

Communications Strategy & Action Plan

2014

Policy, People & Communications

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Summary

This report looks at how the Council and its Members can improve the way they communicate with the Wealden public in the future, taking account of the policies set by Vision 2015, the Corporate Plan and the existing Communications Policy 2011.

Reason

The media world is undergoing an extensive period of change. Existing 'broadcast' channels such as print and radio face overwhelming competition from the internet-based services as they try to reach existing and new audiences. Web-based channels such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as local online news sites, provide a more personalised and interactive alternative to traditional media. While newspaper sales are declining, there are now many more media outlets through which the public receive news and information. Digital communication is much cheaper than traditional print and radio and allows for a personalised approach which is in keeping with the growing emphasis for localism in service delivery. Our approach to communication needs to take account of the changing landscape. We need to make the best use of our limited resources to ensure local people are kept informed of all the services we provide, and are involved in the democratic process.

Introduction

1. Good communications is the responsibility of everyone involved in the Council, including Councillors, staff and partners. The 2011 Communication Policy established Four Points, in keeping with the Code of Recommended Local Practice on Local Authority Publicity, to assist officer and Members.
2. These were Clarity, Consistency, Focus and Effectiveness. They were backed by the principle: Do it once, Use in many times. These remain as germane to what we do today as in 2011.
3. Vision 2015 identified the need for stronger communication about the changing role of the Council, which includes providing more services in partnership with others, encouraging decisions to be made at the lowest levels and holding all service providers to account. In particular, there is a need to reinforce the Wealden identify within shared services and to facilitate greater engagement among Members within their own wards. Stronger communications is also needed to assist Members in their role as community leaders.

Review of Wealden's current communication practice

4. An open meeting of the Council's Communication Group was held on 18 June with representatives from a wide range of Wealden services. Their views about external and internal communication included frequent references to greater use of social media by the Council. These views were then used to commission further research (Appendix A) into the reach of the communication channels currently being used by the Council. These included the local press and radio, parish magazines, and the Council's own Facebook and Twitter accounts
5. The research also looked at the Council's own customer contact information and whether this could be used to communicate to a wider number of residents, with their permission, using email.
6. The findings were then presented and discussed at a Heads of Service meeting on 1 November.

Community Messaging System

7. Sussex Police currently use a Community Messaging System to issue community safety alerts to the public. Members of the public are invited to join the service and provide telephone numbers, mobile numbers and email addresses through which they can be contacted. Alerts can be sent out to targeted geographical locations in an emergency, making it a valuable communications tool. Supported by East Sussex County Council, all county boroughs and districts have been invited to join in the System, and will be able to send out their own service alerts to participants who request it. The Council intends to join the System.

Review of the Communications Strategy

8. The Four Principles of the 2011 Communications Policy continue to be relevant, but the Council needs to make more effective use of the channels now available to communicate to the Wealden public. In a fragmented and changing media landscape, over-reliance on one or two channels will reduce the reach of the public information the Council has a duty to provide. We need to ensure that messages are accessible in some form to all residents. While web access is far more widespread than four years ago, it cannot be the sole basis for communications. Traditional print media, including posters should continue to provide an outlet for the Council's messages.
9. The ability of web-based media to take information and circulate it through search engines and shared social media to a far wider audience should not be ignored. In this world of competing communications channels, content is king. The Council needs to be able to increase the amount of information it puts out. Officers and Members can assist through social media, providing more outlets which can be taken up and re-published through the Council's corporate communications facility.

10. This involvement by Members and officers should assist community engagement and leadership and help reinforce the Wealden identify within shared services.
11. A widespread use of social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, by Members and officers will require a responsible approach. The Council will be able to provide training for Members and officers who wish to become involved. The Council will also devise guidelines about using social media on behalf of the Council. It is not expected that this will increase the workload of participating officers but this should be monitored on a regular basis.
12. Social media provides two-way communication. Although there is very low usage at this Council at the moment, it is increasingly becoming an important channel for listening to resident's problems and answering questions. These insights can help improve our service delivery and communication. They are currently handled by the Council's communications team but Customer Services and other areas, such as Housing, are well placed to respond to some enquiries. Responding to residents and increasing the amount of helpful and supportive information issued by the Council will involve some increase in officer hours spent on corporate communications. This is currently met through shared responsibilities within the Policy, People and Communications Service.
13. It is important not to ignore more traditional channels. As well as supporting parish magazines, the Council should consider make use of the facilities for signage in its 42 car parks across the District. The provision of more localised poster formats should also be explored. These could be professionally designed by the Council, but enable parishes and towns to include targeted local information. The role played by public meetings and to day-to-day interaction Members have with the public in their wards should also be supported.
14. An increase in the amount of information the Council issues is likely to necessitate a review the current Communications Protocol. This has served the Council well over the years, but can slow down the ability to be timely and effective. Any review will need to ensure Cabinet Portfolio holders are actively involved in all communication of policy.
15. Better use of the Vicarage Lane building to keep staff up to date with current Council initiatives should be explored. This includes creative use of the wall space in the building's two stair wells and installation of small screens in the kitchen photocopier area connected to a rolling information display. These should provide further channels to assist with internal communications and staff involvement.

Conclusion

16. The existing principles of the current Communications policy continue to provide an essential basis for the Council's communications but further

actions are required to ensure the Council continues to communicate effectively in the future.

17. These will involve a greater use of social media to provide a wider range of voices and content, and in doing so, will continue to ensure Council messages as accessible as many residents as possible by making full use of the range of available communications channels.
18. A full list of proposed actions has been drawn up – Communications Action Plan 2014 below.
19. The actions outlined in the report will need to be evaluated and, where necessary, amended. The Portfolio Holder will be regularly informed of progress. This will include an annual report on Communications.

For further information about the Communications Strategy and Action Plan 2014 please contact the Communications Officer on 01892 602745, email pr@wealden.gov.uk

Communications Actions 2014

	Action	When
1	Update Media Protocol to increase the amount of timely content that can be published by the Council.	Feb 2014
2	Provide training in Social Media for Members	Spring 2014
3	Update Social Media protocol of Employees and Members	Feb 2014
4	Provide official Twitter account to the main WDC services and train identified officers to provide regular feeds	Spring 2014
5	Encourage regular broadcasting opportunities by Cabinet Portfolio holders	Dec 2013
6	Encourage regular blogging on Wealdnet by Officers	Dec 2013
7	Through Sussex Police's Community Messaging Service, provide regular service information to residents.	Dec 2013
8	Provide regular content to the users of the Sign In portal on the Wealden website.	As of launch
9	Improve branding of the Council's services, including shared and contracted out services to reinforce the image of the Council.	Spring 2014
10	Increase video output to explain Council policy and provide practical guidance.	2014
11	Review opportunities to provide public information displays in our 42 car parks.	Summer 2014
12	Explore use of poster templates to be designed internally which can then be printed out by towns and parishes to include local information for District-wide campaigns.	Spring 2014
14	Explore ways of making better use of the Vicarage Lane premises to keep staff and the public informed of Council activities including the installation of small screens at kitchen areas/ large screen in reception.	Spring 2014
15	Report annually on progress of Action Plan to Portfolio holder.	Dec 2014