HOUGHTON REGIS TOWN COUNCIL

Communication Policy
&
Communication Strategy

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1. Introduction

Houghton Regis Town Council has an aspiration to engage effectively with its residents, partners, employees, councillors and stakeholders.

The Council is responsible for the delivery of local services to those living in the in the parish of Houghton Regis*. Effective communication is key to providing responsive services that meet the local need.

Communication is a complex, multi-dimensional topic and needs to embody a variety of communication methods to enable communications to reach out as widely as possible.

The Communications Policy will set out how Houghton Regis Town Council currently communicates, and the Communication Strategy will set out how the Council can develop its communications.

An important part of any organisation's role is to ensure that information provided both by and to it is easily accessible, relevant and timely. The Council has to recognise the importance of communication and be committed to developing its own services to meet the expectations of the community it serves.

*Where Houghton Regis is referred to reference should be made to the Parish of Houghton Regis which encompasses the town of Houghton Regis, and the rural settlement of Sewell

2. The Benefits of Good Communication

Engaging communities in the work of the Council has many benefits. Good quality engagement will increase people's understanding of the services the Council provides, so that those who need the Councils services can access them. It will also improve customer satisfaction with the Council, by ensuring that services meet the needs of residents and enabling them to help shape the decisions that affect them.

3. Who is our Community?

Our community includes:

- Residents and prospective residents
- Those working-in and visiting Houghton Regis
- Businesses and prospective businesses
- Voluntary organisations and groups
- Stakeholders, partners and other public sector organisations (police, health, fire)
- Central government and government offices.
- The local, regional and trade media (press, radio and television).
- Town and unitary councillors and employees.

4.   Communication Policy - Vision & Aims

Our Communication Vision is that our community will:

- Know what services the Council provides and the quality of service they can expect;
- Feel confident and satisfied with the Councils services, and costs;
- Understand how to get involved with, or influence, the Councils work.

The Council's Aims are to seek to ensure that communications are:

- Relevant and appropriate;
- Honest, open and accurate;
- Accessible to all members of the community;
- Clear, simple and user-friendly;
- Timely and current;
- Up to date and relevant;
- Legitimate in accordance with relevant legislation, national codes of practice and with the Council's own protocols and guidelines;
- Cost-effective.

Through doing so the following outcomes are intended:

- Raised community satisfaction, trust and confidence levels;
- Raised community awareness of services provided by the Council;
- Raised profile of the Council.

The Council will also ensure that all communication activity takes into account the differing accessibility needs of all, regardless of culture or ethnic origin, nationality, religion or belief, gender, disability, age, sexuality, geographical location or any other status.

The Council's approach will be sensitive to the needs, values, language and cultural differences that exist within its communities and will make communication materials available in other formats, where reasonable and appropriate.

5.   Overarching Communication Principles Statement

We will be polite and courteous at all times;

We will use plain language avoiding jargon or words that are not in everyday use;

We will listen carefully to what the community has to say;

We will respect your right to privacy, confidentiality and safety.

Contact by letter or email or social media
We will try to reply to you within 3 working days of receipt.
If we can't give you a full reply within 3 working days, we will send an acknowledgement stating the timescale for reply, explaining who is dealing with the matter and giving you details of how to contact them.

Contact by telephone
We will try to answer the telephone within 15 seconds (or six rings);
We will tell you who you are talking to and ask how we can help;
We will take ownership of any calls that we answer. If you have called the wrong extension number, we will take your details and pass them on to the right person who can help;
We will return your telephone call as soon as we are able and will always try and acknowledge telephone calls within one working day.

6. Current Communication Methods

The Council employs a range of different communication media for internal and external communications. Currently, the principal means of communication are:

(a) External Communications

Printed media:
- **Press Statements, Media Releases and Features**
Some Council employees have a press office function, producing responses to media enquiries and proactive releases to publicise council events. Council may also direct press releases on Council decisions and projects through the council meeting process.
- **Town Crier**
The Town Crier is a resident's newsletter that provides information and features about the council and its services, civic and democratic details, current consultations, community events, grants and developments, local business, updates on forthcoming strategic developments, crime and anti social behaviour and environmental matters.
- **Town Guide**
This is produced every 3 years and contains articles on recent and forthcoming strategic developments and a wealth of community information and advice.
- **Event Programmes**
These may be produced specially to promote events these can often include other pieces of information and advice relevant to Houghton Regis.
- **Event Presence**
To have a Town Council presence at community events i.e. stall with Town Council information, roller banners with promotional detail on;
- **Other**
The Council's Vision which sets out the Council's priorities.

Electronic media:
- **Website**
The Council's website – **www.houghtonregis.org.uk**– contains information on the Council and its services, other local services as well as latest news and events. Copies of the Town Crier and the Town Guide are also available on the website. It also allows people to contact the council with their enquiries, suggestions and

complaints. The website is also where the Council post details of its meetings, agendas and minutes.

- **Social Media to include the sharing of other community events.**
  the council uses social media to provide information, advice and notifications.
- **Links with retailers**
  Have been established through the Shop Local Scheme

(b) Internal Communications

Employees:
As a small council, internal communications centre around:
Face to face meetings / briefings as required.
Emails.
Regular senior officers' meetings (weekly).
Regular full staff meetings (quarterly).
Council documentation is stored on a shared drive accessible to all staff.
Ensure that staff have a broad understanding of the council and its services as a whole by circulating draft minutes.

Councillors:
Staff communication to councillors includes:
Weekly newsletter sent electronically and includes draft minutes, mayoral diary, forthcoming events, other opportunities / information;
Staff able to meet with Councillors, where available;
Leaders briefing meetings are held monthly on average (dependent on availability);
Council and committee meetings (publicly accessible);
Members briefings as required to brief and update members on a specific topic (not accessible by members of the public).

7. Communication Strategy

Improvement to communications:

- All staff and councillors to think about the messages they need to communicate and the opportunities to showcase success and good practice;
- Through Council and committee meetings councillors to consider issuing instructions for press releases;
- Through Council and committee meetings councillors to consider issuing instructions for public consultation;
- To investigate options on the website for electronic newsletters such as business, community, environment, strategic updates etc;
- To investigate options on the website for a consultation portal;
- Undertake councillor and staff training in dealing with the press / media.

In addition, the council will seek to:
Create a Communications Calendar to highlight the activities the council is involved in and any associated communications activity for each month for the year ahead.

8. EVALUATION

In order that communities know about the services the Council offers and for the Council to ensure that those services meet – and continue to meet – the needs of local people, the Council needs to adopt a proactive approach to communication and keep under constant review the means by which they communicate.

What can be measured?

- Raised awareness of the Town Council and the services it provides
- Attitudes towards HRTC
- Participation and engagement with Council projects, initiatives and consultation processes

How will this be achieved?

- Consultation with residents – perception and satisfaction surveys
- Measure press coverage for saturation and against press releases for content usage
- Hits on website
- Number of Friends and Followers on Social Networking sites

9. REVIEW

This policy will be reviewed every 4 years or as required by the Corporate Services Committee.

APPENDIX A

Managing the media effectively to promote and defend the council

This strategy should be read in conjunction with the Town Councils Press Protocol Policy.

The key points for effective management of media relations are to:

♦ Respond to journalists in full within a reasonable time (maximum 4 hours)
♦ Be helpful, polite and positive
♦ Never say "no comment"
♦ Ensure any statements to hostile enquiries are cleared by the most appropriate person and keep written records of responses to journalists
♦ Monitor response times to media enquiries and evaluate media coverage
♦ Ensure the appropriate council spokesman is fully briefed and available for interview if required
♦ Issue timely and relevant press releases using the brand template
♦ Pre-empt potential stories arising from council agendas/minutes by issuing proactive PR
♦ Organise Media training for key speakers (Mayor, Deputy Mayor, Town Clerk and Senior Officers)

APPENDIX B

Social Networking

Social Networking is now a credible communication channel that is increasingly utilised by organisations, as well as individuals, as a means of developing online communities for gathering and disseminating information that is of mutual interest.

Many Public Sector bodies have their own Social Networking sites. The most popular are Facebook and Twitter, Facebook currently being the larger of the two with over 45 million users in the UK although Twitter's popularity has rapidly risen.

Social Networking sites offer value for money and a strong community focus. Running the sites utilises existing ITC systems and is therefore effectively free to set up and update.

There will be certain communities that the Council has previously struggled to communicate to consistently that will already be using Facebook and/or Twitter.

It is a fast, efficient way of communicating as there are no lead-in production times for print or production – you can have a message up and available for viewing by your fans/followers in minutes.

At the same time, it positions the Town Council as a modern council and to change perceptions of remoteness by allowing the Council into the user's own space. More people will be tempted to engage because it does not involve attending a meeting, or even using very much of their time.

Social Networking sites provide the opportunity to communicate with people immediately, in real time. This will, of course, bring its own challenge in that to be truly valued by Friends/Followers there must be a regular flow of messages and content that will encourage regular interaction. Staff already regularly monitor the Town Councils social media pages so that any specific questions or issues that arise can be addressed.