

Communications strategy

2017



“ communicating is at the heart of everything we do ”

contents

Why do we need a communications strategy?	1
Who do we want to communicate with?	1
Our key principles	1
How are we doing?	2
What do people think of us now?	2
What do we want to achieve?	3
How will we achieve this?	3
Action plan	6



Why do we need a communications strategy?

Good communication can create a positive experience for those who interact with the council. It helps residents, councillors, employees, partners, and the media understand our objectives, values, services, challenges and achievements.

To communicate effectively means to listen as well as broadcast, and it only works when what we are saying is clear and easy to understand. Given that we are a council delivering a wide range of complex services to more than 85,000 residents, we face a significant challenge to communicate well. This strategy explores how we will go about facing that challenge.

It is important we recognise that communicating is at the heart of everything we do at all levels of the organisation – communications is not just the responsibility of the communications team.

This strategy provides a framework and action plan for how we can drive forward our approach to communications, ensuring we push our digital communication channels (such as social media, the website and email communications) while recognising the need to continue to include the more traditional methods (such as face-to-face and phone).

As the financial challenges facing local government put more pressure on services to change and to be as cost effective as possible, it is vital that we communicate these changes to our target audiences – both internally and externally. Our customers, members and staff need to know when and how a service is changing or when it

can be accessed in a different way.

This communications strategy is short and simple - looking at how we can build on what's been achieved so far and how we can grow to meet our aims for the future. It is backed up by an action plan, which sets out the milestones along the way.

Who do we want to communicate to?

As a borough council, we have a wide range of audiences and stakeholders. It is important that we target communications to the right audience, so that we communicate with the right people at the right time, in the right way

These include:

- Councillors
- Residents
- Employees
- The media
- Public sector partners
- Town and parish councils
- Businesses
- Government
- Local community groups and charities

Our key principles

The following principles will underpin all our communications work:

- We recognise that good quality communication is essential for the effective delivery of our services.

“A consistent, **accurate and controlled approach** to our response to emergency situations is now in place.”

- We will be as transparent, open and accountable as possible.
- We will ensure information is shared, accessible and meets equality standards.
- All our communication - spoken, written and electronic - will:
 - o Be honest, accurate, timely and up-to-date.
 - o Be clear, written in plain English, and easily understood.
 - o Be consistent and suitable for the audience - including hard-to-reach groups.
 - o Meet the corporate Written Style and Branding Guide and be clearly identified with Tewkesbury Borough Council.
 - o Be compliant with relevant legal requirements and conform to the Code of Conduct on local government publicity.
- Effective ways of communicating – we hold seminars and publish newsletters for our town and parish councils, we now have a number of social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In addition, we publish a monthly online newsletter for staff.
- We continue to ensure communications is published in line with our Written Style and Branding Guide so that all external communication is written and designed in a consistent and professional manner.
- Our community news page in Tewkesbury Borough News has opened up the opportunity for town and parish councils across the borough to add their news to our paper.
- A consistent, accurate and controlled approach to our response to emergency situations is now in place.

How are we doing?

Since our previous Communications Strategy 2014 to 2016, there have been a number of notable achievements as a result of improved communications, including:

- Media coverage continues to be positive, with only a small percentage of stories reflecting negatively.
- A high level of proactive communications – more press releases, social media coverage and media briefings now take place.
- We are the lead communications team for the Joint Core Strategy, working with the team to produce press releases, newsletters, member updates and social media posts.
- Improved media relations – we continue to have excellent media relations with the local media, and we meet regularly with them.

What do people think of us now?

To know what people think of us, we need to understand how our reputation really stands in our communities.

In 2016 we set up a Citizens' Panel, which is a diverse group of Tewkesbury borough residents (from different communities, age groups, needs and backgrounds) who we email occasionally to ask for opinions about our services and to help us pilot new ways of delivering services.

We currently have 251 members and we use the information they provide us with to ensure that our services are available and suitable for everyone.

The list of topics we ask about range from testing online services before they go live, to giving

feedback on strategies (e.g. car parking, waste and recycling collections).

In March 2017, we carried out a snapshot survey and asked the panel what they think of our communications. 50 members responded to the survey, which revealed:

- That 64 per cent of respondents feel that we keep them very or fairly well informed about our services and benefits we provide, but 10 per cent feel not very well informed.
- Encouragingly, the main way respondents find out about the council is through our own website (67 per cent) followed by our own publication Tewkesbury Borough News (50 per cent) and via local media (33 per cent).
- 76 per cent of respondents read Tewkesbury Borough News either in full or in part, and only one per cent of respondents receive it but do not read it.

What do we want to achieve?

While the feedback from our citizens’ panel is encouraging, it can only be regarded as an indication of how we are performing, and the Communication team wants to continue pushing communications forward through digital and traditional channels.

Our communications objectives are to:

- Maintain and improve our local reputation through proactive communications.
- Ensure that all elements of our communications (traditional, digital and graphic design) are integrated, consistent and

co-ordinated across all channels to give maximum support to our Council Plan.

- Encourage two-way dialogue.
- Promote the image of the council as an effective, efficient and listening organisation that is focused on the public and their needs.
- Build and maintain a professional corporate identity for consistent and co-ordinated use throughout the organisation.
- Ensure that our communications activities reflect the full diversity of the community and help ensure equality of access to all our services.

How will we achieve this?

Media and PR

The Communications and Graphics team runs a busy press office function, producing responses to daily media enquiries and issuing proactive releases to publicise council services, news, decisions and performance.

The way we need to respond to enquiries is changing. Most stories are published online first now, so reporters want a very quick turnaround. In addition, reporters are much more likely to pick up stories through social media.

It is important that we make the most of the opportunities to use the media to help communicate our messages to their audiences, such as:

- Issuing media releases in a timely and relevant manner.
- Being proactive when it is clear a decision or approach may be controversial
- Responding to inaccurate information or

misleading interpretation of the facts.

- Continuing to foster excellent working relationships with the media through regular meetings and briefings.
- Producing a daily electronic update of the council’s media coverage for councillors and managers.

Corporate communications

The team manages proactive communications to increase public awareness of council policies, initiatives and service updates. The team is also responsible for maintaining a strong corporate identity across the council, and for managing high quality and consistent communications.

Social media

Social media provides a quick and easy way for the public to receive information and engage with us.

The insight and ability to target specific audiences provides opportunities to support campaigns and key messages. To help support this, we will:

- Grow our social media accounts to help support the effective sharing of news, including in emergency situations.
- Ensure enquiries received through social media are responded to quickly and in an appropriate tone.

Promoting digital

Supporting and promoting digital channels is now a communications priority to reflect the continuing and rapid growth in web and social networking.

Through digital channels, such as our website and apps, we can communicate quickly, target our more hard-to-reach groups (for example, young people) and it tends to be inexpensive.

However, it is also important to recognise that while it is important that we embrace digital channels, our traditional methods of communication are still important. We must not exclude groups or individuals who do not have access to social media or the internet.

Creative and design service

We have an experienced, in-house graphic designer working across all forms of design for digital as well as print media.

The designer offers a professional service – managing the whole process from concept to production. Key to the work of the team is to protect and manage the use of our corporate identity, ensuring the quality of council artwork adheres to the highest standards and the purpose of publications is relevant.

The team will also take a lead in developing innovative design solutions to present council information through digital and social media platforms. This will help us to ensure that our digital presence remains current at all times.

Tewkesbury Borough News

Our residents’ newspaper, which is delivered three times a year, provides timely information and features about the council and its services, as well as details of events in the borough. Our recent snapshot survey revealed that it is still one of the main ways in which residents find out about council-related news.

A review of Tewkesbury Borough News is scheduled to take place in the summer of 2017.

“ Where staff understand what is required of them and **morale is high**, they become ambassadors for the organisation.”

Internal communications

Where staff understand what is required of them and morale is high, they become ambassadors for the organisation.

Even without a specific programme of change, organisations - particularly councils - are changing constantly and good internal communication is the best way of retaining the support of staff and the key to long-term improvement.

We have a multi-channel approach to our internal communications including:

- Staff Briefings
- Weekly management team bulletins
- Intranet
- Monthly internal newsletter – News4U

Supporting documents

The following plans support the work of the communications team:

- Media Protocol
- Social Media Policy and Guidelines
- Social Media User Tips
- Social Media Response Check
- Written Style and Branding Guide
- Customer Care Strategy
- Digital Strategy

Strategy review

This Communications Strategy and action plan will be reviewed regularly by the team, and progress on the action plan will be reported to Overview and Scrutiny on an annual basis.

Communications Strategy action plan

Communications action plan		
Action	What difference will it make?	Start date
Support the Digital Strategy to promote digital ways of communicating.	Clear, consistent and accurate communication is needed throughout this council priority to ensure all audiences feel engaged and understand what is happening and why.	June 2017
Provide training in media and social media for councillors and managers.	It will give confidence to those in media-facing roles, and will help to protect the council's reputation.	February 2018
Review the council's written style and branding guide to ensure it is fit for purpose	Ensuring our communications style is consistent is paramount in building our brand. Reviewing the guide will ensure we are brand is still in line with best practice.	July 2017
Review the council's media protocol to ensure it is fit for purpose.	Our media protocol ensure we have an agreed understanding of how we deal with media enquiries, statements and interviews. It was originally introduced in 2010 and so is due a review.	August 2017
Issue a minimum of two media releases every week	The number of press releases we issue has a direct impact on the amount of local publicity we receive. To ensure our profile remains high in the local community, it is important we commit to producing regular press releases.	June 2017
Carry out a review of internal communications	Gaining a better understanding of staff views of internal communication will help us to improve it.	July 2017
Increase video output where appropriate – e.g. to encourage recruitment.	Video can be a very effective way of reaching out to different audiences, and it's not something we have seriously considered. If an opportunity arises, we should look into the pros and cons of it. Lots of councils use video work in tourism and recruitment.	January 2018
Promote council achievements in the local government arena, such as the Municipal Journal.	Help to improve our reputation within the local government arena.	June 2017
Produce an annual forward plan for communications opportunities	A forward plan will ensure we are appropriately prepared for regular communication activities, freeing us up to give more time to ad-hoc communication requirements.	January 2018
Review Parish Matters	This will ensure we are communicating effectively with our town and parish councils.	June 2017

Communications Strategy action plan

Communications action plan		
Action	What difference will it make?	Start date
Lead on the communications for the Joint Core Strategy team.	Help to ensure consistent and accurate information in simple language is provided for complex issues, such as the Joint Core Strategy.	Ongoing throughout strategy
Investigate the use of info-graphics to help visually communicate complicated messages (such as the budget).	Info-graphics are being used by organisations to communicate messages using graphics. This will work well for areas such as the budget and enviro-crimes.	November 2017
Promote the Council Plan annual refreshes – both internally and externally.	As the council's key corporate document setting out our vision, aims and priorities, it is important that our staff and members of the public know what it is and what it means.	April 2018
Continue to develop our communications through social media.	Help to increase followers on social media, protect the council's reputation, and keep the council up-to-date with new social media communication channels.	June 2017
Promote the joint work carried out through the Public Services Centre.	It will help to promote our public services centre and our joined-up aims.	June 2017

Clare Evans
Policy and Communications Manager
Tewkesbury Borough Council
Tel: 01684 272291
email: clare.evans@tewkesbury.gov.uk

