

EEBC Draft Communications Strategy 2024-28

1. Introduction

The importance of effective communication cannot be underestimated. It supports the delivery of the council's ambitions and priorities, helps build trust and two-way engagement with our communities, and positively impacts the council's reputation. The way we communicate is key in bringing to life the work the council does to support our vibrant and creative borough.

This Communications Strategy for 2024-28 builds on our previous strategy and on the recommendations from the LGA Peer Review in January 2020. It sets out a clear direction so that the communications function contributes significantly to the organisation's objectives with planned, clear, authentic, consistent and high-quality communication that reaches the right people, at the right time.

It is a challenging time for Local Government in the context of constant change, significant financial pressures and the communications landscape continuing to develop at speed. Therefore this Strategy is a living document, and will be updated and added to during its four-year duration. It will be supported by an annual campaign delivery plan produced each spring which is based on the priorities in the council's Four-Year Plan and annual plans.

The Communications Strategy is for the whole council. Every officer and Member is responsible for helping the council to tell our story, and has a role in helping to promote the council and the services we deliver.

2. Strategic Communications Approach

Communications supports the council in achieving its vision, objectives, ambitions and priorities. These are set out in the Four-Year Plan, Future 40 vision and accompanying annual plans and service delivery plans. The Four-Year Plan uses the following themes to set out its key priorities: *(NB: these will reflect what is in the 2024-28 Four Year Plan once finalised):*

- Green and vibrant
- Opportunity and prosperity
- Cultural and creative
- Safe and well
- Smart and connected
- Effective Council.

The Communications Team provides a mix of business-as-usual support and proactive campaigns which focus on corporate and strategic priorities under these

six themes. Our communications projects and campaigns are designed to do one of three things:

- To inform, engage with, and listen to our residents about things that are important and relevant to them
- To protect and enhance our reputation
- To spark a change in behaviour.

There will always be an element of reactive work for a Communications Team, and it is important that we respond to and support urgent or unexpected communications needs. However, it is crucial that reactive work does not take over from our strategic priorities as a team. We aim for 70% proactive and 30% reactive work – the majority of our time and resource is dedicated to proactive work, because this focuses on the highest priorities for the council and its residents. To support this approach, we work hard to build relationships across service areas and to ensure we are involved with projects from an early stage.

Priorities for 2024-28:

Develop use of behavioural change frameworks and theory such as the EAST framework to encourage behaviour change (Easy, Attractive, Social, Timely)

3. Role of the Communications Team

The Communications Team is a small team where each member works across multiple disciplines. We work in close partnership with service areas, as well as with SMT and Members, and have a number of responsibilities which all support the council in achieving its communications objectives:

- Proactive communications work:
 - Campaigns linked to strategic priorities, including key projects and income-generating activities
 - Ongoing communications support for all service areas
- Reactive communications work:
 - Mitigating / minimising reputational risks
 - Responding to urgent or unexpected corporate priorities
 - Crisis communications
- Professional strategic and tactical communications advice and guidance to SMT, Members and service areas
- Reputation promotion and protection
- Management and development of council communications channels
- Brand guardians
- Internal communications

- Developing audience insight.

As a team, we take responsibility to learn, develop and improve on a continual basis; to utilise best practice from across the industry to help us innovate and be effective; and to keep up with developments, advances in technology and current trends. We do this through active research, learning and development and through interacting with fellow local government communicators.

4. Strategy objectives

The Communications Strategy objectives are to:

- Support the council to achieve commercial and non-commercial ambitions and objectives that help improve the lives of those who live in, work in and visit the borough
- Increase resident understanding of the full range of services we provide, and equip and inspire them to engage with and utilise our services
- Ensure residents are informed in an effective and timely manner about issues within the borough that may impact on them
- Make a positive contribution to resident perceptions of the council
- Empower Members and officers to be effective communicators to our audiences and to be ambassadors for the council, ensuring that they have the required information, skills and opportunities to do so
- Use data and insight in the development and evaluation of communications to continually improve our service.

5. Key messages and tone of voice

The way we communicate is vital in creating a consistent story and voice that reflects our values and champions the work being done across the council to support and transform the borough. Our communications will:

- Promote council and local good news stories and successes, showcasing Epsom & Ewell, its people and its places
- Use a wide range of stories and case studies using real people – council officers, Members, residents and businesses
- Tell residents about the full breadth of our services and how to engage with them – increasing understanding of the wide range of services we offer, and the varied work we do to improve quality of life for residents in the borough

- Show how we are making a difference - to make sure the council's unique role in supporting residents is understood and appreciated, to inspire people and to make them proud of the borough.

We aim to use **one trusted voice** that is embedded across the whole council and used in all communications with our audiences. We will further develop our council narrative and tone of voice over the coming year.

Priorities for 2024-28:

Lead cross-organisation work to develop a powerful, compelling and authentic narrative that helps us to tell the council's story simply, effectively and truthfully, with one trusted voice.

6. Audiences

It is fundamental to our communications work that we segment and target audiences effectively. There is no 'one size fits all' approach; different audiences have different needs and preferences and we tailor our communications in a variety of ways to have the maximum impact on different audiences. This includes but isn't limited to:

- The channels we use
- The language and messaging we develop
- The type of visual content we create
- The timing of our communications.

Our key audiences include:

- Residents
- Businesses
- Students
- Visitors to the borough
- Members
- Employees
- Partners, including wider public sector and BID
- Voluntary, community and faith groups
- Media.

Our audiences can be segmented further using data and insight, whether demographic (such as their age or where they live) or behavioural (such as their thoughts and feelings on a topic, their interests and activities, their preferred communications channels or their individual needs and preferences).

It is vital that we segment and target audiences as effectively as we can with the data and insight we have available. We draw our audience insights using data such as the borough profile, ONS data, Surrey-I, LG Inform and previous research and evidence about how residents want to be communicated with, and what engages them. Just as important as this is the deep knowledge that our service areas and partners have of the audiences they serve, which helps the Communications Team to place their messaging and choose their channels effectively.

However, there is much more still to be done in this space and this is a priority for the duration of this Strategy.

Priorities for 2024-28:

To increase and hone our audience insights, both through analysing existing data more extensively, and through finding new ways to learn about our audiences.

7. Channels

We use a tailored, targeted approach using a combination of channels depending on the message and the audience. Our communications need to be easy to understand, to be accessible to different audiences and to reflect all parts of the borough, and therefore we use a combination of a wide variety of channels, depending on the project or campaign. Many of our channels are cost-neutral; paid channels are used with careful consideration depending on what the campaign is trying to achieve.

The channels we use regularly include our website, organic and paid social media (including Facebook, X, Instagram and NextDoor), marketing materials, Borough Boards, media relations, e-newsletter, internal communications and partnership communications.

While many of our audiences are online, there is still a proportion who do not use the internet or social media. Other audiences have a first language that is not English, or do not engage with our primary channels. We use a blend of channels for our communications, including offline channels, with the aim that no-one is excluded, including those who may be harder-to-reach. We produce hard-copy materials for many of our campaigns and plan distribution carefully. We utilise our Borough Boards as a valuable way to reach people offline across the borough. Perhaps most valuable for our harder-to-reach audiences is working with service areas, Members and external partners, to use their channels and relationships with audiences to get communications through effectively.

We will also ensure that we support and promote any initiatives relevant to our residents that help them to develop their digital capabilities, whether these are council, national or partner-led initiatives.

We know there is still work to do in this area to further improve the reach and accessibility of our communications and this will be a priority over the duration of this strategy.

Communications channels are constantly changing and developing, and it is a responsibility of the Communications Team to keep up with, and respond to, emerging trends and technological advances. Recent examples of this are the changes to X (formerly Twitter), the emergence of Threads as a new social media channel, and the emergence of AI.

Appendix 1 of this strategy provides a Communications Channel Analysis which sets out our ambitions, both for our established channels, and for developing channels we are either not currently using or are at the early stages of using.

Priorities for 2024-28:

- To continually improve our usage of our established channels, and to develop our usage of new or nearly new channels on an ongoing basis
- To get feedback from audiences, through methods including a survey, on how they would like to be communicated with and where we can improve on our channels and messaging.

8. Branding and design

Our brand (including but not limited to our logo and crest) must be used clearly, consistently and appropriately, by all those within the council and by partners when appropriate. This ensures the council is visible in our communities, and gives credibility and authenticity to the information we share with our audiences.

The Communications Team is the guardian of the council's brand. We provide advice and guidance to others on use of our brand to make sure we meet these objectives.

Priorities for 2024-28:

- Refresh and update our brand and editorial guidelines and embed them across the organisation
- Build up a strong suite of images for use in our communications work

9. Communications activity and campaigns

We develop, run and evaluate a range of proactive communications campaigns each year, based on corporate priorities, and including income generation projects.

We also support service areas with ongoing, business-as-usual communications work. We use a client-account manager system with each service area having a specific comms representative who attends regular meetings and builds close relationships with the teams, to ensure involvement with projects at early stages and a deep understanding of what communications work needs to achieve.

Our campaign plans are structured using the ‘ROSIE’ method:

- Research and background
- Objectives of the campaign
- Strategy (audiences, key messages, channels, timescale and resources)
- Implementation plan
- Evaluation.

Examples of key campaigns delivered over 2023-24 include Elections, the Local Plan consultation, cost of living support, Town Centre Masterplan consultation, and a community services campaign.

Over the coming four years, campaigns will be developed for priority areas identified in the 2024-28 Four Year Plan and service delivery plans. An annual campaign plan will be produced each spring for the coming financial year.

Communications campaigns over the life cycle of this Strategy may include, but won't be limited to, our Arts, Heritage and Culture strategy and associated activity; health and wellbeing initiatives; the Government Waste Strategy; the Local Plan; climate change and biodiversity; economic development; and elections.

10. Evaluation

Robust evaluation of communications work and campaigns is critical, so that we can:

- Understand what has worked well
- Identify areas to change or improve upon next time
- Provide information and evidence of the impact of communications activity on council priorities.

All too often, evaluation stops at ‘what we did’, but this is only one element of evaluation. Evaluation needs to consider audience action on the back of the campaign, and most crucially, what impact the campaign had. Did it achieve its objectives? Was there a change in audience attitude or behaviour as a result?

We evaluate all our campaigns using four key criteria, and using a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis. The final criterion, Outcomes, is the most important:

Evaluation Criteria	Description	Examples
Inputs	The campaign activity that was carried out. “What did we do?”	Synopsis of activity carried out across range of channels

Outputs	Reach, distribution, exposure of the campaign. “How many people saw it?”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media reach • Website page views • Number of e-newsletter opens • Media coverage • Marketing materials distributed.
Outtakes	Interest, engagement and action due to the campaign. “How did audiences engage with the campaign?”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media engagement (likes, shares, comments, clicks) • Website clicks • E-newsletter article clicks • Visitors at an event • Positive feedback or comment on public channels.
Outcomes	Impact, influence, change in attitude or behaviour due to the campaign. “Did the campaign achieve its objectives?”	Impact of campaign on project objectives (e.g. number signed up to a service; increase in recycling rates; decrease in people not registering to vote on time)

Priorities for 2024-28:

- Develop regular reporting mechanisms for SMT and Committee Chairs on communications activity, engagement and achievements.
- Develop mechanisms to evaluate audience reactions to a campaign

11. Appendix: Channel Analysis

The tables below give information about the established and developing channels we use to communicate with our audiences, including our current priorities for the 2024-28 Communications Strategy period.

Communications channels are constantly developing and new channels emerging. This channel analysis provides a snapshot in time, but will be revisited and updated regularly over the duration of the Strategy.

Established channel	Further information	Priorities for development in 2024-28 strategy period
Media relations	<p>The Communications Team manages the council's relationship with the media. It provides strategic advice on the council's overall media approach and is responsible for proactive media releases as well as responses to reactive enquiries, in liaison with the relevant service area and Member.</p> <p>The media is a constantly changing landscape; print media readership has reduced significantly, though online versions of local and regional media continue to be key influencers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An increased focus on trade, specialist and regional media, including proactive targeting for relevant profile and editorial pieces • Proactive packages for local press on key good news stories • Review of media list • Closer following of media coverage.
Website	<p>While service areas are responsible for their sections of the website, the Communications Team provides support with content, design and location of pages related to key campaigns. The Team also manages the homepage carousel which is the primary location on the website for campaign promotion.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A website redesign is planned during the time period of this Strategy. This is needed to modernise and update the website, reflect audience requirements and improve the user journey.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging audiences to self-serve when they can via My Council Services • Increased use of Google Analytics to monitor website usage and engagement, evaluate campaign activity and identify areas for improvement.
Organic social media	<p>Social media is extensively used by local audiences and is a valuable two-way channel to communicate and engage with our audiences, and to hear back from them. We are active on Facebook, X, Next Door and Instagram, and have recently started using Threads.</p> <p>We use our social media platforms to share useful, relevant and interesting information; to inform and explain; to promote our campaigns; to ask for opinions; and to answer questions from residents. We share content from partners as well as our own content.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping up to date with, and utilising, new platforms and technical advances • More varied content utilised, including an increase in video • Encouraging further engagement and response from audiences through the content we post • A social media strategy will be developed to grow followers and increase engagement.
e-Magazine (e-Borough Insight)	<p>Our e-newsletter goes out monthly to about 1,550 subscribers. It includes articles on relevant and important council and community news and events.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The e-newsletter will be rebranded with a focus on making it modern, visually pleasing, clear, relevant and easy to navigate • Once this work is done, a campaign will be undertaken to increase subscriptions, readership and engagement • Analytics will be used more extensively to assess what is working and what needs refinement or change.
Marketing materials	<p>A range of marketing materials are designed and produced by the Communications Team. These include flyers, leaflets,</p>	

	posters and banners and are used regularly for all kinds of communications activity and campaigns.	
Borough Boards	The Communications Team manages submission of posters for the 25 Boards placed around the borough, and distributes them to custodians to place on the Boards.	
Internal communications	<p>It is vital that through effective internal communications, we:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase staff's connection with each other and with the organisation • Inform and engage them in key corporate news, events and priorities • Increase accessibility to our senior management team • build a shared sense of purpose • Recognise and celebrate good work across the organisation • Ensure employees have a voice and feedback mechanisms, and feel heard. <p>This will enable the council to develop a stronger organisational culture based on a clear vision and set of values.</p> <p>A range of internal communications initiatives are already in place or are underway to support these aims, including the creation of a new intranet. This work will be ongoing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An operational internal communications strategy will be developed to further help this work to move forward. • We will work to ensure that the newly developed intranet is used and valued by the organisation.

Developing channel	Further information
Paid social media	We have recently started using paid, targeted Facebook adverts to widen engagement from target audiences in key campaigns. This is a valuable, low-cost channel that enables us to guarantee exposure to our target audiences, and to evaluate what is successful.
Local Facebook groups	Local Facebook groups are a key method that residents use to communicate with each other about local issues and interests. While we monitor them, we don't currently have an active presence as a council on local Facebook groups and this is something to focus on in future.
Email marketing / Direct mail	<p>We don't currently have an email marketing function but this is a valuable way to reach target audiences, particularly those who use the internet but aren't on social media. This is a potential future project to be considered, in terms of benefit vs resource required.</p> <p>Direct Mail has a place when targeting certain areas or audiences in the borough, for key campaigns that have some budget behind them.</p>
Advertising	This includes online, digital, print in relevant local magazines and media, Out Of Home eg buses, billboards. Advertising is expensive so it is not currently used extensively, but should be considered for key suitable campaigns.
SEO and Google Adwords	Effective search engine optimisation (SEO) ensures your webpages appear near or at the top of a search engine's results when certain keywords and search terms are used. SEO can be encouraged both via organic methods (general best practice when setting up and tagging webpages and so on), and via paid methods such as Google Adwords.
Retargeting	Retargeting is a paid digital channel which shows council adverts to those who have visited our website on subsequent websites they visit. It encourages those who have considered taking an action to go back and complete it.
Partnership communications	<p>We have established relationships with a number of partners including Surrey County Council, other borough Councils, Active Surrey, the Employment Hub and the Epsom & Ewell Refugee Network. We plan to deepen the existing relationships with local partners and also to establish relationships with a wider section of partners who can help us get relevant messaging out to their audiences; as well as even better utilise the relationships service areas across the council have with a far wider network of partners.</p> <p>Members and staff are also valuable partners in helping to get key messaging out to audiences.</p>