

South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District Councils' Communication Strategy 2016 – 2017

Introduction

South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District Councils have been working in partnership since 2006. Delivering their services and communications jointly - helping to build sustainable communities for residents, businesses and workers across the regions.

The two councils are proactively communicating their policies and activities through the way they look, what they say, how they say it and how they present information.

What we have achieved so far

In just the last year we have jointly delivered a host of communications and campaigns, such as the Police and Crime Commissioner Election, the waste contamination campaigns and the £0.5m plus improvement works to Abbey Meadow. We have also issued over 160 press releases and regularly briefed stories and council messages to local and regional media, and on occasions, the national media.

And we have kept colleagues informed of the on-going high profile, five councils' project and promoted the annual staff awards.

These campaigns and activities have been delivered using a mix of channels including; the councils' websites, press releases, Outlook (a newspaper for South Oxfordshire residents), electronic newsletters, Twitter and YouTube.

Internally we are highlighting our activities to colleagues via the Intranet, through the staff newsletter Connect, In Focus (a bi weekly email for councillors, and copied to staff) and via planned face to face staff briefings with the chief executive and senior colleagues.

Looking ahead

But we know there is more to do. The councils are delivering a number of major milestones over the next 18 months/two years, including finalising Local Plans, launching delivery plans for Didcot Garden Town and Berinsfield, promoting two Enterprise Zones and new leisure centres in Didcot and Wantage, and securing a permanent council office location.

The local authorities could possibly become one unitary council over the coming years – and working closely with our colleagues from the other three districts, where possible and strengthening our relationships with local media will be key to ensuring our communication activities and messages are heard.

These are also important issues for our residents and local businesses and will likely be debated by community groups and reported by the media.

It is vital therefore that our customers, including residents and businesses across both districts, continue to feel informed about the councils' business, understand the

benefits of any changes we are making and are aware of the positive impact our services are having.

We will do this by ensuring our campaigns and activities are innovative and integrated - communicating to all our customers and colleagues simultaneously - using the appropriate channels available to us. This may be in print, via our websites and the intranet, through the media, face to face, electronic newsletters and via social media platforms such as the councils' Twitter account (which currently has over 12,000 followers), YouTube and Facebook.

It is also important for our customers to know they are being listened to and our communications will be aligned with the councils' consultation strategy, where appropriate.

We particularly want to find new effective and low cost ways of engaging with our audiences via social media and to also understand better how customers will behave and interact with us via our social media platforms.

Take Facebook for example who tell us that: "People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them." Globally, there were 1.13 billion daily active Facebook users on average for June 2016 – the majority being mobile phone users.

We are therefore looking at how we can boost our social media activity by testing how our campaign messages and activities might be received by customers on Facebook, through targeted local Facebook posts.

These will likely be short bursts of low cost or no cost activities posted on Facebook over a few days or a week. We would measure reaction and engagement to see what works best. The insight gained will help us decide on the level and shape of our future Facebook activity and resourcing.

Alongside, we will also look at other social media opportunities, including growing our digital network and asking our partners and local businesses to endorse and re-tweet our Tweets and share our Facebook posts.

And we will look to deliver quality video content, that's accessible and showcases the very best of our services. Our videos will be hosted on YouTube and regularly promoted through the councils' websites, Twitter, Facebook, press releases and other communication activity. Videos and other content could also be used in official presentations.

Our campaign messages will be delivered to all our stakeholders at the right time using the traditional and digital channels available to us.

We will also work with heads of services to develop communication plans and activities specific to their areas - aligned with the councils' corporate plans.

And we will work closely with our partners leading on projects such as the Didcot Garden Town and the Berinsfield Community Investment project to help them

develop clear communication plans and ensure announcements and communication activities are delivered to a high standard, are on message and timely.

In addition we will look at the benefits of developing a ‘thought leadership’ communication plan for the chief executive and senior leaders.

A thought leadership campaign would enable the councils to demonstrate the positive impact they are having on its services and communities. It will boost the council’s reputation and help us to be recognised nationally, regionally and locally as being a great council with good services.

Councillors are also a critical link in the chain of communications - as they represent the views of their communities and the views and values of the councils to the public.

For our staff, we will look to improve knowledge of the council’s services and boost engagement through a new internal communication campaign that recognises and champion’s colleagues who are working behind the scenes to deliver important services, and who may not always get the recognition they deserve. This activity will complement the annual Staff Awards event, acting as trailers throughout the year and encouraging people to nominate colleagues. The internal campaign will feature on our new look intranet for staff, which is due to go live at the end of 2016.

For our councillors, we will continue to keep them updated through our fortnightly newsletter In Focus and work with teams across the councils to ensure new councillors are educated about the councils’ services.

Our activities will be monitored and evaluated to make sure they are having the right impact. Our communications will be adjusted if need be to take our findings into account and we will always look to ensure value for money.

A new communication strategy for 2016 – 2017

The two councils are already aligned to ensure effective communications are being delivered across the districts – helping to improve customer satisfaction, strengthen relationships and counteract negative perceptions.

This is the first joint communication strategy for both councils, agreed by the chief executive and both leaders.

It sets out the structure, aims and objectives for communicating with its audiences, including helping to deliver the corporate plans, roles and responsibilities, our commitment to keeping customers and staff fully informed and encourages good practices internally and externally, such as supporting the councils translation and interpretation policy.

It also sets out how we are going to deliver our communications during the last quarter of 2016. The strategy will be supported by an activity grid, which sets out the communication activities we will be focusing on over the coming year, and a section on measuring outcomes.

This is a rolling strategy, its plans and activities will be regularly updated.

Our vision

To provide a better understanding of what South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District Councils are doing to improve services, continue to provide strong leadership and position the councils as influencers, locally, regionally and nationally.

Our aims

To achieve our communication objectives of informing and influencing our stakeholders and the wider world, we will:

- Work closely with the senior managers, cabinet and others to help them set a clear proactive communications agenda and drive it through the organisation
- Help colleagues see communications in a strategic context – where everything the council says and does matters
- Ensure all narratives, messages, images and content are clear, consistent, professional, aligned and timely and be totally accessible to the target audience from the outset, and wherever possible takes into account people who cannot access the internet
- All communication activities will be assessed by the communication team to ensure they reflect and promote the councils' vision, aims and objectives. Primarily this will be PR and marketing activities and corporate publications

Our objectives

- To inform stakeholders of our services and of the work we are doing to make South Oxfordshire and the Vale the best place to live, work and raise a family
- To influence perceptions of the councils, its services and the two districts as a whole

Our goals

In delivering our objectives we will achieve the following goals:

1. Deliver well executed and planned communications that reach all of our audiences across a range of channels, so they feel consulted and informed
2. Demonstrate the councils' leadership role by more targeted communications with residents, businesses, councillors, wider stakeholders and our staff – using both traditional and digital channels
3. Continued improvement of the councils' reputation and influence with all stakeholders

Our audiences

Understanding our audience is the key to delivering successful communications with impact. We will work with teams, including our consultation officer, to ensure we understand our audiences well. We will also continue to draw on customer and staff surveys to help inform and shape our future communication plans and activities.

The audience list is extensive, but includes the following groups.

- Local residents, partners, councillors, staff, local/regional businesses, parish and town councils, local, regional, national and specialists media, wider stakeholders and other influencers such as councils across Great Britain, the Government, lobby groups and visitors.

External communications

Our external communications will be driven by the councils' corporate plans, its consultation strategy, where appropriate, and from surveys and feedback from residents, customers, councillors, partners and local businesses.

As well as using traditional routes to engage with customers, our communication activities will also signpost people to go online to access information about our services wherever possible.

Findings from Residents

The 2015 South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Residents survey shows an increase in positive attitudes towards the councils, including a rise in the number of people who think both councils treat people fairly and provide value for money.

A good proportion of our residents obtained their information from the councils' websites, (South 47 per cent, Vale 51 percent). Others chose traditional routes, such as Outlook (South) - 42 per cent, local/free papers - 39 per cent (South) and 34 per cent (Vale), and village/parish newsletters (South and Vale) 34 per cent.

Recycling is the most positive satisfaction for our customers, with a satisfaction rate of 89 per cent for both councils.

The survey also showed that 73 per cent of residents feel either very well or fairly well informed, with just five per cent saying they were not well informed at all.

Public Information

We will continue to put important council information into the public domain using both traditional and online channels. Our communications, campaigns and activities will always look for low cost options, driving people online wherever possible. But we must also recognise that some members of the public, particularly the older population will not have access to the intranet.

According to reports published by Ofcom in 2014 and 2015, over eight in ten (83 per cent) of adults now go online using any type of device in any location - nationally.

Nearly all 16-24s and 25-34s are now online (98 per cent), and there has been a nine percentage point increase in those aged 65+ ever going online (42 per cent vs. 33 per cent in 2012).

The total amount of time spent online among 16-24s in 2015 was around 27.6 hours per week, and 6.5 to 9 hours per week amongst 65+ year olds.

We also need to factor in Southern Oxfordshire's ageing population. The long term prediction by the Office for National Statistics is that by 2037 the number of people aged 85+ living in South Oxfordshire is expected to reach 10,100, and 9,000 for the Vale of White Horse - almost three times the number in this age group in 2013. This growth is at a higher rate than the national average (+173% in South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse vs +148% in England).

Our challenge is therefore, to ensure our communications are designed to engage all age groups, using a mix of traditional and digital communications – although it is worth noting that the working aged people of today – will take their digital skills with them into older age.

Work continues to ensure the councils' corporate publications are of high quality and offer value for money. Currently the Outlook publication has been one of the main sources of information for residents in the South and has a fairly high level of readership at 42 per cent.

There are currently three editions a year, but this will likely be reviewed towards to end of 2016.

We will also focus on the South News and Vale News, which is an electronic newsletter emailed to town and parish councillors and local publications, for inclusion in village and parish and town newsletters.

From September 2016, these newsletters have been designed with residents in mind and emailed out to households and town and parish councillors across the two districts. A campaign has already begun to encourage residents, of all ages, to sign up to the newsletters and we will continue to look for innovative ways to grow this network.

This approach will help to align how we communicate with residents in South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse, and as the network grows, it will provide quick and easy access to thousands of households and offer value for money.

The councils' websites consistently score high for customer satisfaction. Ten per cent of page visits are to planning webpages – the most visited area of our sites.

In the past 12 months South Oxfordshire's website received 5.8 million page views. There was a 400 per cent increase in views of the waste pages when our clear sacks campaign ran in September 2016.

The Vale of White Horse received 4.3 million page views in the past 12 months and there was a 1000 per cent increase in page views of the Abbey Meadow webpages when we announced the upgrades in July and August 2016.

Website usage is growing each year as our customers and stakeholders increasingly use our sites as a first point of call - often driven online through our campaigns and communication activities and through day to day interaction with our staff and our partner's staff.

The 2015 residents' survey showed that 47 per cent of people in South Oxfordshire and 51 per cent in the Vale of White Horse access the councils' websites.

Our challenge therefore is to find ways to drive more and more customers online to access our services and information over the coming years, whilst still meeting the needs of people who cannot access the internet.

This is not entirely the responsibility of the communications team, but we can help to change the behaviours of customers by heavily promoting our websites and their offer through our campaigns and communication activities. We will also work with colleagues to help them identify innovative opportunities, such as the development of web applications to support our services.

Our websites must be easy to read and navigate, reflect the councils' branding, include the most up to date public information and be accessible to all. Its content must be in plain English, reflect the councils' corporate business plan and mirror our communication messages, campaigns, activities and images.

Looking ahead - our vision is for the councils to have one of the best local government websites in the country, with excellent customer experience and continued increased uptake. Work is already underway to update our current sites for both South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse district councils, with new-look websites going live in early 2017.

Media Relations

We want South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse councils to be recognised as leaders in delivering local government services and the voice of authority for important local and regional issues. That its reputation in delivering innovative and timely communications is second to none.

As councils we need to be across the news agenda and have strong relationships with the local and regional media and also specialist/trade press. We need to work with them proactively as well as position ourselves as reliable, communication professionals so they come to us for information about the work we do and know how we are supporting thousands of residents across the South and Vale districts.

With today's news stories reported instantly via social media channels, such as Twitter, Facebook and media websites, it's especially important we are on the front foot and able to respond to all types of issues and interactions – from delivering campaigns, counteracting negative coverage to producing strong, newsworthy content.

Looking ahead our communications team will therefore:

- Build stronger relationships with local and regional media – ensuring they are seen as the people to go to for credible, high quality, multi-channel content, statements and information about the councils' business and its services
- Proactively work with local and regional media (print, broadcast and online), to sell in the councils' announcements, positive news stories, case studies and

campaigns. This will result in better, well executed coverage across the channels

- Seek to place articles, blogs, and story's into the specialist/trade and business press
- Be aware of the current news agenda and keep councillors and senior colleagues up to date on emerging news stories
- Evaluate news stories and announcements to understand the tone of media coverage, what is working well and what is not, adjusting our approach to achieve higher impact when we need to

A review of resources may be required in order to provide a more proactive approach to media handling, including delivering high quality content, and media monitoring.

Branding

A trusted brand is one that provides consistent messages to the public across its services.

Branding is also the main driver of public satisfaction. South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse district councils brand has three core elements, the corporate identity (how we present information), how we behave and how we perform.

The councils have different logos - but they are united when it comes to delivering excellent customer services. They have already achieved customer service certifications for a number of services and are working towards achieving a full Customer Service Excellence Award.

Our challenge going forward is to ensure teams across the councils deliver consistent messages to its customers – that are clearly written in plain English and represent our style and branding guidelines.

During 2016/17, the communication team will update the councils branding style guides, taking into account the councils translation and interpretation policy and ensuring the guides are simple to use and accessible for all.

We will find innovative ways to promote the guides to colleagues, getting their buy in, so that everyone sees it as a must use resource.

Internal communications

We want South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District councils to be recognised as great employers – where staff are proud to work, feel a sense of belonging and feel good about the work they do.

Engagement is essential to building staff advocacy – where staff speak highly of the council and are proud to work for the organisation.

They act as our ambassadors in the community, informally and formally, helping to convey a positive impression of the councils.

We are already engaging with colleagues through the intranet, Connect (the staff newsletter), In Focus (an email for councillors, copied to staff), and through ad hoc face to face briefings with the chief executive.

However, from November 2016 and throughout 2017, we will also develop and run a robust and engaging internal communication campaign aimed boosting staff engagement and improving their knowledge of the councils' work.

We will draw on the latest staff survey results and informal feedback to help shape the internal campaign.

The campaign will also recognise the work colleagues are doing through:

- Encouraging managers and colleagues to share accounts of how their team members are doing extraordinary work, or going the extra mile, to deliver the councils' services
- Publishing these accounts as stories and blogs on the intranet and internal newsletters and all staff emails
- Introducing/testing a new 'Have your Say' feature, where colleagues can email the communication team with their questions, with suitable responses published on the intranet
- Review our employee awards to make them more motivational for staff
- Maintaining regular face to face and intranet led briefings for staff with the chief executive and senior leaders to update colleagues on the councils business, listen to their views and address any concerns

It is also vital that all staff are aware of the councils' campaigns and activities and have access to the councils' narratives and lines to take when issues arise and to use in their presentations, speeches and events.

We will therefore ensure our external communication campaigns and activities are proactively promoted internally to colleagues as they go live, including publishing content on the intranet and disseminating messages through the operational management group.

Responsibilities

Everyone across the councils has a responsibility for communicating internally and externally. The communication team is the councils' professional lead on communications and can develop and execute communication plans and activities, but all staff and councillors are ambassadors for getting messages across to stakeholders.

In practice this means:

The management team will

- Be responsible for driving the Communication Strategy by applying its principles to their work
- Keep their cabinet member regularly informed of issues and developments

- Take responsibility for ensuring the successful implementation of the Communication Strategy in their service area
- Provide regular feedback to the chief executive thus creating an upward flow of information

Operational management group will

- Communicate decisions at the right time and in the most appropriate way so information reaches all audiences
- Notify communications of any sensitive issues as soon as possible so they can prepare appropriate communications for media interest
- Ensure staff are aware of the Communication Strategy, and understand their part in delivering it
- Establish channels of communication to keep staff regularly informed of service and council wide news and give them opportunities to express their views and opinions on internal matters
- Seek professional advice from the communications team before agreeing to any communications
- Work closely with the communications team to identify projects that require stand-alone communication plans and work with the communications team to develop and execute these
- Keep stakeholders informed of service developments and issues

Councillors

Councillors are a critical link in the chain of communication with stakeholders because they represent the views of the public to the council and the views and values of the council to the public.

Roles for councillors in communicating and influencing on behalf of the council are important in fulfilling the councils' role as community leaders.

Support and professional communication advice will continue to be provided to councillors on how they can fulfil their ambassadorial role and demonstrate community leadership.

Communication team

The communication team is the central point of contact and lead for all communication activities.

The team will:

- Provide professional advice to staff on communicating news and information across the full spectrum of communication activities (media relations, marketing and PR, branding, new media etc.)
- Coordinate cross service/multi agency media relations and PR activities
- Produce core corporate publications (Outlook and Connect)
- Be strategic - working with colleagues across the councils to horizon scan, plan and deliver well executed and timely communication activities

- Take on a leadership role - working closely with councillors and colleagues to identify communication risks and provide handling advice, drafting media lines to take and statements where appropriate
- Oversee/produce high quality, innovative images and videos that support our announcements and campaigns and reflect the whole community
- Ensure consistent communication with audiences by enforcing the councils current Style Guide

The communication manager has overall responsibility for coordinating, and monitoring the progress on implementing the strategy. This will be monitored by management team.

All staff

All staff have a responsibility to communicate effectively with their audiences by:

- Getting professional advice from the communications team before beginning any communications activity, such as launching new initiatives – including agreeing the timing, drafting content and designing images
- Ensuring communications sign off all communication material other than letters/emails to individuals or small groups of people
- Keeping their line manager regularly informed of service issues and achievements
- Ensuring content/activities are delivered with the councils style guides and translation and interpretations policy in mind
- Giving regular feedback on services, issues, policies and procedures – informally and formally. This may be through team meetings or face to face discussions with line managers and through staff surveys

Measuring and Evaluation

Evaluating the effectiveness of the councils' communications will ensure our campaigns and activities are delivered with impact, reach the right audiences, at the right time, using the right channels, meet the councils' business objectives and offer value for money.

Our evaluation will be through:

- Feedback via customer and staff surveys
- The number of visits to content on our website for a particular campaign
- Positive, neutral and negative coverage in the local and regional press
- Analysing social media traffic and click through rates – where possible
- The number of visits to campaign/news content published on the intranet
- The number of residents who sign up to South and Vale newsletters
- Feedback from the chief executive's face to face staff briefings
- Campaign specific targets, such as the fall in contamination rates, and how many people sign up to our e-newsletter

It is important to note however, that obtaining, analysing and recording in-depth data from our campaigns and activities will be resource intensive.