

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

RECORD OF DECISION OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Decision Made: 14 May 2009

Report of the Head of Communications - Communications Strategy

Issue for Decision

To consider adopting a new Communications Strategy following consultations with councillors, staff and stakeholders, on the authority's draft Strategy be considered and that all sections of our community receive information, and are consulted about Council activities in order to ensure equality of access to services. This updated strategy will set the overall corporate framework within which Council communications work will be undertaken.

Decision Made

1. That the Communications Strategy 2009-12 be approved.
2. That the Communications Strategy 2009-12 be reviewed annually to monitor progress and to take account of new initiatives such as any taken as a result of the Communities in Control White Paper.

Reasons for Decision

The Council's Vision and Strategic Plan set the overall direction of the authority. These documents are underpinned by a variety of other cross-cutting plans and strategies which aid overall strategic and operational delivery. The Communications Strategy is a key underpinning document as it impacts directly upon the authority's overall reputation. In turn, these considerations can have a direct impact upon external assessments of the authority. The desirability of having a Communications Strategy has been summarised by the Improvement and Development Agency (I&DeA): *"Good communication leads to more effective services, a better reputation and stronger relationships."*

For many years the council has embraced the principles of open and accountable government. As the community leader for the Borough and a focal point for the community, the Council needs to be able to communicate effectively with all its citizens, local businesses and stakeholders. Good communication can: lead to increased satisfaction with the council and its services; to equal access for all citizens to the council's services; to the increased take up of services; and to effectively informed citizens, elected representatives and officers.

Our communication and consultation strategies have been reviewed and updated. As part of this process an Equality Impact Assessment has also been carried out

and the strategy seeks to provide effective communication and engagement of all stakeholders regardless of race, age, gender, faith, sexual orientation or disability (referred to as the "six fundamentals").

The overarching goal of the strategy is therefore *"to provide effective communication and engagement of all stakeholders regardless of race, age, gender, faith, sexual orientation and disability throughout Maidstone Borough Council and the wider community."*

Consultation on the draft communication strategy included – residents, staff, councillors and hard to reach groups. As a result of these consultations a number of amendments have been made to the approved consultative draft of the strategy. The amendments including all of those suggested by the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee are:

Page	Details
5	A better example of a local issue has been added
5	'Various publics' changed to stakeholders
5	Amended to reflect the desire for local information
6	Strategy amended to acknowledge role of well informed Councillors as advocates of the Council
7	Grammatical corrections
9	Reference to recycling site changed to recycling 'bring to' bank to differentiate between KCC and Maidstone Council facilities
11	Explanation added – ways to improve our profile in Local Government press website
12	Further explanations of accessible communication added
12	Action point amended to insist on the use of Plain English throughout the website
12	Amended to refer to improved communication with visually impaired people
14	Strategy amended to make mention of internal communication methods which contribute to understanding of Council policies etc.
14	Amended to reflect desire of residents to keep up to date with the work of Councillors via email and website
14	Amended to reflect desire for more Information by email and website
15	Amended to reflect desire for more information about consultations within the website and email.
16-21	Action Plan amended to indicate the post holders responsible for the delivery of targets
17	Objective 3 amended to include reference to agendas and responses to consultations
18	Key Objective 10, staff meetings frequency amended to every other month
18	Key objective 11, Wakey Wakey Newsletter amended to include links to council news releases

The strategy has also been updated to take account of the recently adopted Sustainable Communities Strategy and Strategic Plan, which set out a new vision and priorities for the Council.

The strategy and in particular the consultation section has been amended to reflect the importance the Council places on engagement with stakeholders and the ways the Council engages with residents. The strategy has been renamed to reflect these changes.

The Communications Strategy includes an action plan with a range of specific targets aimed at:

- Ensuring that citizens are aware of local issues such as climate change and that they have a sense of place;
- Creating a high profile for the council as a dynamic, progressive, efficient and business-like organisation at local, regional and national level;
- Ensuring consistency, plain language and total quality in all communications with the public;
- Encouraging and enabling our staff to understand, support and deliver the council's vision and priorities in line with the ethos crystallised in our core values (STRIVE);
- Engaging and empowering staff to feel confident in communicating with the council's various publics; and
- Building greater awareness of council services and policies and engaging with stakeholders to gain a greater understanding of their aspirations to inform council policies;

The action plan has been reformatted under these objectives. All of the actions in the draft strategy have been retained.

It is important that officers have access to the latest version of the strategy so that they are aware of the communications framework and environment within which service managers operate. The approved strategy will be made widely available and imbedded with staff using – internet pages, staff newsletter, reminder materials, and team meetings etc.

As well as setting out an overall strategy the document includes an action plan (section 6), past achievements (section 7), a statement of principles of consultation (Appendix 1) and PR and Editorial Policy (Appendix 2). In terms of achievements, recent developments have included a refresh of the Council's website digitalmaidstone.co.uk and greater use of the internet including – podcasting and audio video clips and You Tube and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Alternatives considered and why rejected

The Council could choose not to have a Communications Strategy but it risks low levels of satisfaction with the council and its services and the inequality of access to the council's services. The lack of an overall long-term approach to communications can also have a detrimental impact on external assessments.

Background Papers

Should you be concerned about this decision and wish to call it in, please submit a call in form signed by any two Non-Executive Members to the Scrutiny Manager by: xxxxxxxxxx.
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