

Swale Borough Council

Communications Strategy

2015/16



Introduction

Engaging with our community through effective communications

Commentary by Cllr Andrew Bowles, Leader, Swale Borough Council



“Communications are at the centre of everything we do. Through successful communication, we are able to deliver the services that are most important to residents across Swale, and develop good working relationships with many of our partners in the public, voluntary and private sectors.

This strategy outlines where we will focus our communications activities during the year. It will help us to ensure that communication between us and the people and organisations that we come into contact with is always accessible, timely, informative, and appropriate. In this way, we hope that everyone is kept informed about the Council’s priorities, news, and the decisions we make on residents’ behalf; that they know how to access the services and get advice and support that they need from us when they need it; can get involved in the activities and events we undertake; and that they continue to have the opportunity to share ideas and opinions with us.

Although there are many facets to the communications activity we undertake, **this year we have a specific ambition to improve our digital communications**. We recognise our digital channels have started to fall behind as technology has progressed apace, and that the way many people want to receive their information is increasingly on the move through new mobile devices and tablets. We want to be able to better meet those changing preferences and to continue to expand the ways in which people can interact with us through digital channels without compromising our use of traditional communication methods, which cannot be undervalued.

Although it is important our communications inform people of the services we provide and promote the good work we are doing on residents’ behalf and with taxpayers’ money, we also have to be able to listen and act on their concerns in order to fully engage our audiences and truly build trust in us as an organisation. Our Local Area Perception Survey suggests people know how to find us and the information they need, and we’re generally good at reaching the people that we need to. But we know that we must continue to develop and, with this strategy, we are not only demonstrating our ambition to continually improve, but also our commitment to delivering clear and consistent communications that best meet the needs of the community we serve.”

Meeting the needs of the community

In order to deliver high quality, cost effective services that meets the needs of residents and communities, the Council must engage with people and enable them to influence decisions that affect their lives. Good and effective communication is pivotal to this – ensuring that people know what their Council is doing, and making sure the Council is listening and letting people have their say. Our vision for communications is that we as an organisation:

- ✓ ***Deliver consistent, timely, informative and trusted communications that help people across our community feel informed, aware, involved and satisfied with the work of the Council and the services we provide;***
- ✓ ***Develop communications that are accessible and meet the needs and preferences of our different audiences; and***
- ✓ ***Innovate to meet changing demands for information and to help engage and support the community and maintain the positive reputation of the Council.***

Addressing our resident's priorities

This Communications Strategy sets out our priorities for the year. It ensures the Council is clear on its approach to communicating messages it should be relaying, and focussing on those services that are a priority for residents. It has been informed by our Local Area Perception Survey (LAPS).

Our 2014 LAPS showed that:

- 74% of residents are satisfied with Swale as a place to live, 2 points down on 2013;
- residents feel that levels of crime, clean streets and health services were the most important services in making somewhere a good place to live. Satisfaction that the Council is keeping the streets free of litter and agreement that the Council is making the area cleaner and greener are both declining trends;
- road/pavement repairs, level of traffic congestion, activities for teenagers, clean streets, shopping facilities and job prospects were identified as those areas most need of improvement;
- 56% of residents are satisfied with the way the Council runs things, up from 39% in 2010, with 57% stating that the Council is making Swale a better place to live;

- in terms of communication, 57% of residents feel well informed; 59% are satisfied with the website, with 23% using that in the last year as a means of contact with the Council; and
- there is a small decline from 2013 figures in residents feeling that the Council listen to their views which was 42% and is now 40%; and 76% do not feel informed about how to get involved in local decision making.

There is a strong correlation between levels of satisfaction with Council services and communication. So by focussing on promoting good services that we deliver, and showing how we listen and act on the concerns of residents, we will build on the trust that residents already have in us, improve satisfaction in our services, and enhance the Council's reputation.

Working together

Communications is the responsibility of everyone that works in the Council, not just the Communications Team. As such, this strategy aims to help inform the way our staff communicate and how Members champion the Council and its services in their communities.

Some of our services are delivered across more than one local authority through shared service arrangements. Many of the features of local life that are deemed most in need of improvement by residents are either the sole responsibility of outside agencies such as Kent County Council (highways, health services), or over which the Council has only limited influence in conjunction with local or national partners. **This underlines the vital importance of the Council fulfilling its community leadership role by sustaining effective partnerships**, as residents don't necessarily know or need to be concerned about the difference between what is our role and responsibility and that of others. In these instances we will ensure that when we are communicating about partnership projects, we take a joint approach to provide our audiences with consistent messages.

Being accessible

There are many different ways local people, businesses and our partners communicate with the Council. Our aim is to ensure that any interaction people have with us – whether that be at a Local Engagement Forum or attending a Council or Committee meeting, following us on social media, reading our news in the local press or in our residents magazine (Inside Swale), ringing the customer service centre for advice and information, or speaking to our refuse collection teams, or Community Enforcement Officers while out and about in the Borough – the information people receive is consistent, informative, clear, and helpful.

Supporting the Corporate Plan 2015 - 2018

We want to ensure that our purpose, values and priorities are clearly understood by local people, local businesses, our workforce, elected members, and our partners and other stakeholders. The Communications Strategy supports the Corporate Plan which defines the Council's purpose, values and priorities for the year ahead up to 2018.

Our purpose and values

The Council's purpose is to focus its energy and resources into **'Making Swale a better place'**. The values our staff and elected Members stand for are:

Fairness – being objective and balancing the needs of all those in our community

Integrity – being open, honest and taking responsibility

Respect – embracing and valuing the diversity of others

Service – delivering high quality, cost-effective public service

Trust – delivering on our promises to each other, customers and our partners

What we want to achieve

Our Corporate Plan 2015-18 outlines three priority themes that draw together the different strands of the Council's work and help focus our efforts for the next three years to improve Swale as a place, as a community and, our organisation. These are:

A Borough to be Proud of.... where we are working towards a number of large and small-scale regeneration projects to foster economic renewal and improve the appearance and facilities in our towns and villages; a Borough that is noticeably clean and well maintained and our environment is respected and enhanced; one that attracts business investment and tourists; and that has world-class multi-modal transport links that help our economy grow and residents can benefit from;

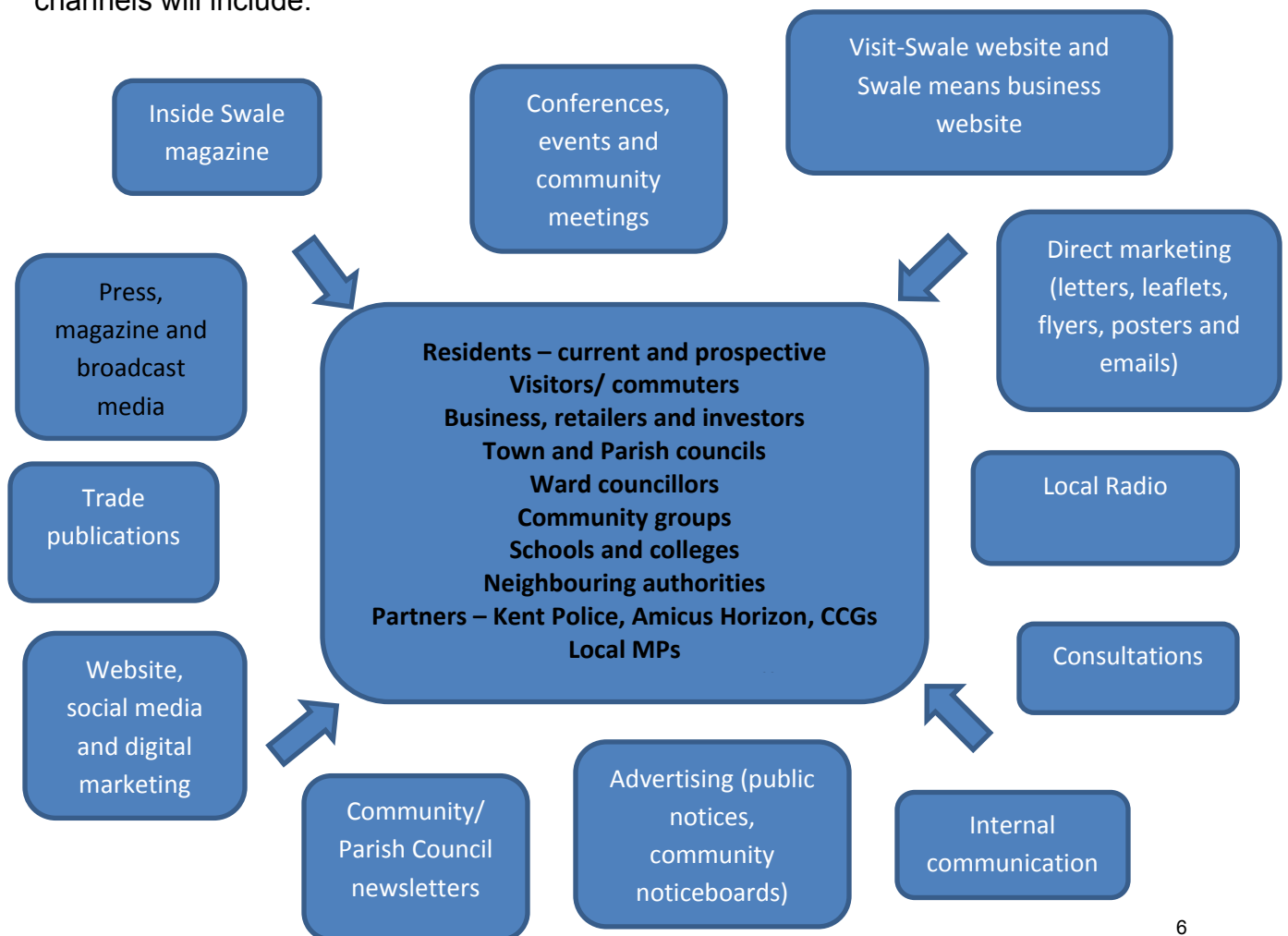
A Community to be Proud of.... where we focus on people working together to solve local issues; where we enable and support a flourishing voluntary sector working to improve lives; a low-crime borough where no one has to live in fear of crime, domestic abuse or intimidation; one that is educated and in which everyone has the opportunity to acquire the skills they need to support their families and business can recruit well qualified local people; one where everyone plays their part in maintaining their own wellbeing through healthy lifestyle choices but have access to world class healthcare when they most need it; and

A Council to be Proud of.... one that is regarded as an asset by its residents; which continuously seeks new ways of achieving better results at lower cost; whose financial viability is more independent of decisions made by central government; and that has the confidence and capacity to fulfil its community leadership role both in sustaining effective partnership with key local agencies and at a national and European level.

[Please see our Corporate Plan for more details.](#)

Connecting with our audience

Our audience for Council news and information includes residents across the Borough, businesses and potential investors, local and regional partners, stakeholders and visitors. If we are to communicate successfully and be confident that we are reaching and connecting with our audience both internally and externally, then we need to ensure that our communications channels are diverse, appropriate and tailored to their individual needs and preferences; that our messages are tailored to be relevant and resonate with particular audiences; and that we deliver integrated activity that takes account of channel preferences and are simple, creative and engaging. Our key channels will include:



For more details of how we will use our key communications channels to inform and engage our target audiences, please see Appendix 1.

Using Customer Insight

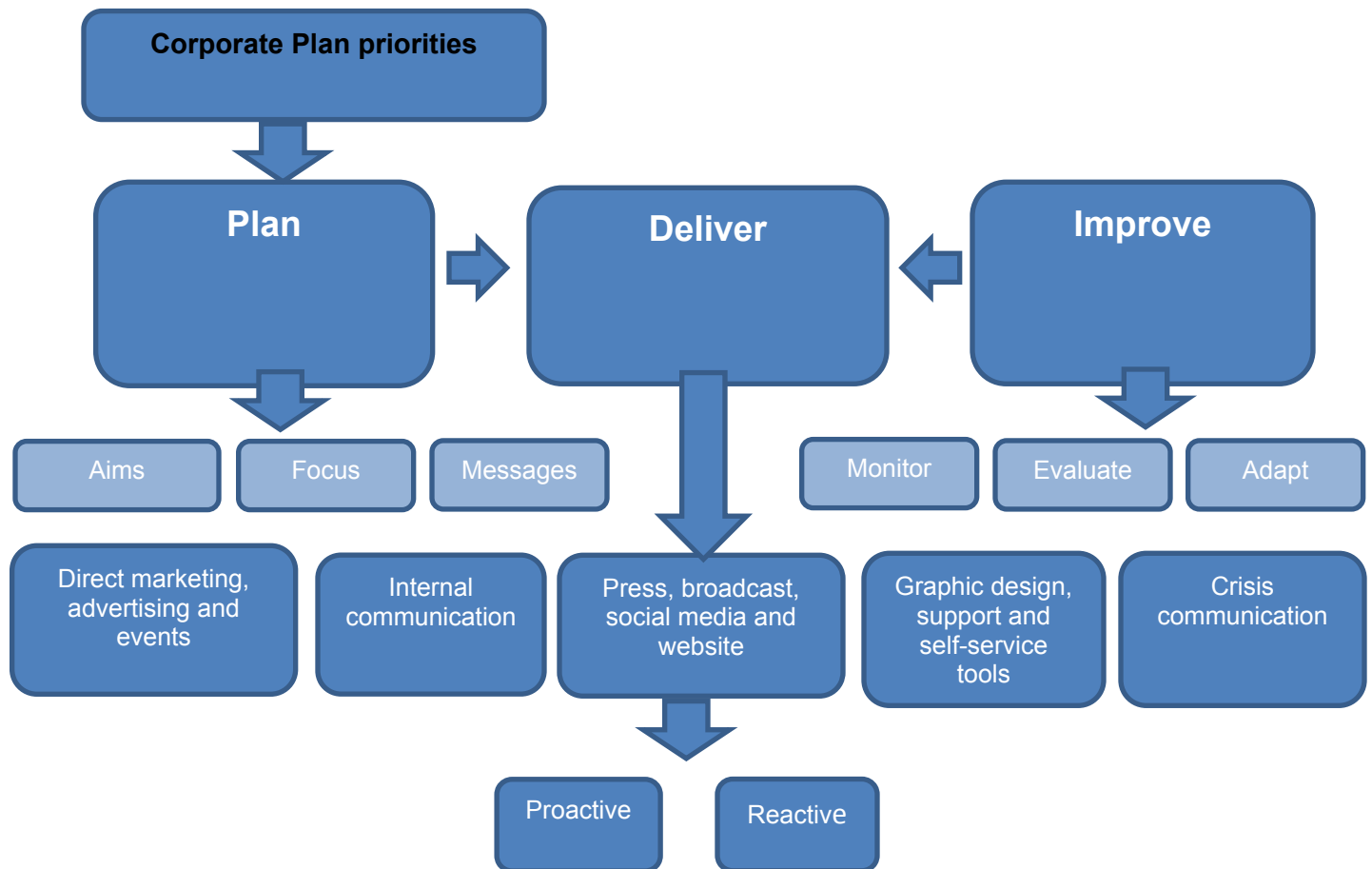
In order to better target our customers with communications, we will use our intelligence gleaned from previous interactions with our customers along with more general demographic and market information. This will enable us to better understand our customers' needs and profile our customers to ensure we target our communications better and through channels which groups and individuals are more likely to favour.

Our approach

As a Council our strategic approach to communications is:

- **To plan:** we undertake strategic planning to ensure the focus of activities undertaken throughout the year support the priorities for the Council set out in our Corporate Plan and reinforce our key messages;
- **To deliver:** we deliver communications to our varied audiences through a range of channels, undertaking proactive activities and campaigns, by providing effective response to media enquiries and in emergency situations should they arise; and
- **To improve:** we assess, adapt and strive to continually improve our approach to communicating with our audiences through effective monitoring and evaluation of our communications channels and the campaign activity we undertake.

This approach to communications drives **what** we communicate about as an organisation; **who** we communicate with; **when** we communicate; and **how** we reach them through various channels.



To plan

Aims

It is our intention that throughout the year our audience are aware of where the Council focuses efforts and resources, understand the reason for decisions we take, know about the work we plan and do deliver, can get involved should they chose to, and are clear about difference our work makes to the Borough. As a Council our communications aim to:

- **Raise awareness** - informing audiences and promoting our services, telling the Council's story and that of the community locally, and raising the profile and reputation of what Swale has to offer at a national level;
- **Be accessible** - providing a range of channels to meet the communications preferences of our audiences;

- **Focus on the things that matter most** - to the Borough as a whole, and to the people in the towns of Sittingbourne, Faversham, Sheerness and the Isle of Sheppey and the surrounding localities;
- **Listen to your views and engage with all our audiences** - providing a variety of opportunities for dialogue, to provide feedback, enabling people to get involved in shaping decisions and tell us what they think;
- **Develop understanding** – so our audiences understand our priorities and why we focus on those things, where money is spent; and that we demonstrate the Council understands what matters to you, what we're doing well and not so well and how we work with people in the Borough to make changes;
- **Celebrate the work we do and the successes we achieve** - be proactive in sharing the progress we make and the outcome of our work; improve communications with staff and elected members so they feel proud of the work of the Council and act as advocates in our community;
- **Demonstrate how the Council acts on concerns** - responding to issues and feedback promptly, efficiently, informatively, and professionally; and
- **Maintain our resilience** - ensuring a robust business continuity plan is in place and we are able to swiftly react and respond in case of emergency.

Messages

Messages will vary depending on the subject of our communications and the campaign theme itself, but across all our communications we will strive to consistently explain how, and demonstrate that:



Value for money

The Council has limited resources available for communicating and is focussed on finding the most cost-effective mechanisms to communicate that provide the greatest

impact or return on investment in order to ensure value for money. As such the service will focus those resources on priorities and services that our audiences feel are most important and that evidence and evaluation suggest make the most impact. Following the results of the LAPS survey, the service will strive to increase how well informed residents feel.

Digital ambition

As the demand for online services increases, our website will be upgraded to offer improved access to information and council services from desktop, tablet and mobile devices as part of the Channel Shift programme and Digital Access Strategy.

Enhancing the functionality of the website in turn offers increased opportunities for expanding the range and scope of digital communications channels we use to reach residents. As these technical improvements are made, we will be introducing new direct email communications for our residents to provide them more timely and relevant direct information about the aspects of the Council's work, and drive adoption of new online services and information by our customers. We will continue to grow our social media presence and following, sharing service news and information through corporate social media channels including Twitter and Facebook. We will also look to explore other means of access i.e. mobile devices as they are increasingly a common way of connecting. We want to move to digital not only to meet the demand, but also for greater accessibility and a more convenient, 24/7 service which is more sustainable and better value for money. However other channels will be maintained for those who cannot access digital.

Wider priorities

70% of communications resource and activity will focus on:

- delivering high-quality and informative corporate communications channels for our audiences;
- delivering proactive communications activities and campaigns that provide information and news about those services and achievements that are of most importance to our local audiences (please see Appendix 2 for an overview of our campaign priorities);
- undertaking proactive public relations activities at a local and national level to promote the work of the Council, the Borough and what it has to offer to tourists, prospective residents and businesses/investors;
- continuing to enhance our website offering and satisfaction with it as a communication channel;

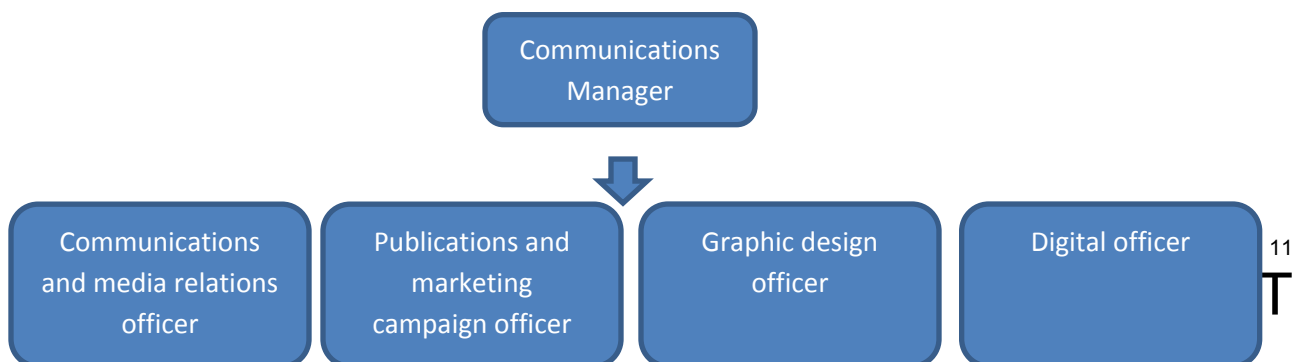
- building our database of residents email addresses and introducing new direct email communications for residents tailored to their information preferences to supplement other digital channels;
- building on our partnerships with key local media partners, involving them in the work of the Council, providing them with access to expert spokespeople on relevant topics, and providing them with timely, informative and accurate news and information;
- developing our growing corporate social media channels to increase our reach, following and interactions with our growing online audiences;
- enhancing the opportunities for our audiences in the community to engage directly with us on issues that matter most to them, make it easy for residents, stakeholders and community groups to get involved in sharing their views and shaping Council decisions;
- collaborating effectively with key deliver partners to better integrate and coordinate our communications, and provide consistent news and information about our work together; and
- ensuring business continuity, and playing an active and vital role in the Council's emergency plan.

There will be approximately 20% of resource made available as a contingency for dealing with reactive issues and unplanned events.

The remaining 10% will be focussed on monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness and reach of our communications activity, and the continual development and improvement of the channels we manage.

To deliver

The Communications Service is small, with professional communications expertise across the communication mix and extensive experience of delivering media relations, digital communications, and events and marketing campaign activity in local and national government organisations. The team is responsible to Cabinet Members and the Strategic Management Team and consists of:



The Communications Service has limited resource and budget of £13,750 to contribute to priority activity. Given the limited central communications budget, most communications activity needs to be funded by Service Area budgets or where external funds have been secured through partner organisations to deliver a campaign.

Given the limited resource, decisions on what activity to prioritise may need to be taken, which is why this strategy has been developed to focus activity and prioritise. **That priority 'list' is being developed and shown in Appendix II.** Through the consultation period this will be finessed through discussions with staff and Members. This is not to say that work to deliver against priorities has not already begun for this year. The Communications Service is already working with Service Areas to deliver proactive communications against their service plans.

The Council's Communications Service will deliver this strategy working in conjunction with Council Members, SMT/ Heads of Service, Managers and staff within service areas. It will also work with external partners to ensure a joined up approach, to grow the small resource it has and to add value through a joint partnership approach.

The Communications Service will focus delivery on:

- managing and co-ordinating proactive PR campaigns and messages through our corporate communications channels;
- advising Members, the Strategic Management Team and service area staff on appropriate messages and communications tactics;
- devising communications and campaign plans for priority activities;
- using the oversight of all communications being undertaken by the Council and its partners to ensure opportunities for synergies across campaigns are realised;
- maintaining our strong relationships with press and broadcast media and co-ordinating proactive public relations activities and reactive press relations;
- acting as brand guardian to control the use and application of the Council's corporate identity;
- managing content and developing our electronic and online channels; and
- producing publications and corporate literature in support of Service Areas' events, activities and communications campaigns.

We will also provide communications guidelines to support the work of staff and Members across the organisation, including codes of conduct for dealing with the press,

social media policy, email communication policy, website content management guidance and training, and brand and style guides.

To improve

Tracking performance and measuring success

The Communications Service will monitor its **outputs** (number of press releases issued, media enquiries responded to) and the **impact** (the volume and favourability of coverage, audience reach, audience engagement levels) of its work and campaigns by monitoring:

- available data on channel effectiveness;
- attendance/footfall and levels of satisfaction with events; and
- cost per unit/reach and return on investment data for direct marketing and advertising activity.

The Service will report utilising a performance dashboard. We will undertake regular channel reviews and consult our audiences on the effectiveness of those corporate channels we are managing.

We will also use our annual LAPS and other data sources to track our progress against key communications metrics including:

- how well informed residents feel about the Council's work;
- levels of satisfaction with the website;
- use of social media;
- the level/ opportunity to view our messages;
- residents' perceptions of whether the Council listen to their views; and
- how well informed local people are about how they can get involved in local decision making.

Communications channels

Audience	Channel	Purpose
<p>Residents and local businesses</p>	<p>Local press and broadcast media including: BBC South East (TV, radio & online); ITV Meridian (TV) Kent Messenger Group (print, online, TV & radio):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ KMTV ▪ KMFM ▪ Faversham News ▪ Sheerness Times Guardian ▪ Sittingbourne Messenger ▪ Sittingbourne News Extra <p>Faversham Times (print and online) Kent on Sunday KM Business</p> <p>Trade and national press including: Local Government Chronicle; Municipal Journal Planning Magazine; Regeneration & Renewal Local government/home affairs correspondents Special interest correspondents/features editors (eg, tourism, planning, housing etc)</p>	<p>Distributing press releases to share major news and announcements for residents</p> <p>Be responsive to press queries and providing facts and views from expert spokespeople on key subjects and issues across the Borough</p> <p>Involving media partners in activities in the Borough through press events</p> <p>Ensuring media partners are fully informed about the progress of major projects, news and announcements through press briefings</p> <p>Enabling press attendance at Council and community meetings</p>

	<p>Websites and social media</p> <p>www.swale.gov.uk</p> <p>www.swalemeansbusiness.co.uk</p> <p>Twitter</p> <p>Facebook</p> <p>Publications</p> <p>Inside Swale magazine</p> <p>Public meetings</p> <p>Local Engagement Forums, Rural Engagement Forum, Committee meetings, Council meetings</p> <p>Marketing activity</p> <p>Direct emails, leaflets and letters</p> <p>Billboard, display and press advertising</p> <p>Events and roadshows</p> <p>Telephony</p>	<p>Providing easy access to Council information, regular news, feature content, online services and ways to contact us with queries.</p> <p>Delivering daily announcements of news, events, activities and responding to followers' questions, comments and queries</p> <p>Providing residents with news and information about Council priorities, projects, activities and services</p> <p>Providing a regular series of events across the Borough and Council meetings to enable residents to hear directly from Members about activity and issues that affect them in their local area.</p> <p>Directly informing residents when introducing new approaches, providing information about our services or action is needed.</p> <p>Supporting priority campaigns to inform residents of our priorities, major events and activities, public notices and when action is needed.</p> <p>Supporting key community events with our presence, and providing the opportunity for residents to meet our teams, learn about our services and work, and ask questions.</p> <p>A good number of our customers still prefer this channel</p>
Tourists	Local press, national and broadcast media	Distributing press releases and undertaking media events to promote and publicise locations, events and activities across the Borough to potential tourists and visitors.

	Websites and social media www.visit-swale.co.uk www.visitkent.co.uk www.faversham.org www.visitsheppey.com Twitter and Facebook	Enabling visitors and tourists easy access to news, events, activities across the Borough.
Staff	Swale Borough Council intranet All staff briefings and team meetings Staff suggestion box Swale Stars	To provide a source of daily news and information for staff To provide staff opportunities to hear from their managers and Strategic Management Team, and to raise comments and questions To recognize and reward excellence in staff performance.
Local partners and stakeholders	Town and Parish councils, community groups, AmicusHorizon, Kent Police, KCC wardens, Swale CVS, Clinical Commissioning Groups, KCC, KFRS, schools and colleges.	To work in partnership to ensure a joint approach to relevant campaigns and consistent messages for audiences.

Priority Communications Activities

Priority	Communications Activity (short term one offs)
A Borough to be proud of	
Delivering major regeneration projects	Regeneration Conference November 2015
Enhance the Borough's economic and tourism offer	Tourism promotion - Visit Swale; Visit Kent; Visit England Markets development Anniversaries/Frontline Kent Grant recipients Sheerness heritage centre Blue flag beaches
Keep Swale clean and tidy	FPN regime Successful prosecutions Bag it Bin it Win it Operation bin it Deep cleans
Protect and improve the natural built environments	Climate local Swale Sustainable Sheppey Faversham Creek neighbourhood plan Local Plan Green Grid Planning decisions
Lobby for better roads and transport	Kent highways traffic alerts and updates KCC Road repair schedule
A Community to be proud of	
Foster economic growth and prosperity for all	Business support scheme Local First Pop-up shop opportunities Small Business Saturday TIGER finance scheme for business
Encourage active communities and support the voluntary sector	Volunteer Week Trustee events Partnership activity with CVS Staff volunteering day Local Engagement Forums
Reduce crime and disorder	Noise Action week Estates action days

Communications Strategy 2015/16

	<p>Shed-u-cation Operation creeper PREVENT awareness Dark nights Halloween advice Fireworks safety Don't drink and drive/ Be 'phone safe'/Road Safety campaigns CCTV results International day for the elimination of violence against women Summer holiday Anti-social behaviour operations</p>
Use our influence to ensure local skills are matched to local jobs	<p>Apprenticeships scheme Apprenticeship Week</p>
Work in partnership to improve physical and mental health	<p>Leisure and sports facilities and opportunities in the Borough This Girl Can</p>
A Council to be proud of	
Improve local people's experience of dealing with the council	<p>Do it online, encouraging and promoting channel and self-service options LAPS 2015 Council tax support scheme changes Universal credit</p>
Encourage innovation at every level	<p>New Mid-Kent partnerships and services Industry awards – e.g. MJ Awards for Sustainable Sheppey</p>
Strengthen our resilience	<p>Emergency planning/ preparedness and advice</p>
Priority	Communication Campaigns (long term through the year)
A Borough to be proud of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Town Centre Regeneration • Swale means business • Bitter about litter • Recycling behaviour change and service expansion
A Community to be proud of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteering • Health and wellbeing, getting people active and healthy
A Council to be proud of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff engagement campaign