

External communications strategy

for Dorset Council



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Dorset – a great place to live, work and visit

1 – Introduction

“Public communication is a force for good, improving and, on occasions, saving lives.”
Alex Aiken, Executive Director of Government Communication

This document sets out how communications and marketing will help deliver the council’s strategic objectives and priorities as set out in the Council Plan

Our aim through this strategy is to allocate professional communications resource where it can best deliver measurable outcomes in support of council priorities.

This strategy focuses on external communications and engagement – i.e. with audiences outside Dorset Council. We have a separate but linked strategy for internal communications and employee engagement.

Foreword



“Our ambition is for Dorset to be a great place to live, work and visit. Our priorities for Dorset are economic growth, protecting our unique environment, providing suitable housing, and supporting people to stay safe and well within strong, healthy communities.

“My fellow members and I advocate for Dorset on a local, national and global stage to achieve these priorities.

“In today’s complex and uncertain world, telling the council’s story simply, effectively and truthfully has never been more important. Communications play an important part in achieving our vision, giving residents a clear and coherent picture of what we’re delivering and why it matters to them and to Dorset’s future.

“This strategy will form the basis of all our communications activity over the next four years. It sets out our commitment to strategic communications: delivering evidence-based campaigns with clear objectives that make a measurable difference to achieving council priorities.”

Cllr Spencer Flower, Leader of Dorset Council

The context in which we operate

Population

Dorset (Council area) has a population of 378,500 residents.

Despite a relatively low birth rate and the tendency for younger people to move out of the area, the population continues to grow slowly, driven mainly by people moving into the county and longer life expectancy. Dorset’s working age population is expected to see a marginal decline (6%) over the next 25 years.

Dorset is an attractive place for people to settle in their retirement – 29% of the population is aged 65 and over

(compared to 19% in England and Wales).

Satisfaction with quality of life is generally high in Dorset with crime rates low. But the Dorset rural idyll can conceal pockets of deprivation, mostly in urban areas (mainly Weymouth and Portland). There is also some rural deprivation due to isolation and difficulty accessing housing, transport and essential services.

The population is predominantly white British, with 4.4% of our residents Black, Asian and minority ethnic.

Natural, geological and historic environment

Dorset's natural environment is a great asset.

95 miles of coast in Dorset and Devon are classified as a UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site – the only one in England. Over half of Dorset is covered by the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty designation; 7% of Dorset is protected as a Site of Special Scientific Interest; and Dorset has one of the largest areas of protected lowland heath in Europe.

These designations together mark Dorset as a special place but also present challenges in terms of available land for delivering housing and employment development.

Dorset also has a rich historic environment, with one in twenty of all the protected ancient monuments in England, a well preserved pre-historic landscape and around 10,000 listed buildings.

Economy and infrastructure

Employment in Dorset is high but, like the UK, our economy has a productivity gap. Manufacturing, health, retail, education and hospitality are all big employers in Dorset. 20,200 businesses are based in Dorset: 86% are micro firms and fewer than 1% are large firms. Dorset has an estimated 147,000 employees supporting an economy worth around £8.1 billion.

Earnings are below average and house prices are high with affordability issues for many young people and keyworkers. In 2019, lower end house prices were more than 10 times higher than lower end earnings in Dorset.

Dorset has no motorway but over 2,500 miles of roads. 95.1% of premises in the Dorset Council area have access to superfast broadband. 3.1% of premises in the Dorset Council area have access to full-fibre broadband. Mobile connectivity is still a known issue and is being addressed by work on the 5G programme.

COVID-19 has had a major impact on the economy globally, nationally and in Dorset. Relative to the UK, Dorset has higher shares of employment and businesses across the hardest hit sectors such as tourism and leisure.

Dorset Council

Dorset Council was formed as a unitary council on 1 April 2019, bringing six councils together into one. The council has a workforce of approximately 4,500 employees (excluding school employees) and provides over 450 services.

Dorset Council aims to be customer focused, effective and modern, a sustainable organisation, and an employer of choice.

We aim to be a key player in place shaping, working with communities, rather than doing to them or for them. We believe in the importance of early intervention, helping people to support each other to avoid situations reaching crisis point. We also aim to be fiscally disciplined through strong commissioning and procurement, and ambitious in our use of assets, estate and capital to reduce the impact of demand for our services. We are an inclusive council, working for everyone in our communities.

Why effective communications with our residents is important

The Local Government Association (LGA) and the Government Communication Service (GCS) advocate the need for building trust among our residents in order to communicate effectively. We can build this trust by placing residents at the heart of our thinking and engaging with them as part of our planning and delivery of services. Our residents should know what services are available from the council, how to access them, and why we take the decisions we need to. We also need to maintain our reputation with our workforce, partners, businesses and other stakeholders.

National research conducted by IPSOS Mori on behalf of the LGA for its 'Reputation' campaign highlighted that when people feel well informed by their council, they are also more satisfied with their council and the area where they live, and they feel more involved and engaged in the council's decision-making processes.

Understanding our residents, what their needs and expectations are, and making sure we communicate effectively with them, is therefore a crucial activity for the council. Although the research showed that overall perception is more important than actual quality of service as measured by traditional performance indicators, this does not mean that communications can be a substitute for weak service delivery.

It means that solid council performance, and a clear system for explaining that performance to target audiences is the key to raising satisfaction.

The following table shows the perceptions of Dorset Council residents compared to perceptions of residents nationally.

	2019 Dorset Council residents' survey	Oct 2019 LGA national residents' survey
Satisfaction with the local area Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your local area as a place to live?	88% of respondents were satisfied with their local area as a place to live	83%
Satisfaction with the way the council runs things Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way Dorset Council runs things?	61% of respondents were satisfied with the way Dorset Council runs things	63%
Feeling informed Overall, how well informed do you think Dorset Council keeps residents about the services and benefits it provides?	58% of respondents think Dorset Council keeps residents well informed	59%
Trust in council How much do you trust Dorset Council?	53% of respondents said that they trust Dorset Council 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount'	61%
Perceived value for money To what extent do you agree or disagree that Dorset Council provides value for money?	39% of respondents agreed that Dorset Council provides value for money	49%

Council responsiveness To what extent do you think Dorset Council acts on the concerns of local residents?	42% of respondents think Dorset Council acts on the concerns of local residents 'a great deal' or a 'fair amount'	59%
Speak positively Would you speak positively or negatively about Dorset Council?	30% of residents would speak positively of Dorset Council	N/A

This shows that Dorset Council lags behind the national averages for trust in the council, perceived value for money, and responsiveness.

Many different factors contribute to how residents perceive a council and the services it provides. The output of the Communications Team can impact significantly on those public perceptions. By working with councillors, senior officers, employees and partners to deliver this strategy over the next four years, our objective is to improve the extent to which residents feel informed and engaged in the council's work and thereby improve their satisfaction with the council.

Corporate objectives

The Dorset Council Plan 2020-2024 sets out our ambitions for the next four years. Our vision is: Dorset – a great place to live, work and visit.

Dorset Council's corporate priorities are outlined in the Council Plan:

- Economic growth
- Unique environment
- Suitable housing
- Strong, healthy communities
- Staying safe and well

Work to address the climate and ecological emergency is a cross-cutting theme across all these priorities.

Our values:

- are an advocate for Dorset on a local, national and global stage
- work together with our communities and our partners to make things happen
- put people first and design services around their needs now and in future
- are open, accessible and accountable
- use time and money wisely
- value people and build on their strengths.

Communications objectives

- build and maintain the council's reputation
- support achievement of the council's strategic objectives (as outlined in the Council Plan)
- build the council's identity and engagement with employees, members, residents, partners and other stakeholders
- warn and inform during crisis situations.

In terms of SMART targets, we will use the results of the residents' survey in 2019 as a benchmark and look to improve all resident perceptions of the council. It is important to note that communications alone will have a limited ability to change these perceptions. Perceptions are also based on personal experience of council services and customer service, so we need to work together as one team across the council to improve residents' experience in the round.

Our target audiences and how to reach them

We will improve how we target audiences through the use of segmentation, and tailoring channels, messaging and creative approach to the needs of each segment. There are many ways of segmenting audiences. Some of the variables are outlined below.

Residents - segmentation variables

Mosaic groups – the largest Mosaic* groups in Dorset are:



Margaret 'country living' (Mosaic group A) – 20% of Dorset households. Married and in her sixties, living together with her husband in a comfortable detached house.

Communications preferences: Web (including using her smartphone) and telephone if she can't do what she needs to do online.



Rob 'rural reality' (Mosaic group G) – 16% of Dorset households. Rob lives in Maiden Newton, West Dorset, is a mechanic, and is divorced with three children, one of school age.

Communications preferences: Prefers face to face. Rob has a mobile phone but generally uses his old computer at home to send out the occasional email.

*Mosaic is a consumer segmentation model, with 15 groups and 66 types that help to understand an individual's likely customer behaviour



John 'senior security' (Mosaic group F) – 13% of Dorset households. Now a comfortably off homeowner, enjoying life in his later years.

Communications preferences: Prefers to ring the council to the council and speak to a "real" person but will write in if necessary.



Andrew 'prestige positions' (Mosaic group B) – 10% of Dorset households. Married "empty nester" in his own house, living comfortably with an established professional job.

Communications preferences: Web (including from his smartphone).



Mildred 'vintage values' (Mosaic group N) – 8% of Dorset households. Pensioner in later retirement years living on low income in social housing, reliant on the state to maintain her quality of life.

Communications preferences: Over the years Mildred has always phoned or written to the council. She also occasionally drops in. Phoning up is now her preferred way but she finds the "press 1 for this and press 2 for that" frustrating and confusing.



Eesha 'aspiring homemaker' (Mosaic group H) – 8% of Dorset households. Married and in her thirties, living together with her children in her own house (with a mortgage!)

Communications preferences: Web (including from her smartphone) and telephone if she can't do what she needs to do online.



Alicja 'transient renter' (Mosaic group L) – 3% of Dorset households. Single, 20, living together with flatmates in a shared flat in Dorchester.

Communications preferences: Web, (mainly from her smartphone) but also uses social media, particularly Instagram. Online lets her use Google translate if she doesn't fully understand.



Kelly 'family basics' (Mosaic group M) – 3% of Dorset households. Living together with her new partner and children in a rented housing association property in Littlemoor.

Communications preferences: Mainly smartphone (and occasionally tablet) and only telephone when she can't do what she needs to do online.

Digital segmentation

- 1) **The 'digital natives'** – very digitally savvy. Don't really want to talk to the council. Happy to self-serve online. These are customers who want to use online services and so we should enable them to do so, end to end.
- 2) **Not as digitally savvy and may need more confidence** to do tasks online. We need to make the digital offer attractive to them – make it so easy and convenient to use that they feel the benefits and it becomes the preferred option
- 3) **Assisted self-service.** 10-13% of residents don't have the essential digital skills for life and work. Some may have a mobile phone and be keen users of social media, for example, but no good at financial transactions, downloading information or cyber security, say. Some of these people may have a fixed line broadband connection at home but don't make much use of it. We need to help them, and they will grow in confidence over time.
- 4) 7-10% are **completely offline** and have never been online. Likely to need other non-digital channels. May be reluctant to contact the council but are likely to need our help. Customers that either may never be able to use and access our services or should never use online services due to the nature of their query (e.g. vulnerable, homeless, need very expert service.)

Geographical segmentation

We can target residents according to where they live, using postcode targeting for social media campaigns, email newsletters, digital advertising and mailings.

Other target audiences:

- Dorset businesses
- Visitors
largely the remit of Visit Dorset, a separate marketing team within Dorset Council which focuses on promoting Dorset to visitors and supporting the leisure and tourism industry
- Dorset MPs
- Partner organisations:
 - town and parish councils – and the DAPTC
 - blue light services: health, police, fire & rescue
 - voluntary and community sector
 - Dorset LEP, Chambers of Commerce, BIDs, etc.
 - neighbouring councils
 - sector organisations (LGA, SOLACE, APSE, etc.)
 - government bodies
 - schools and colleges
 - providers and suppliers

Communications strategy and the role of the Communications Team

Strategy: 'how will we achieve our objectives?'

We propose that council communications are:

- **Strategic:** communications must be involved in the council's strategic planning from the very start to ensure that all audiences and stakeholders are considered appropriately, and the strategic communications objectives are identified.
- **Prioritised:** aligned to Council Plan priorities to ensure we allocate appropriate resource to the most important projects and campaigns with a 'One Council' approach. This means we will be more proactive, and less reactive in our approach, based on strong forward planning and coordination. We will deliver fewer, bigger, better campaigns that achieve specific measurable outcomes. In terms of lower priority work, we will enable services to do more themselves.
- **Customer focused and accessible:** improving our use of audience insight and reaching different audiences in the ways that best meet their needs. We will ensure we use research and engagement to find out more about our audiences, to listen to them, and to respond to their needs. All communications must be fully accessible.
- **Robustly evaluated:** we will continually test, learn and improve our communications, and we will robustly monitor, analyse and report on the outputs and outcomes achieved by communications activity so that we know what we are achieving.
- **Delivered in partnership:** we will join up messaging and campaigns across council services and with partners wherever possible to amplify communications, achieving greater impact and using limited resources effectively and efficiently.
- **Open, honest and transparent:** we will communicate with our external audiences in a way that is open, honest and transparent, providing clear, factual information that avoids 'spin'. We will communicate with audiences about democratic decision-making.

Tactics: 'how will we implement our strategy?'

- **Tell our own story:** we will focus on communicating our own narrative rather than letting the narrative about Dorset Council and its services be led by others. This involves a more proactive, less reactive approach. We will use a story-telling approach to engage audiences with compelling content featuring human interest (such as frontline employees and local residents). We will produce more shareable content including videos. We will have more two-way conversations with audiences. We will be brave and creative in the communications we produce.
- **Raise awareness of the work of the council:** we will deliver a constant drip-feed of communications across all channels to showcase the day-to-day work of the council and how it is helping to improve residents' lives. We will also help explain the reasons for and impacts of council decisions, projects and service changes to those affected – linking this back to the overall corporate narrative. We will continue to use the hashtag #WorkingforDorset
- **More targeted:** we will increase our use of audience insight and segmentation to better target communications activity so that it is as effective as possible. We will work with colleagues in Digital and Customer Services to exploit the opportunities presented by the new digital platform, including improved collection and use of customer data, better targeting, and better cross-promotion of services.

- **Uniting people:** wherever possible, we will focus on what unites rather than what divides them, to support greater community cohesion in an accessible and inclusive way. We will ensure appropriate representation of all members of our community in our communications. We will continue to use the hashtag #DorsetTogether
- **Consistent branding, messaging and tone of voice:** we will use consistent branding across everything we do as a council to help raise awareness of what the council does, and, in turn, increase resident satisfaction with the council. We will also ensure that as an organisation we speak with 'one voice'.

The communications 'offer' – how we will work with council services to achieve this

This is what the corporate communications team will deliver:

Strategic communications advice

Provided by the service manager and by the communications business partners, acting as trusted and expert advisers to service leads and to councillors. By being involved upstream when new projects and service changes are first considered, we will advise on reputational opportunities and risks. We will support senior leaders, attending key internal management and political meetings.

Strategic and effective campaigns

Planning, delivery and evaluation to achieve outcomes in line with Council Plan priorities such as demand management, income generation, behaviour change, etc.

Crisis communications

Supporting the council's response to emergency incidents and acting as a member of the Dorset Local Resilience Forum's Warning & Informing group.

A range of communications channels

To reach the council's various audiences and stakeholders, including systems and processes to manage those channels. (See Core communication channels below). It is recommended that all advertising and communications procurement is centralised across the council and delivered by the central communications team in order to achieve economies of scale and efficiencies.

Support, advice and training

To facilitate self-service where appropriate e.g. with service-level newsletters, social media accounts, engagement activities, etc.

A proactive and reactive media relations service to protect and enhance the council's reputation

Brand management, ensuring the council's visual identity is used consistently and appropriately

Graphic design (online and traditional) and print

Consultation advice, planning, delivery, analysis and reporting

Stakeholder and community engagement

With town and parish councils, the voluntary and community sector, minority communities, the armed forces, and with Dorset MPs.

Campaigns plan

The communications team will agree an annual plan of communications priorities and campaigns with Cabinet members and with senior officers. This will inform the team's work and resource allocation, and individuals' performance objectives.

Any requests for communications support outside of the agreed priorities will need to be negotiated with the communications service manager and business partners.

Proposed external communications campaign priorities 2020-21

PRIORITY CAMPAIGNS

Heavy-weight, integrated, multi-media campaigns – generally for a mass market audience

- **Reaching out**
Help people facing economic impact of COVID-19 to access support and avoid reaching crisis point
- **Fostering recruitment**
Recruit more foster carers (generate enquiries)
- **Social worker and carer recruitment**
Recruit more social workers and carers (generate applications)
- **Local Plan**
Seek residents' views and input in the Local Plan consultation and increase understanding of how Planning works
- **Council budget**
Raise awareness of how council funding is spent and what this provides
- **Climate emergency**
Encourage people to contribute to the public consultation and to change their lifestyles in ways that reduce carbon emissions
- **Children's social worker recruitment**
Recruit more social workers (generate applications)
- **COVID-19**
Encourage compliance with public health guidelines to minimise spread of the virus
- **Assistive technology**
Increase take up of assistive technology to support independent living at home
- **Direct payments**
Increase take up of direct payments by social care service users
- **Census**
Encourage residents to complete the national census

ONGOING THEMES

Regular communications provided on these themes

EU transition

A Better Life (Adults transformation programme), including Building Better Lives

Economic development

Domestic abuse and safeguarding

OurDorset (partnership of health and social care organisations working together to deliver Integrated Care Systems)

Homelessness and housing

Weymouth regeneration – inc. Weymouth harbour walls, North Quay, Weymouth Station Gateway project

Idling and safer crossings

Transforming Cities Fund

Winter weather and gritting

TIC consultation

Dinah's Hollow

Council assets and properties

Day-to-day dripfeed of messaging

Via email newsletters, social media, Dorset Council News,

Highways maintenance

Changes to waste rounds

Environment work (e.g. verge cutting, weed spraying)

New building projects

Trading standards scam alerts

Flood protection advice

Self-service

Service to do own comms. Comms team support with advice, systems, templates etc

Family Information Service newsletter

Low Carbon Dorset – promoting initiatives with businesses, etc.

Libraries

Leisure centres

Country parks

Core communication channels and activities

- Dorset Council News magazine, delivered to all households in the Dorset Council area three times a year
- E-newsletters available on a number of topics for people to subscribe to
- Social media – Dorset Council presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube. Exploring opportunities with Snapchat and TikTok.
- Website: www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk
- Media relations: proactive and reactive activity with local, regional, national, international and sector-specific media
- Advertising on radio, local press, online, vehicles, street dressing/out of home, and digital.

- 'Trusted voices': sharing key messages via Dorset Council employees, councillors, and partners.
- New channels – we are currently exploring opportunities for Dorset Council:
 - Podcasts
 - Online webinars and public Q&As
 - Online radio show
- Supporting the 'Help and Kindness' pilot to join up non digital channels across Dorset, involving local communities.

Reporting and evaluation

- We will produce a monthly performance dashboard: monitoring and reporting on effectiveness of different communication channels.
- Every campaign will have an evaluation report
- Evaluation will include analysis of both outputs and outcomes of communications activity, and we will ensure we continually learn in order to refine and improve our activity.

