

Rutland County Council

Communications and Engagement Strategy

2022-27

Supporting Rutland County Council and the community through effective communication and engagement

Service area: Corporate Communications

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Rutland
County Council

1. Purpose

This strategy is intended to support Rutland County Council's Corporate Plan and strategic aims through effective communication and engagement.

The strategy is focused on achieving two key priorities:

Strengthening the Council's relationship with communities: Establishing a model of communication and engagement which supports open dialogue, promotes shared responsibility and involves our residents and the community to shape and deliver key services.

Building confidence in the Council's work: Our residents, staff and stakeholders all have a clear understanding of the Council's work, its aims and objectives, its services, and its effectiveness.

2. Background and context

The importance of external communication

Effective communication and engagement are essential components for helping the Council to deliver its strategic objectives, discharge its democratic duties, create awareness and understanding of its work, and maintain an open dialogue with residents and stakeholders.

The need for this is greater now than it has ever been because the current landscape is extremely challenging. Financial pressures, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and a raft of new statutory responsibilities all require the Council to consider what services are delivered in the future and how. This will mean a change in what the community can expect from the Council and a greater exploration of how the community can contribute – working together to realise our shared vision.

We must communicate and engage consistently and effectively to create mutual understanding between the Council and the communities it serves. We must make sure that our communities understand how and why decisions are made and have confidence that we are always working in the best interests of the County. By doing this, we will build trust and understanding – helping to avoid the pitfalls of confusion and misapprehension and enabling the Council to operate effectively.

The importance of internal communication

Good communication within organisations is also a critical ingredient for success. Routine two-way sharing of information helps staff and Councillors to carry out their roles effectively, promotes a sense of shared understanding and unity, and ensures employees feel valued. In turn, this can have a positive influence on staff wellbeing and performance, which aids staff retention and supports the overall delivery of Council's objectives.

Continuous ongoing engagement – the Future Rutland Conversation

Throughout 2021, Rutland County Council led the Future Rutland Conversation. This was an extensive year-long community engagement exercise that supported the development of an aspirational vision and set of long-term priorities for the County that everyone could share and work towards:

“A County for everyone and a place to live your best life.”

The Future Rutland Conversation marked the beginning of a renewed focus by Rutland County Council to work with the community and wider stakeholders to collaborate. During this process, residents told us that they wanted to continue to be regularly involved and have opportunities to have a say on the important issues that affect them and the services that the Council provides.

3. Our goals

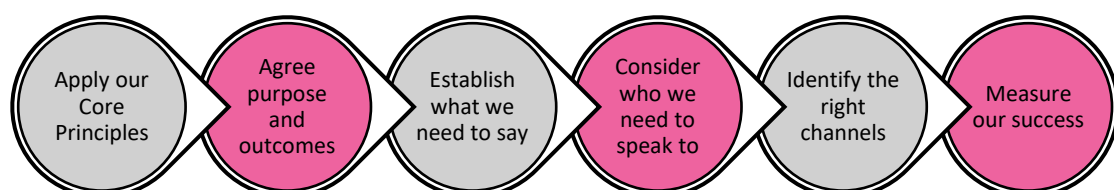
To achieve the two key priorities stated at the outset of this strategy and support Rutland County Council to reach its wider organisational objectives, we have established seven goals linked to communication and engagement:

- Create opportunities for residents to engage in decisions and services that are significant for the County
- Ensure that external communication and engagement activity is timely, accurate and relevant
- Promote awareness and understanding of Rutland County Council’s work
- Support behaviour change that may be needed to meet our corporate aims (e.g. how to recycle properly to help improve recycling rates)
- Provide information in a way that helps our customers
- Make digital channels our primary means of communication while remaining connected offline
- Ensure that internal communication promotes our shared vision and organisational values

4. Our Approach to Communications

To provide a consistent approach for the Councils internal and external communication and engagement activity, we have established a six-step process which will be applied across all Council services, projects, campaigns, and programmes of work.

Figure 1. Six-step process for communications planning



Step 1: Apply our Core Principles

Serve a clear purpose

Our communication activity must serve a purpose and directly contribute to the delivery of one or more commitments defined in the Corporate Plan 2022-27.

Be timely

We will communicate early. Where community engagement activity is deemed appropriate this will be done in advance of any decision or service change, giving people time to participate.

Engage and listen

When we undertake engagement activity, we will provide opportunities for two-way dialogue with residents and stakeholders by both communicating outwardly and listening to what they have to say.

Clear and transparent

As well as being timely, the information that we share will be clear, concise, relevant, accurate and engaging, and will simplify complex issues and subject matters.

Informative

At all times, our communications activity will seek to educate and inform in order to promote a shared understanding and dispel any confusion or misconception.

Step 2: Agree purpose and desired outcomes

Agree purpose

Rutland County Council's communications activity (whether internal or external) serves one of three purposes:

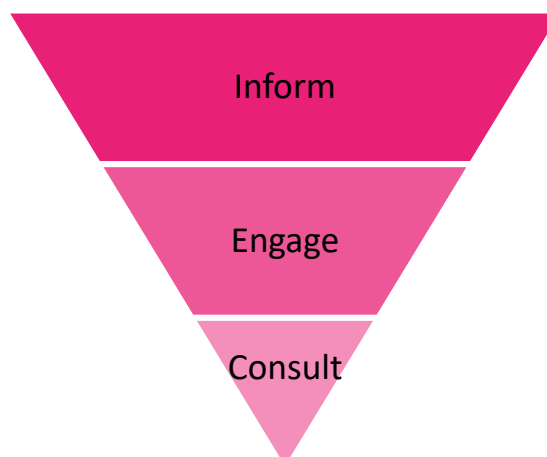
- We communicate to **inform**
- We communicate to **engage**
- We communicate to **consult**

Purpose	When we will do this
<p>To inform</p> <p>Imparting information to a wide range of stakeholders without requiring a response back.</p> <p>Promotes awareness and understanding of general operations and service delivery.</p> <p>Information is widely disseminated and easily accessible, providing a complete picture of what the Council is doing.</p> <p>Makes up most of the Council's day-to-day communications activity.</p>	<p>Council governance, including information about meetings and decisions (before and after they are taken).</p> <p>A new service, campaign or programme is launched.</p> <p>Operational changes to services (planned and unplanned).</p> <p>Sharing good news and success stories.</p> <p>Reporting on Council performance.</p> <p>Responding to serious incidents and emergencies.</p>

Purpose	When we will do this
<p>Engage</p> <p>A targeted facet of Council communications that supports focused discussions with relevant stakeholders.</p> <p>More active and involved than simply sharing information.</p> <p>Establishes a two-way conversation to make sure information is exchanged between the Council and stakeholders in relation to specific issues and their participation in decision making processes.</p> <p>Emphasis on building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships through on-going dialogue.</p>	<p>To assist in the development of new ideas, services and long-term policies/approaches.</p> <p>When decisions may impact on services and the County.</p> <p>When targeted communication is needed to make certain specific groups have received and understood important information.</p> <p>While one of our key aims is to provide opportunities for residents to be engaged, this must be proportionate, relevant to the issue or subject at hand, utilise our resources wisely and ensure maximum benefits of the community.</p>
<p>Consult</p> <p>A structured process to gather the views of residents and stakeholders in relation to a specific issue or change.</p> <p>An extension of Engagement – it precedes formal changes to services and is more resource intensive.</p> <p>Involves obtaining views and opinions and accounting for them through careful analysis and evaluation.</p> <p>Particularly relevant for statutory services.</p> <p>Follows the <u>Gunning Principles</u> and <u>government best practice</u>.</p>	<p>When formal changes to services are being considered.</p> <p>When there is a statutory requirement to consult.</p>

The bulk of our communications activity will be geared towards keeping residents and other stakeholders well-informed. We will carry out in-depth engagement whenever appropriate and in a way that helps to strengthen our relationships with stakeholders. We will consult when needed.

Figure 2. Relative proportion of RCC communications activity (indicates volume of activity and not importance/value)



Agree desired outcomes

Setting objectives that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) is a prerequisite for good communications planning and evaluation. Intended objectives and outcomes will be agreed before each communications programme begins and tied to the Council's wider strategic aims, to provide a sound basis for measuring results and determining success.

Step 3: Establish what we need to say

Before starting any kind of communication or engagement activity, we will carefully consider and develop the key messages we need to convey. This will ensure that the information produced and shared is more likely to be understood and achieve the intended outcomes.

The importance of developing clear messages based on the information needs of our audiences applies whenever we need to communicate. For example:

- Helping residents to complete a transaction, access a service or take part
- Helping residents and stakeholders to understand what the Council is doing
- Engaging residents to provide their input into a new service or way of working
- Consulting residents on a change to services
- Publishing statutory information that must be shared
- Distributing information on behalf of our key partners that is relevant to our vision and important for residents to know and understand
- Providing community leadership in the event of an emergency or serious issue
- Celebrating success and achievement, including that of the Council, community, and partners
- Helping and supporting behaviour change where needed e.g. adopt a new way of accessing a service. If the activity is designed to bring about behavioural change, we will undertake a problem analysis prior to beginning communication which will help to ensure the plan is more effective.

Step 4: Consider who we need to speak to

When we use the term 'Stakeholders' we are referring to anyone who has a stake or vested interest in the Council, its operations, or the county of Rutland. Clearly, this is an extensive list of groups and individuals. Before we embark on any form of communications or engagement activity, we must first understand which of our many stakeholders need to be reached.

We will adopt a targeted approach to stakeholder relations that recognises where some stakeholders may take priority over others. We will also communicate and engage with stakeholders appropriately – in ways that consider their individual information needs. By investing time and care in stakeholder relations, the Council will strengthen its relationships with others in a way that promotes future collaboration and is mutually beneficial to all parties involved.

Step 5: Identify the right channels

There are a range of different channels available to the Council, depending on the purpose of our communications. Adopting the right mix of channels after stakeholders have been identified, messages have been developed and outcomes have been agreed, is essential for success.

Rutland County Council is committed to making digital channels its primary means of communication in response to customer preferences and feedback gathered through the [Future Rutland Conversation \(Council Services\)](#). This will be done while supporting digital inclusion and remaining connected offline by providing effective alternatives for those without internet access. The Council's channels include but are not restricted to:

- Public meetings or focus groups
- Newsletters (printed and digital)
- Email
- Telephone
- Direct Mail
- Local/regional/national/trade media
- Website and MyAccount
- Social Media
- Video
- Communication through partner organisations:
- Printed materials (such as posters and leaflets)
- Paid advertising and advertorials
- Indoor and outdoor events
- Video conferencing (e.g. Zoom)

Step 6: Measure our success

We will monitor a range of metrics, performance indicators and sources of information to determine the success of our communication and engagement, and whether our activities have achieved their desired outcomes. This may include:

- Website traffic/page visits
- Engagement on social media
- Public enquiries
- Survey responses
- Attendance at groups and events
- Written and verbal feedback

5. Roles and Responsibilities

The role of the Communications Service

The Communications Service will work proactively to implement this strategy and will be responsible for leading the Council's communication and engagement activities, as well as embedding best practice across the organisation. The service will:

- Provide ownership and act as a quality controller to ensure that all communication activity aligns to our strategy and priorities
- Lead communication and engagement activity for all major Council strategies, projects, programmes and campaigns and to collaborate with teams to develop robust communication and engagement plans
- Maintain a high level of awareness of emerging political, social, economic and communication developments at local, regional and national levels and ensure this is accounted for in all communication activity
- Provide expert advice and guidance to teams on service-level communications activity i.e. promotion of a service
- Advise and guide in the development of external communication materials, provide writing, style and branding guidelines
- Promote effective use of communication channels through clear guidance. This includes supporting the development and effective use of the website
- Deliver internal communications that facilitates a two-way flow of information, ensuring all staff and Councillors are well informed and confident in sharing information
- Foster positive relationships with the media, and other influencers, so that we can work collaboratively with them
- Maintain a close working relationship with key stakeholders and support effective partnership working on communications programmes

In addition to its proactive work, the Communications Service will put resources and process in place to respond to emerging issues which need a communications response. This reactive role can range from low-level media enquiries to major national and even international incidents which have a bearing on Rutland.

Council Officers

Council officers will be proactive in promoting the Council by providing timely and accurate information to residents about services and, where appropriate, ensuring that the community are engaged when considering new or changes to services. Officers will keep information and materials, including digital content, up to date and will work collaboratively with the Communications Service to develop communications that help to improve service delivery, enhance customer experience and support the Council to achieve its wider strategic objectives.

Rutland County Councillors

As elected representatives, Councillors will:

- Help residents to participate in decision making and to proactively engage the community on key issues and matters for the County.
- Keep residents regularly informed by disseminating key information and raising awareness of what the Council is doing.
- Promote, and provide, opportunities for residents to be involved in conversations about services, seeking out views and striving to make all voices heard.
- To advocate for those who may struggle to engage with us through conventional methods.
- Provide timely and accurate information and to challenge any misconception or misunderstanding of the Council and its services, as well as helping residents to understand the national context in which decisions and discussions are taking place.

6. Delivery

A range of key actions have been identified for the first two years of the strategy which will help to realise our communication and engagement goals:

- Create and publish a set of Minimum Service Standards and Commitments that will apply to all Rutland County Council communications and engagement activity
- Develop a central point of information that provides an overview of the Council's Corporate Plan and brings together policy updates and reporting from across the organisation to map progress against the Future Rutland Vision
- Complete a full audit and gap analysis of all Rutland County Council communications channels, supported by a separate stakeholder mapping exercise that identifies the main contacts and information needs for all key partner organisations
- Develop a new intelligence-led approach that uses customer feedback, analytics from digital platforms (like the Council's website and MyAccount service), national accessibility standards and Plain English best practice to identify ways of improving service-level information.
- Develop a digital roadmap that draws on the outputs from our communications audit and gap analysis to outline Rutland County Council's future digital offer – including development of a new corporate website, expansion of the MyAccount service, social media, email, video and photography, and digital inclusion.
- Develop an Internal Communications Strategy that outlines the Council's future approach to communication between officers, services, senior management and councillors – including the adoption of new corporate values, customer standards, staff engagement and the development of key channels such as the staff intranet.

7. Outcomes

Successful implementation of this strategy and achievement of its two key priorities will deliver the following outcomes:

- Residents and stakeholders will be fully informed about the Council's operations and its progress against both Corporate Plan objectives and relevant aspects of the Future Rutland Shared Vision
- Residents and Stakeholders will have clear lines of communication with the Council and feel valued
- People will know where to go to find easily accessible information about services and who to contact if they have questions
- Residents will understand why actions and decisions are taken by the Council, even if they do not always agree with them
- Residents and stakeholders will be able to engage with the Council around specific issues and decisions, to shape local policies and services
- Residents and stakeholders will know how they can help the Council achieve its strategic objectives for the benefit of local communities

8. Review

This strategy aligns to the Corporate Plan and will be reviewed every two years.

ENDS

For more information about this strategy document or Rutland County Council communications, please email: communications@rutland.gov.uk