



Putting people first

Corporate Communications and Engagement Strategy, 2015-20



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1. Introduction

We are committed to delivering great value services for Maidstone Borough residents. The effectiveness of how we deliver our vision is determined to a significant extent 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.

Effective communications and engagement will ensure that our vision, priorities and outcomes are clearly understood by local people, our workforce, our partners, local businesses and other stakeholders.

2. Our communications and engagement aim

We will communicate clearly, openly, accurately and regularly with residents, business and our partners, and throughout the council, to promote mutual understanding, and give a better service to the people of Maidstone Borough. We will achieve this by:

- Articulating and communicating activities and services that support and deliver the strategic priorities in the council's strategic plan.
- Providing consistency in the delivery of key messages.
- Ensuring that all our communications are open, honest, clear, concise, simple and accessible.
- Ensuring that there are clear opportunities for residents and partners to have an influence on our policies and services.



3. Maidstone Borough Council's Strategic Plan 2015-20

The Corporate Communications and Engagement Strategy supports Maidstone Borough Council's Strategic Plan and sets out how we will communicate the council's vision, mission, priorities and values set out below to all our stakeholders:

OUR VISION

That our residents live in decent homes, enjoy good health and a pleasant environment, with a successful economy that is supported by reliable transport networks.

OUR MISSION

Putting People First.

PRIORITY 1

Keeping Maidstone Borough an attractive place for all

Providing a clean and safe environment

Encouraging good health and wellbeing.

Respecting the character of our Borough

Ensuring there are good leisure and cultural attractions

Enhancing the appeal of the town centre for everyone

PRIORITY 2

Securing a successful economy for Maidstone Borough

Securing improvements to the transport infrastructure of our Borough

Promoting a range of employment opportunities and skills required across our Borough

Planning for sufficient homes to meet our Borough's needs

OUR VALUES

Service

Everything we do impacts on our customers, both internal and external. We will listen to and understand their needs, then take action to provide the right service in a positive and professional manner.

Teamwork

Working together to achieve our objectives and goals in a way that utilises the talents and creativity of everyone in our organisation.

Responsibility

We work in an environment that encourages us to take ownership for our actions. Making the right choices and decisions that lead to a satisfactory outcome for all.

Integrity

We have the courage to act on our convictions to build trust and honesty. We work with our partners and customers to create a feeling of openness and transparency in everything we do.

Value

Taking care and weighing up our options, aiming to get the maximum effect for every penny of public money we spend.

Equality

Valuing our differences and understanding how they can contribute to a better working environment and services that are fair and easy to access.

4. The strategy in context

Research shows that the better informed people are about their council services, the more satisfied they feel. The Place Survey confirmed long-held beliefs that well informed residents are more likely to be satisfied with their council and feel it offers value for money (The New Reputation Guide - 2010, www.lga.gov.uk/reputation)

Good communications therefore can lead to more effective services, a better reputation and stronger relationships.

In our most recent residents' survey (conducted by Lake Market Research in autumn 2013) around two thirds of residents (67%) believed they were kept well informed about the services and benefits Maidstone Borough Council provides. This represents a small improvement compared to 2011 (63%) and clearly there is still room for improvement.

Maidstone Borough Council does not believe in spin.

Paragraph 4 of the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2011 (available for download from the gov.uk website) 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'"

In addition the council's editorial policy sets specific standards for Maidstone Borough Council publicity. The policy at Appendix 5 has been amended to take account of the Council's committee system that will operate from 2015-16.



5. Corporate Communications and Engagement Strategy 2015 - 2020

A successful Communications and Engagement Strategy to establish and maintain clear and relevant two-way channels of communication will:

- Raise awareness of the council's vision
- Maintain a culture of two-way communication with all our stakeholders to ensure that feedback is consistently fed into service planning and delivery
- Keep Maidstone Borough residents well informed
- Address negative or potentially damaging information about council services
- Support council staff in their roles as ambassadors for the organisation
- Support elected members in their role as community leaders
- Reach all sections of the community
- Keep abreast of technological developments and embrace them where feasible
- Promote respect and trust between the council and its stakeholders
- Raise the profile of Maidstone Borough
- Maintain a strong and consistent identity for the council
- Raise awareness of council services to maximise access to them
- Keep staff informed and promote understanding
- Develop and promote opportunities for residents, community groups and other stakeholders to engage with the council
- Maintain and improve customer satisfaction levels with the council
- Involve stakeholders in policy development and decision-making

We are committed to making all our communications and engagement activities:

- Two-way – both informing and listening
- Relevant and appropriate for target audiences
- Easily accessible
- Easily understood by everyone in our community
- Consistent
- Honest and accountable
- Timely

Continued over



We will achieve this by:

- Providing opportunities for residents and communities to be more involved and offer views and opinions on services and issues. These will be tailored to the needs of different groups – residents, parishes, councillors and officers, businesses, community groups and other partners.
- Exploring common approaches to engage groups of people, particularly those who are harder to reach.
- Carrying out communications and engagement to support and promote the priorities outlined in the Strategic Plan.

6. Our stakeholders?

A stakeholder is a person, group, or organisation that can affect or be affected by an organisation's actions, objectives, and policies. Stakeholders have varying needs and different stakeholders are entitled to different considerations.

Our communication and engagement plans (appendix 3) will seek to identify stakeholders and how to engage with them.

7. How do we communicate and engage?

We have many methods to communicate with stakeholders, and for them to communicate with us, including face to face, our Customer Contact Centre, our residents' newsletter, our website, traditional and social media, consultations and road shows. However, we will be innovative by:

Improving our digital communications

- Making our website more interactive so it is quick and easy to engage with us.
- Using new ways to engage people through digital and social media.
- Developing digital channels as alternatives to print when appropriate.

Tailoring communications and engagement to maximise impact

- Using data to tailor activity to reach groups of people more effectively.
- Evaluating of our approach to continue to increase effectiveness.
- Joining up activity to reach key groups of people in the most effective way and provide value for money.

Continued over



Maintaining a strategic approach

- Focusing on the priorities in the Strategic Plan.

Ensuring Maidstone has an influential voice locally and regionally

- Presenting the borough's views locally and regionally on our priorities.

Providing opportunities for people to engage on issues and services

- Increasing opportunities for people to engage on issues and services by developing existing and new channels.

Providing the best communications and engagement by working as one team

- Building on effective, coordinated communications and engagement that is consistently high quality and provides value for money.
- Working with partners and others to co-ordinate communications and engagement for the benefit of Maidstone residents and businesses.

8. What do we communicate and engage in?

We communicate and engage with stakeholders about the council's services, policies, values and decisions, and the issues which impact on stakeholders. This includes information on how the council works and how to get involved in decisions, councillors, public service information during emergencies, and consultation and engagement opportunities. Stakeholder feedback is passed on to departments to inform service planning and delivery

Where people expect to be able to play a role in how services are designed and delivered, we will recognise and appreciate their involvement.

We will tailor our communications and engagement to the needs of different groups – residents, officers, members, businesses, communities and other partners - to enable deeper engagement.



9. Who communicates?

Communication is the responsibility of every officer and member of the council. We have a corporate communications team of three full time equivalent people that manage the council's communications function by providing procedures, guidance and advice, which ensures that information is exchanged in an accurate and consistent manner.

The reporting structure of the team is:



The council has an agreement with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council to supply design services.

The communications team is responsible for delivering the action plan for this strategy. It deals with all requests/enquiries from journalists on behalf of staff and assists all councillors with requests/enquiries from journalists. Journalists can expect us to:

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

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



10. Standards and Evaluation

We have in place formal measurement mechanisms for our communications and engagement activities (appendix 3). These are in line with communications best practice, and indicate progress towards the achievement of our targets.

We will regularly review our progress in implementing this strategy and will share updates.

The council's approach to communications, branding and the corporate identity is detailed in the council's clear communications guide and branding guidelines. The council has adopted principles of consultation (appendix 4) and maintains a consultation handbook. We will continue to brief and inform our staff to ensure consistency.

We will continue to use the results of both formal and informal research to measure residents' satisfaction with the quality and quantity of information we provide. Our next survey of residents' attitudes to the council and awareness of its services is scheduled for the autumn 2015. We will review the results before preparing our 2016-17 communications and engagement action plan.



Appendix 1 – Summary communication and engagement channels

Our detailed plans to deliver this strategy are set out in the 2015-16 action plan at appendix 6. We will measure our success against the results of the residents' survey in autumn 2015 and then every two years.

The following is a summary of the channels we use and why.

Community and business engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote coproduction of solutions with residents, businesses, staff, partners and other stakeholders where possible and be clear on when we are seeking to engage, inform or consult to manage expectations. • Provide community and business forums, e.g. Maidstone Older Person's Forum, Disability Focus Group, BME Forum, Maidstone Economic Business Partnership, Marden Business Forum etc. - to provide balanced and objective information to assist people in understanding and actively engaging in local issues and opportunities. • Provide individuals and communities with training, information, advice and support needed to develop their confidence, skills, knowledge and ability to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - participate in community life - engage with services - engage in local decision-making - understand and engage with democratic processes - come together to take action for themselves • To partner with the community in each aspect of the decision, including the development of alternatives and the identification and delivery of the preferred solution. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For example, neighbourhood action planning which involves community groups, residents and public organisations working together to tackle neighbourhood issues. • To place decision-making in the hands of the community. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For example, Maidstone Community First neighbourhood funding to increase community engagement, improve health and wellbeing and reduce crime and ASB.
Corporate identity and branding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop understanding of the needs of different audiences and plan marketing communications accordingly. • Promote services and information in a clearly branded way through the most appropriate channels. • Ensure guidance and support is available for internal use so that the corporate identity guidelines can be adhered to by all.

Continued over



Council publications e.g. Borough Update	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To inform and educate target audiences about changes to service delivery and issues directly related to the council's key communications messages.
Internal communications e.g. One Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop communications channels to provide honest, accurate, understandable and timely information to staff and councillors that is relevant to them undertaking their roles effectively and increasing their understanding of council business. Listen as well as inform, ensuring that sufficient channels of communication, including feedback mechanisms, are in place so information moves up, down and across the organisation. Ensure that members of staff are aware of, and involved in, decision making and activities. To gain organisational buy-in and support for our strategic plan.
Leaflets and posters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To inform and educate target audiences about changes to service delivery and issues directly related to the council's key communications messages.
Media relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop proactive and open relations with the media, responding quickly and effectively to media enquiries. Use news releases to inform and educate target audiences about changes to service delivery and issues directly related to the council's key communications messages. Ensure procedures are in place so that all officers and councillors dealing with the media have appropriate support.
Publicity and awareness campaigns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To inform and educate target audiences about changes to service delivery and issues directly related to the council's key communications messages.
Social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus social media activity on developing Twitter as an information provider, with Facebook used for time limited campaigns, issues and engagement, rather than for general news updates.
Website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support the use of the council's website to access council information and services, and to facilitate e-channels of communication that the public can use to speak to us and access services.



Appendix 2 - Our performance and targets

Indicator	Residents Survey 2011	Residents Survey 2013 *the definition of some indicators was amended in 2013	Residents Survey 2015 target
Overall satisfaction with local area as a place to live	84%	84%	85%
Percentage of residents who trust the council (new indicator in 2013)	n/a	61%	64%
Agreement that residents can influence decisions affecting their local area	35%	29%*	32%
Agreement that the local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together	77%	56%*	60%
Satisfaction with the way Maidstone Borough council runs its services	63%	66%	68%
Percentage of residents that feel that the council keeps them well informed about the services and benefits it provides	63%	67%*	69%
Agreement that Maidstone Borough Council provides value for money	46%	43%	45%
Indicator	Best Companies Survey 2007	Best Companies Survey 2010	Best Companies Survey 2015
Employee engagement measured by the Best Companies accreditation scheme	586.2	602.9	576.4



Appendix 3 – Communications and Engagement plans template

Background

- A brief summary, including situation and/or environmental analysis tools as appropriate, of the context in which the communications/engagement will take place and the events or actions that have led to the activity.

Overall Aim

- The aim should clearly follow from the background.

Objectives

- These should be clear, concise and achievable outcomes that can be measured.

Key messages

- What are the key facts, thoughts or ideas that this activity seeks to get across?

Measurement:

- How will this activity be measured against its objectives?
- What are the criteria for success?

Review:

- How and when will progress be reviewed?

Resources:

- What is the total cost of this activity and what is the breakdown of costs by activity?

Timetable

- When is this activity likely to begin?
- Over what period will it continue? What other relevant council activities or events will coincide with this activity?

Stakeholders

- The communications/engagement activity should identify a clearly defined audience or set of audiences and demonstrate how the objectives relate to each. Audience needs should be considered.

Actions

- What elements comprise the communications/engagement activity? What media/tools will be used?



Appendix 4 - Principles of Consultation and Engagement

- **Inclusive** - Involving all sections of the community. When possible information should be available in a choice of formats.
- **Open** - With real choices. What can people realistically change?
- **Impartial** - It should not lead local people to a response.
- **Informative** - People must be informed to make reasoned decisions.
- **Involving** - It must enable people to really become involved in the development of proposals rather than the final decision.
- **Understandable** - Plain English must be used.
- **Appropriate** - To reach all groups there should be a mix of quantitative and qualitative research.
- **Strategic** - To avoid 'tick box tiredness' consultation should take account of the council's partner's consultation exercises.
- **Joined Up** - Is it appropriate to combine consultation exercises?
- **Resourced** - Sufficient human and financial resources are committed to ensure consultation is rigorous and reaches all participants.
- **Professional** - There must be confidence that the results are real and not massaged to produce the outcome favoured by the council.
- **Timely** - It should be at times and in places where people are likely to participate.
- **Listened to** - It must be owned by the council and the results must provide them with real information on which to base decisions.
- **Reported & Communicated** - Feedback on the results and how they have informed the decision will build confidence that views are listened to and acted on.



Appendix 5 - Public Relations and Editorial Policy

This appendix sets out the Public Relations and Editorial Policy for council newsletters, news releases, media events and enquiries, and council road shows.

- All the council's communications will comply with s.2 of the Local Government Act 1986 and s.27 of the Local Government Act 1988, and have regard to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. This means that it will be:
 - Non-partisan
 - Lawful
 - Cost-effective
 - Objective
 - Even-handed
 - Appropriate
 - Have regard to equality and diversity
- The council will only publicise and promote the decisions, policies and services of the council and its partners.
- Committee Chairs and the Leader of the Council can be quoted in news releases, council newsletters and media statements to explain decisions and policies and to promote council services.
- News releases and responses to media and other enquiries will include contact details for all group spokespersons.
- The council will hold photo calls and events to promote and explain decisions, policies and services. The council will be represented at photo calls and events by The Mayor, the Leader of the Council, Committee Chairs, and council officers, as appropriate. All members of the council will be informed of, and welcome to attend, these events.
- News releases will be sent to all councillors at the same time that they are issued to the media.
- Ward members and group leaders will be informed of council road shows as soon as the dates are fixed and invited to attend or send representatives.

