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Meeting: Council, 17th June 2024

Agenda item: 24/041

Report subject: Council community engagement and communication

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PROPOSAL

To produce a Town Council Communications & Engagement Strategy, and in order to do this and improve our visibility and engagement with the community, to create two new roles – Marketing & Communications Manager and Events & Projects Officer.

Introduction

Why effective communication matters

As the closest level of government to their communities, it is essential for effective communication to support effective governance. Local councils are providing more and more services than ever before, and this means that it is important that councils effectively communicate what they do.

A community that feels communicated with, and listened to, is more likely to understand and positively engage with the council's initiatives, leading to increased trust, participation and cooperation. This in turn leads to recognition, respect and a good reputation, which is key for local councils. The council should recognise the importance of communication and be committed to developing its services to meet expectations of the community it serves.

Information provided by the council to the community must be easily accessible, relevant and timely, making the most of new information technology and new ways of communicating, whilst still acknowledging the value of traditional communication methods. Communication is also a two-way process, and the council should also ensure that easily accessible and relevant routes are available to allow the community to communicate with them.

Strategic approach

It is important that the council has a clear strategy, setting out the purpose of engagement with their community, what it is they wish to communicate, how they can enable the community to engage with them, and identifying how can we best do that. An assessment is required of what we do already to communicate with our community, how we enable and encourage them to communicate with us. Do we listen? How do we show that? What other methods could we use to communicate what we do, how do we market ourselves - we need to shout about our achievements, our activities and ask the community for their thoughts. Could we make better use of the technology and systems we already have, or could we employ different techniques, new technology, new ideas?

This will all feed into a Town Council Communications & Engagement Strategy.

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What does engagement look like?

Different levels of engagement could include:

- Informing the community about the work and services the council provides
- Consulting with and seeking out the views of the community
- Encouraging community participation in local government
- Collaboration with individuals, community groups and organisations
- Building effective working relationships with the community, encouraging a sense of ownership of assets, infrastructure and new projects

Effective and meaningful community engagement can provide a number of benefits:

- The problems and needs of local people are clearly identified in order that appropriate new or improved facilities or services can be provided
- Those participating feel empowered by being involved in decision making in their local community and a sense of ownership and pride in the new facilities/initiatives
- It may result in a renewed respect for the council, enhanced leadership within the community and greater interest in elections or for standing for council

Key approaches:

Consider your audience and key messages – what do we want our community to know? What are our council priorities, services and facilities, and how do we communicate these effectively? Who is our audience?

Evaluate use of different communications channels – use of digital and analogue communication channels – use effective tools for engagement.

Listen to your community – lots of council communication is 'broadcasting' information, but it is also important to listen. Ask questions, gather feedback, understand our community's needs and concerns.

Utilise social media more effectively – social media is an essential modern tool for council communication, and can be used to build sustainable two-way conversations with the community.

Use email letters – e-newsletters can inform the community about news, events and key council messages, and can be sent to subscribers regularly.

Easy access to council information – the council's website should be designed to provide easy access to the information our community needs – council services, policies, procedures.

Use of language – all communications should be clear and concise to avoid confusion, and should avoid technical council jargon.

What do we sound like – the tone of our communication is also very important, as the message can often be misinterpreted. How do we want to come across in our communications? Should we use different tone for different communication channels?

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<u>Use video and multimedia</u> – use of a range of media when communicating to the community can effectively explain a complex subject matter. It can build trust and break down invisible barriers between councils and their communities.

<u>Strategic approach</u> – it is important that the council has a strategic approach to communications and a clear plan.

Communication methods

It is important to use an appropriate mix of communication methods to have the greatest chance of being heard and of receiving feedback.

<u>What do we do already?</u>

- Facebook – used fairly regularly, but administered by multiple people so tone is not consistent and frequency is not regular
- Instagram – not often used, but could link Facebook posts to Instagram automatically
- Twitter – not currently used, dormant account
- Electronic notice board at Watermark and Endsleigh Garden Centre – what information is being shared?
- Posters distributed around the town – now make good use of Canva – design software
- Website – needs updating for better accessibility, transparency regulations requirements, and use of news pages more frequently
- Council office open to public – phone, email and in person
- Publication of agendas and minutes on website
- Council attendance at external events – very infrequent and no identity

<u>What else could we do?</u>

- Hold regular and well-publicised town councillor surgeries – consider how to make these more interesting and engaging
- Better promotion of events, activities, services available – use of social media, hard copy, websites, external advertising
- Council attendance at external events to talk about the role, and what the council does, etc; could also be by way of short video message on social media
- Promoting our meetings, and encouraging the community to attend and give us their views – sharing the link to the agenda on the website via social media; consider live-streaming meetings to assist those who cannot attend, or record and share on a council YouTube page
- Make better use of our existing social media platforms, with structured marketing and posts promoting our facilities, 'evergreen' content[1], directing people to our website and our meeting agendas, and posts that shout about what we're doing
- Upgrade our website to be more end-user friendly, and manager friendly, also making sure that it is accessibility compliant and promotes council transparency
- Improve our public-facing presence by purchasing branded items – gazebo or banner wrap, printed promotional flags, table cloths, etc with our logo and contact details

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[1] Evergreen content can improve search engine rankings and improve social media algorithms, and could be repeated posts about who to contact for hiring of rooms, remembering to put clocks back/forward, annual diary dates, etc.

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<u>Local Council Award Scheme</u>
Should council wish to reinstate its quality council status, through the Local Council Award Scheme, effective communication and engagement with the community is vital. 'The Local Council Award Scheme (LCAS) has been designed to celebrate the successes of the best local councils and provide a framework to support all local councils in improving and developing to meet their full potential. The scheme allows councils to show that they meet the standards set by the sector, assess them by their peers, and put in place the conditions for continued improvement'[2]

Under the Scheme, the council is expected to produce an annual report, online material and regular news bulletins (online required, but also could be in hard copy) throughout the year. If the council uses social media such as Facebook, this should be evident from the council's website. Our community engagement should include promotion of council activities as well as the democratic processes. This could be by way of surveys, focus groups, online, street polls and community workshops.

Not just council, but also community?

As part of the current Ivybridge Community Economic Plan project, it has become evident that there is a real need to improve promotion of the town, both to potential visitors but also to residents. There are several community run Facebook pages which do a great job in sharing community posts, but there is no continuity, and with multiple pages the information can become diluted. There is also no 'central' website with all things Ivybridge – the target audience could be existing residents who might not be fully aware of what there is to offer in their town (and this has also become evident through the CEP process), visitors to the town (we want to encourage new people to visit our town, to stay and enjoy what we have to offer), and potential new residents (who may want to know how many schools we have, dentists, doctors, shops, leisure facilities, who removes household waste and collects their council tax, etc).

This exercise could also include a review of the current website for The Watermark facility, and whether any improvements could be made to better promote activities and events taking place.

During the course of assessing our current communication methods, and realising the need to upgrade the town council's website, an opportunity has presented itself to further expand and to create an additional website, managed by the town council, but solely focusing on the town of Ivybridge – what it has to offer, the clubs, groups, businesses, services and facilities.

It could be expanded further to have a new town Facebook page, with very regular posts being shared about what the town has to offer, what's going on, etc, and with all posts still being able to be shared by the current numerous community Facebook pages.

The CEP process is also looking at an 'identity' for the town, and the town council could very much be a part of this process and helping to form an identity that encourages people to visit, engage and enjoy the town.

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[2] NALC www.nalc.gov.uk

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Resource implications

In order to achieve the aim of improving our engagement with the community, and to reduce the risk of overloading existing staff members, this responsibility should fall to new specific roles.

It is proposed to create two new roles 'Marketing & Communications Manager and Events & Projects Officer.

Staffing

Marketing & Communications Manager

This position would be responsible for overseeing all aspects of our external communications, including social media, website management, public relations, and community engagement. They would also be responsible for working with the council on producing a Communications and Engagement Strategy. By having a dedicated professional in this role, we can enhance our visibility, improve our transparency, strengthen our relationships with residents, and effectively communicate the council's initiatives and achievements. It is suggested that this role would be full-time, or at least high-hours part time.

Events & Projects Officer

An Events & Projects Officer would report directly to the Marketing & Communications Manager. This role would be responsible for planning, organising, and executing various community events, festivals, and celebrations, together with working with the Marketing & Communications Manager to identify other potential engagement events. As we strive to foster a vibrant and engaged community, having a dedicated Events Coordinator would ensure that our events are well-coordinated, professionally executed, and aligned with our overall marketing and communications strategy.

The 'project' element of this role would include co-ordinating future town council consultation exercises, such as a potential to update the neighbourhood plan, or to create a Corporate Strategy/Strategic Plan for the town council. There is a potential also to share this role (therefore jointly paid) with the Ivybridge Heritage Group, who have indicated a need for such a role (part time) to help with project management, setting up of a heritage centre, sourcing funding, etc. It is suggested that this role is part-time, with a view to assessing hours required and increasing if necessary.

Financial

It is proposed that if approval was given to create the two new roles, an appropriate committee would be delegated the task of approving job descriptions and finalising pay scales. However, for the purposes of this report and proposal, it is envisaged that salary ranges could be:
Marketing & Communications Manager – SCP 22 to 25
Events & Projects Officer – SCP 13 to 17

In terms of Town Hall salary budget available, we have sufficient to meet current salary requirements, including a small percentage depending on outcome of NJC/unions salary agreement. Any additional salary requirements would be met this year by General Reserves, and budgeted annually going forward. It is proposed that the two new roles would start in

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September, and therefore requiring only 6 months of salaries this year. The Events & Projects Officer role could have a staggered start date, in order to allow the Manager role time to establish their position.

Equipment/space

Additional PCs and telephones to be purchased for the two new roles. There is a potential for these roles to be flexible – office/home based, which may increase attractiveness of the role as a more modern way of working, and so use of laptops instead of PCs is to be investigated.

Note, all of council's PCs are to be replaced this financial year, ahead of Microsoft's withdrawal of support for Windows 10. Earmarked Reserves have already been allocated for this purpose, and would accommodate two additional devices.

Additional office space to be found. Current office space could be rearranged to accommodate two new staff members, with one additional desk to be purchased.