

Communications strategy



2020 - 2024

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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 90,000 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 using 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 with?

As a borough council, we have a wide range of audiences and stakeholders. It is important that we target communications at 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.

- 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 digital - 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.

How are we doing?

Since our previous Communications Strategy 2017 to 2019, 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.
- Communication has become even more proactive, using press releases as standard, but social media allows for more informal, quick updates.
- 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.
- 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, as well as daily updates on the intranet.
- 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.

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 November 2019, we carried out a snapshot survey and asked the panel what they thought of our communications. 58 members responded to the survey which revealed:

- That 72 per cent of respondents felt we kept them very or fairly well informed about our services and the benefits we provide – an increase of 8 percent since the last survey in 2017.
- Encouragingly, the main way our respondents find out about the council is through our own website (39 people chose this source of communication), followed by our own publication – Tewkesbury Borough News – (32 people chose this source of communication) and through local media (15 people chose this source of communication).
- 81 per cent of respondents read Tewkesbury Borough News either in full or in part.
- 16 per cent of respondents said that they did not receive Tewkesbury Borough News, but work is already in place to bring this figure down.

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 communications team wants to continue pushing communication 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 communication (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 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 media enquiries is changing. Most stories are published online first, 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 regular updates 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.

Using digital methods we can communicate quickly and target our more hard-to-reach groups (for example, young people). One significant benefit to using digital methods of communication, is that it tends to be inexpensive.

However, it is also important to recognise that whilst 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' magazine, which is delivered twice a year, provides 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.

- Written style and branding guide
- Customer care strategy
- Digital strategy

Strategy review

This communications strategy and action plan will be reviewed regularly, and progress on the action plan will be reported to Overview and Scrutiny Committee on an annual basis.

Internal communications

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

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 communication including:

- Face-to-face staff briefing sessions
- Management team briefings
- Intranet updates
- Monthly digital newsletter – News4U
- Email updates for emergencies

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

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