

Communicating with your community Part 1: creating a communications strategy



This handout is a summary of the learning points covered in the training session delivered by Breakthrough Communications. You can find out more about how we empower town and parish councils to communicate with their communities at www.breakthroughcomms.co.uk. You can also contact us by email at hello@breakthroughcomms.co.uk.

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Introduction:

Why effective communication is crucial for local councils of all shapes and sizes?

- Parish and town councils are increasingly seen as the 'go-to' council in their area
- As you take on more services, getting your council's message across AND building a sustainable conversation with your community has never been more important
- Residents rarely distinguish between different tiers of local government, so it is important we communicate what we do, how we do it and what others do

A good communications strategy, therefore, should achieve the following things:

- Actively support the council in achieving its council-wide aims and objectives(e.g. the things that matter to the council)
- Set out your council's strategic plan to communicate with the community
- Clarify the messages you are trying to communicate to specific audiences
- Impacts how the council is seen and heard
- Supports positive change in perception

Building a communications strategy for your council:

Our 8-step framework to build a communications strategy for parish and town councils:

1. Agree the purpose of the strategy, what you're trying to achieve and the approach you will take
2. Review the council's current and previous communications
3. Use SWOT and other methods to analyse internal and external issues affecting communications
4. Consider your council's existing objectives and develop SMART communications objectives
5. Consider your council's messages for different audiences, communications activities, as well as positioning and tone
6. Consider appropriate communication channels for different messages and

audiences

7. Put together a resource-appropriate plan of work to implement the strategy and consider key metrics
8. Review, review, review

1. Purpose and Approach

This stage is crucial. Consider what you hope to achieve, by when and overall purpose:

- Are we trying to review the entire council's approach to communications, specific services, or both?
- How can we engage Members in the process and agree a shared vision?
- What does 'good' look like?
- Will we conduct the process independently or should we seek external support?

2. Review your council's current communications

- We recommend you carry out an anonymous survey of colleagues, asking for feedback about how the council currently communicates
- Key questions to ask include:
 - What's worked well in the past?
 - What hasn't worked so well?
 - What do we feel we do really well right now?
 - What do we know we can improve?
 - Is there anything we should stop doing?

3. Carry out a SWOT analysis

- Consider Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats relating to how your council communicates - consider internal and external factors
 - What do they mean in terms of your communications priorities?
 - How can you turn threats into opportunities?
 - How can you play on your strengths through effective communication?

4. Linking together your council's aims and objectives to clear communications objectives

Explore your council-wide aims and objectives



Consider relevant operational matters



Create clear communications objectives for each

An example approach: **Council-wide objective: To support the work of village voluntary organisations and charities through grants and practical support**

What this means for the council:

Ensure effective liaison with local Help organisations understand how we organisations all year round can assist and support them.

What this means for communications: Maintain financial transparency and Ensure residents understand how community support for the project projects benefits the wider community.

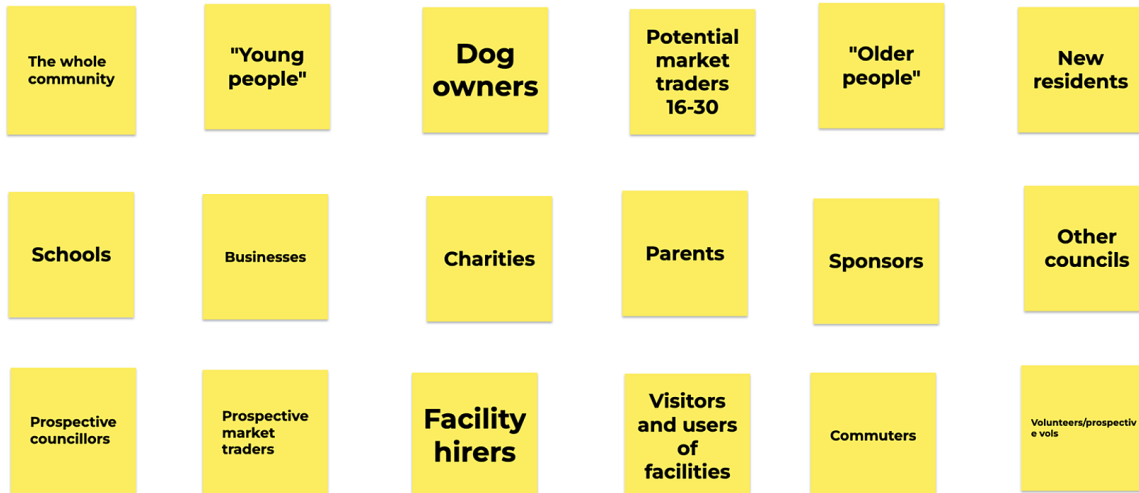
Examples of SMART communications objectives

- Increase our total following across all social media platforms by the end of 2023 by 50%
- Increase our social media engagement amongst under 30 year olds by 25% by the end of April 2023
- Generate 100 click throughs to our website per month across all platforms
- Reduce the number of incoming requests to the council relating to services provided by Principle Authorities by 10% by July 2023
- Aim for at least 15% response rate to our annual Community Survey

5. Your council's audiences and messages

It's important to define what different audiences need to know about your council, and what the messages are for each audience.

Example audiences:



Example messages:

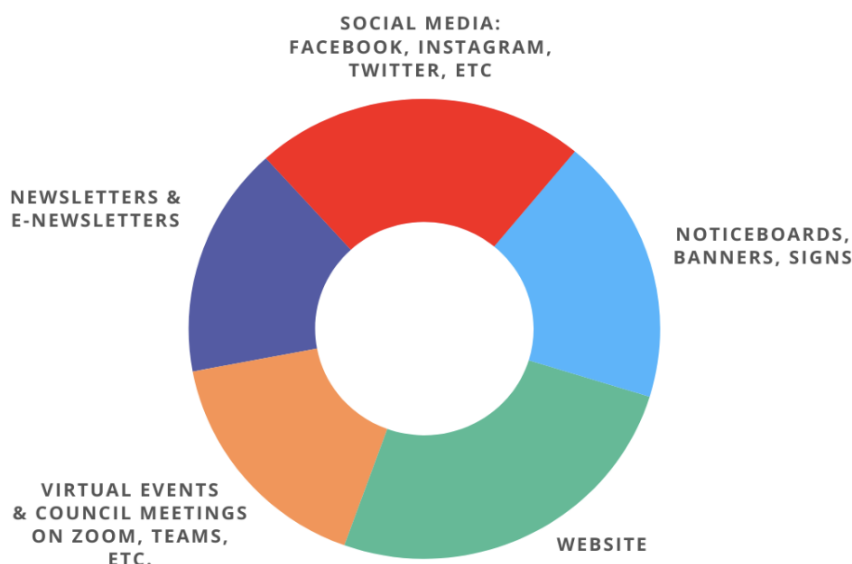


Your council's positioning and tone:

- What does tonality mean for your council and how it communicates?
- How do you (and your Members) want your council to be seen and heard by the community?
- What does your corporate 'voice' sound like? What's your tone?
- Will your voice and tone differ between audiences and different communication channels?

6. What are the best ways to communicate?

- Whether you're a large or small council, having a mix of communications channels is important to ensure your messages can be heard by your key audiences
- Digital communications channels vs. traditional communications is a false dichotomy - it's about a balance and appropriate mix of both



7. Implementing the strategy

- Now it's time to implement and deliver our agreed communications strategy
- Draw up a Communications Plan that outlines:
 - Communications objectives, key messages, audiences and communication activities throughout the year
 - Budget and resources allocated
 - Timescales and milestones
 - KPIs to measure success

8. Regularly review and assess

- What does success look like and how will you know when objectives have been met?
- How often will Officers and Members review the plan, and adjust as needed according to changes in internal or external factors
- Being agile is key - things can change fast, and we need to be able to adapt!

Don't forget related communications policies that develop as a result of the strategy...

Your communications strategy should inform your communications policy (and not the other way around!)

Key aspects of the policy should include:

- Outline your vision for effective internal and external communication
- Explain how the council will communicate with different groups (audiences), where communication can take place and who will do the communicating
- Consider procedures, responsibilities and accountabilities (Officer and Member) and how this links to the relevant Code of Conduct
- Be mindful of GDPR and other relevant legislation

3 things to go and try out

1. Carry out a virtual workshop with your Members to develop an outline communications strategy jointly
2. Then put together a realistic and resource-appropriate communications work plan and consider how to implement it within your own resource constraints
3. Try out one new thing that you don't currently use as a council to communicate (or try and improve on something you do)