

Communication and Engagement Strategy

2019 - 2022



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Introduction

This is an exciting and challenging time for Waverley Borough Council. While working on major regeneration and improvement projects, investing in a more sustainable and environmentally conscious culture - following the declaration of a climate emergency - and a focus on delivering housing that is accessible to all in one of the most expensive places to live in the UK, the council faces increasing customer demand and expectation while dealing with financial challenges. All this under a new, collaborative political leadership team who have a commitment to create a more open and transparent culture at the council.

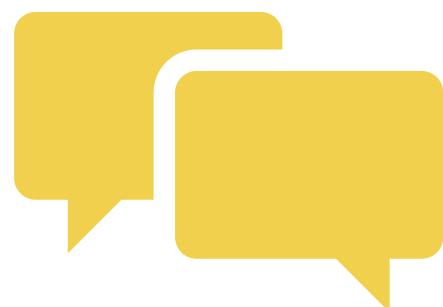
Trust in government is at an all-time low¹ and misinformation is rife on social media and within local communities. To avoid confusion and to promote confidence in the council, it is important we strive to be clear and honest with residents and create opportunities for engagement, producing work that creates an impact to cut through the noise and fake news. Proactive communications that align with corporate priorities need to be prioritised to ensure our communications service is delivering the best impact and value for money to the council.

We will ensure we maximise opportunities to engage with our residents and take them along on this journey with us, so they have ownership over their communities, their futures and their relationship with their council.

To do this, we need to take a strategic approach to our work and readjust the balance to focus on planned, productive, coordinated priorities that will make a tangible difference to our communities, help to increase much-needed income for the council and enhance its reputation, while doing fewer unnecessary or reactive projects. We will make sure our work is based on robust evidence and research to achieve optimal impact and evaluate what we do to demonstrate our return on investment. To help ease the pressure on our time we will empower and enable staff to support us in creating human content, which will help to showcase the valuable and often unseen work the council does for the community.

This strategy sets out how the Communications and Engagement Team will provide an excellent, value for money service to support the council's strategic objectives, making the best use of the skills and expertise in PR, communications, marketing and engagement functions.

¹ Edelman Trust Barometer 2017



Objectives

This strategy seeks to move the Communications and Engagement Team from working in an unplanned, reactive and tactical environment to a service that is proactive and strategic, with a robust plan of activity in place. This will be a major change in the way we work and will require the support of colleagues and a change in culture across the organisation to be successful.

Where we have been	Where we want to be
A reactive, busy and stretched team	A proactive and organised function, which allows time for creative thinking, research and evaluation
Too many priorities	Focused, smaller number of well-defined priorities
One-way, PR-focused communications	Engagement, listening, consultation and co-production of services are considered as part of every project activity
Predominantly traditional and paper based	Creating more opportunities for digital engagement, including through video and interactive tools (but still maintaining accessible and traditional channels where appropriate)
Service focused	Audience focused

Our vision:

- We will engage with our communities, ensuring their concerns and ideas are heard and understood by the council.
- We will promote civic pride in the council and the borough of Waverley.
- We will take a scientific, planned and strategic approach to communication and engagement activities, focusing principally on proactive activity that aligns with corporate priorities – rather than just reacting to events or requests without challenge.
- We will do more with digital, harnessing the opportunities and strategic value it can bring to both customers and the council.
- We will have a robust and well-functioning team, focusing on supporting internal and external customers.

Our objectives for 2019-2022

1. [We will get the team fundamentals right.](#)
2. [We will create a corporate narrative.](#)
3. [We will take a proactive and planned approach to our work.](#)
4. [We will advise and support colleagues.](#)
5. [We will treat communications and engagement as a science.](#)
6. [We will make time for creative and human communications.](#)
7. [We will engage and listen to residents and customers.](#)
8. [We will make the most of digital.](#)
9. [We will be commercial.](#)
10. [We will adopt and promote an ethical culture.](#)

Strategic objective one: We will get the team fundamentals right

In order to make sure we become a more efficient service, we will endeavour to improve our 'business as usual' functions in the following areas:

Protocols

We will develop a communications and engagement guidance handbook, containing a set of protocols, which will clearly explain: how the team will support and advise colleagues and councillors, how it sets its annual work programme, timescales to work within when answering media enquiries and when delivering campaign support, and how to ask for support for ad hoc projects that are not deemed an emergency or a strategic priority, through a new process and support request agreement form.

Benefits: improved internal customer service with a fairer approach, greater clarity over how the team operates and what we can realistically deliver, less confusion about processes and better expectation management, defined parameters for measuring performance and clarity over what support we expect from internal customers to allow us to do our job more effectively.

Media relations service

We will provide a media relations service which offers timely responses and encourages positive working relationships with all local, regional and national journalists and news outlets. However, we will not shy away from setting the record straight when required. In addition to rebutting unfounded criticism and ensuring our decisions are explained and properly understood, we will also deploy positive news stories that promote the work done in line with our corporate priorities.

To work more efficiently, we will target publications and media outlets that have the greatest impact in terms of key audiences, influencers and stakeholders we wish to engage with and - where appropriate - provide reporters with verbal updates over press releases, to save time and resources. Where possible, our content will be enhanced with the use of graphics, video, pictures and audio.

We will also ensure key council representatives are properly trained and briefed before any planned press or media interviews.

Benefits: more balanced and accurate coverage across media platforms, a more proactive approach leading to fewer reactive press enquiries.

Emergency communications

We will play a pivotal and essential role in the council's emergency planning and business continuity functions. During business continuity situations or local emergencies, we will issue advice and support and manage messages that need to go out to staff, the public and the press, using the most effective channels available to us to reach our target audience.

We will commit to continuous development in this area through ongoing training and learning from experience, by reviewing and evaluating our actions, processes and plans.

Improving internal communications and engagement

Work will be undertaken to vastly improve staff communications and engagement, in collaboration with the HR Team. A new, separate Internal Communications Strategy will be developed, which will focus on treating staff with respect and honesty, while providing them with the knowledge and empowerment to do their best work. It will set out how the communication and engagement channels and activities will be improved to realign messages to staff with corporate priorities, celebrate staff success, promote our news and values through timely campaigns, support managers, drive staff engagement and measure success.

Benefits: a better informed and engaged workforce will be more satisfied, productive and will help to deliver our key messages through their contact with customers.

Team resilience and organisation

To improve the efficiency and resilience of the team, we will overhaul our SharePoint site by instituting a new filing system, so files can be easily found, and create a suite of new databases to ensure data is securely saved, including photos, consents and contact details.

Team members will commit to having fortnightly one-to-one reviews and fortnightly team meetings to discuss and plan work, identify opportunities and ensure the team's admin is kept up-to-date. All work will be captured on individual and team trackers to monitor performance and progress.

Team members will also be proficient in a number of communications, engagement, marketing and digital skills.

Benefits: greater productivity, team data and documents are readily available, work is easier to find and the team is robust and skilled in a number of areas.



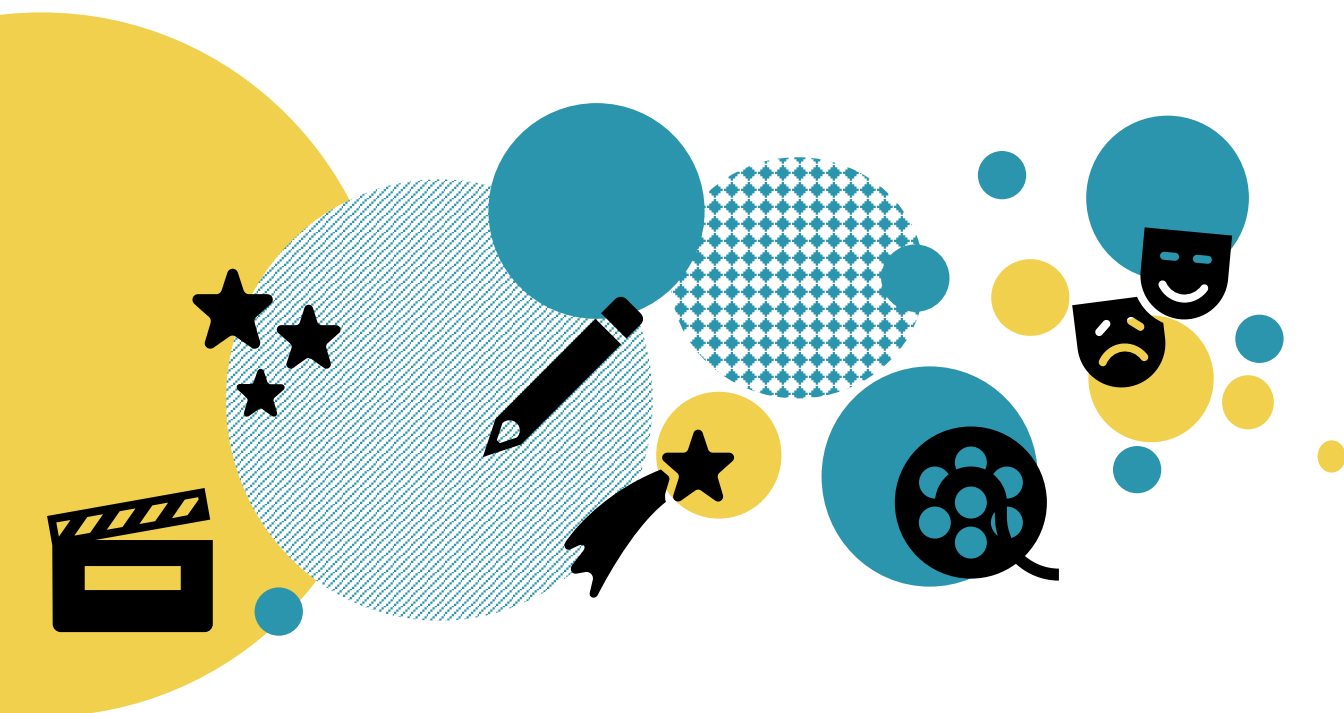
Strategic objective two: We will create a corporate narrative

To improve our stakeholders' perceptions of the council, we should identify what the council wants to achieve and be known for - and put that aspiration into a story that translates to everyone we touch; that has the power to inspire staff, excite partners, attract customers and potential employees and resonate with community influencers and residents.

It needs to set out where we have been, where we are, where we are heading and explain our shared purpose with our residents. It will act as a snapshot of what we are and what we do, making our purpose clearer to the people we serve.

This compelling story, which will articulate our priorities and how they are reflected in the services we provide, will help to define Waverley's position within the county, country, job market and public sector.

Benefits: the narrative will explain why we exist and what makes us unique, reducing confusion about what it is we do. It will highlight shared aspirations that will help us to connect with our audiences and partners and outline how they can work with us.



Strategic objective three: We will take an aligned and proactive approach

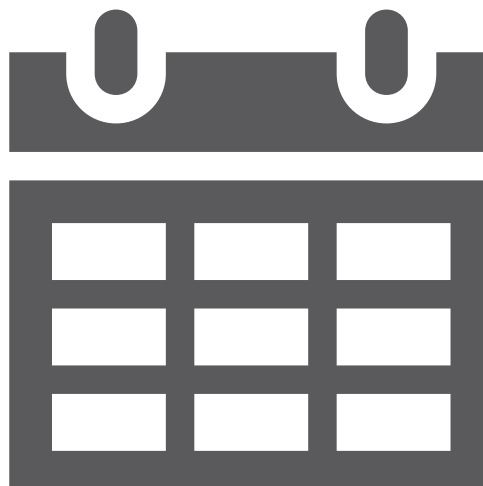
All communications and engagement work we commit to will support at least one of the council's Corporate Strategy priorities.

In order to maximise our resource and time, the Communications and Engagement Team will work within an agreed annual forward plan, signed off by the Senior Management Team and the Executive.

The plan will allow for some flexibility, but the bulk of work (we are aiming for 60 - 80%) and timescales will be agreed in advance, at the beginning of the plan period, to reflect corporate service plans. This will allow the team to plan its workload so an appropriate amount of resource can be allocated to each project to ensure it is delivered and there is time for research and evaluation. We will focus on high priority work that meets the organisation's aspirations and will aim to focus on no more than 12 core projects or campaigns a year. This means our time and expertise can be focused on the most important areas of work.

The forward plan will also factor in time for emergency communications, last minute but important requests, media responses and other business as usual activities— this will make up the remaining 40% of the team's time. Lower priority work may be done in this time period if there is capacity and it does not have a detrimental impact on core projects.

To evaluate our performance against the plan and to monitor adhoc requests, the team will log all their work within a monthly communications tracker.



Strategic objective four: We will advise and support colleagues

In order to allow the team to focus on priority work, we will give our colleagues the tools and support to be able to self-serve, where appropriate, and we will then quality-check prior to print or publication.

Templates

Money can be saved and time can be created by providing staff with toolkits and templates to create simple posters and press releases. All will be quality checked before publication and press releases will still be sent by the Communications Team. This will offer a faster and more efficient service for all parties.

External support

Where staff are unable to produce work on their own using templates, the team will recommend trusted, high quality external support for areas including photography, videography and graphic design. The cost of this support will be met by the service area requesting it.

Training and advice

We will train and encourage frontline staff to take ownership of creating content for our social media channels, including using smartphones to take photos and videos and gaining the appropriate photo consents. This will help us to demonstrate much of the fantastic but unseen work the council does for the community.

We will also continue to provide an advice service to all internal customers, explaining the best way to reach, communicate, engage and consult with stakeholders.



Strategic objective five: We will manage communications and engagement as a science

A more scientific, planned and strategic approach is needed to make sure our communications and engagement functions are delivering tangible results that create an impact and make a difference.

Using established and tested models

The Government Communications Service promotes a wealth of scientifically tested, successful models to support communications activities, including the EAST behaviour change model and OASIS communications planning model. Wherever possible, these models will be used to support the delivery of campaigns.

Research

For each communication or engagement campaign and project, time will be allocated for background research to support and inform the following communications approach. More data will be used to inform campaigns and evaluations.

Targeted and audience led campaigns

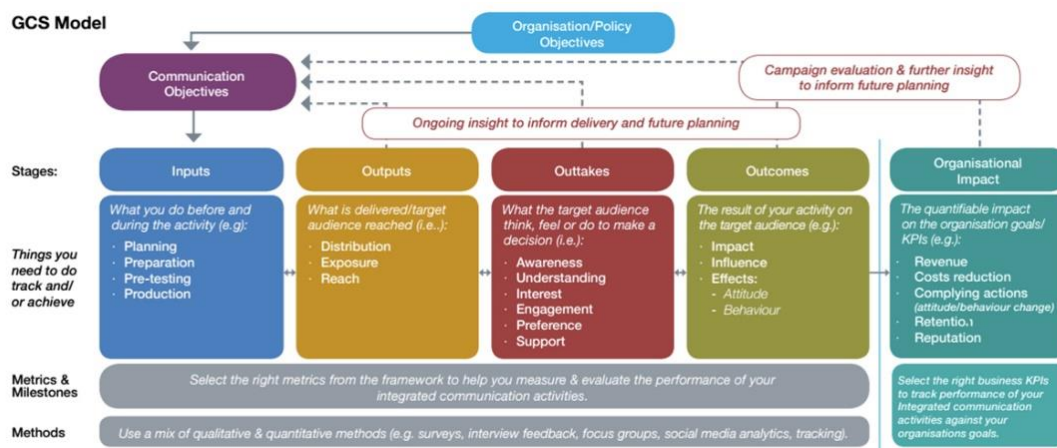
The team will ensure all communications are focused on the people we want to reach. Time will be spent to identify and map stakeholders so that all activities are appropriate for, and targeted to, the people we need to engage with. Where possible, community influencers and potential sources of misinformation will also be identified.

Testing on audiences

To ensure our campaigns are achieving maximum impact and messages are landing, more testing will be done with representatives or focus groups from target audiences in the planning stages, to identify any issues or barriers to success.

Evaluation

At the beginning of each large campaign, communication officers will set clear SMART targets to measure success and identify how the campaign will be evaluated. We will use the Government Communication Evaluation Framework as a basis (see figure below). Any lessons learnt in the evaluation will be logged to aid learning for future work.



Strategic objective six: We will make time for creative and human communications

In order to grab people's attention during their busy lives, it is important to allow the Communications and Engagement Team to have time and space to think outside the box, to come up with new ideas, approaches, creative solutions to problems and ways to help the council's messages to stand out in a sea of information.

We will need to be able to take advantage of the new methods, technologies and channels used by our target audiences and, in the case of social media, adapt approaches to keep up with ever-changing algorithms so our content is seen. We need to be supported in taking some risks, in order to reach those we want to engage with. This may involve taking a less corporate approach to communications, trying out new methods of engagement and highlighting our kind, human and caring qualities. This can be done through utilising video, ensuring we use plain English, enhancing written work with bold graphics and allowing staff members and customers to promote messages on our behalf, as well as corporate spokespeople.

Experimenting with new technologies

Society is constantly evolving and changing and the tools and ways in which we communicate with our residents need to reflect this.

Social media is continually updating, new platforms regularly spring up and algorithms are constantly changing. Voice-controlled intelligent personal assistants are rapidly increasing in homes² and people are expecting a more personalised service – therefore we need to ensure council information can be found through search engines with ease. It is important we are aware of these technologies and are prepared and able to use them.

Traditional channels still matter

On the flip side, many residents in the borough still rely on traditional, paper-based communications to receive their council news and in some cases traditional methods are the best or only feasible way for meaningful interactions. In addition, the recent manipulation of personal data from social media channels, such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal, mean that many people are wary of engaging online and are choosing to opt out of using these channels.

Focusing on real people and real stories

Using residents as protagonists in our storytelling will make them more relatable. Using video of our residents will also help to generate more trust, genuine connection and personal understanding. Video should not just be used for social media or website, but can be used to enhance training sessions or meetings.

² 2.7 million homes already own at least one Amazon Echo or Google Home smart speaker, Kantar Worldpanel, 2017

Strategic objective seven: We will engage and listen

Informing our residents about the work the council does, how it is performing and how they can access public services is important. Residents have a right to be informed and understand how their Council Tax is being used and we will continue to do this through press releases, posters, newsletters, advertising, social media and various other methods. But to make sure we're getting it right for our residents and to gain their respect and trust, we need to create more opportunities to listen to their views and hear their feedback on how they feel the council is performing.

Our communications should be treated like a telephone - not as a megaphone.

Learning

To better understand our residents we should use information we already have access to. We can use data and demographics to provide us with a broad picture of the borough's population, which will help us to predict their needs and preferred interests and communications channels, as well as giving us the background to ensure any future engagement exercise is representative. The Communications and Engagement Team will also create a database of community contacts and influencers, that can be used to support projects and gain local knowledge.

Listening and engagement

Taking time out to hear feedback is important. Although the council often consults with residents and has carried out citizens' panel surveys, now is the right time for the council to take stock and review how well it is doing at engaging with its residents. As part of this strategy, the Communications and Engagement Team will conduct a thorough review of the council's engagement offering and suggest a range of ways the council can do more to improve the way it engages with stakeholders.

However, in the short term, the team will encourage more engagement through:

- identifying stakeholders and considering if and how to engage with them as part of every council communication plan
- utilising more new public involvement activities such as Listening Panels
- supporting the council to work more effectively with town and parish councils
- holding focus groups, events and resident workshops
- carrying out face-to-face and online surveys, including participatory budgeting exercises
- encouraging more open meetings with partners
- monitoring local letters, blogs and social media posts to gauge public feeling and reporting this information back to decision makers so residents' views are heard
- supporting consultations
- holding roadshows and pop-ups in town centres/ events
- monitoring articles in local papers and other publications
- encouraging closer working with partner agencies.

Strategic objective eight: We will make the most of digital

Social media

Our social media platforms are an integral way for us to reach, listen and engage with residents. They are also an important part of the council's customer service offering, with residents expecting timely responses.

To maximise our channels, we will:

1. review our LinkedIn account to identify improvements to support economic development, recruitment and WTS, encouraging staff to engage with the content and platform
2. conduct an internal review of all our channels and develop a new social media strategy, supported by a calendar of content, a recruitment of social media staff 'champions' and training to support them to provide content
3. keep up to date with changes, trends and technologies and apply them to our work.

Agile working and the right equipment

To ensure the team can work remotely, especially if spending more time in the community, we will:

- develop an electronic photo consent form
- ensure all members of the communications team have iPads to film, edit and upload content to social channels and update the website.

Website

We will continue to review and improve our website to make sure it meets customer needs and encourages channel-shift.

To do this we will:

- use customer feedback to improve online services
- continuously research customer need and technological advancements that can enhance our online offering
- put the customer at the heart of our work and ensure user journeys are stress-free and content is accessible
- carry out user testing
- review our stats to evaluate our performance.



Strategic objective nine: We will be commercial

To ensure we support the council to generate income and the take-up of services we will:

- support the marketing and promotion of our paid-for and statutory services
- sell at least £2,000 worth of advertising space in each edition of the Your Waverley magazine to generate income for the council.



Strategic objective ten: We will adopt and promote an ethical culture

Ethics will underpin every aspect of our practice, from storing data to the accuracy of our messaging, transparency and trust.

We will do this by:

- ensuring all communications to stakeholders are truthful and honest
- creating communications and engagement opportunities that are accessible to all
- focusing on evaluation so we can demonstrate that our work creates the desired impact and offers our residents value for money
- using environmentally friendly approaches where possible and when we need to use paper, we will ensure it is FSC certified as a minimum standard
- managing, storing and using our residents' personal data with integrity.



