Communications Policy 2011

Good communications is **the responsibility of everyone** involved in the Council including councillors, staff and partners.

The challenge of communicating such a diverse range of services to a wide range of customers is immense. This **Four Point Policy** follows the principles within the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity and provides a simple guide which will help the Council pursue the aims of the Transformation Programme to create *a streamlined organisation, commissioning and delivering essential customer-focussed services in a way which provides excellent value for money.*

1. **Clarity** - The Council's communications should be **clear, concise** and **trusted**.

2. **Consistency** - We communicate through many different channels to a wide range of people, including residents, businesses, visitors, our own employees and councillors, our partners, parishes and central government. It is therefore essential that the same **consistent messages** are promoted through the most cost-effective formats available to the Council whilst ensuring the messages are **accessible to everyone**.

3. **Focus** - The messages should help **customers get the best** out of the many services provided by the Council. This includes encouraging **dialogue** with customers as to how we can further improve services and **clarifying information** where necessary.

4. **Effectiveness** - The Council will seek to ensure that these messages are **accurate**, **timely** and **effective**. All services will be clearly **branded** so the public understands what we do. This will make sure that the Council is **accountable** to its customers and the community.

This policy provides a high level overview of communications at Wealden and will next be reviewed by 2014. It is underpinned by a suite of documents providing operational detail for practitioners which may be updated from time to time.

Communications Policy

Putting the Four Points into Practice

The [Draft] Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity requires that our publicity (communications) 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

This recent guidance has been taken into account in preparing this Appendix and will be incorporated in the supporting documents and guidance which underpin this Policy.

Consistent Messages through different channels:

Do it once, use it many times: Part of Wealden's communications effort goes toward producing media releases which are published on the Council's website, in the district's local papers, and used by other media including the local radio stations. In order to decide which information is published as a media release, we consider a range of factors including the importance of the information and the desire to promote the specific objectives of the Council.

The media release process leaves out other information about the Council's activities which would be of use to the public, our partners and our own staff. Communicating the wide range of activities and services we offer is challenging, but is essential to ensure the public understand the value they get from their Council. This information would also be vital in keeping the Customer Contact Centre fully briefed to handle public enquiries.

The Council's Policy and Review Service provides a Corporate Briefing for staff (published on Wealdnet - the Council's intranet) and a Parish Bulletin for Parish Councils reporting on decisions at Wealden's Cabinet meetings and other key activities. The Member Services team publishes a regular bulletin for Councillors.

A round-up of activities in all Council services would have a number of outlets:

- The Wealden Website.

- Customer Contact Centre.

- Media contacts - via email.

- A possible weekly broadcast on local community radio.

- Staff & Councillors - via Wealdnet.

- Partners & Parish Councils - via email.

All the above would increase media circulation which would therefore reach out and inform the public to a greater extent. It would also:

- Reinforce the consultation process.

- Provide a record of achievements for performance monitoring.

Ensuring the messages are accessible to everyone...

… encouraging dialogue with customers as to how we can further improve services and clarifying information while using the most cost-effective formats available to the Council.

It is important we are able to make the most of our communications output. **The Council should focus efforts on promoting and providing an up-to-date, effective website.** We do not wish to confuse the public by providing numerous online channels to access our services and information. The Council's website reflects the branding of the Council and staff in each service are able to update their web pages regularly.

All news and media releases across the Council can be entered into the online news system, providing the Communications Team with control over the news on the homepage.

Social media is also a widely used way of encouraging feedback about services and wider public needs. Such technology is now being seen as one of the best and quickest ways to raise community concerns and show community leadership. It is also inexpensive. By monitoring responses, we

can improve the way we meet our differing customers' needs and help ensure we pursue well-constructed policies to achieve this.

Where social media sites are used by the Council, they should be suitable for the target audience - Wealden for Youth (W4Y), for example - and provide a link to, and promote the main website.

We also need to ensure that designated staff members have the ability to monitor such social networks during working hours, and are empowered to enter into online debate once appropriately informed of the Council's position. These staff members should not solely consist of Communications staff.

Criticism of the Council can badly affect our reputation. We need to be alert when cases arise and act promptly to clarify and explain our position. Where necessary, more advanced interactive technologies requiring faster responses to personal queries can be expected in the future.

Cheaper digital recording techniques will make small screen sound and pictures communication - either on pc or mobile phone - much more popular, without aspiring to the high quality of broadcast television. If it is necessary to use video as a method of online communication, sites such as You Tube should not be used. The Council's website allows video to be accessed directly from our website. However, we aim to make **all content** accessible and will therefore provide a text alternative for any video or sound featured on our website. Transcripts should be provided as a minimum and subtitles and sign language alternatives should be investigated. Video/sound based content technology could be used to provide useful functions to assist our communications, including:

- To provide short *How to…* instructional videos such as correct use of recycling bins; improve food hygiene, and provide safety advice to businesses

- Allowing Councillors to directly explain Council policy particularly in situations where the Council's aims may be misquoted or misconstrued.

Since the 2008 -11 Communications Strategy was written, a new community radio station, Uckfield FM, has gone on air and new digital methods of communications are being taken up by local residents.

Ensuring the messages are accessible to everyone using the most cost-effective formats available to the Council

The Council's website is the key communication tool available to the Council and it is also the most cost-effective. We must, therefore, increasingly look to web-based solutions. Given the predominance of email as the principal form of one-to-one communication the Council should seek to use, with their permission, the email addresses of residents and businesses in order to provide an additional channel for communication.

We take our responsibilities towards equality and diversity seriously and need to ensure information about our services is available to everyone in the district in a language that is understandable. We currently have 1,200 residents who are blind or partially sighted, and 600 who are deaf or hard of hearing. The ageing profile of our district indicates that these numbers are likely to increase. We need to ensure that:

- Where possible, content should be featured as text on a web page. Text on a web page is the most accessible form of web communication, and can be accessed by blind or visually impaired people using a screen-reader. The information can be provided in a pdf (or Word) document **in addition** to content on a web page if required. If information is not suitable for a series of web pages (large, in-depth documents such as the Corporate Plan, for example), a summary of the content should be placed on the web page with a link to the pdf. It is necessary to ensure all pdf's are written in an accessible way.

- All major public documents contain a summary that is in everyday language, is easy to read and, if appropriate, should include pictures and links to video and audio formats. By taking the *executive* out of summary we can ensure people with a wide range of reading skills can

access enough information to decide if they need to make contact with the Council to seek further details.

- Printed text on the Council's green background to be avoided. White or cream backgrounds are preferred for text.

- All audio and video material produced by the Council includes a text version.

- Our website has links to translation software enabling access in the languages other than English that are in most common use within and around Wealden.

All services will be clearly branded to make sure that the public know what we provide and so that the Council is accountable to its customers and the Wealden electorate.

Clear branding is vital in raising public awareness of the services we provide. During times of change, such as the Council's move to a single office and the temporary arrangements which precede this, it is even more important that customers are kept informed, that service locations are clearly signed and advance notice is given to the public and partners through the various media channels.

A branding checklist will be produced for external agencies and partners to make compliance with our branding guidelines easier.

Services currently produce a number of different newsletters and other publications for different client bases. To assist with the production of these publications and help maintain the corporate brand, a template will be produced allowing each publication its own identity within the Wealden 'family'.

Whenever the Council needs to communicate, those responsible for doing so need to be clear

- what they are communicating

- the reasons for communicating and

- who they are communicating with.

The following questions also need to be addressed:

- Is the type of communication the most appropriate?

- Is it cost-effective?

- Can it be done another way?

- Can it be joined with any other communication?

Advice is available from Jim van den Bos, Communications Officer on 01892 602745.

The policy is underpinned by the following documents, which may be amended or added to at any time.

Quickguide to producing Wealden Publications

Communication Strategy and Action Plan 2008-2011

Protocol on Media Relations

Quick Guide to our Corporate identity (Style Guide)

Publication Schedule 2010

Photo Consent Form

Writing Media Release - a quick Guide

Some useful Media Contacts

Answering media enquiries

Submit a story for Wealdnet

Media releases

Key Communicators

Minutes of the Communication Group

Communications Action Plan 2011 - 2014

Key to Principles

1   clarity
2   consistency
3   focus
4   effectiveness

No	Action	Principle(s)	Lead Person	Target Date	Comments
1	Re-form Communications Group to ensure cross department representation from staff with an involvement in communications and those who have skills set which matches future strategic direction for communications.	1,2,3,4	David Palmer	31/3/11	
2	Develop web and other electronic communication to take primacy in internal and external communications coupled with higher personalisation and lower cost.	1,2,3,4	Helen Standen	31/3/12	
3	Achieve savings of £20k in 2011/12 and £40k thereafter on corporate communications budget.	4	David Palmer	31/3/12	
4	Develop the use of video (and audio), suitably supported with provision for visually and hearing impaired users to communicate key messages and provide explanation of services via the Council website.	1,2,3,4	David Palmer	31/3/12	
5	Create and maintain a database of all our customers and their respective interests in our services to facilitate SMART electronic communication.	1,2,3,4	Helen Standen	31/3/12	

No	Action	Principle(s)	Lead Person	Target Date	Comments
6	Investigate and introduce as appropriate, the use of social and other media which helps the Council to improve communication across the district and increasing engagement with those groups who have traditionally been harder to reach. Review policy, protocol and guidelines to help manage expectations.	1,2,3,4	Jim Van den Bos	30/09/11	
7	Train and develop Members, staff and partners so that they can contribute to the delivery of higher quality, lower cost, communications across the district.	1,2,3,4	Jim Van den Bos	30/09/11	
8	Arrange Member training sessions on working with the media following election of new Council in May 2011.	1,2,3,4	Trevor Scott	30/09/11	
9	Develop a "no frills" electronic newsletter using the do it once, use it many times principle, for publication on the website and to keep the public informed on at least a quarterly basis.	1,2,3,4	Jim Van den Bos	31/3/12	
10	Explore and develop further effective ways of encouraging ways that residents and others can communicate with the Council.	1,2,3,4	Jim Van den Bos	Ongoing	
11	Ensure that all communications provide an opportunity to respond, obtain further information or provide feedback.	1,2,3,4	Jim Van den Bos	Ongoing	
12	Co-ordinate a publications schedule, maximising the opportunities to combine publications and reduce costs whilst retaining the timeliness of communications.	1,2,3,4	Jim Van den Bos	Ongoing	

13	Promote the Transformation and Single Site in line with the specific communications plans.	1,2,3,4	David Palmer	31/12/12	
14	Use learning from staff survey to improve / personalise communication in respect of Transformation Programme and Single Site.	1,2,3,4	David Palmer	Ongoing	
15	Monitor communication about Wealden including that through new media.	1,2,3,4	Jim Van den Bos	Ongoing	
16	Update all car parking and other signage on all corporate assets	1,2,3,4	Terry Crone	31/3/14	
17	Work with Members, staff, partners and umbrella groups to test the effectiveness of communications policy (particularly with harder to reach groups) and respond appropriately to challenges.	1,2,3,4	David Palmer	Annually	
18	Develop a local performance measure to test the success of this communications strategy and report back, as appropriate, to Cabinet.	1,2,3,4	David Palmer	31/3/11	
19	Keep policy and supporting documents under review.	1,2,3,4	David Palmer	Minimum of Annually	

ends