

Communications Strategy



Introduction

Communication is a vital function of Tendring District Council, providing people – residents, businesses and visitors, but also our own staff – with information. That can range from how to access our services, changes in policy, and support transparency and openness about how decisions are made in our democratic institution.

As an organisation, Tendring District Council carries out huge amounts of fantastic work each year to serve and improve the lives of our residents, businesses, and visitors to our area. Some of this work can be very visible: new buildings and facilities, for example. But much of it can slip under the radar, we take it for granted and perhaps only notice it in the rare instances when things go do not go quite right.

I want us to shine a light on this activity; not only to celebrate it and our successes, but on a more basic level to help people understand what we deliver with the money they pay in council tax or business rates. These are core tenets of Our Vision – our Corporate Plan – and why this Communication Strategy is reviewed to align with that that top-level strategic direction of the Council.

With difficult and uncertain times ahead globally, as well as challenging financial times for us as a Council, we must build – earn – trust in what we say from local communities. We must be a trusted authority voice to tackle rising mis- and dis-information (both deliberate and accidental); therefore it is more important than ever that we communicate effectively and efficiently so that we can remain accountable to those we serve and act as community leaders; remembering that our reputation affects not only us as a local authority, but the district as a whole.

Communication is not one-way, and we will endeavour to listen as well as talk to our community.



Councillor Mark Stephenson - Leader of the Council

Vision for Communications

The over-arching vision for communications at Tendring District Council is that it is proactive; externally, sharing information with its audiences before it is requested, and internally that communications is planned in at the beginning of work where possible.

Communications should be innovative, at the forefront of technological and social change – without taking undue risks. There will always be an element of reactive communication, but this should be prepared for as much as possible.

All work of the Communications Team should support the golden thread narrative in Tendring District Council's adopted Corporate Plan. Though this may not always be explicit and direct, for example when considering internal communications, help for operational services, civic activities, or supporting transparency by communicating the work of Council committees, it should be there.

The Corporate Plan – and subsequent annual priorities – will be the determining factor in prioritising the team's focus during periods of peak workload when capacity is reached, while also considering urgent matters and emerging priorities. This is managed through project and activity planning processes adopted during the previous Communications Strategy period.

In order to support this golden thread, more scope will be allowed for strategic planning work, taking a more proactive approach from the Communications service. This does not mean necessarily proactive communications – though this will also continue to be part of the approach – but a move from the Communications team away from solely reacting to other services' communications needs (albeit in a planned way) and beginning to source and develop their own work. This would involve making suggestions to services of how Communications can help, not just in informing audiences, but by being the solution in some cases.

Being on the front foot in this way also extends to reviewing and updating ways in which we can communicate with the public, exploring new channels and opportunities. As always in the fast-paced digital world innovation will be actively encouraged, with the team able to try out new methods – and, where they prove successful, develop a business case for adoption.

This innovation will have a particular focus on assessing and embracing the opportunities provided by Artificial Intelligence (AI), including ensuring it is used in an ethical and safe framework. Within the Communications service this will initially involve testing and using internal tools to improve content and planning creation; but may evolve as the technology does.

In addition to this increased proactive approach, Communications will look to provide inputs into the organisation, not just delivering outputs and outcomes. These inputs will move beyond providing professional advice and expertise, and include feeding back sentiment from the wider public captured from the team's work on social media.

Internal communications will also be a focus, to ensure that staff and Members are all part of the same golden thread. A corporate approach to internal communications will be regularised, with an added focus on improving two-way communications with seldom-heard staff. The recently implemented new intranet provides a potential platform for expansion of internal communications through further phases of development.

Accessibility will continue to be at the centre of communications work, while the service will push for wider adoption of accessible standards – reminding staff that everyone has a role to play in delivering accessibility.

Community engagement is important for Tendring District Council, and while two-way communication should not replace dedicated engagement, it will be a vital pillar to ensure that this engagement is effective. This strategy therefore supports and overlaps with the Council's Community Engagement Strategy – itself due for review under the proposed Highlight Priority Actions for 2024/25 being considered as this strategy is being developed.



Live streaming a Tendring4Growth event



TV interview in Clacton town centre

Who Communicates and How We Communicate

Each and every officer and member of the Council has a responsibility for communication, and to do so effectively, whether that be through everyday conversations, public meetings, letters and emails, or online.

The Communications Team oversees this function by providing advice, guidance and appropriate procedures, to ensure information is exchanged in accordance with this strategy. The team also considers long-term and wider planning of communications, to achieve and manage the overall picture of communications across the whole Council; while individual services retain their own budgets to finance campaigns and communications activity beyond the standard use of our channels and officer time and expertise.

Staff are provided with Customer Service Guidelines, and we also display our Customer Services Standards in our reception and public areas. As society moves increasingly into a digital age our websites, intranet and social media are critical methods of exchanging information, while ensuring anyone not digitally enabled is not excluded. Therefore a close working relationship between the Communications Team, Customer Services Team and the IT Team is essential.

In the ethos of every officer having a responsibility for communication, these tools are not solely owned by the Communications Team.

Internal communication – engaging with our staff and ensuring information flows down, up and across the Council – is also critical so that our organisation acts effectively and as one.

We have a range of channels through which the Council communicates, and people can communicate with us. These include: telephone; face-to-face meetings; our websites; press releases; social media; consultation groups; Council, Cabinet and other Committee meetings and public questions; consultation events and displays; reports and policy documents; staff and member briefings, emails and newsletters; the intranet; and mobile apps.



Who are we Communicating with?

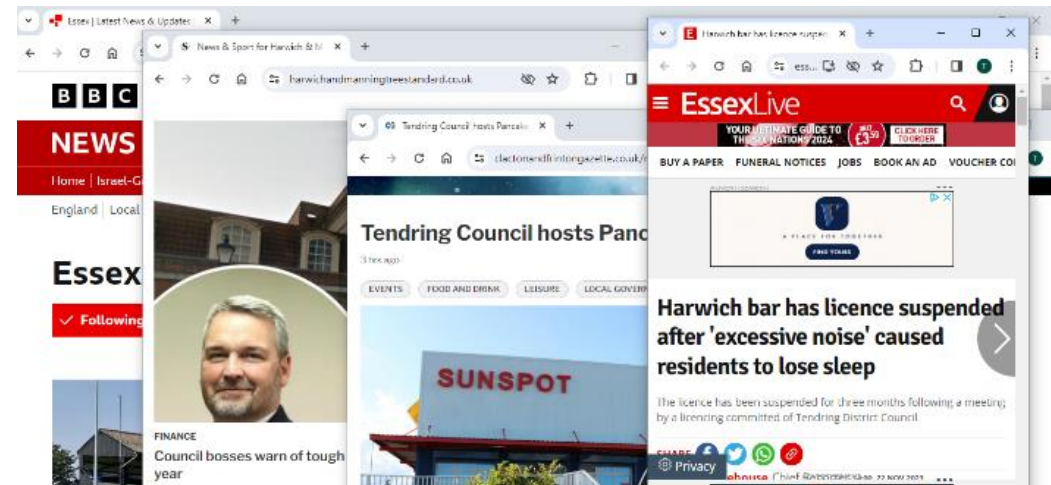
Specific projects will need to reach specific audiences, which will be determined as part of the campaign planning process.

In general terms, though, Tendring District Council has the following audience groups:

- Tendring's public; residents and communities within the district
- Businesses; based in Tendring
- Wider public; such as visitors to our area or potential new businesses
- Partners; we have a number of key partners, such as other public, third and private sector organisations who we do business with on a day-to-day or project basis
- Members; ensuring councillors are also kept informed
- Staff; internal communications are critical to ensure all employees are pulling in the same direction and that they are kept informed about the work taking place across the organisation. This is vital if they are to be effective ambassadors for Tendring District Council and to form good communications interactions with other audiences.



Promoting Special Constable volunteering



Local newspaper titles

Communications and the Corporate Plan

Tendring District Council's adopted Corporate Plan 'Our Vision' (2024-2028) has six areas of focus each containing a number of more specific objectives.

Already the Communications Team supports a vast number of these objectives, directly or indirectly, but in line with the Vision above Communications will now look to deepen that work to uphold and deliver against, the Corporate Plan.

This can be done in a number of ways, such as (but not limited to):

- Promoting clean and tidy communities (**Pride in our area and services to residents**)
- Encouraging responsibility and volunteering opportunities (**Pride in our area and services to residents / Working with partners to improve quality of life**)
- Levelling Up funding, Freeport East, Tendring Colchester Borders Garden Community programme support (**Raising aspirations and creating opportunities**)
- Working closely with the Tourism and Event team (**Promoting our heritage offer, attracting visitors and encouraging them to stay longer**)
- Promoting transparency and publication of decisions and spending, and engagement with residents (**Financial sustainability and openness**)
- Sharing partner campaigns (**Working with partners to improve quality of life**)
- Informing the public on enforcement activity (**Championing our local environment**)
- Continuing to support and possibly lead events for Tendring4Growth (**Raising aspirations and creating opportunities**)
- Critically, Communications can best support the beginning of the Our Vision strapline: **"Listening to and delivering for our residents and businesses"**.

Each year planned communications work will be aligned with the Highlight Priority Projects, which are drawn out of the Corporate Plan.

A strong theme in the public consultation held as part of development of Our Vision was the importance of the public engaging with the Council's work; two-way communications can support with this aim.

How Will Communications be Improved?

Over the period of this Communications Strategy, there will be five key focus areas to improve activity:

1. Email and smartphone communications

Building upon and updating the previously developed business case, explore options for increased use of broadcast email to reach audiences. Exploring other social media channels (such as WhatsApp Channels) which will deliver messaging directly to people's smartphones.

2. Adopting AI

Innovate in the use of internal AI tools within the Communications team – and keep abreast of developments in this field to explore further opportunities – while also developing a framework to ensure ethical and legal considerations are adhered to.

3. Internal communications

New methods have begun to be utilised to improve internal communications. These will be explored further, and an overarching approach for internal communications formalised.

4. Social listening

To support the ethos within Our Vision of “listening to residents”, look to capture sentiment around Council services and priorities from communities, particularly within social media; and, crucially, to feed that sentiment into the organisation so we can learn from it.

5. Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring performance – against outcomes, not just outputs – and evaluating that is vital to ensure the service continues to deliver against its own targets and priorities, as well as those of the wider organisation. While the team does do this currently, it is due for a refresh to ensure it continues to measure and assess the right metrics and report those effectively into senior leadership – as well as agilely within the team. This may support the feedback aspect of the fourth area for improvement (social listening).



How is Success Measured?


Measuring success in communications can be difficult, especially when considering areas such as behaviour change and reputation management – however, that does not lessen the importance of setting specific, measurable objectives. Each communications campaign should have its own specific objectives, aligned to the desired outcomes of the campaign.

This strategy's success must be aligned with its vision and outcomes, and will be measured as below.


- **Establish at least one email newsletter providing news and updates to residents by March 2025.**
This will be dependent upon approval of a business case and appropriate financial and governance processes.
Corporate Plan theme: Financial sustainability and openness
- **Complete a social media audit of all Council channels by the end of 2024.**
Work has already begun on this, but has been paused due to other commitments.
Corporate Plan theme: Cross-cutting all themes
- **Trial the use of WhatsApp Channels, with a trial channel launched by July 2025.**
This is subject to appropriate research and internal process testing.
Corporate Plan theme: Financial sustainability and openness
- **Review and refresh the Council's Branding Guidelines and reinforce their correct use across the organisation by the end of 2025.**
Building upon work completed in the previous Communications Strategy; this does not mean a re-brand of the Council or its logo.
Corporate Plan theme: Financial sustainability and openness
- **Support the development of an ethical framework for the use of AI by the end of 2024; and test AI tools within the Communications service in the following year.**
Work is underway with partners on this framework, which will need cross-organisational support. Internal use of AI tools is intended to support staff with capacity and efficiency.
Corporate Plan theme: Pride in our area and services to residents

- **Create an internal communications strategy and/or policy to regularise and formalise current approaches, by the end of 2026.**
This will help to bolster corporate communication with all staff, and could include a section on the new Intranet.
Corporate Plan theme: Cross-cutting all themes

- **Develop a social listening process, including a feedback loop into the organisation, by June 2026.**
This may begin in a simple form and be developed over time; for example, with a ‘You Said, We Did’ approach which is an emerging highlight priority.
Corporate Plan theme: Financial sustainability and openness



Last Year in Communications - 2023

<p><u>FACEBOOK'S TOP THREE ORGANIC POSTS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You don't need to spend Christmas alone - (Dec) Likes: 93 Comments: 13 Shares: 159 Reach: 58.6k • Beach Patrol Job Vacancy - (Jan) Likes: 137 Comments: 143 Shares: 189 Reach: 30.8k • Parking Charges To Be Introduced At Orwell Place - (Nov) Likes: 82 Comments: 177 Shares: 33 Reach: 26.2k 	<p><u>X'S TOP THREE POSTS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special Constable Partnership - (Oct) Impressions: 8,934 Engagements: 34 • International Women's Day - (Mar) Impressions: 7,062 Engagements: 33 • Beach Patrol Training - (May) Impressions: 5,605 Engagements: 103 	
<p><u>FACEBOOK CONTENT</u></p> <p>Facebook has continued to grow as a channel for TDC. Throughout 2023 we reached 290,598 people.</p> <p>Content is key as shown by the year's top post:</p> 	<p><u>SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWERS</u></p> <p>Facebook: 9,725 +682 X: 7,832 +44 LinkedIn: 1,597 +513 Instagram: 575 +184</p> <p>Followers numbers increased steadily in 2023 across our channels. Growth on X has slowed due to the ongoing transition of the platform.</p>	<p><u>SOCIAL MEDIA INSIGHTS</u></p> <p>Social media continues to be an important platform for us to reach the wider public; these figures are just for the corporate account and do not factor in others such as leisure centres or the Theatre.</p> <p>Phase two of our social media audit will begin in 2024 to further refine and optimise our channels.</p>
<p><u>TOP ENGAGEMENT TWEET</u></p> <p>Our tweet with most engagement in 2023 was about a flood alert and a flood warning - Nov</p> <p>It received 23.4% engagement rate, 61 engagements, and 261 impressions.</p> 	<p><u>POSTING</u></p> <p>676 posts on our corporate Facebook page. We received 327 conversational messages from the public on our Facebook page and 50 on our X page. 350 tweets on our corporate X page. 204 posts on our corporate Instagram page. 128 all-district posts on our NextDoor page. 142 posts on our LinkedIn page.</p>	
<p>The top tweet and top media tweet are already provided by the Twitter algorithm and these are determined by how many impressions the Tweet received.</p>		

Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity (2011) says that:

“Publicity by local authorities should be: lawful; cost-effective; objective; even-handed; appropriate; have regard to equality and diversity, and be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.”

We will have regard to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity and all our communication will be free of political bias

As such, we are committed to making all our communications activities:

- **Two-way** - making it easy for people to get in touch with us in ways that suit them.
- **Relevant and appropriate** - 'speaking in the language of our audience', using plain English that people understand. Using the right channel to reach the audience, and putting the right content on each channel.
- **Easily available and easily understood** - in different formats.
- **Consistent** - consistency of messages, tone, style and presentation, with a clear narrative across the range of Council core communications.
- **Honest** - telling it how it is, and not over promise.
- **Accountable** - making it clear who is responsible for decisions taken by the Council.
- **Timely** - responding promptly to enquiries from third parties such as the media, partners and stakeholder groups. We will make sure that communications are up-to-date.
- **Identifiable** - making clear use of branding to show the communication has come from the Council.
- **Efficient** - avoiding unnecessary duplication or contradictory/mixed messages.
- **Planned, but flexible** - ensuring that communication is considered as an integral and early part of service and project planning; while being agile to adapt as situations change and maximising opportunities as they arise.
- **Accessible** - in line with accessibility best practice.
- **Give a Return on Investment** - for services' spending.

Communications must also have regard to other regulations, such as the Code of Corporate Governance and Tendring District Council's Constitution; and local authorities should pay particular regard to the legislation governing publicity during the period of heightened sensitivity before elections and referendums.

The Civil Contingencies Act (2004) also confers a duty on local authorities to 'Warn and Inform' on potential and occurring critical incidents; the Council has a separate Media Plan for such occasions.

Supporting Protocols

This Communications Strategy outlines the overarching approach we plan to take to reach our stakeholders. It is linked to, and supported by, the following guidance and protocols:

- Branding Guidelines
- Media Protocol
- Social Media Policy
- Social Media Guidelines
- Drone Policy
- Community Engagement Strategy
- In addition, this strategy is intended to support the Corporate Plan.

Contacts

If there are any queries regarding the Communications Strategy please contact the Communications Manager communications@tendingdc.gov.uk.

Annex – Previous Strategy

The previous Communications Strategy set out five broad areas of focus to improve communications at Tendring District Council:

- Video content
Over the period of the previous strategy there has been some improvement in generating video content; but there is more work to do to embed this as part of the team process
- Project work
New processes have been put in place both internally within the Communications team and also with engagement across the organisation. This will continue to be refined
- Social media
The Council has expanded the range of social media it uses, including the introduction of corporate Instagram and NextDoor accounts. Work is underway on an audit of existing channels to refine these
- Email and SMS communications
This became downgraded as a priority over the lifespan of the strategy, though email has seen an expanded use in internal communications.
- Internal communications
Some improvements have been made in this area, which can now be built upon and refined.

Although these previous objectives have now been superseded by the new strategy, they will continue to play a role in communications activity as embedded practice.

There is value in reflecting upon the success or otherwise against the measures set-out in the previous (2021) Communications Strategy:

- **By 2024 increase the number of videos created each year by 50% from 2020 figure (baseline: 50).**
In 2023 the service fell behind this target – having been on track in 2022 – largely due to capacity and resource constraints. Video remains an important part of the team’s work and will continue to be developed.
- **Ensure every initiative which goes through the Council’s projects boards has a communications plan.**
The organisation’s approach to project management changed; however, new planning processes set up within the Communications team achieve this target.

- **Grow the number of Facebook followers on Tendring District Council's corporate account to 8,000 by 2024 (baseline: 5,300).**

This was achieved in Q1 2022. At the end of 2023 the figure was 9,725.

- **Increase the number of staff actively posting to the Council's corporate Facebook page by 300% by 2024 (baseline: 5).**

This target was missed, though it was identified early on that the target needed re-aligning as the Council's approach to social media changed and practices introduced during Covid-19 were discontinued.

- **Present a business case for email communications software, and reinforce the Council's Branding Guidelines with regards to email content, by 2024.**

Branding Guidelines were refreshed and reinforced internally, while a business case for email communications software was presented as part of the Transformation Project, but a decision made not to progress it at that time.

- **Work with the IT Team as part of its review of SMS communications software, scheduled for completion by January 2022.**

This workstream was discontinued as other work took a higher priority.

- **Review and improve the TDC's Communications Group and the Intranet, refreshing both by the end of 2021.**

The TDC Communications Group set new Terms of Reference and focus, while a new Intranet was rolled out in Autumn 2023.