

# Communication, Consultation and Engagement Strategy

2017 – 2020

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## Background

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Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council is a complex organisation responsible for delivering a vast range of different services to support and improve the lives of our residents. Many of our services, such as refuse collection, are used by all of our residents; others are more targeted to specific groups and we also have a year round calendar of events.

We pride ourselves on being open, honest and fair; leading by example, retaining our longer term ambitions for the Borough in the face of adversity; being determined; delivering genuine value for money and setting high standards of customer-focused public service.

Having such a varied role means that it can often be a challenge to:

- Get our messages across in the right way, to the right people at the right time.
- Provide appropriate opportunities for our stakeholders and communities to tell us what they think through consultations that influence service delivery, decision making and policy development.
- Actively engage with residents and encouraging participation.

We recognise the need for all of our residents and partners to understand what we do, so that people can have their voices heard and influence decision that we make on their behalf and are able to access the services we provide. We believe that our residents and stakeholders should be given the opportunity to be involved in the decisions that affect them and deserve good quality services, shaped around their needs.

That's why effective communications, consultation and engagement are an important focus for us.

This Communications, Consultation and Engagement Strategy sets out how we will communicate to the diverse range of audiences that have an interest, or a say, in what we do. It explains the messages we want to give and also the various ways we intend to reach and engage with residents and partners.

The Council also plays an important role in helping promote the borough and portraying a positive image of our area. This is vital if we are to attract businesses to invest and grow here, visitors to come here and enjoy the leisure facilities, shops and events and people to move here.

As public sector funding continues to be reduced its even more important that we communicate effectively with our residents so that they understand why difficult choices have been made, that's why this strategy also explains how we aim to communicate more cost-effectively by doing things different and always looking at ways to improve.

We need to continue to ensure that our communities and stakeholders are involved in the decision making process and are given the opportunity to help find solutions through high quality consultation and engagement. It is also crucial that we communicate the challenges, decisions and future changes in the most effective, inclusive and timely ways possible.

This Communication, Consultation and Engagement Strategy sets out:

- Our key communication messages, campaign methods and evaluation.
- How we will engage with our stakeholders, including hard to reach groups.
- How we will consult.

## Principles

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A number of principles underpin this strategy. They are to communicate, consult and engage with the community we serve in a way that is:

- Open and honest
- Timely
- Influenced by our residents and other audiences
- Accessible
- Two way
- Targeted
- Cost-effective and efficient
- Integrated

Read more about these principles on page 7

## Where are we now?

Councils that perform highly most often have effective communication, consultation and engagement at the heart of all that they do. In these councils effective communication, consultation and engagement is central to the business, it's not an 'add on' that is used to get the message out after decisions on policy are taken.

National research carried out by MORI shows that residents who feel informed and involved have greater levels of satisfaction in their council and the services they provide. We're a small team but were keen to make a big impact and are committed to doing better as we were passionate about what we do.

To support this aim a review of Stockton-on-Tees Borough Councils communications, consultation and engagement teams was carried out in July 2016, superseding a review in 2014. The purpose of this was to further improve the way we communicate, consult and engage and to become more efficient and cost-effective in the way we do this.

The review resulted in a centralised team where all communication, consultation and engagement colleagues were brought together as a combined unit.

This review has meant we are working together more and are clearer about who we want to reach, what we need to say, and how we are going to say it in the most effective way.

## Who do we want to reach?

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We want to communicate, consult and engage with a wide range of stakeholders:

### **External**

- Our local residents - both generally and as users of specific services.
- Our local businesses and business groups i.e. North East Chamber of Commerce
- Children and Young People
- People working and studying in the Borough
- Voluntary sector groups, community groups and other representative groups
- Geographical groups i.e. Parish Councils, Community and Residents' Associations
- Media - including local, regional and national
- Central Government
- Businesses, visitors and potential relocators from outside the Borough
- Partners – i.e. Police, other councils, health trusts, Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA), organisations within the public, private, community and voluntary sectors

We also take our internal communications seriously so we make sure we include our employees, Members, contractors and service providers.

# What do we mean by Communication, Consultation and Engagement?

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**Communication**, is generally defined as ‘the imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing or using some other medium’ and the ‘successful conveying or sharing of ideas and feelings’.

We use different methods of communication based on target audiences – both internal and external



**Consultation** is defined as the process of ‘dialogue between individuals or groups, based upon a genuine exchange of views, with the objective of influencing decisions, policies or programmes of action’. It can involve:

- Passing information and receiving comments.
- Seeking opinions on options before a decision is reached.
- Seeking to involve local people, communities, businesses, voluntary sector organisations and other organisations in important decisions which have an impact on them, including children and young people.
- Listening and learning from local people, communities and other stakeholders.

**Engagement** can generally be described as ‘developing and sustaining a relationship between public bodies and community groups to help them both understand and act on the needs or issues that the community and work towards a common vision’. Communities, in this sense, can mean groups of people with similar needs or aspirations such as the users of a particular service.

## What do we want to achieve?

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Effective communication, consultation and engagement are essential to support the councils work and delivering the overall Council Plan. This strategy aims to do this by:

1. Keeping our residents well informed about our services, policies, decisions and delivery achievements to enhance our reputation and to improve confidence in the Council.
2. Apply a consistent and corporate approach to communications, consultation and engagement to ensure that these plans are integrated into service planning and delivery and are clearly branded and adheres to the corporate style so that it is easily and instantly identifiable with Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
3. Provide good internal communication, consultation and engagement to improve employee morale, increase performance and to enable staff to understand and demonstrate the council's core values to create a corporate environment of trust and loyalty where they are valued and encouraged.
4. Provide clear, easily understood, timely and up to date information to all stakeholders.
5. Ensure that outcomes of engagement and consultation are used to inform policy and decision making to help shape and improve services, improve public understanding and keep our residents and stakeholders informed of progress.
6. To raise the profile of the Borough to a range of opinion-formers, policy-makers, visitors, business, investors and potential relocators regionally, nationally, and internationally.

To ensure we meet our duties as well as the aims and objectives within this policy, all communication, consultation and engagement activity will be developed in line with the following:

- **Clear and concise:** We will use plain English and avoid jargon and acronyms in all our communications to ensure messages and purposes are clear, understandable and accessible. When consulting we will only ask questions which are necessary and easy to understand.
- **Purpose:** All our activity will have a clear and defined purpose. We will only consult or carry out marketing and media activity if there is an identified objective. Consultation and engagement will be used to influence local decision making.
- **Timely:** All communication, consultation and engagement activity will, when possible, be planned in advance so consistent messages can be used at the right time, in the right way with the right people. We will openly inform, engage, discuss and consult with stakeholders at the earliest possible opportunity, ideally when proposals are being developed or when information is confirmed and becomes available. Due consideration

- will be given on the lead up to any elections or referendums to whether it is appropriate to launch new campaigns and consultation or engagement activity.
- **Proportionate timescales:** The length of time for consultation and engagement activity will be judged against the nature and impact of the proposal / issue being consulted upon. We will ensure that sufficient time is given for respondents to consider any information provided and that there is sufficient time for them to provide an informed response.
- **Targeted:** We will ensure that all our communications and consultations are targeted at the right stakeholder groups so they are effective and use resources in the best possible way. Where proposals, events or services affect specific individuals or groups, these stakeholders will be made aware of the activity so they can find out more, have their say or become involved. Consultation activity, in particular, will be tailored to meet the needs and preferences of different groups of people across the Borough, ensuring accessibility for all, value for money, avoiding consultation fatigue and to ensure messages are consistent. We will also ensure information is accessible for those with additional needs (such as large print formats, audio or translation services).
- **Feedback:** We will ensure that any internal or external feedback will be conscientiously taken into account and will be considered in any final decision making. With regard to consultations, the results will be used to inform the development of relevant impact assessments. We will publish the results of consultation and engagement activity stating how many responses were received and how they have been used in formulating the recommendation.
- **Forward thinking:** We will actively explore and assess how we can best use new technology and other new communication channels to reach and engage as many people as possible.
- **Corporate identity and style guidelines:** All communications involving the council will meet our corporate identity guidelines. This is to protect the brand identity, to maintain the council's professional image and to ensure all council activity is consistent and accountable. This includes use of the Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council logo and images.
- **Partnership agreements:** As we embrace a stronger integrated and joined up approach it is important that all partners agree in advance how any partnership activity will be carried out and communicated. This is to ensure there are consistent messages and that all communication and engagement protocols and corporate identity guidelines are met.
- **Responsibility:** We acknowledge that communication is a two way process and is the responsibility of everyone. Council employees, elected members and all stakeholders have a role to play in open, timely and effective communication, consultation and engagement with each other.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Given the important emphasis on using our resources to best effect, the way in which we communicate, consult and engage should be inclusive and effective. Monitoring and evaluating activity, where possible, will identify if we have met defined goals, areas that need exploring further and activity which can be improved.

Utilising this approach will ensure value for money and cost effectiveness across all communication channels and activities and help us to be realistic about our limitations and the need for the council to use reducing resources to best effect.

## What do we want to say?

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A set of key messages and campaigns have been developed that we will focus on in the year. By effectively allocating our resources we hope it becomes easier for people to understand what we do and also be more efficient in what we spend on communications.

Each year we will review these key campaigns to make sure that they reflect the priority areas for the Council that year.

Our key messages/campaigns for 2017/18 are:

- Ambitious, effective and proud to serve
- Creating economic prosperity
- Protecting the vulnerable
- Improved Health
- Exciting year-round programme of events
- Six thriving towns.
- Do it online
- Fostering
- Employee Engagement

For more information on these campaigns please refer to the CCE Key campaigns and messages document.

## How are we going to do this?

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There are a number of channels we use to reach our various audiences. The choice of channel depends on the audience we want to reach. In most cases a number of different activities will be used to support our key campaigns and messages. To deliver this we will have to continue to adapt and make improvements by:

- Monitoring performance of campaigns
- Focus on an objective led approach
- Utilise data to make more informed decisions
- Agile working and efficient systems and processes
- Manage workload effectively

The principles on page 7 underpin this.

By coordinating communications efforts in the way we aim to provide a clearer message, reduce duplication and cost, and increase the reach of campaigns.

Detailed communication plans will be developed for each of the key campaigns listed in section X. These plans set out the main objectives of each campaign, target audiences, key messages and the calendar of activities, budget and resources needed to support them. They also evaluate the success of each campaign.

Each year the key campaigns and messages will be reviewed to ensure they the Councils priorities for the year ahead. However many messages, such as the investment in the Borough and the support for the economy will be in themes that carry forward for a number of years as we help raise the profile of the Borough as a great place to live, work, study, visit and do business.

## Have we been successful?

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Measuring and evaluating the impact of our communications, consultation and engagement activity is important, particularly when planning future projects, campaigns and investment. We also need to demonstrate that we are achieving value for money.

The success of this strategy will be reviewed on a regular basis through a variety of methods including:

- Press and broadcast media
- Visitor numbers to events and feedback from those who do/do not attend
- Participation in consultation projects
- Website statistics
- Intranet and employee engagement software statistics
- Response to direct marketing i.e. leaflets, posters and mailshots
- Residents satisfaction survey
- Staff surveys
- Readers feedback on Stockton News
- SOCITM and accessibility results
- Viewpoint responses

More detailed analysis is collected after key events such as the Stockton International Riverside Festival as well as data from external partners, such as British Cycling for the Cycling Festival to inform future activity and targeting of particular activities.

## Get in touch

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# Did you know in 2017/18 we....



Dealt with over **680** media enquiries

Organised **20** advice days for the local community



Launched **Brightminds bigfutures** for the young people of our Borough



Reached over **5 Million** people on Facebook



Developed and implemented over **30** integrated communication and marketing campaigns

Increased our Facebook following by **36%** to over **11,500**



Collected over **300** winter coats for charitable organisations

Created more than **45** presentations for the Chief Executive



Broadcast **40** Facebook Live videos with **74,355** views



Launched a new **Period poverty** pilot scheme



Fed over **1800** young people with our Snacks all Summer project



Engaged with nearly **10,000** residents and stakeholders on a number of consultations and surveys