

COMMUNIC ATIONS STRATEGY

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INTRODUCTION

Our aim is to deliver a first class, effective and efficient communications service for the council using a multi-channel approach to reach the wide variety of customers and stakeholders we serve, including residents, members, employees, businesses, community partners and visitors to the district.

The aim of this strategy is to share how we will tell the story of Three Rivers District Council and the district as a whole. This strategy outlines how communications will support the delivery of the Corporate Framework (the council's overarching plan). The challenges of recent years illuminated the power of our communities, and renewed a desire for our staff to work together as one with partners to create a district that is a great place to live, work and visit. This new communications strategy is designed to work seamlessly to support those objectives and values outlined in our Corporate Framework.

Through strong story telling we want to build on the strengths highlighted over recent years to help tackle the challenges of the future, to ensure Three Rivers truly is an inclusive place where people feel safe and welcome, with access to good housing supported by an infrastructure that supports a healthy lifestyle and tackles inequalities. A district in which the most vulnerable residents are supported, with a district council that takes action to mitigate and adapt to the climate emergency.

At its heart, the story our district will be told through a voice rooted in authenticity, which celebrates all we do to make Three Rivers the best it can be today and tomorrow.

OBJECTIVES

This strategy aims to:

1. To tell the council's story, promoting its successes, increasing the accessibility and visibility of the Corporate Framework, council strategies, decision making and other initiatives with high quality multi-media content.
2. To protect and increase brand awareness of Three Rivers District Council as a trusted, effective and high performing organisation amongst our customers, partners, stakeholders, elected members and staff.
3. To engage council staff through regular and effective internal communications so that staff feel better informed and become ambassadors for the council.
4. Help to deliver the council's priorities, initiatives and decisions with the support of strategic communications.
5. To engage and communicate with internal and external stakeholders on the council's journey as part of the government's plans for devolution and reorganisation.

VISION

The vision for Three Rivers is a district council that is adept at telling its own story, celebrating its successes, informing its broad audiences of why and how the council is doing what it is doing. The ultimate aim of our communications is that audiences will have a clear understanding and a positive perception of the council's vision, aims, values, services and achievements, leading to higher levels of satisfaction and engagement.

The strategy has a clear focus, clear objectives, specific actions and measures impact and outcomes.

The strategy sets out our approach for the next three years.

OUR ROLE

Communications is the corporate voice of the council and as such operates across the council, working with all departments and elected members.

Our responsibilities are therefore numerous, both external and internal, both reactive and proactive; working with staff at all levels, elected members, the Chair, the media, and the general public. We have overall responsibility for the council website and intranet, the website news feed, social media platforms, e-newsletters and public notice-boards.

We:

- Identify and deliver the council's news, telling its story using words, pictures and video, in a clear, balanced format
- Promote and celebrate the council's successes both externally and internally, placing stories with the media
- Protect and manage the council's reputation, handling crisis communications
- Produce high quality design, protecting and enhancing the council's brand
- Provide expert communications advice to the senior leadership team
- Collaborate with partners and stakeholders on campaigns
- Engage and inform staff through our internal communications

AUDIENCE

The target audience of any communication will vary depending on what is being communicated. In some cases, people may belong to more than one audience group. But understanding audience and targeting is key to successful communication - who are we trying to reach and what do we want them to do?

Our audience includes:

- Residents
- People working in and visiting Three Rivers
- Businesses in the district
- Prospective residents and businesses
- Three Rivers councillors and employees
- Voluntary organisations and community groups
- Stakeholders and partners, including town and parish councils, the county council and neighbouring borough and district councils
- Central Government
- The local, regional and trade media (press, radio and television)
- Key influencers/community leaders

OUR CHANNELS

As a council Three Rivers has a number of key channels which this strategy utilises to deliver its key communications objectives, they are broadly divided into owned media, earned coverage and paid for communications. These channels are further outlined below:

Owned media (the channels we create and control):

- TRDC website
- TRDC social media accounts - Facebook, X (previously known as Twitter), Instagram, LinkedIn, Youtube, Threads
- Email marketing on GovDelivery
- TRDC intranet
- Internal updates including the weekly Chief Executive's message
- District Notice Boards
- Digital Display Boards

Earned (our customers, partners, the media and the public share our content or speak about our brand)

- Word of mouth
- Local and regional media coverage
- National media coverage
- Trade media coverage
- Broadcast media coverage
- Social media content shared by others
- Leaflets
- Information shared by partners

Paid (a third-party channel)

- External advertising

- Print, digital and banner advertising
- Paid search via Google etc.
- Broadcast advertising
- Boosted social media posts

PROGRESS SINCE 2019

The last communications strategy was published in 2019. At the time, responsibility for communications was largely devolved to departments including identifying news, drafting press releases and approving content for the website.

Communications was underutilised as a corporate function, operating largely reactively and on demand from services rather than proactively according to the council's priorities and Corporate Framework.

In recent years the department has undergone considerable transformation with great strides made to embed a new communications culture within the council, with experienced, professional communicators leading and driving communications.

Some of the key achievements include:

- Established a proactive approach to news gathering and storytelling, with a team of corporate communications experts both identifying stories and developing high quality multi-media content.
- Extensive media coverage in local media resulting in increased awareness of council projects and priorities.
- Launched a new e-newsletter platform on GovDelivery which as of February 2025 had a total of 44,979 unique subscribers.
- As of February 2025, we have 12 newsletter topics including council news, climate, bin collections and business, with 87,568 subscriptions. The newsletters have an open rate of more than 81% compared to the industry average of 20%.
- In-house capability to shoot and edit professional standard video content. More than 60 videos have been filmed since winter 2021, five in the last two months alone (as of August 2024).
- A weekly internal newsletter helps to raise awareness amongst staff of the latest council internal and external news and new initiatives.
- Established improved sign-off process to ensure external communications are channeled through Communications.
- Ambitious project to relaunch the council website with a wipe the slate clean approach, rewriting much of the content.
- Established a photo database on Adobe Lightroom with a project funded through Additional Resources Grant (ARG) to provide stock photographs of the district.

- Launch of a new internal podcast focusing on sharing knowledge and building a sense of organisation community.
- Launch of external podcast to increase awareness of council's key messages, its Corporate Framework, good news stories and case studies.

STAFF AND STRUCTURE

Communications & Digital Services is part of the Corporate, Customer & Community directorate and Customer Experience service.

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Communications & Digital Services is part of the Corporate, Customer & Community directorate and Customer Experience service.

The Communications & Digital Services team has responsibility for core communications and press office functions as well as the council's website, intranet, the Customer Portal (online forms), social media, graphic design, digital screens, district notice boards and branding.

NEXT STEPS

Significant progress has been made in developing the council's communications with a significant increase in proactive communications via good news stories via the web news section, newsletters, new audio and visual communications, press releases and social media. We will now develop further embedding of video as a primary means of communications and a series of virtual communications workshops or 'masterclasses', delivered by members of the Communications team, to help understand more how Communications can help the council and colleagues effectively achieve the objectives of the Corporate Framework.

The communications team is now established as a key stakeholder in new projects and initiatives from the outset resulting in clearer communication with residents and customers. The programme of Communications Workshops / Masterclasses is designed to assist with achieving this goal.

Three Rivers will speak and listen as one council, telling its story with pride, uniting its staff and members under a common and consistent brand while celebrating the council's positive achievements.

To tell its story effectively in a way that truly engages audiences requires an approach to storytelling that consistently utilises high-quality, innovative, multi-media content. Content really is king.

This is particularly true of video which is favoured by social media algorithms and is proven to achieve far higher engagement and would therefore help to increase audience on these channels.

Social media, graphic design and news should not be treated as separate things, operating independently of each other. Instead the approach is to tell one story, tailoring it for multiple channels.

The Communications team will continue to be trained as content creators, as well as other key personnel outside the team such as the Climate Change Officer and Leisure officers who have some responsibility for supporting Communications. Training and support within the team will enable the whole team to have the basic skills in identifying and writing news content, shooting and editing video, photography and creating social media posts.

This strategy will consistently put people at the heart of communication, identifying the human interest in the work the council does. For example, by focusing on the benefits to residents, rather than just the policy.

We will continue to develop and improve our use of analytics, especially on social media, tracking trends so that we are guided by what audiences want and respond to.

Internally, Communications channels - namely the intranet and weekly internal newsletter - have been refreshed to make them more appealing, more modern and - crucially - more interactive so that they drive a two-way conversation with staff, rather than simply broadcasting messaging. This strategy aims to hone and enhance these channels to maximise impact and efficiency.

Visibility of the Senior Leadership Team will continue to be enhanced to staff through more regular blogs or thought pieces. And the day-to-day happenings of individual services can be better told using multi-media storytelling techniques. By making any given service more aware of what other services are doing will help to reduce the tendency for them to operate within a 'bubble'. This can be facilitated by boosting content creation skills both in the Communications team, and with other designated internal comms champions.

OBJECTIVES & ACTIONS

Objective 1: To tell the council's story, promoting its successes, increasing the accessibility and visibility of the Corporate Framework, council strategies, decision making and other initiatives with high quality multi-media content

Actions:

- Produce a series of webinars and workshops for staff – to better inform them about the role of corporate communications and how the service can help them. To cover topics such as identifying news.
- Produce training sessions for Communications staff on news writing, video filming, editing, photography and social media
- Establish video as the default for storytelling, investing in filming and editing equipment

- Provide training for all comms staff to ensure all have core content creation skills, including writing, video and social media creation
- Put people at the heart of every story we tell
- Establish monthly meetings with all heads of service/senior managers to identify at the earliest possible stage key projects, initiatives and issues that will require comms input or support
- Ensure communications are linked to the key priorities of the Corporate Framework, referencing these in our comms output
- Provide dedicated comms support to major projects and top tier strategies through comms officer support and communications plans
- Provide advice and template communications plans for service level strategies and projects
- Attend regular meetings with key council officers to ensure draft council agendas are shared with comms at the earliest opportunity in order to identify news stories

Objective 2: To protect and increase brand awareness of Three Rivers District Council as a trusted, effective and high performing organisation amongst our customers, partners, stakeholders, elected members and staff.

Actions:

- Refresh and expand the council's branding guidelines detailing a consistent approach to design and presentation
- Establish Communications as the council's Brand Guardian, ensuring a consistent sign off process for all council communications
- Develop a series of departmental workshops to help inform staff about the importance of consistent branding and writing for external audiences. Three workshops will cover how to identify news, how to write for news and how to utilise council branding. The aim is to increase understanding of the importance of communications, how it works and how best to work with the communications and digital teams to get your message out to the wider audience. This would be open to all council officers, but should be attended by all department heads and managers.
- Ensure adoption of the Government style guide for all external publications, and work with departments to ensure that the writing style guide is followed by encouraging service staff to be appointed as designated web editors supported by training workshops
- Develop and implement a procedure for approving all web content prior to publication to ensure consistency of tone and style

Objective 3: To engage council staff through regular and effective internal communications so that staff feel better informed and become ambassadors for the council

Actions:

- Launch new multi-media internal newsletter on the GovDelivery platform, using analytics to inform content and approach
- The Digital Team to launch a new intranet or equivalent platform which is fit for purpose and allows staff to engage in online conversations and share best practice, featuring more regular internal news updates and vibrant content, such as audio and visual elements as outlined in Objective 2
- Raise the profile of leaders and senior managers with regular video and other content such as informal videos within the weekly internal newsletter and explore the potential for developing more internal broadcasts such as podcasts with the Senior Leadership Team.
- Assign an internal comms champion within each service, responsible for providing regular staff news

Objective 4: Help to deliver the council's priorities, initiatives and decisions with the support of strategic communications. Improve internal communications across the council encouraging collaboration and support.

Actions:

- Introduce a more strategic approach to communications through communications plans which are used for major projects and by council services area where appropriate.
- Develop an annual campaigns plan (see Appendix 1) to outline scheduled events, campaigns and projects which require communications support.
- Use annual campaigns plan to establish appropriate communication channels and content.
- Recommend regular reviewing of communications activity and spend by services areas across the whole authority.

Objective 5: To engage and communicate with internal and external stakeholders on the council's journey as part of the government's plans for devolution and reorganisation.

Actions:

- Introduce a more strategic approach to communications to communicating the devolution process from a localised point of view for both internal and external audiences.
- Keep residents, key stakeholders and partners informed of the latest key developments as determined and agreed by TRDC chief executive.
- Clearly communicate the primary objectives and point of view of Three Rivers District Council first and foremost, secondly to work with other councils and organisations affected by devolution – including those neighboring authorities in Hertfordshire and, if appropriate, further afield.
- Establish regular communication collaboration with appropriate partner councils.
- Develop joint strategic communications approach with partner councils.

- Utilise internal communications channels, include Team Brief and Friday Message, Staff Days to ensure staff are informed about key developments.

MEASURING SUCCESS

We will use evaluation to understand what works well and what doesn't, supporting an environment of continuous improvement across all our communications.

We evaluate our communications in a number of ways:

Media monitoring - We will operate a mainstream media monitoring system which records all media coverage for the council. We will monitor both the quantity and quality of media coverage. For example, we consider an item's tone and the council's share of voice in any coverage.

Social media monitoring - We use social media monitoring software including Hootsuite to manage our presence on social media and to provide useful analytics data. This information along with information on social media interactions will be reported to Corporate Management Team (CMT) quarterly alongside the Compliments & Complaints summary reports to CMT.

Website analytics - We use SiteImprove to record and analyse visitor traffic on the council website. Analytics data is used to monitor demand and usage of content and provide reports for service areas. This can be used to adjust or update content to ensure it fully meets the needs of visiting users.

Reputation surveys - The district wide Resident Survey measures overall satisfaction with the Council as well as trends in how well informed people feel about the council. We will continue to use the results of the survey to identify changing trends in customer behaviour and aspirations so that we can adapt our communications accordingly.

We conduct an annual staff survey which includes a section on our internal communications. We will use the results of the survey to gain feedback on the effectiveness of our communications and identify emerging channels.

GOVERNANCE OF OTHER POLICIES AND GUIDANCE:

This strategy should be read in conjunction with other policies and guidance owned by Communications:

- **Campaigns Plan** – An annual work programme of communications and marketing campaigns.
- **Media protocol** – this ensures that staff are clear about their responsibilities if asked to comment to the media.
- **Social media protocols** - Social media guidance for councillors and lead members.
- **Brand guidelines including accessibility** – how and where we use the council's brandmarks, colour palette, fonts and how to ensure our marketing material is accessible.
- **Accessibility Statement** – statutory page on the website detailing website accessibility compliance
- **Corporate writing style guide** – The council adopts the Government Digital Service style guide which guides the style, spelling and grammar conventions for all content published on our communication platforms. It can be found at [GOV.UK](https://gov.uk), arranged alphabetically.

