

# Sevenoaks District Council

## DRAFT Communications Strategy



## Communications Strategy

This strategy sets out how the Council will communicate effectively with its residents, local businesses, stakeholders, staff and Councillors, especially during a time of budget reductions and a drive towards financial self-sufficiency.

The strategy is 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.

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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 Councillors 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.

This strategy and the Communications Team's work plan builds on the achievements of previous corporate communications objectives and work plans, which introduced improved ways of working.

First and foremost, this plan has the aim of maintaining the current high levels of satisfaction and trust with the Council.

But this is a time of change in the communication landscape with electronic and social media becoming a powerful, cost effective medium at the Council's disposal. This strategy will help ensure the Council better utilises these technologies.

A greater emphasis will also be put on visual identity to ensure output is consistent and conforms to the Council's Brand Guidelines.

## Council Vision & Promises

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

The Council's vision 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
- Protect the Green Belt
- Provide the high quality services residents want
- Support and grow the 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 change, it is important to build trust with local people, local businesses and community leaders. The Communications Team is there to support the Council in being transparent and explain what service changes are taking place and why; the reasons why and benefits to the community of achieving financial self-sufficiency; that statutory and high priorities are being defended and delivered well in a period of financial austerity.

## 2. Communications at Sevenoaks District Council

### The Communications Team

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

The Communications Team is one of the smallest teams in the County for the responsibilities it holds.

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

- 1 FTE Communications Manager
- 1 FTE Communications Officer
- 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 throughout the year, acting in a planned and proactive way to deal with communication issues and to advise and support Strategic Management Team and other staff about relevant matters.

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

### Our Responsibilities

Main responsibilities of the team include:

- Oversight of the Council's website
- Production and editing of In Shape, the Council's resident and business magazine
- Management of the Council's social media presence on Twitter, Facebook, Streetlife, Pinterest and LinkedIn
- Media relations
- Campaigns and marketing and
- Internal communications, including the intranet.

### Value for money services

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

The team is committed to:

- Working smarter
- Maximising capacity
- Sharing resources
- Shared working across organisations
- Partnership working and
- Raising income

## 2. Communications at Sevenoaks District Council

(continued)

### Working with Councillors

All roles within the Communications Team are apolitical.

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

The democratic mandate (elected Councillors) 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 Councillors. These are:

- Officers must be apolitical
- To provide support to Councillors 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 Councillors regarding the media
- To always inform and be transparent with Councillors, demonstrating to the local community that they have a strong voice in important decisions.

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

### ■ Cabinet – Leader & Portfolio Holders

These Councillors 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 can 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 Team's primary audiences are local residents, local businesses, Councillors and staff.

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

Effective internal communications assist with retaining staff as advocates during a time of 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 the Communications Team's objective to communicate the Council's Vision and Promises and its ambition to become financially self-sufficient. In doing so it will explain the services the Council provides and underline the level and quality of services provided.

The Communications Team will approach this through campaigning and a balanced mix of media and marketing using the following communications methods:

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

At 1 April 2015 a total of 3,788 business properties were listed for Sevenoaks District.

The District has a diverse mix of businesses and it is a priority to help them grow as well as looking to bring new ones into the area.

The Communications Team's objective is to communicate the Council's promise to 'support and develop the local economy'. In doing so the team 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 sustainable employment for local people.

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

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

### ■ Stakeholders

Services are provided across the 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. The Council wants its stakeholders, including Councillors, partners and the local media, to be advocates for the Council.

The Communications Team's objective is to communicate the Council's vision and promises, but also to empower and engage people in supporting the Council's Communications Strategy.

This will be achieved 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 around 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 the Communications Team's objective to communicate the Council's Vision and Promises.

In doing so the Team will make it clear how services and individuals make a contribution to achieving the Vision and Promises.

Through our communication with staff the Council aims to empower staff to promote the quality of services and uphold the Council's reputation. Our last Staff Survey told us that 82% of staff talk positively of the Council to people outside of the organisation, with the remaining 18% saying they talk neither positively or negatively.

The Communications Team's will approach this through sustaining excellent communications, delivering the Council's key messages and providing positive examples of achievements towards the Council's vision and promises.

The Communications Team will use the following communications methods:

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

## 4. Measuring our results

### Maintaining the Council's reputation

A telephone survey is undertaken every two years by an independent research company asking a range of questions, including some formulated by the Local Government Association.

The survey found that resident satisfaction with the Council was 79%. This is believed to be one of the highest scores, if not the highest, of any council. The most recent national figure for satisfaction with the local Council from research conducted by the LGA is 67%.

Trust in the Council currently measures 74% (set against a national figure of 58%)

The same survey also found that 59% of residents believe that the Council delivers Value for Money. Nationally the value for money score for local Councils is 51%.

The challenge for the Council and the work of the Communications Team is to sustain high levels of satisfaction with the Council and sustain the proportion of residents who feel the Council delivers value for money.

### Targets and outcomes

In assessing the performance of the Council's Communications Team the following targets and outcomes will be measured against the life of this strategy.

- 1)** Maintain 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 90% balanced or favourable coverage in the local print media.
- 4)** Greater adoption of electronic communication channels to engage better with residents, Councillors and staff.
- 5)** Targeted consultation, which empowers residents and the business community to inform and influence Council policies and services.

## 5. 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 Commitments and
- IT Strategy.

### Guidance for officers

Further communications guidance is available on inSite, the Council's intranet. This information includes:

- The Communications Team's current work plan
- Publicity and media guidelines; and
- Advertising Policy.

### Guidance for Councillors

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

- The Communications Team's current work plan
- Publicity and media guidelines; and
- From the Council's Constitution (Appendix W) 'Guidance on the Disclosure of Confidential Information by Councillors'.

# Sevenoaks District Council

## DRAFT Communications Strategy

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