

VISION FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Wycombe District Council

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The success of our communications depends upon our ability to connect with our audiences in a timely, appropriate and relevant way, giving them information, and helping change behaviours, in a way that fits in with their lives. This means that we must not only listen to our audiences and master new techniques, including digital technologies, but we must also remain at the forefront of the latest thinking, constantly revising and updating skillsets to keep ahead of the extraordinary pace of change. The evolving, data-rich world offers the opportunity for us to inform our work with highly focused insight. It also enables us to integrate more effectively, connecting directly and quickly with influencers and audiences in a well-governed and planned way.

Our Communications should improve the lives of people and communities in Wycombe District; support the effective operation of our services and deliver responsive and informative communications.

This document outlines the potential to achieve four major service improvements:

1. Better engagement with our audiences
2. Improved use of technology and insight to inform communications
3. Well-governed and planned influencing and communications
4. Greater Value for Money

To realise this potential, it is proposed that WDC implements several key changes:

- 1) The Council should have the ability to carry out the following Communications functions
 - a) Strategic Communications
 - b) External Communications
 - c) Strategic Engagement
 - d) Internal Communications
- 2) The Council should develop a repository for intelligence and insight to provide data on audience, channels, campaigns and learning.

- 3) Strategic management of Communications should take place at senior level amongst elected members and senior officers at an early stage and throughout project development.
- 4) A full communications and marketing strategy should be developed which aligns to corporate priorities in the emerging corporate plan and service needs.
- 5) A complete communications and marketing process re-design should be implemented, including reviewing and adapting other organisational processes which are known to impact on the Council's interactions with the community.
- 6) The Council should develop the communications skills across the organisation with the ability to utilise new technologies and adapt to changes in communications.
- 7) The Council should undertake strategic relationship building with key stakeholders outside the Council in order to support and enhance Communications activity. Effective digital communications requires a strategic approach to understanding the relevant channels and forums; developing audience and growing reach.
- 8) The resources available across the Council for communications activity should be reviewed and realigned to corporate communications priorities to ensure every pound spent on Communications is delivering.
- 9) A strong culture of joint ownership of communications opportunities and threats should be developed across the organisation together with a culture of evaluation and learning.

INTRODUCTION

1. This document sets out a vision for evolved corporate communications, re-imagined as dynamic communications and marketing suitable for the digital age.
2. This document is not a communications and marketing strategy, though it sets out a vision including core objectives and output requirements which provide a way forward to enable WDC to develop a strategy for Communications and to deliver a re-imagined service; aligned to overarching corporate priorities in the emerging corporate plan and support the needs of our communities.

CONTEXT

3. Gone, or at very least going, are the days of communications teams' primary functions being press related. Instead, it's about dynamic, responsive and engaging campaigns and engaging in real time on social media.
4. The way that the Council communicates has to change because the way in which the public wants to engage with us is changing. We need to look more closely at where and how we are spending our time and effort and decide what works now and will work moving forward. We need to focus on the communications and marketing channels that will work for us more effectively and engage proactively with communities operating in a digital world.
5. We also need to change how we work as an organisation. The days of controlling the release of information through careful preparation of individual lines and stories, must give way to a broad understanding of the Council's messages and objectives which set parameters but allow the freedom to respond quickly and engagingly with our communities.
6. A strategic approach to communications led and driven by senior leadership will lead to a shared understanding of where we should focus our communications resource and use it to best effect. It's not about doing more, it's about doing the right things well.

A re-invigorated programme of change

7. Early decisions to make significant changes to the organisation and significantly reduce the number of employees as well as prudent financial management has put WDC in a strong financial position.
8. Where other authorities are coping with the ongoing need to achieve efficiencies and rationalise delivery, Wycombe District Council is looking to real transformation not driven by cost-cutting but the ambition to transform and respond to our changing world. To achieve efficient and effective delivery through working differently and focusing on what really matters. There is now a clear desire amongst senior members to implement a re-invigorated programme of change, where projects may provide significant benefits across a broad range of themes.
9. Senior Members are keen for this ambitious, proactive, and beneficial series of projects to be closely supported by a contemporary communications and marketing function. They noted that this support must be able to go beyond reacting to local media, to engage directly with the District community(s), promoting the value of the work and encouraging positive perceptions.
10. There are key areas of work identified within the existing and emerging Corporate Plan which will require particular focus and support from the Communications function. These are Leader and Chief Executive; Digital First; Housing Delivery and Economic Development and Planning services.
11. Part of directly engaging with communities involves being able to connect with them in ways and spaces where they choose to converse already. Whilst the council retains a strong personal link to community groups and residents' associations via the members, more work needs to be done to engage digital communities and demographics.

THE VISION

Core Objectives

13. A re-designed communications and marketing approach that will deliver support across four themes:

a) Strategic Communications

To carry out effective engagement with communities, the Council will need to develop an understanding of what is happening and is likely to happen nationally and within the industry. In that wider context the Council will also need to develop a core message it wants to disseminate through communications. To do this effectively we will need to gather insight on channels, audiences and communities both digital and offline.

Communications groundwork will help to positively position messages or stories before they 'go live', and specific engagement and events will be undertaken to support the narrative. The Council will effectively evaluate communications campaigns on completion to learn and inform future campaigns.

b) External Communications

The Council will produce publishable content, manage information releases and identify opportunities and threats as they arise. The Council will effectively communicate a positive image through proactively identifying and capitalising on opportunities to share news and reactively engaging with conversations in the community and challenging false and inaccurate information.

c) Strategic Engagement

The Council will build alliances with partners and third parties to disseminate messages and share content; proactively target key individuals and groups with influence; develop reach and target activities to engage audience.

d) Internal Communications

Through proactive dissemination of messaging from senior Member and Officers, the Council will engage and unify service areas around organisational objectives. The Council will devise a range of channels, feedback systems and forums which network every area of the organisation.

Service areas will be energised and empowered to share corporate messages and news via their work streams. They will be supported to identify opportunities for engagement, marketing and communication.

Required Output

14. Based on national recognised communications practice* and wider thinking about the need for a modern approach based on new technologies and methods of communications.

*Eg Government Communications Service Modern Communications Operating Model (MCOM)

a) Strategic Communications

Horizon Scanning

The new approach will understand the national context; the emerging issues and be cognisant of developing technologies and communities.

Data and Insight

The new approach will focus on creating a repository of data on key stakeholders, fora, audiences, channels, campaigns and learning and be able to layer this with the Council's wider insight resource.

Strategy

There is a need to interface with current strategy development processes, to inform and support the creation, articulation, and embedding of new strategies. This is particularly important for the Corporate Plan, to which the communications and marketing strategy should be integrally linked.

Channel Development

There is a need to actively develop our social media presence, to undertake activities to cultivate following; understand communities and develop techniques for increasing the impact of our outputs.

Evaluation

Good communications requires that the Council develop SMART targets for the outputs of communications activity and evaluate success in relation to stated outputs.

b) External Communications

Campaigns

Campaigns should be developed in relation to key activity with defined objectives and goals that will lead the conversation from pre-launch to completion, present the project positively, engage and inform the external audience to prevent misinformation, and encourage users to switch to the new method of operating (where appropriate). They should not be rigid but should evolve with clear understanding of any changes to the overall aims.

Marketing

The new approach will include the development of marketing skills which will inform larger scale campaigns and benefit from the learning from previous similar activity.

Media Handling

Media handling should concentrate on creating and seeding stories strategically rather than tactically to showcase policy strategy and operational delivery. While a highly-responsive reactive handling capability, which can explain policy and spike inaccuracy before publication, will continue to be important, the aim should be to use media enquiries as opportunities to deliver broader messages.

Creating Content

The decline of printed media and rise of more immediate forms of media provides an opportunity for the Council to develop direct content more than ever before. Alongside the Council's press releases, and magazine content, there is an opportunity to develop media content appropriate to different channels and audiences which can be published directly to audiences through digital media.

Digital Media

The Council is already engaging in social media. There is a need to broaden this across the various social media channels and forums which are used within the District and the wider local government environment. The Council will need to have a managed response to service requests and comments made online and to monitor the conversations and engage in or influence them at the right time and in the right way. Digital media also provides opportunities for the publication of direct content, promotion, marketing and campaigning as a tool within the basket available for communications. It also provides opportunities to deliver content in new ways through single images and videos more accessible to a wider group within the community.

Creative Design/visual media

Creative design will be used to support output and will also help to break down barriers to engagement with demographics that recognise and/or use visual messaging.

Events Promotion

There is a broader goal for the Council to make the District a destination venue and support the visitor economy. Marketing and promotion of events will be key to the successful delivery of these events and to achieve the wider economic goals for the District.

c) Strategic Engagement

Audience

Campaigns should be developed based on insight and audience rather than content. The development of insight and understanding audience is key to understanding how to engage effectively

Relationships

To be effective at influencing specific audiences, key relationship development is key to the Council's approach. For example a campaign to influence national policy is dependent on relationships within government, within other campaign organisations, with local government partners, MPs and with local community groups and more. There is a

need to actively develop and support relationships across a wide range of areas in order to support effective communications.

Reach

Within the digital world relationships can be developed with those who are influential on particular channels through their existing following and reach which can help to disseminate messages wider than the Council's own channels.

d) Internal Communications and Feedback

Corporate Communications

The new approach will work proactively with senior decision makers to provide messaging internally that ensures clarity around policy, direction, and purpose. The communication of the Corporate Plan in ways which engage with staff and members to own and understand the plan and supporting strategies is key to delivery.

Internal Engagement

There is a need to further develop the tools used to engage with staff and to effectively manage the online tools available to focus engagement.

Feedback

There is also a need to provide Members and Officers with the opportunity to feedback on change, and propose new ideas and improvements.

PROPOSED CHANGES

15. The organisation needs to have a collective view of the function and output of a communications and marketing service. To this end, it is vital that WDC develop a communications and marketing strategy, that is integrally linked to the Corporate Plan, and which can flexibly adapt to integrate with new major projects as they are forming. It must also be capable of supporting the business needs of all the service areas.
16. The strategy should not overtly seek to limit or control the dialogue between stakeholders, rather it should empower Members and Officers to engage with their audience in a consistent and coherent way. It will help, train, guide, and support Members and Officers to use language, tone, and style that makes the content of their output more accessible, engaging, and successful.
17. The strategy should include a review of the current supplementary documents covering for example House Style, Brand Guidelines, Media Handling and Social Media guidelines.
18. There is also a need to review the current processes for providing communications and marketing support to achieve the new strategy, or create new processes as the strategy is being developed. The processes should be designed with an awareness of the digital expectations of an increasing number of audience demographics, and would benefit from integrated links with the Digital First project (if it is approved).

Budgets

19. Currently the funding is devolved to service area specific budgets. The new function would benefit from a review of the expenditure across the council to inform an overall approach to the effective management and use of resource spent on Communications and Marketing. The current overall level of spend should also be reviewed in the light of the new strategy and resource requirements to deliver, as effective communications becomes an integral, rather than peripheral, part of project planning, management, and execution.

A new model of support

20. There is a need to review the operation of the current Communications function and to consider how best it should operate to deliver the new strategy. There is a need for engagement in communications across the Council and for information to flow both ways, making it easier to engage Members and Officers in organisational priorities, and to create opportunities for cross-pollination between work streams.

CONCLUSION

21. Successful and modern public service communications changes lives for the better, running campaigns rooted in the objectives of the organisation that provide powerful, timely and relevant information to allow people to make effective choices.