications Team has clear objectives when determining its strategy for working with Members, these are:

- Officers must be apolitical;
- To provide support to Members in their role as community leaders and as advocates for the Council;
- To provide support to both the decision making and scrutiny functions;
- To support and advise all Members regarding the media;
- To always inform and be transparent;
- With Members, demonstrating to the local community that they have a voice in the choice of important decisions.

Within the Council's governance arrangements it has been agreed that Members in particular roles will have an active role in the Council's communications. These are as follows.

■ **Cabinet – Leader & Portfolio Holders**

These members are accountable for many day-to-day Council decisions. Some decisions will be taken collectively by the Cabinet and others by the Leader of the Council or by individual Cabinet portfolio

holders. In all cases, decisions will need to be recorded and published on a regular basis. The Leader and Portfolio Holders will be the 'public face' of the Council and will be the first point of reference for comments on key decisions.

■ **Advisory Committees, Scrutiny, Standard & other committees**

From time-to-time, issues could arise when these committees other than Cabinet make recommendations or take decisions, which require a formal Council comment. In these circumstances it will fall to the relevant Chairman to make such comment either orally or within a news release prepared by officers.

Further information and detail is available within the Council's 'Public and media relations guidelines'.

3. Reaching our audience

Our audience

The Communications Teams' primary audiences are local residents, local businesses, elected Members and staff.

External communications and effective media relations help to promote the District Council's value for money credentials and advertise the breadth of the services it provides.

Effective internal communications assist with retaining staff as advocates during a time of significant change in public service funding.

In addition the Government audience is essential because a good reputation of a Council or an individual service can aid opportunities to secure external funding and enable the Council's voice to be more clearly heard on the national stage.

Reaching our audience

■ Residents

The 2011 census recorded Sevenoaks District Council as having a population of 114,893, occupying 47,020 homes.

- 51.5% of the population are female;
- The average age in the District is 41;
- 19% of the population are aged over 65; and
- The BME population makes up 4.2% of the District.

It is our objective to communicate the Council's Vision and Promises. In doing so we will clearly explain the services the Council provides and underline the level and quality of services provided.

We will approach this through campaigning and a balanced mix of media and

marketing, and use the following communications methods:

- Effective branding;
- Effective media relations;
- Campaigning through multiple media;
- Using In Shape, the Council's magazine;
- Direct marketing; and
- Social media.

■ Businesses and landlords

At 1 April 2013 a total of 3,827 business properties were listed for Sevenoaks District with a total rateable value of £90,350,904.

The District has a diverse mix of businesses and it is a priority to help those businesses grow as well as looking to bring new business in to the area.

It is our objective to communicate the Council's promise to 'support and develop the local economy'. In doing so we will seek to encourage businesses and landlords to invest in the District, be supportive of economic development and growth in the right areas and promote sustaining employment for local people.

We will approach this through targeted media and marketing events and seeking to create new opportunities for dialogue with businesses. To do so we will work strongly in partnership with the Council's Economic Development team, and use the following communications methods:

- Effective media relations;
- Email newsletter for businesses;
- Campaigning through multiple media;
- Publicising SDC involvement in local business meetings and events; and
- Marketing and publishing.

3. Reaching our audience (continued)

■ Stakeholders

Services are provided across Sevenoaks District by a wide range of service providers including Town and Parish Councils, Kent County Council, Police, Fire, Health services and numerous third sector and charity organisations. We want our stakeholders, including Members, partners and the local media to be advocates for the Council.

It is our objective to communicate the Council's Vision and Promises, but also to empower and engage people in supporting the Council's communication plan.

We will approach this by direct communication, by seeking participation in Council communications activity and providing media style briefings on important issues through traditional communications routes.

■ Staff

The Council employs 350 full time equivalent staff. It is critical to the Council's performance that staff are engaged in the overall direction of the Council and are highly satisfied in their work.

It is our objective to communicate the Council's Vision and Promises. In doing so we will make it clear how services and individuals make a contribution to achieving the Vision and Promises. Through our communication with staff we want to empower them to promote the quality of services they provide and support the Council in growing its reputation.

We will approach this through sustaining excellent communications, delivering the Council's key messages and provide positive examples of achievements towards

the Council's Vision and Promises. We will use the following communications methods:

- grapeVine email new bulletin for all staff;
- Direct News bulletin for staff working at Dunbrik depot;
- using In Shape, the Council's magazine;
- the intranet;
- Staff Briefings and meetings; and
- Notes from Management Team meetings.

4. Measuring our results

Growing the Council's reputation

A survey undertaken in 2010 found that resident satisfaction with the Council was 70%.

The same survey also found that the 50% of residents believe that the Council delivers Value for Money.

Although the Council is performing well in terms of overall satisfaction and value for money compared to other councils, there is a sizable proportion of residents who are undecided on their view of the Council. Fifteen per cent of residents are undecided when it comes to overall satisfaction and 27% in terms of value for money.

The challenge for the Council and the work of the Communications Team is to more clearly articulate the work of the Council to determine whether this can increase the proportion of residents satisfied with the Council and decrease the proportion who are undecided.

A new resident survey will be undertaken in 2013/14, on a similar basis to the survey carried out in 2010, which amongst other things will enable the Communications Team to assess the impact of their strategy and action plan over the past three years.

Proposals will be developed to ensure resident surveys can be carried out more regularly from within the current budget levels.

Targets and outcomes

In assessing the performance of the Council's Communications Team the following targets and outcomes will be measured against for 2013/14.

- 1) Continue to build the reputation of Sevenoaks District Council as an organisation that has integrity, provides good value quality services and improves local residents' lives.
- 2) A focus on media relations, that is targeted and supports two/three campaigns per year
- 3) A target of 95% balanced or favourable coverage in the local print media
- 4) A new intranet with better access to Council information to help staff do their jobs more efficiently and effectively
- 5) Targeted consultation which empowers residents and the business community to inform and influence Council policies and services

6. Additional Information

Links to plans and strategies

The Council's Communications Strategy is closely aligned to the commitments in the Council's Vision and Promises. It is also designed to compliment and support a number of other Council plans and strategies. These include the:

- Corporate & Service Plans;
- Human Resources Strategy;
- Equality Statement; and
- IT Strategy.

Guidance for officers

Further communications guidance is available on the Council's Intranet. This information includes:

- Work plan for 2013/14, also provided as an Appendix to this strategy;
- Public and media guidelines; and
- Advertising Policy.

Guidance for Members

Further communications guidance is available to Members from the Council's Communications Team. This information includes:

- Work plan for 2013/14, also provided as an Appendix to this strategy;
- Public and media guidelines; and
- From the Council's Constitution (Appendix W) 'Guidance on the Disclosure of Confidential Information by Members'.

Sevenoaks District Council

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If you have any comments about this document or require further copies, please contact:

**Communications Team
Sevenoaks District Council
Argyle Road
Sevenoaks
Kent
TN13 1HG**

Telephone **01732 227000**

E-mail
communications@sevenoaks.gov.uk

Other formats:

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