Folkestone and Hythe District Council
DRAFT Communications and Engagement Strategy 2018-2023

Introduction

My Grandmother was born into a world where the largest number of people any individual could address, or engage with, was the number of people who could be gathered into a room. Within a generation, the invention of broadcast media meant that those who had access to the means of broadcasting were able to reach an audience of all those who had access to the means of receiving such broadcasts. Today, almost everyone in the world can reach almost everyone else in the world as a result of the internet.

This extraordinarily empowering communications revolution has brought opportunities unimaginable to those who lived at the same time as my Grandmother. And it has brought unimaginable challenges!

With so much 'background noise' and 'fake news', there has never been a more important time to hone our communication and engagement activities. For the Council to succeed in its Corporate Plan ambitions, it needs to maintain and enhance its role as a trusted partner for people to engage with, and as a trusted source of information. And we need to do so using the means and the language preferred by our audiences; not just by us.
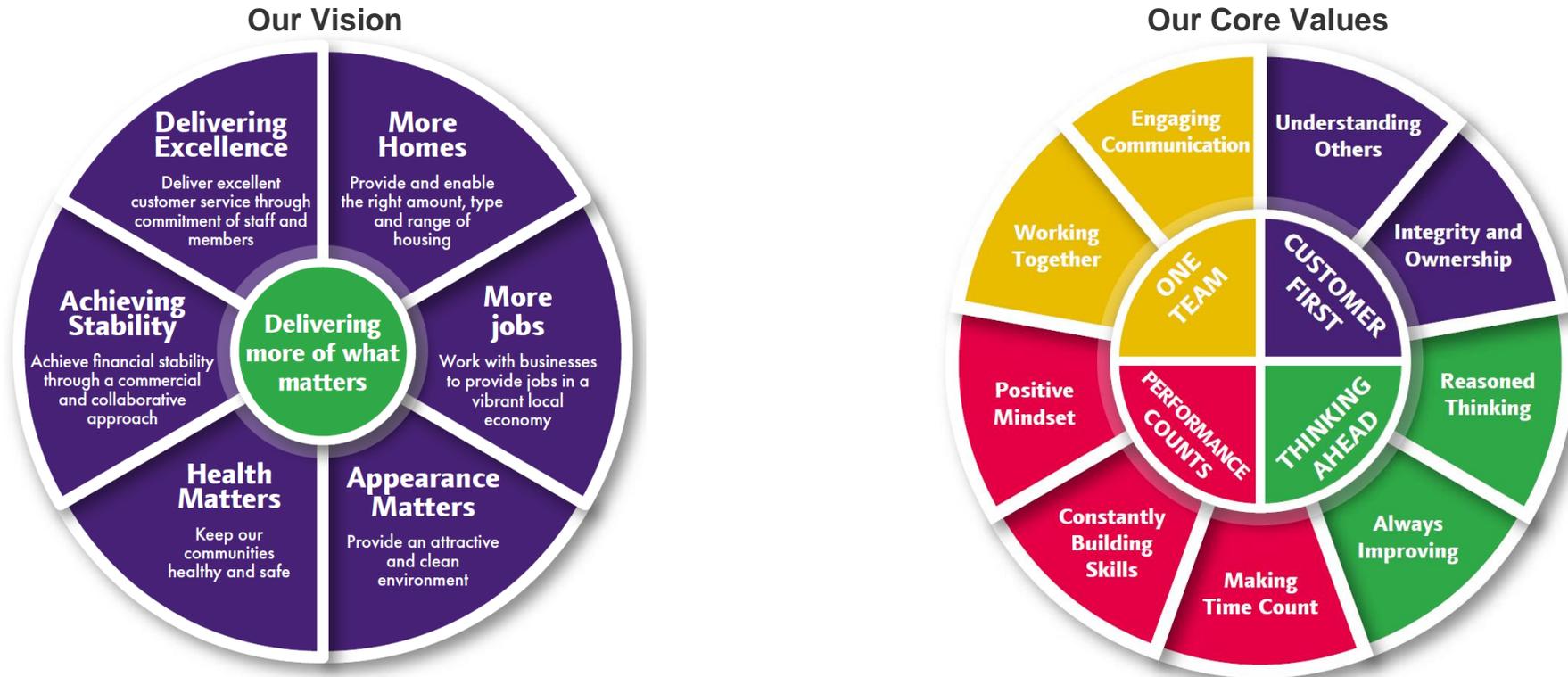
We start from a high base. We enjoy warm and positive feedback from our social media content, we have more people visiting our website to learn of news about the Council, and our consultation and engagement has received praise during our successful accreditation to the Government's Customer Service Excellence® standard.

This Strategy sets out the way in which our communications and engagement activities help to set, refine, and deliver our Council's ambitions. It summarises the means by which we communicate with our wide range of customers, partners, and other interested parties. It helps promote accountability by its focus on strong and consistent branding, removing any customer confusion and developing trust. And of course, it reaffirms our values, which underpin all that we do.

Cllr Rory Love
Cabinet Member for Customers, Communications, and Digital Delivery

Council Vision, Objectives and Values

During 2017/18, the Council introduced its refreshed Corporate Plan, setting out its three year Corporate Plan vision of I*nvesting for the next generation ~ delivering more of what matters,* and outlining six new strategic objectives. The objectives are driven and delivered by the Council's staff who adhere to four core values which, in turn, are underpinned by nine behaviours.

Our Vision

Delivering more of what matters

- **Delivering Excellence** — Deliver excellent customer service through commitment of staff and members
- **More Homes** — Provide and enable the right amount, type and range of housing
- **Achieving Stability** — Achieve financial stability through a commercial and collaborative approach
- **More jobs** — Work with businesses to provide jobs in a vibrant local economy
- **Health Matters** — Keep our communities healthy and safe
- **Appearance Matters** — Provide an attractive and clean environment

Our Core Values

ONE TEAM, CUSTOMER FIRST, THINKING AHEAD, PERFORMANCE COUNTS

- Engaging Communication
- Understanding Others
- Working Together
- Integrity and Ownership
- Positive Mindset
- Reasoned Thinking
- Constantly Building Skills
- Always Improving
- Making Time Count

The way in which our vision is perceived is determined by the quality of our communications and engagement. This strategy outlines the approach we will take to ensure our communications and engagement activity is the best possible and helps to achieve our vision.

Objectives and Principles

The Council is operating in a challenging financial environment with savings required in the medium term. We must adapt and rise to the challenge of prioritising our finite resources to support the delivery of the Council's priorities. The Council continues to deliver essential services to the community despite the increasing financial pressure. We owe it to our residents to tell them about the work we continue to do and the positive impact that it is having on the community. We have used funding reductions to spur innovation which has enabled us to continue to meet our targets and perform well in this tough financial environment. Furthermore, the Council's heightened voluntary level of transparency means that it operates under intense scrutiny from residents, local media and other interested groups. Council activities are pored over by those interested in our activities so we must continue to ensure that the reasoning behind our decisions is communicated in an effective and honest manner.

The objectives of this strategy are set out below:
- Effectively communicate the Council's vision to residents and other stakeholders
- Maintain a strong and consistent Council identity
- Showcase the district as a great place to live, work, play, visit and bring business
- Increase awareness and access to Council services and activities
- Encourage more people to vote through better awareness of Council elections
- Improve the process and participation levels during Council-led public consultations
- Support elected members in their role as community leaders

Principles
Effective communications is the stock-in-trade of all our Councillors and officers, whether representing their communities or acting as ambassadors for the organisation. This strategy is designed to be read and understood by everyone within the organisation, and relies on their support for its success.

The Communications team sets the strategic framework for delivering the communications and engagement functions which will assist the Council in the delivery of its ambitions.

The framework is based on six key principles that will shape our communications delivery.

1. The Council's customers are at the heart of our activities.
2. Communication activity will protect, promote and enhance the Council's reputation.

3. Performance and survey data will be used to ensure our campaigns are audience led and outcome focused.
4. Communications is an integrated and strategic corporate function.
5. Communications must be of demonstrable value to the Council and the communities it serves.
6. Appropriate channels are used to help engage and inform residents and to promote behaviour change.

The Council will communicate clearly, openly, accurately, regularly and at appropriate times with residents, businesses, and our partners, and throughout the Council by ensuring our communications and engagement activities are:

- Two way – both informing and listening
- Relevant and easily understood by their target audience
- Cost-effective
- Accessible

Our Communication Channels

Our range of communications channels can be used in different ways to engage with different audiences.
Our audiences have high expectations for a rapid response and for time-critical information. The communications landscape continues to shift towards online and digital, and away from traditional media channels such as newspapers. However, all our media channels remain important as we recognise that different audiences prefer to receive their news in different ways. In order to ensure that we communicate and engage widely across our stakeholders, a number of different media channels should be used.

Website
The Folkestone & Hythe District Council website is the channel which our residents use most frequently. While customer transactions account for a large part of the website's usage, it is also the place where official Council messages are published. All our news releases are published here, and audiences from our other online channels are routinely directed to our corporate website to read about an issue in greater depth. The way in which our customers use the website is continually reviewed so that the online transactions are smooth and remove the need for customers to call or visit the Council itself. It is also important that the website meets Government accessibility requirements and we will continue to adhere to these standards.

Other websites are created, monitored and/or administered by the communications team including Folkestone Works, Folkestone Community Works, Oportunitas, Lifeline and Spotlight. It is important that these websites also adhere to the digital standards, ensuring they can be accessed by the widest range of their target audiences.

Media – print and broadcast
The local press is a significant channel to reach the residents of the District. In general the readership demographic of printed versions of newspapers tends to be older residents but all local papers are putting significant resources into creating an online presence to reach a wider and younger audience. Local newspapers have their own websites where news is published and also their own social media accounts.

Social Media
Social media gives direct access to audiences and as an interactive media it enables engagement and dialogue. It also enables the creation of content in a more dynamic format, which can be more appealing to the community. These platforms allow direct and unmediated broadcast of messages, directly from us. Social media can be particularly effective in emergencies and other fast moving and topical situations.

The platform with the most reach is Facebook followed by Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and then LinkedIn. External research and analysis on levels of engagement has revealed optimum times to post content on the different social media platforms. The Communications team make use of this analysis to ensure that content is published at times that will reach the widest audience. The communication style on these platforms is less formal, and more social and friendly. Often, team members will attribute their name to responses so that they are viewed less corporately and clearly from a person rather than *'the Council'.*

Generally speaking, the different platforms are used in the following ways:

Facebook – general messages as local residents are the most likely group to follow us on this platform. This remains our most engaging platform where residents often ask questions and report things such as fly tipping and full bins. The communications team are on hand to answer any queries raised by this platform and aim to respond to comments within two working days. The team aim to foster a community feel, engaging residents, answering their questions and being as helpful as possible.

Twitter – general messages suitable for a local audience as local residents are the most likely group to follow us on this platform. This is a useful media to tie in with partners to help them promote their services and updates by liking and retweeting their tweets. Twitter is the preferred platform to report on ever-changing, real-time events such as Council meetings and emergency situations. This platform is also used by other Twitter users to ask questions which the team respond to as soon as practicably possible (and aim to do so within two working days).

Instagram – this platform is used to promote the attractive district of Folkestone & Hythe (links closely to *appearance matters*). The team engage with residents and tourists alike and use hashtags to promote the District more widely by topic. This highly visual platform is populated by posts from residents and visitors alike, who regularly capture the beauty of the District and publish photographs accordingly. The communications team often repost such pictures, spreading the beauty of the District to a wider audience.

YouTube – used specifically for videos, which can be the most engaging and popular social media content. Videos published on all our social media channels are always more popular than text, with younger audiences finding them particularly engaging. More of our communication is being recorded not just on YouTube but also on Twitter and Facebook Live. An increase in video Council communications is likely and the Council has its own YouTube channel where it can upload video content.

LinkedIn – this professional network is used to advertise employment opportunities at the Council and to give an insight into what it is like to work for us. It is also used for articles which highlight our professional expertise and showcase that we're leaders in a number of professional areas.

Publications
The production of leaflets and other materials is the responsibility of each service area. However to maintain consistency of brand and design the communications team are consulted. Since the name change, new brand guidelines are being finalised which will give greater flexibility, yet at the same time, more brand consistency, to those wishing to produce their own materials.

Your District Today is our District lifestyle publication which is delivered to each household in the District. The publication is a key channel that allows us to report back to the community on our recent activities. There are two issues a year which reach 50,000 households, one in spring/summer and the other in autumn/winter. The content of Your District Today shares success stories and news of our partners from across the District and highlights how the Council is going about meeting our targets. It reinforces key messages such as changes to Christmas bin collections, and shows how our customers can contact us.

Internal
Councillors and staff are encouraged to follow our public-facing channels as much as possible to keep abreast of the content that we publish. Internally, the main channels of communications are emails, staff briefings and the intranet. Staff engagement in particular is key as the majority of employees live within the District and are promoters of the excellent work that we do. Engaging Councillors and staff regularly through effective communication is crucial and is something that the team strive to achieve.

Achieving Our Strategic Communications Objectives

There are a range of activities that we will undertake to help us achieve our strategic service objectives. This will be undertaken using a selection of the communication channels outlined above, depending on the activity.

We will:

Effectively communicate the Council's vision to residents and other stakeholders by:
- Focusing communications on the priorities in our Corporate Plan
- Communicating the Council's vision across selected media channels in a clear and understandable way
- Explicitly demonstrating how we are delivering more of what matters

Maintain a strong and consistent Council identity by:
- Refreshing, updating and ensuring communications adhere to the Council's brand guidelines
- Being consistent in our style, messaging and brand identity
- Relentlessly communicating that the name of the Council is Folkestone & Hythe District Council and ensuring that instances of stakeholders still using our previous name are corrected
- Being clear, consistent and honest in all corporate communications

Showcase the District as a great place to live, work, play, visit, and invest by:
- Working with key local partners to create compelling place branding and marketing campaigns
- Creating campaigns to attract skilled people, inward investors, and visitors to the district
- Reflecting the thriving business community in the District across Council media channels including those which are specifically business-focused, such as Folkestone Works
- Promoting the beauty of the District to residents across our media channels, encouraging them to contribute to maintaining that beauty
- Promoting the area by sharing national news articles that highlight the District as a great place to live, work, play, visit, and invest

Increase awareness and access to Council services and activities by:
- Publicising how residents can access our services and the best way for them to contact us
- Promoting the new and convenient ways in which residents can access services digitally
- Promoting Council activity through all our online channels, via publications and internally

- Helping our residents find solutions to their issues by clarifying what is our responsibility, what is the responsibility of our partners and how solutions can be found
- Using data to tailor activity to reach different groups of people more effectively
- Evaluating our approach, incorporating research and analysis, to continue to increase our communications effectiveness
- Helping promote services that the Council provides, including those which are non-statutory and may be administered by Council-owned companies
- Creating and promoting campaigns that encourage residents to recycle and provide information regarding what can and cannot be recycled
- Sharing how Council interventions have had a positive impact on the community and beyond

Encourage more people to vote through better awareness of Council elections by:
- Making Council decision-making as transparent as possible by webcasting meetings, tweeting from Committee meetings and widely sharing decisions that have been made
- Raising public awareness of the election process and how decisions are made on their behalf by their elected representatives
- Publicising that residents need to register to vote, how they can do this, and by when they need to do it
- Encouraging residents to vote in elections by promoting when they are, where they can vote, and how they can do it.
- Working with local partners (especially educational establishments) to help young people understand the voting process and assisting with the removal of barriers that might prevent them from voting
- Improving public awareness on what Councillors do by running a day-in-the-life-of series of articles

Improve the process and participation levels during Council-led public consultations by:
- Widely publicising consultations to our residents and identifying any specific groups that might have a key interest
- Finding creative ways to be more proactive with consultations such as pop-up stalls in popular locations
- Ensuring that consultation portals and forms are easily accessible for all
- Making sure that the correct audiences are engaged and they know what the consultation is specifically about

Support elected members in their role as community leaders by:
- Ensuring that Council communications are consistent with the policy decisions being taken by members
- Working closely with members, particularly the Cabinet, in ensuring that Council communications are consistent with the objectives of the Administration

Roles and responsibilities

Communication is the responsibility of us all. From Councillors to staff, we all have a role in promoting the services the Council has to offer and communicating more generally with the residents of the district. The Communications team is responsible for developing and delivering the associated plans that underpin this strategy. The team manages the Council's communications function and provides procedures, guidance and advice, to ensure that information is exchanged in an accurate, effective and consistent way. This includes ongoing and daily activities, longer-term projects of all sizes, marketing, promotion, and emergency crisis communications.

The Communications team plays a key role in how residents, staff and stakeholders perceive the Council.
We recognise the importance of reputation and will work to protect and enhance the Council's trusted name through effective branding, excellent media relations, and by providing good quality information in a timely manner. Paragraph 4 of the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2011 (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/5670/1878324.pdf) says "Publicity by local authorities should:

- Be lawful
- Be cost-effective
- Be objective
- Be even-handed
- Be appropriate
- Have regard to equality and diversity
- Be issued with care during periods of 'heightened sensitivity'"

Councillors' role
Councillors in their role as elected representatives engage with residents, groups and businesses on a wide range of issues and provide a link between our community and the Council.

Employees' role
All employees have a responsibility for communication with the public and with their colleagues. It is important that all colleagues are kept well informed about our priorities and successes so they can act as Council advocates.

As well as proactive communication and managing media relations, the Communications team also advises on, and deals with, reactive enquiries from the media on behalf of the Council.

Media
The media can expect us to:

- Foster a cooperative, courteous and mutually beneficial relationship
- Regard them as partners in providing people with timely, accurate information
- Make every effort to assist them with their requests and enquiries.

The Council expects to be reported fairly and accurately and given a reasonable opportunity to reply to media enquiries.

Prioritisation Framework

In order to establish the level of resource that needs to be allocated to each campaign, a prioritisation level should be attached to it. Priorities can change throughout the life of a campaign depending on activity, deadlines and timescales. Below are the summary requirements for each category.

Priority 1
- A high level corporate priority that is of strategic importance to the Council
- Requires consistent long-term attitude or behavioural change among target audiences
- Is a politically important issue
- Has clear delivery objectives that link directly to priority targets
- Requires significant communications activities
- Has a clearly defined and specific target audience
- Is a high priority to residents

Priority 2
- Is of strategic importance to the Council
- Requires attitude or behavioural change among target audiences (both short and long term)
- Has clear delivery objectives that link to strategic objectives
- Requires a smaller mix of communications activities
- Has a broader audience
- Is a medium priority to residents

Priority 3
- Requires short-term recognition from target audiences
- Has a very broad audience
- Is a short-term burst of communications activities
- Communicates one-off pieces of activity
- Has no clear need for attitude or behaviour change among residents

Other
- Anything not linking to corporate objectives will receive communications support in the form of appropriate media relations or social media only

Get in touch

Do it online at **www.folkestone-hythe.gov.uk**

- PAY your Council Tax
- FIND your bin collection day
- SEE planning applications via our Planning Portal
- REPORT littering / fly tipping / abandoned cars
- REGISTER to vote
- BUY your annual car parking permit
- ….and more!

It's clear, simple and fast.

Website: www.folkestone-hythe.gov.uk
Facebook: FolkestoneandHytheDC
Twitter: @fstonehythedc
Instagram: @folkestonehythedc

Folkestone
& Hythe
District Council