

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.

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

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

Contact us

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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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1. Background & Introduction

Introduction

The Communications Strategy sets out Sevenoaks District Council's approach to communications with its residents, local businesses, stakeholders, staff and Members.

Reviewed annually, this Strategy 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 more focused and proactive communications from the Council and higher levels of resident satisfaction.

Council Vision & Promises

The Council's communications have one common goal – to improve the reputation of the Council by communicating the Council Vision and Promises – its corporate narrative.

The Council's Vision is to take:

“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 document is to set out a strategy 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 the Communications Team is there to support the Council in being transparent, to help it explain what service changes it is making and why and to contribute to the Council's long-term aspiration of becoming financially self-sufficient through the marketing of the Council's commercial services.

To deliver the Council's message effectively it is important to build trust with local people, local businesses, staff, Members and other 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.

Communications is part of the Transformation & Strategy team and comprises:

- 1 FTE Communications Manager;
- 1 FTE Communications Officer;
- 0.2 FTE 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 way to deal with communication issues and advise and support Strategic Management Team and other staff about relevant matters.

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

During 2013 a Members Communications Working Group provided significant support to the Council in reviewing its Communications Strategy.

Our Responsibilities

The main responsibilities of the Communications 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, including management of the intranet.

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 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; 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 guidelines when 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 when the Council is faced with making important decisions.

Within the Council's governance arrangements it has been agreed that Members in particular roles 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 are 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, Standards & other committees**

From time-to-time, issues arise when 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.

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

3. Reaching our audience

Our audience

The audience for the Council's communications are local residents, local businesses, elected Members and staff.

Effective communications and media relations assist the Council in building trust with the local community, raises awareness of the services the Council provides and promotes the Council's value for money credentials.

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

In addition the Government audience is essential as a good reputation 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 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:

- Commitment to the brand value;
- 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 2014 a total of 3,816 business properties were listed for Sevenoaks District.

The District has a diverse mix of businesses. In addition to encouraging new businesses in to the area it is a priority to help our current businesses grow.

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 and Health Authorities 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 bulletin for all staff;
- Direct News bulletin for staff working at Dunbrik depot;
- Using In Shape, the Council's magazine;
- In Site, the staff intranet;
- Staff Briefings and meetings; and
- Notes from Strategic 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.

When measured again in 2013 residents told us that satisfaction with the Council had increased to 88% and belief that the Council provides Value for Money had increased to 58%.

Importantly, when measured for the first time, 80% of residents told us that they trusted the Council.

Levels of trust and satisfaction with the Council demonstrate exceptionally strong performance. The challenge for the Council's communications is support the organisation to at least maintain these levels of performance.

Although the Council is performing well in terms of value for money compared to other councils, 26% of residents are undecided on their view.

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 2015, on a similar basis to the survey carried out in 2013, which amongst other things will enable the Communications Team to assess the impact of its strategy and action plans over the period.

Targets and outcomes

In assessing the performance of the Council's Communications Team the following targets and outcomes are measured against.

- 1) Continue to build the reputation of Sevenoaks District Council as an organisation that can be trusted, that 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) Effective internal communications that builds trust between the Council and its staff and supports high levels of morale and job satisfaction.
- 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 Corporate Plan and the Vision and Promises it set out. 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;
- Financial Strategy; and
- IT Strategy.

Guidance for officers

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

- The Communications Work plan;
- 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:

- The Communications Work plan;
- Public and media guidelines; and
- From the Council's Constitution (Appendix W) 'Guidance on the Disclosure of Confidential Information by Members'.

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Other formats:

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