

South Cambridgeshire District Council – Communications strategy 2013/14

Summary

The communications strategy for the Council is centred on taking a proactive approach to consistently deploy timely and easy to understand information to internal and external audiences. Communications is only effective as a two-way process and listening and responding to communities and staff is key. These approaches aim to uphold and enhance the Council's reputation, make sure staff feel valued and help secure additional funding and resources for the area.

Strategy overview

Communications is a two-way process and the communications team will work with services to design, support and deliver projects and campaigns that fulfil the Council's corporate plan and priorities. By offering more opportunities for engagement we will be able to increase the way we measure effectiveness. This goes beyond the channels currently managed by the communications team and a separate strategy for community engagement, managed by the Policy and Performance Team, will be in place. This strategy does not give details and messaging for specific projects as the communications team will devise more detailed plans for these including objective goals for each one.

Our vision and key messages

Through consultation the Council has agreed a vision we are striving to deliver. Communications will continue to support the delivery of this long-term goal through clear, honest and upfront messages:

“South Cambridgeshire will continue to be the best place to live, work and study in the country. Our district will demonstrate impressive and sustainable economic growth. Our residents will have a superb quality of life in an exceptionally beautiful, rural and green environment.”

Alongside our vision a set of aims, actions and approaches are also in place to maintain focus. Our external messaging will reflect the priorities residents and

businesses have helped us set and demonstrate how we not forgetting the basics, such as clean streets and value for money, while delivering on our promises:

Message one – we are a listening Council and are fully committed to engaging with communities to make sure the right decisions are made for local people.

Message two – we pride ourselves on delivering first class and value for money services and will continue to drive down costs to make sure every penny works as hard as possible for our taxpayers.

Message three – the district is consistently recognised as one of the best places to live, work and study in the country and we will continue to put the needs and future aspirations of our residents and businesses at the heart of everything we do to maintain the high quality of life we enjoy.

Message four – South Cambridgeshire is open for business and a national bright spot that can help pull the country out of recession. We pledge to continue to cut red tape and back our businesses so they can grow, create jobs and boost the local and national economy.

Message five – The district is one of the fastest growing areas in the country and we are committed to delivering sustainable communities where business can prosper and people want to live, work and go to school.

Communications channels – now and in the future

The communications team will actively pursue proactive and two-way communications wherever possible. Below is a snapshot of the main internal and external channels in use and actions to build on our current successes. These actions will form the action plan for the Council's communications.

External channels

South Cambs Magazine – following a tendering exercise last year, saving £33,000 over three years, the magazine is produced and designed in-house. It is produced four times-a-year and delivered door-to-door to households. An interactive version is also online. The last reader's survey in 2011 showed residents found it of value and generally supported its production. During the last 12 months work has been carried

out to improve the use of two-way communications through the magazine – an example being response forms being included for the Local Plan, which helped generate over 20,000 comments during the first round of consultation. Service reps across the Council contribute ideas and more case studies than in the past are now being used to bring the magazine to life. Each edition now also includes a competition to draw in readers. A cross-party editorial board of Members and officer service reps is also in place to improve the range of topics covered.

Action points:

- Carry out reader's survey in 2013 to gauge opinion and shape future content.
- Secure attractive prizes for competitions in each edition of the magazine.
- Work with editorial board and service rep officers to make sure content is lively, brings issues to life and promotes Council priorities.
- Maximise opportunities for two-way communication.
- Continue to be innovative to seek best value, including monitoring of distribution.

Traditional media – the communications team has sought to encourage an open and honest dialogue with the media to build strong local links and develop opportunities for coverage. A proactive stance has also been taken to communicate key information to our residents through the media. During 2012 the communications team issued 220 press releases – a 68% increase when compared to recent years – and over 1,300 pieces of coverage were secured. A total of 90% of the coverage was positive or neutral with only 10% being negative in tone. The national spotlight has also been secured for key projects such as Northstowe but further work could maximise all media opportunities, especially in trade publications.

Action points:

- Continue to build relationships with media contacts
- Create a new list of trade press contacts for each service area to increase reach
- Proactively generate, maximise and manage news stories, including over 200 news releases each year that support corporate priorities
- Aim to maintain 90% positive and neutral media coverage

Website – The Council's website is managed by the web team, which sits within the ICT service. The website was re-launched at the end of 2012 following work to make

it more interactive and easier to carry out tasks online. The website is an important communication tool and the new layout gives the flexibility to react to customers and bring topical information onto the homepage instantly. The website gives opportunities for cost savings, such as paying bills and requesting services online, and will provide new ways to get in touch such as web chat and text messaging.

Action points:

- Help reduce costs by promoting the new website, and the added functionality, at every opportunity as an easy way to contact the Council.
- Promote the launch, and ongoing use, of web chat and text messaging.
- Contribute to the web team's plans for updating the homepage with the latest relevant hot topics.

Social media – the communications team currently manages the Council's corporate Twitter and Facebook accounts. Followers on Twitter stand at 1,810 and we have over 100 people 'like' our page on Facebook. These figures were at the end of February 2013. Social media is a good example of two-way communication as it is being used frequently to ask questions and resolve residents' problems. Followers on Twitter continue to grow and Facebook numbers are slowly increasing and this channel is one of the ways we hope to engage with more young people. Information from all services goes through the corporate accounts with the exception of the Youth Council who control their own pages.

Action points:

- Increase followers on Twitter and Facebook by 20% by March 2014.
- Play a role in emergency situations and major events by giving coordinated real time information.
- Continue to answer questions and address concerns put forward on social media accounts with turnaround expected of the channel.
- Use social media to influence and build advocates for the work of the Council.
- Provide social media advice and support to officers, members and youth councillors

Internal channels

SCene – the magazine for staff and councillors is produced bi-monthly and content covers a mix of social and corporate information. Content is written by the communications team, graphics carry out the design work and the printing is done

internally at low cost. A staff survey in January 2011 showed that 84% of staff read every edition with 43% reading every page. Staff said they value the magazine being printed but a further survey could help refresh the magazine to match current needs.

Action points:

- Survey staff to refresh the magazine content.
- Seek staff views on whether SCene should continue as a printed version or solely online.
- Investigate appetite for staff from across the Council joining the communications team as a training opportunity to help write SCene.

Corporate brief – this monthly briefing organised by the communications team updates managers on key corporate information. It is led by the chief executive and presentations are given by managers to update colleagues on key pieces of work. Managers then disseminate information to their teams. A review of the session has been carried out and some workshop sessions have been suggested to steer projects. Feedback from senior management has suggested a separate leadership forum may be more helpful to steer early policy.

Action points:

- Continue to organise monthly corporate brief sessions by gathering suggestions of updates and circulating agendas
- Facilitate at least three workshop based corporate briefs each year
- Review the way information is posted on Insite after briefings to improve access to information.
- Work with EMT to look into separate leadership forum, including ongoing communication of outcomes.

InSite – this is a key internal communications channel that is managed by the web team. Following the re-launch of the Council's website development work shifted to InSite. This strategy depends on some features being made available for the communications team to update and manage. As well as holding corporate information, such as forms and contact details, there is space for corporate and social news as well as the chief executive's blog – which allows comments to be made.

Action points:

- Support web team on development of new InSite
- Advocate simplification of the spaces provided for corporate and social news so it is clear for staff.
- Work with ICT to ensure InSite is the portal to access email and main Microsoft Office packages on all SCDC computers.
- Help develop, and manage, new 'Ask EMT' feature on Insite. This will be another way for staff to ask questions with answers all being posted online in a clear and transparent way.

Additional channels

Staff Forum – Through the Leadership Development Programme a new staff forum is in the process of being set up. This will not replace the unions, but will look at issues such as staff comfort in buildings and social and charity events. The group has been suggested as a direct result of staff consultation and will be made up of officers from all levels and areas of the organisation. The communications team will assist in communicating information for this new group once it is in place.

Action point:

- Assist the staff forum engaging with staff and promote outcomes in a 'you said, we did' format to increase staff morale and show the Council is listening.

Information screens – The Council spends time and resource on design work for posters and other promotional materials for around the building. These are printed which also has cost implications. Savings could be made, while also improving communications, by redirecting this resource. Screens on each floor of the building and the canteen could replace the need for posters and have the advantage of being updated instantly.

Action point:

- Work with business efficiency team to assess and consider options for adding screens to improve information for staff

Training

Media training – an in-house training programme will be developed by the communications team and offered to councillors and officers. This will be delivered in

small groups to make sure practical sessions are possible. The sessions will be designed to maximise each media opportunity to ensure clear and simple key messages are delivered. Presentation and written communication skills have been put forward to HR as part of the corporate training programme.

Action point:

- Develop training programme for councillors and staff
- Survey demand for training with councillors and staff
- Roll out programme of training

Mutual training – A member of the communications team will attend departmental team meetings periodically so communications can be further integrated as part of the work all departments carry out. This will allow members of the communications team to hear about what is planned in departments and add value by helping to make sure residents get every opportunity to be involved. This will also give a chance to talk about communications issues, and flag potential stories at an early stage.

Action point:

- A member of the communications team to attend team meetings where feasible

Branding

Every organisation's brand is important because it's the face of the Council and influences what people think of you. For the Council this is no different and our image, words, and feeling must remain consistent. A detailed design guide is in place for the Council's graphics team to implement but all employees need to be brand guardians to ensure consistency. To make this as simple as possible a short, concise and non-technical document should be developed to help all officers use the brand effectively. It is standard practice in most organisations for the communications team to sign off the branding on all documents that are designed in partnership or by third parties to ensure consistency and this should become standard practice.

Action points:

- Develop short non-technical guide for officers to ensure brand consistency
- Review design guide following production of non-technical guide

- Promote practice of partnership documents being signed off by communications/graphics team

Localism and Members

The Council works very closely with parish councils and is fully supportive of localism. Parish councils and our 57 members are key to good communications with communities and all service areas across the council have a role to play to make sure members and parish councils are well informed so they can be advocates. The communications team can assist in advising officers about the importance of keeping these groups well informed, and in a way that allows feedback. Communications should also ensure the appropriate Members and/or Parish Councils are made aware at an early stage if there is anything we are leading on that is taking place in their area.

Action point:

- Provide advice to colleagues to ensure appropriate members and/or parish councils are well informed and have opportunities to feedback.
- Keep appropriate members and/or parish councils informed at an early stage if an event or media enquiry of high interest is taking place in their area.
- Utilise local village publications by sending all appropriate news releases

Risks and constraints

The communications team has one full-time and two part-time (job share) team members. The team is small but agile and must remain responsive to new projects and activities that become high priorities throughout the year. This can have a knock on effect on delivering the activities that have been set as the current priorities. Reactive media enquiries and emergency planning also takes a good deal of time, and must be carried out quickly, and this affects the capacity for the team to prioritise proactive work.

Forward plan

A separate corporate grid of communications activities will be developed. This will capture all projects, events and meetings taking place that we should consider for communications activity. This grid will help the communications team maximise

opportunities by having a better forward plan that service areas will contribute toward.

Ongoing work carrying out the day-to-day activities on the corporate grid will run alongside the actions identified in this plan.

Action plan timeline

The timeline below gives targets for activities and will allow the team to benchmark the Council's performance on an on-going basis.

When?	What?	Who?
Ongoing	Secure attractive prizes for competitions in each edition of South Cambs Mag	GB/KQ/AE
Ongoing	Work with South Cambs Mag editorial board and service rep officers to make sure content is lively, brings issues to life and promotes the priorities set for the Council	GB/KQ/AE
Ongoing	Maximise two-way communications through South Cambs Magazine	GB/KQ/AE
Ongoing	Continue to be innovative to seek best value on South Cambs Magazine, including monitoring of distribution	GB
Ongoing	Continue to build relationships with media contacts	GB/KQ/AE
Ongoing	Proactively generate, manage and maximise news stories, including over 200 annual news releases	GB/KQ/AE
Ongoing	Contribute to the web teams plans for updating the homepage with the latest relevant hot topics	GB/KQ/AE
Ongoing	Help reduce costs by ongoing promotion of new self-service website	GB/KQ/AE
Ongoing	Attend warn and inform meetings and play an active role in emergency situations and major events by giving coordinated real time information through social media.	GB
Ongoing	Continue to answer questions and address concerns put forward on social media accounts with turnaround expected of the channel.	GB/KQ/AE
Ongoing	Use social media to influence and build advocates for the work of the council	GB/KQ/AE

Ongoing	Provide social media advice and support to officers, members and youth councillors	GB/KQ/AE
Ongoing	Continue to organise monthly corporate brief sessions by gathering suggestions of updates and circulating agendas	AE
Ongoing	Provide advice to colleagues to ensure appropriate Members and/or Parish Councils are well informed and have opportunities to feedback	GB/KQ/AE
Ongoing	Keep appropriate Members and/or Parish Councils informed at an early stage if an event or media enquiry of high interest is taking place in their area.	GB/KQ/AE
Ongoing	Utilise Parish Council publications by sending all appropriate news releases	GB/KQ/AE
Ongoing	A member of the communications team to attend variety of team meetings where feasible	GB/KQ/AE
TBC	Work with EMT to look into separate leadership forum, including ongoing communication of outcomes	GB
TBC	Assist the staff forum engaging with colleagues and promote outcomes in a 'you said, we did' format to increase staff morale and show the Council is listening	GB/KQ/AE
TBC	Help develop, and manage, new 'Ask EMT' feature on Insite	GB/KQ/AE
TBC	Promote the launch and ongoing use of web-chat and text messaging on the Council's website	KQ
Mar 13	Support web team on development of new Insite	GB
Mar 13	Advocate simplified spaces for corporate and social news as part of development of Insite	GB
ADD DATE	Promote practice of partnership documents being signed off by communications/graphics team	GB/KQ/AE
May 13	Develop media training programme for Members and officers	GB
May 13	Work with ICT to ensure Insite is the portal to access email and main Microsoft Office packages	GB
May 13	Develop short non-technical guide for officers to	AE

	ensure brand consistency	
Jun 13	Review design guide following production of non-technical guide	AE/GB
July 13	Create a revised list of trade press contacts	KQ
July 13	Survey Members and officers to gather list of delegates interested in media training	AE
July 13	Survey SCene readers to assess and refresh content	AE
July 13	Seek views from SCene readers on whether magazine should remain printed or solely online	AE
July 13	Investigate appetite for staff joining the comms team as training opportunity to write SCene	AE
July 13	Review the way information is posted on Insite after briefings to improve access to information	AE/GB
Aug 13	Carry out South Cambs Mag reader's survey to gauge opinion and shape future content	GB/KQ/AE
Sept 13	Begin media training programme with small groups	GB/KQ/AE
Sept 13	Work with business efficiency team to assess and consider options for adding screens in SCDC office to improve information for staff	KQ/GB
Dec 13	Positive and neutral media coverage for the year to hit 90% target	GB/KQ/AE
Dec 13	Facilitate at least three workshop based corporate briefs each year	AE
March 2014	Hit 20% increase in followers on Twitter and Facebook over the last year	GB/KQ/AE