

Chesterfield Borough Council

External Communications and Marketing Strategy

2014-2017



Section 1: Introduction

This strategy sets out the future direction of all public relations, media, online, publications, marketing and communications activity carried out on behalf of Chesterfield Borough Council.

Like all public sector organisations, Chesterfield Borough Council is going through a period of huge change. Between 2010/11 and 2016/17 the council will have seen its Government grant cut from £8.7 million to £4.3 million.

Put simply, we have less money and need to spend what we have where the need is greatest. It also means we need to generate more income so that we can invest it into providing services that were previously funded by central Government.

We will need honest and frank communications to explain this 'new world' to tax payers so they understand that, no matter which political party is in power, we can no longer continue to provide all services in the way we used to. Some services will be run in different ways, some will no longer be provided by us and some will require public or third sector support to enable them to continue.

This is a real communications challenge because it comes when the demand from customers for services is increasing and expectations of receiving good customer service have never been higher.

Alongside this, the council has to consider the impact of changes to the demographic make-up of the Chesterfield population, the impact of welfare reforms and the significant health inequalities seen across the borough. The council also operates in an environment of frequent public policy changes.

Given this complex and constantly changing environment it is important we use the most appropriate channels of communications and marketing to reach our wide variety of customers and partners with our key messages. This includes residents, businesses, community partners and all levels of government.

Good communication with residents has been consistently shown to be a key factor in overall satisfaction with the council's performance and perceptions of whether our services provide value for money.

It is also at the heart of good customer service and effective, meaningful consultation.

This strategy sets out how we intend to address these challenges.

2. Where are we

To support the development of this strategy a scrutiny review of external communications and marketing was carried out. This involved visits to three other local authorities to compare the way they operate with our current approach and identify the strengths and weaknesses.

The scrutiny review identified a number of key issues facing the council. These were:

- The small number of media that provide in-depth coverage of issues in Chesterfield, meaning there are fewer opportunities to use the media to communicate with residents about council issues compared to other local authorities that were visited.
- The flow of information to the corporate communications team needs to be improved to enable effective external communications to take place.
- The need for a consistent and standard approach to branding across council services to be taken and then be fully adopted with a one council approach.
- The need for the council's website to be developed to ensure it is easy to use, can be easily seen on mobile devices (smartphones and tablets) and has content that is concise, relevant and up-to-date, and written in such a way that it enables the information to be found easily by users of search engines such as Google and Yahoo. This work should be guided by the use of website analytics to identify customer habits, behaviours and needs and address them.
- The need to adopt a digital first approach to communications, where the default position is to use electronic communication but to back it up with paper based communication where needed.
- As part of this to look at greater use of video clips as a way of communicating messages on websites and social media.
- The need to enable more people to do transactions online (eg pay their council tax) rather than in person or by post.

Resident survey

In September and October 2013 the council took part in a survey of residents called Are You Being Served? that enables responses to be compared with those of other local authorities.

From the survey we know that the vast majority of residents (73.8 per cent) are fairly or very satisfied with the way we run services and 54.6 per cent tend to agree or strongly agree that we provide value for money.

Similarly satisfaction rates for individual services are high.

Research shows a strong correlation between residents being well informed about council services and satisfaction rates with them and their perception of whether they are receiving value for money. Put simply, if people know about the full range of council services funded through their council tax they tend to be happier that they are getting value for money.

We also found that:

Overall communication

- 59.7 per cent of residents felt fairly or very well informed about Chesterfield Borough Council and the services it provides
- 80.2 per cent of residents who read the council's Your Chesterfield newsletter said they felt fairly or fully informed about the council's services

Brand advocates

- 5.8 per cent of residents would speak highly of the council without being asked and a further 37.2 per cent would do so if asked. However, 12.4 per cent would speak negatively if asked and 4.2 per cent would do so without being asked.

Communication channels

- The most popular way to find out about council services was – in order of popularity - through reading local newspapers, reading leaflets, from friends and family, reading Your Chesterfield, local radio, the council's website, posters, village newsletters, local TV, councillors, social media, council officers and then online forums
- When asked how residents would like to receive information they said – in order of popularity - by leaflets, local newspapers, Your Chesterfield, village newsletters, the council's website, email, posters, local TV and radio, councillors, by visiting a council venue, social media and council officers

Council website

- 36.3 per cent of people find it fairly or very easy to get the information they need from the council's website but 44 per cent don't know or don't use it
- 28 per cent of people have found it fairly or very easy to pay for their council tax on the council's website but 67.4 per cent of people don't know or have never used this function
- 11 per cent find it fairly or very easy to report an issue (eg graffiti) on the website but 80.6 per cent don't know or have never used this function
- 7.8 per cent of people found it fairly or very easy to make an application (eg a planning application) on the council's website, with 82.5 per cent who don't know or have never done this
- 12.3 per cent of people found it fairly or very easy to make a compliment, complaint or comment about council services on the website. 75.8 per cent don't know or have never done this.

Appendix 1: Chesterfield Borough Council external communications strategy

- 7 per cent of people found it fairly or very easy to make an enquiry on the website.
84.3 per cent of people don't know or have never done this.

Branding

An informal audit of the council's branding has identified some key issues that need to be addressed. Key council buildings, including the Market Hall, Queen's Park Sports Centre and Healthy Living Centre have little, if anything, that helps identify them as Chesterfield Borough Council-run facilities. Even the council's headquarters, the Town Hall, has no clear signs at the entrance points to indicate that it is a council building.

Other buildings, such as the customer service centre, identify the borough council but use a variety of different visual styles. The same applies to the council's vehicles, the town's street signs, bus shelters and uniforms worn by staff.

Comments in the local media and the residents' survey show that there is widespread confusion among the public between the place brand (Destination Chesterfield) and the council's brand. This is complicated further by several services within the council having adopted hybrid versions of the Destination Chesterfield branding for services that should have council branding.

3. Where do we want to be?

Delivering on our vision

The council has a well-established vision of 'Putting Our Communities First'.

The way we deliver this is through the three priorities set out in our corporate plan. These are to:

- To make Chesterfield a thriving borough
- To improve the quality of life for local people
- To provide value for money services

Our values drive the way we go about this task. These are:

- **Customer focused:** delivering great customer service, meeting customer needs
- **Can do:** striving to make a difference by adopting a positive attitude
- **One council, one team:** proud of what we do, working together for the greater good
- **Honesty and respect:** embracing diversity and treating everyone fairly

To be a successful council we need to ensure:

- All parts of the council are working together as one team to deliver the priorities set out in our corporate plan
- The council is easy to understand and talk to
- Everyone knows what we are trying to achieve and how we plan to get there
- Residents know what we have achieved
- Residents know how we are responding to new challenges that come along

Another way of saying this is that we need to build the council as a brand. A brand brings together everything people see, hear and feel about our organisation. In short, people need to understand who we are and what we stand for.

We don't have a clear visual identity of the brand and quickly need to create one so that it is understood by customers and staff.

The rest of our brand is made up of things that are less tangible but equally important. These are:

- Our vision – what the council is here to deliver.
- Our values – the drive the things we do.
- Our key messages – setting out, in a simple way, what we want to tell residents and businesses about the services we are offering.
- Our service delivery – ensuring we provide good quality services for residents and businesses.

Appendix 1: Chesterfield Borough Council external communications strategy

- Our behaviour – ensuring we treat customers fairly and equally and deliver on our promises.

We need to bring all these elements together in a unified approach across all communications and marketing channels so that we are consistent in our messages, our tone and our look and feel.

4. How will we get there (our communications objectives)

Our eight communication and marketing objectives are:

4a. To adopt a digital first approach to communications that seeks to increase the number of people accessing information and talking to the council through digital communication channels (eg website, social media, email, e-newsletters, video).

When planning communications our first thought will be to ensure our message is being delivered using digital communication channels. We will then consider if paper based communications are also required.

While we recognise that for sectors of our audience paper based communication is, and will continue to be, the only effective communication channel this objective reflects the future direction of communication as the proportion of people wishing to communicate using digital methods increases.

It will also play a part in delivering the council's desire for 'channel shift'; encouraging more people to contact and interact with the council using electronic methods. This brings savings for tax payers and also allows them to engage with the council at times to suit them. Increasingly, this contact will be through a smartphone.

4b. To build and maintain our brand, including a clear visual corporate identity, so that tax payers can clearly see that it is the council delivering the services they are paying for.

This will ensure that residents and businesses make a clear link between the services they pay their council tax or business rates for and the services which we deliver.

4c. To ensure our brand is applied consistently and in a coordinated way across the council and its services

This will enable residents and businesses to know what services are provided by Chesterfield Borough Council and what are provided by other authorities, such as Derbyshire County Council.

4d. To improve the user experience of our website, including ensuring it is suitable to be viewed on mobile or tablet devices.

A major overhaul of the website's content is needed to make it more user friendly and logical for customers. This includes:

- enabling customers to do more things online instead of having to ring up the council
- ensuring content is specifically written for the website rather than copied from other sources to prevent pages of lengthy content
- ensuring content is written in plain English and is up-to-date
- reducing the number of PDFs so that content can be found more easily and
- being designed so it can be viewed on mobiles or tablets, using responsive design.

To achieve this, the website needs effective day-to-day management.

4e. To increase the number of people using our website and social media channels to obtain information and to carry out transactions

Between 2012 and 2013 the number of unique visitors to the council's website increased by 39 per cent. However, as the resident survey showed, significant numbers of people are not accessing the website for information or to carry out transactions. We need to market the website more effectively and promote its use ahead of more traditional routes.

4f. To deliver pro active media relations and public relations that inform the public about our vision, priorities, services and success in delivering them.

As the resident survey shows many people find out information about the council from the relatively few local media organisations that cover Chesterfield. It is important that we have a positive and pro-active approach to dealing with the media, recognising their role in scrutinising the council's work, while seeking opportunities to work together on issues that are of concern to the town and borough.

4g. To develop alternative channels to communicate messages

Our communication channels are largely traditional ones. We need to develop newer communication methods, particularly trialling the use of video.

4h. Seek commercial opportunities from the council's brand and sub brands

In the current financial climate it is important that the council seeks opportunities to maximise existing income sources and seek new ones. Successful marketing will be a key part of this process as people will only use facilities and services when they know they are there and they are easy to access.

It will be important for services within the council to incorporate marketing considerations as part of any income generating proposals and for the marketing officers to seek out new opportunities. For example, looking at coordinated advertising or sponsorship opportunities.

To achieve this, coordination of marketing activities across teams will be required.

Our principles of communication

When delivering these objectives we will adopt the following principles:

- To have a culture of open and transparent communication
- To deliver open, honest, consistent and timely two-way communication with our customers in a coordinated way across all channels
- To ensure our communications are kept simple, jargon free and relevant to the target audience
- To ensure our communications activities reflect the full diversity of the community and help ensure equality of access to all our services.
- To offer information we provide in alternative formats (eg large print, audio) and to translate documents into community languages on request.
- To never knowingly provide misleading or inaccurate information
- To apologise and change things if we get something wrong
- To carry out relevant and effective public consultation in line with our Community Engagement Strategy (2014-17), avoiding unnecessary duplication and providing feedback about findings and actions taken as a result
- To ensure all data protection laws and other relevant legislation (eg defamation laws) are adhered to. Particular care will be taken to ensure no personal data is communicated publicly.

5. How we will deliver the strategy

To deliver the strategy effectively we need to ensure communications and marketing activity are reflected in service and team plans throughout the organisation with appropriate resources to deliver against our objectives.

All employees

Every council employee has some responsibility for communicating with the public about the council's activities, whether in formal or informal situations.

It is important that employees buy in to and deliver the council's corporate values and are kept well informed about the council's vision, corporate priorities, aims and performance so they can be effective advocates for the council.

Service managers and team leaders

Service managers and team leaders all have responsibility for creating awareness of the communications strategy among their teams and the wider public.

They will play a key role in delivering the strategy, particularly the implementation of consistent corporate branding. It is vital that they buy in to the 'one council approach'.

Service managers and team leaders also have responsibility for establishing and maintaining two-way channels of communications with all members of their teams. This will ensure employees are aware of key council decisions that enable them to be effective advocates for the council and its brand.

Senior leadership team

Good communication is at the heart of all council activity and will often dictate the success or otherwise of particular projects or activities. So devoting time to communication and marketing issues should be a priority activity for the council's senior leadership team.

The team will also play a prominent part in communicating messages to the public and partner organisations, both directly through their actions and also when representing the council in public arenas.

Councillors

As the democratically elected representatives of the public councillors have an important part to play in keeping the public informed about key issues, as well as feeding back the views of local people to officers.

They carry out this representative role at local, regional and national level and so will partly influence the reputation of the council in a variety of different communities and settings.

Corporate communications team/marketing officers within services

As the communications and marketing professionals within the organisation this group will take the lead role in ensuring that communications and marketing activity is planned, resourced, delivered and evaluated. They will do this in conjunction with service managers.

By taking a 'one council' approach this group can improve the reputation of the council, avoid duplication and ensure value for money is provided.

Our communications and marketing activities will reflect the financial reality the council faces, while seeking opportunities to help generate income.

6. Evaluation

Evaluation is a necessary part of the communication process but is often reliant upon secondary measures or subjective analysis.

However, we will adopt the standards and guidance issued by the Government Communications Network in its document Evaluating Government Communication Activity which says: “A pre-planned, but partial, evaluation is better than no evaluation.”

Our evaluation activities will be split into two levels. Individual campaigns will have evaluation included as part of the accompanying communications plan. This will assess the impact of each individual communications activity.

This will be supplemented by evaluation of the higher level objectives in this strategy, which will largely be measured through our resident survey carried out every two years.

Measures (All targets relate to the period 2014-2017)

Overall communication

- Percentage of residents who feel fairly or very well informed about Chesterfield Borough Council and the services it provides
Current: 59.7% Target: 64%
- Percentage of residents who read the council’s Your Chesterfield newsletter and say they feel fairly or fully informed about the council’s services
Current: 80.2% Target 82%

Brand advocates

- Percentage of residents who would speak highly of the council (including those who would do so without being asked and those who would do so if asked)
Current: 43% Target: 47%

Council website

- Number of unique visitors to the council website
Current: 254,744 Target: 285,000
- Percentage of people who find it fairly or very easy to get the information they need from the council’s website
Current: 36.3% Target: 42%

Appendix 1: Chesterfield Borough Council external communications strategy

Social media

- Number of new followers to corporate Twitter account

Current: 3,600 Target: 8,000

- Number of new followers to corporate Facebook account each year

Current: 815 Target: 2,000

Media relations

- Percentage of neutral or positive media stories about the council (*subject to limitations of media monitoring)

Current: 80% Target: 81%