

Communications Strategy

June 2024

“Communications without strategy simply does not work. It is the golden thread that links a corporate plan, the organisation’s values and behaviours, residents and employee’s insight, and makes sense of it all.”

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Communications at Swale

We believe that good communication is about engaging with our audiences, not just informing them about issues and services.

Communication is also about giving people the opportunity to express their views and opinions as well as providing information. Good communication leads to better services, a stronger reputation and positive relationships.

Internal and external communications affect all aspects of our day-to-day business: from businesses talking to our teams about planning issues; families using our leisure facilities; councillors advocating on behalf of their residents; and information in the council tax letter about value for money.

Communications is the responsibility of everyone who works for us, not just the communications team.

We want to keep improving our services including communications. All employees and councillors can play a role in this improvement.

Why Swale needs good communications

There are clear relationships between how well-informed people are about our council's services and their overall satisfaction.

Good communications lead to more effective services, a better reputation, and higher levels of trust. A good reputation and high levels of trust are especially important when things go wrong.

Residents and businesses need to know that they can trust us to deliver good services and provide effective community leadership.

The Local Government Association (LGA) defines good communications as:

- Articulating the ambition for the area
- Improving corporate and personal reputation
- Supporting good political leadership
- Helping engagement with residents, partners, and staff
- Building trust
- Rallying advocates
- Driving change and deliver savings
- Attracting investment (and good people)

- Being used to manage performance
- Strengthening public support and understanding

And it is delivered through:

- Leadership – clarity of purpose and commitment
- A distinctive brand – what you stand for, values and trust
- A clear vision
- Being authentic to your local area
- Adopting a strategic approach to communications – communication without strategy does not work
- Developing a corporately agreed, fully evaluated annual communications plan - not just sending out ad hoc stuff
- Making sure all communications activity is based on research and insight and that campaigns are linked to corporate priorities and resourced accordingly
- Investing in evaluation
- Ensuring communications are owned by everyone

These principles are the foundations of our communications strategy.

What is a communications strategy?

A communications strategy is key in supporting delivery of our priorities. It provides a framework to ensure that we deliver clear, consistent and coordinated communications, that offer good value for money. It should set out priorities for delivery and improvement.

Together, officers, councillors, residents, businesses and other partners, such as the voluntary sector, can use this strategy to make sure the council is communicating clearly, consistently and through appropriate and accessible channels.

As a **resident** you can use this strategy to help:

- Understand what channels of communication are available and which are most suitable and convenient for you
- How you can communicate with us to give your views, feedback on services and highlight issues of concern
- Measure how effectively the council is communicating and how it offers good value for money.

As a **Councillor** you can use this strategy to help:

- Understand and challenge how we are doing in communicating effectively
- Signpost residents and businesses to communication channels that you think may be useful to them
- Understand priorities for improvement in communications and how we are delivering these.

As an **officer** you can use this strategy to help:

- Understand what external channels of communication are available and which are most appropriate to engage with your customers and service users
- Understand what internal channels are available so you have the all the information you need to deliver excellent services
- Understand priorities for improving communications and your role in supporting this

Our approach to communications

Our communications will be timely, open, trustworthy and focused on issues that matter to the residents of Swale. We will communicate in plain English.

Our goals are to:

- Inform and engage residents and staff
- Prove we provide value for money
- Build trust and confidence in what we do
- Improve key services and show we are doing so
- Focus on changing lives for the better

To meet the goals of our communications strategy we will aim to:

- Communicate as one organisation with one voice
- Engage with our audiences through channels which work for them: listen and ensure we are easy to communicate with
- When possible, act on feedback we receive
- Ensure our communication is successful by measuring the quality and impact of what we do.

How we will do this:

- We will deliver clear, creative and value-for-money communications based on the issues that matter to Swale residents
- We will protect our brand so that all residents recognise the council's role in improving the borough

- We will ensure our staff are informed and engaged in all that we do

Our audiences

Internal audiences:

- Council staff:
 - office based
 - staff based outside of Swale House
 - hybrid and homeworkers
 - senior leaders (EMT, SMT) and managers.
- Councillors:
 - leader and committee chairs
 - backbench councillors
 - opposition councillors

External audiences:

- residents
- local government partners – Kent County Council, Kent councils
- major contractors
- partnerships
- government departments and key politicians – MP's and Kent Police and Crime Commissioner
- local, regional, national and businesses
- community groups, faith groups and voluntary organisations
- schools

Communications channels

Effective communication relies on a mix of communications channels, including, direct communications (leaflets, publications, digital and social media), media relations, events and internal and partner communications (working with employees and stakeholders to ensure everyone gets consistent, timely information).

Within our campaign plans, these channels will be matched to different audiences to ensure that messages are communicated at the right time, to the right people, in the right way.

We communicate and engage with residents, councillors and employees through a wide range of channels:

- The council's website – [swale.gov.uk](https://www.swale.gov.uk) – is our main communications channel. In 2023, the site had:

- 58.4k site views per week
- 6k views of home page per week
- Various social media channels (March 2024):
 - Facebook: 12.4k followers
 - Twitter/X: 7.8k followers
 - LinkedIn: 1,908 followers
- Inside Swale: 64,765 copies delivered by Royal Mail
- Business newsletter (1,783 subscribers)
- Print and broadcast media – regular press releases and occasional radio adverts
- Adverts and public notices in local press when appropriate
- Public engagement events including service committees, area committees and full council
- Member briefings
- Monthly all staff briefings.

Through the life of the strategy – we wish to develop the way we communicate with residents, members and officers. We will actively work to

- Create the news we report and encourage councillors to produce their own content, such as videos showcasing their ward work
- Change our relationship with residents through social media by using it as a discussion tool rather than an informing tool (this will require additional resource)
- Trial and roll out the use of additional social media channels, such as Instagram and WhatsApp, where resources allow
- Continue promoting job opportunities through social media
- Work to identify how to have more two-way dialogue with residents, such as through Q&A on social media with committees and councillors
- Reduce our reliance on news releases to local print media, understanding the impact of this on the key messages we want to get out.
- Increase the amount of information we share with members through briefings (both written and meetings)
- Celebrate the diversity of our communities.
- Improve our internal comms offer to officers.
- Support council services to ensure we are promoting our services and events in a relevant and timely manner, understanding the resource implications and impacts on other communications work.

We will look to use the following mechanisms to communicate effectively:

Our external channels:

- council website
- social media channels – which could include Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram
- emerging email newsletter
- annual council tax leaflet
- Inside Swale
- Targeted direct mail
- On council buildings
- providing assets for community noticeboards
- Out of home advertising (print and digital)
- Railing banners
- vehicles – waste and recycling, grounds maintenance
- construction site hoardings
- neighbourhood shopping parade
- events
- litter bins and street furniture

Our internal channels:

- weekly staff bulletin (housekeeping)
- intranet
- display sites within council buildings including toilets, lifts, meeting rooms, photocopier rooms and wellbeing areas
- Chief executive and leader face-to-face and virtual briefings
- all staff briefings
- directorate team meetings
- All staff/member emails
- Teams channel and other 365 apps
- internal events

Our resources

The communications and policy team will develop and deliver the strategy's annual communications plan working with services and members.

The team is responsible for most of our core communications – including media relations, the main social media accounts, the website and intranet, the twice yearly Inside Swale magazine, the emerging email newsletter, internal communications channels, and some campaigns.

The communications function is led by a manager, who reports directly into the chief executive and attends meetings of the Strategic Management Team (SMT). There are

two communications officers, a graphic designer and a web communications officer. This is a lower level of resource compared to other Kent councils.

The team will have more of strategic presence in the council, leading our communications activity.

This is so the team is more involved in the right projects at the right time using the team's full range of expertise and knowledge to advise and support service areas on communication matters and reputational issues

Work Plan

The communications and policy team works within an annual work programme of communications and marketing campaigns that link directly to the corporate plan, annual delivery plan and associated service plans.

The work plan will be developed by the communications team working with heads of service and committee chairs, ensuring our strategic aims and service objectives are reflected in all communications activity.

There must be a clear line of sight of all work coming into the team that can be prioritised by managers on an ongoing basis and resource is used as flexibly as possible to deliver the priorities and projects emerging.

Equalities and accessibility run throughout all activity, ensuring inclusion is a key part of service planning. This applies to how we develop and share messaging, the channels and networks we use, and how we listen to feedback.

The broad scope of the team's work is as follows:

- **Priority 1** - campaigns are those that will have the biggest impact on council reputation and are vital to the delivery of one of our agreed priorities.
- **Priority 2** - campaigns are closely aligned to priorities but have a lesser impact on the reputation of the organisation.
- **Priority 3** - activity includes smaller campaigns - either aimed at smaller audiences or supporting time limited activity or events.

Our standards

The style and standard of our communications reflect our culture and reveal who we are.

All communications we issue – both internal and external – are:

- Open and honest - plain talking and direct as well as truthful and factual.
- Timely - up-to-date information communicated regularly, consistently and quickly.

- Clear and concise - easy to understand and jargon free.
- Accessible – meeting our legal obligations and easy to access through online and traditional channels.
- Relevant - targeted at the needs of the intended audience.
- Inclusive - designed to encourage and value discussion and feedback, with information available in formats suitable for people with disabilities and in a variety of languages.

Our Core Principles

We will be driven by the following principles which will frame how we work and prioritise what we do.

- Digital by default – placing the strongest emphasis of our work on digital and social media activity. This increases efficiency, reduces costs and is environmentally friendly.
- Acknowledging the diversity of our population, a range of communications methods are deployed to reach all our audiences, including those with limited or no digital access.
- Insight-driven – based on what we know our customers and stakeholders want. Focused on audiences rather than policies.
- Fully evaluated – so that we can tell what is working well and what needs to be improved.
- Innovative – continually reviewing and testing our approach to ensure we deliver the right message, at the right time, in the right format.
- Collaborative – working with internal and external partners to foster a culture of shared understanding and collective goals.

Evaluation

A good communications strategy relies on good evaluation which is not just a list of outputs but focused on outcomes and driven by insight.

Each of the campaigns in the annual campaigns plan will contain an evaluation section, which will include:

- inputs - what we put in, our planning and content creation
- outputs - what is produced, such as content and assets
- outcomes – what is achieved, such as audience reach, engagement, behaviour change

We will make quarterly reports on our progress against the strategy's annual campaigns plan to EMT and annually to Policy and Resources.

The Annual Campaigns Plan

The annual campaigns plan will be developed alongside an annual delivery plan and will be signed off by the chief executive and leader. Each campaign will follow the same template and will use the following headings:

- context
- aim and objectives
- strategy
- tactics
- audiences
- messages and content
- channels
- resources
- evaluation

Actions

To support delivery of this strategy, we will:

- identify training resources for members to encourage greater use of video in their communication with residents
- review and refresh if necessary the council's brand guidance
- roll out and grow the audience for new direct email newsletter for residents
- identify resource to support wider use of additional social media channels, including training where necessary
- create "house rules" and officer guidance for use of social media
- develop style guide to ensure website content is consistent, accessible and effective