Draft Communications Strategy 2015-2018
1. **Introduction and context**

1.1. In the challenging and changing environment of local government, it’s really important that regular, reliable and accurate information about the Council is provided to the people we want to communicate with – our ‘target audiences’.

1.2. This means making sure information about what we do, why we do it and how we do it is provided to our residents, customers, businesses, Councillors, staff, partners and other stakeholders in an effective way.

1.3. Effective communication helps improve awareness and understanding of everything we do as a Council – from basic information about how to access our services and facilities and how much certain services cost to why we make the policy decisions we do and what our objectives are.

1.4. Ensuring people and communities know and understand these issues can help build trust and confidence in the Council and improve our reputation.

1.5. There are clear links, supported by various pieces of research, between effective communication and satisfaction with performance. This research shows that people who feel well informed by an organisation like the Council tend to rate that organisation’s performance more highly.

1.6. In practice, this means satisfaction levels go up when people feel well informed, which means effective communication can really make a difference.

1.7. The Council’s communication activities cannot be undertaken in isolation – they need to be aligned with strategic objectives and support the achievement of corporate ambitions for the people and communities of South Ayrshire.

1.8. The Council’s strategic objectives are:

- maximising the potential of our local economy;
- maximising the potential of our children and families;
- maximising the potential of our adults and older people;
- maximising the potential of our communities;
- maximising the potential of our environment; and
- improving the way we work as a Council.

Better and more effective communication has a big part to play in achieving all of these.
1.9. Within the Council, communications is led by the Public Affairs team, which provides professional and expert advice and support for press and media, internal communications, marketing, stakeholder communications (such as Councillors, MPs/MSPs), social media and the Council website.

1.10. Public Affairs has a central role to play in ensuring this strategy makes a positive difference to the Council’s communication activities. However, communication in the Council isn’t just the job of one team.

1.11. It’s up to everyone – from the Chief Executive to Councillors to staff delivering frontline services every single day – to ensure we are an effective and communicating organisation; and a listening one too.

1.12. Communication is central to all that the Council does. This is highlighted by the inclusion of communication as a core competency – a key skill we all require – within the Council’s PDR (Performance and Development Review) framework for every member of staff.

1.13. This draft strategy sets out the proposed strategic framework for the Council’s approach to communications in terms of our day-to-day information sharing.

1.14. It establishes the focus and direction for communications activities and applies to everyone communicating on behalf of the Council.

1.15. It also sets out specific actions for the Public Affairs team that will help the Council communicate better and more effectively.

1.16. The overall aim of the strategy is to ensure that our people, communities, staff, elected members and stakeholders are well informed about the Council’s services, objectives, challenges, policies, plans and performance.

1.17. Put simply, it’s about getting the right information to the right people, in the right way and at the right time. By doing this, we can work to change both people’s perceptions and behaviours in relation to the Council.

1.18. This will help improve our reputation and ensure the Council gets the credit and recognition it deserves for the services it provides.

1.19. The strategy is not designed to be a list of specific communication activities, but is about creating the framework within which these activities will be taken forward.

1.20. Its success depends on it being adopted, supported and championed across the Council.
1.21. It’s supported by the Policy and Performance Service and Improvement Plan 2015-18, which includes performance measures and improvement actions for the Council’s Public Affairs team.

2. The changing picture

2.1. One of the biggest challenges in delivering effective communications is the constantly changing picture of where people get the information and news they want.

2.2. The growing use of digital technology like smartphones and tablets has transformed how quickly people get information, respond to it and share it with others.

2.3. To some extent, this can make it easier for organisations like the Council to get our message out there. It also helps us connect and engage with people on a more direct level and make the communication feel more personal.

2.4. However, the ‘online marketplace’ is getting increasingly busy thanks to the growing numbers of online blogs, forums and ‘news’ and information sites. This can make it extremely challenging to know what’s being said and where, to provide the support required, and to ensure clarity of message.

2.5. While the use of digital channels is growing, the more traditional channels still have an important role to play if we want to reach as many people as possible. This means there’s a massive demand for communication and information that the Council needs to resource and deliver on an ongoing basis.

2.6. This is a considerable challenge and one which could create a very real risk to the Council’s reputation if we don’t respond appropriately.

2.7. As well as a changing communications landscape, the Council also has to manage – and respond to – changes in the political and operational environments we work within.

2.8. In these areas, change is likely to be the only certainty over the next few years as we work to deliver around £20 million savings over the next three years and deal with any political changes as a result of the UK Parliamentary General Election (2015), Scottish Parliament Election (2016) and Local Government Election (2017).

2.9. Undoubtedly, this will mean an increased demand for efficient and effective communications.
3. Where we are now

3.1. Since 2010, when the Council’s first Communications Strategy was created, there has been positive progress and a number of developments in the Council’s approach to communications. These include:

Policies, guidance, processes
- Social Media Policy and Guidelines
- Revised Media Protocol
- Advertising Guidelines
- Pre-election and pre-referendum guidance.
- Joint Communications Protocol (with East Ayrshire Council) to support the Ayrshire Roads Alliance
- Joint (with NHS Ayrshire & Arran) health and social care plans and protocols to support the integration of health and social care
- Communications forward planning calendar.

Internal communications
- Weekly Council-wide emails to all staff with PC access
- Weekly information note for chief officers and politicians
- Sharepoint sites to enhance internal information-sharing
- Revamped intranet site
- Monthly Chief Executive bulletin for all staff throughout the organisation.

Online
- Redesigned Council website to provide a more ‘responsive’ platform that adapts for mobile technology, improves access to Council information and services and maintains industry quality standards
- Corporate and service specific social media channels to increase information and engagement with the public.

Other
- Refreshed and updated Council logo to provide a cleaner, more modern look
- Plasma information screens in customer service centres and staff canteen areas
- Awarded media advertising contract to ensure we continue to achieve best value when buying media advertising.

3.2. This strategy builds on the progress made to date and recommends further improvements.

4. Our strategy

4.1. Our strategy sets out the approach we will take to deliver effective communications on behalf of the Council.
5. Vision and aims

5.1. The strategy’s vision is to ensure our audiences feel sufficiently informed and engaged to build trust, confidence and satisfaction in the Council that helps improve our reputation and image.

5.2. Through this strategy, we want to:

- Help people understand what we do and why.
- Positively promote the Council and improve our reputation and image.
- Deliver a co-ordinated, managed and consistent approach to communications across the Council.
- Provide excellent, value for money communications support that helps the Council achieve its strategic objectives.
- Target our communications to increase their effectiveness.
- Maximise our use of digital communications such as website and social media to increase access to information, make information more immediate, and make it easier for people to interact with the Council, while reducing use of printed materials.
- Ensure employees understand their role within the Council, and feel valued and proud to work for the Council.
- Positively promote South Ayrshire as a good place to live, work, study, invest and visit.
- Support our elected members in their roles as community leaders.
- Ensure consistent use of the Council brand so the Council gets the credit and recognition it deserves for the services provided.

6. Principles and standards

6.1. Our principles and standards for communication are embedded in all we do. They apply to all forms of communication and to all those communicating on behalf of the Council.

6.2. Our principles and standards are to:

- Communicate in a clear and consistent way, based on open, honest, accurate information.
- Put our customers and audiences at the heart of our communications activities.
- Produce easy to understand communications that get to the people we want to reach at the right times.
- Deliver planned, joined-up and integrated communications that make use of different methods to reach target audiences.
- Take a ‘digital first’ approach to our communications, moving more of our communications activities, content and materials online.
- Ensure communications are accessible and reflect the Council’s commitment to equality and diversity, with information available in suitable formats.
• Ensure communications go up, down and across the Council, as well as to and from the Council.
• Comply with relevant legislation, Codes of Practice, Council policies, protocols and guidelines.

7. Key messages

7.1. Key messages are an important part of communications planning. Key messages make it clear what we’re about – they set out what we want to say to our audiences and let our audiences know what we expect from them or how we want them to respond.

7.2. Many key messages will apply to everyone we communicate with, while some will be specifically tailored to ensure they are relevant and appropriate to the relevant individual audience, method of communication or campaign.

7.3. High-level messages that reflect our strategic objectives should be at the heart of all Council communications activities. This means everything we do should say something about what we’re doing to make the most of the local economy, our children and families, our adults and older people, our local communities, our environment, and what we’re doing to improve the way we work as a Council.

7.4. Within these messages, the themes we should put across are:

- We’re committed to putting people and communities first
- We provide quality, value for money services
- We’re committed to improvement and best value
- We’re ambitious and forward looking
- We want to make a difference
- South Ayrshire is a good place to live, work, study, invest and visit.

7.5. Being clear about the messages we want to put across will play an important part in ensuring the success of our communications, so it’s important we give this appropriate consideration and get it right.

8. Target audiences

8.1. For communication to be as effective as possible, it should be targeted in a way that gets the right information to the right people, in the right way and at the right time. Target audiences are, quite simply, who we want to talk to.

8.2. By the very nature of what we do, a lot of what we communicate will be relevant to the public at large, in its widest possible sense. However, there will be times when we can break down our target audiences to be
much more specific – for example, those in a specific location, those of a specific age range or those with a particular need.

8.3. Who the particular target audience is can help determine the best ways to reach them and this will be influenced by what we actually know about that specific audience.

8.4. This can help ensure that in planning any communications activity, we have the relevant insight or information to know who our audiences are; what they think; what motivates them; and how, where and when we can reach them.

8.5. This is vital in ensuring the effectiveness of our communications and we need to ensure we have access to relevant insight and information that allows us to deliver for our target audiences.

8.6. Target audiences for the Council include:

- Local residents
- Customers/service users (some of whom may not live in South Ayrshire)
- Local businesses
- Councillors
- Council staff (this can be broken down further into directorates/services/teams)
- Trade unions
- Representative groups (such as tenants and residents associations)
- South Ayrshire 1000 (our citizens’ panel)
- MPs/MSPs/MEPs
- Third sector partners – voluntary sector
- Community councils
- Community planning partners like the NHS, police and fire services
- Partner organisations such Scottish Government, other Councils, funding bodies
- Visitors and tourists
• Media – print, broadcast, online, specialist
• Online communities.

8.7. This is not an exhaustive list, but gives a flavour of the wide and varied groups of people we communicate with on a regular basis. And people can be members of more than one target audience – for example, many of our staff are residents in South Ayrshire and also make use of Council services as customers.

8.8. In identifying target audiences and planning our communications activities, it’s vital we know what we are trying to achieve – in other words, why are we communicating/what’s the point of it?

8.9. This could be:
• Increasing awareness – creating awareness of what's going on or what's changing
• Increasing understanding – making sure people know why we’re doing these things
• Increasing support – winning hearts and minds and building support for what we’re doing
• Increasing involvement – getting buy-in from audiences and getting them involved in sharing our message
• Increasing commitment – establishing real commitment to what we’re trying to achieve through sharing the message and active involvement.

8.10. And if we don’t know what we want our target audiences to do, we should ask ourselves why we’re communicating in the first place.

9. Communication channels

9.1. Communication channels are the methods we use to get information to our target audiences – the how or the ways we communicate. They give us options for choosing the most effective way of getting the information we want to the people we want.

9.2. The particular channel, or channels, chosen for any one communications campaign or message are influenced by many factors. These can include who we need to reach, how many people we need to reach, how quickly we need to reach them, how much it will cost to reach them, how easily they can be reached, what we want them to do when the message reaches them and the message itself.

9.3. For most messages/campaigns, we will use a variety of channels so we can reach as many of our target audiences as possible.

9.4. Examples of the communication channels we use are detailed below. The key challenge is to choose the most appropriate channels for our
target audience. This is where knowing more about our audiences – the insight – provides further value.

9.5. It’s vital take a joined-up and strategic approach – rather than focusing on any one of these channels in isolation – so that communications are as effective as possible and achieve what we set out to.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News releases/briefings for the media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council/Panel meetings – where decisions are taken by Councillors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotional and marketing campaigns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media (e.g. facebook/Twitter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plasma information screens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotional materials (leaflets, posters, flyers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor advertising (billboards, poster sites, street furniture, public transport)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In person/face to face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenants’ newsletters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public events/roadshows/meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community council updates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct mail/email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payslip advertising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Planning partners’ websites and publications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noticeboards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media (national, regional, local, specialist, broadcast, online)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text messaging/instant messaging</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chief Executive’s monthly update

Council-wide email

Weekly information note for Councillors, MPs/MSPs/MEPs

Staff intranet (Re-wired)

9.6. Different audiences are best reached by different channels and that’s why a mix of channels will generally be used.

10. **Measurement and evaluation**

10.1. Measurement and evaluation are essential parts of a communications strategy. Effective measurement and evaluation will tell us whether we’re doing things right and achieving our aims and objectives – or whether we need to do something different.

10.2. The success of this strategy will be shaped by how far we achieve our vision of ensuring our audiences feel sufficiently informed and engaged to build trust, confidence and satisfaction in the Council that helps improve our reputation and image.

10.3. To find this out, we need to undertake regular monitoring and measurement that allows us to assess levels of awareness and understanding of our messages and values.

10.4. This will show how effective our communications are and will help identify what needs to change and improve if we’re not delivering for our target audiences.

11. **Conclusion and actions**

11.1. Effective communication can make a big difference to the Council and it’s important we get it right for our customers and audiences.

11.2. This strategy is designed to ensure our audiences feel sufficiently informed and engaged to build trust, confidence and satisfaction in the Council that helps improve our reputation and image.

11.3. We will do this by ensuring principles and standards are followed at all times, and consideration of key messages, target audiences, communication channels and evaluation are at the core of all communication activities.
11.4. These will then feed in to the communications activities we undertake on a daily basis for services, issues and initiatives.

11.5. The delivery of the strategy will be supported by actions that will further improve how we communicate as a Council, create better and smarter ways of working and ensure we take a ‘digital first’ approach that reflects the growing use of online channels and reduces the cost of print.

11.6. These actions, which will be led by the Public Affairs team, have been identified through the ‘How Good is our Council?’ self-evaluation process and focus on delivering improved outcomes for customers and other audiences.

11.7. The strategy actions will be reviewed and updated each year in line with updates to the Policy and Performance Service and Improvement Plan and other elements of improvement work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Timescale for completion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduce quarterly reminders to services to review web content to ensure it is up-to-date and accurate</td>
<td>June 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore Council Advertising Network, which would permit adverts on the Council website, as potential source of income for the Council</td>
<td>August 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop individual communications plans that support each Service and Improvement Plan across the Council to better work with services to support the Council’s strategic objectives, highlight what we’re doing to achieve these and what we’ve delivered</td>
<td>September 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore ways of introducing better customer and audience ‘insight’ into the planning, targeting and measurement of public affairs activities and campaigns</td>
<td>September 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore options and costs for reputational monitoring/tracking to help evaluate the effectiveness of our communications</td>
<td>September 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review corporate identity and brand guidelines</td>
<td>September 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review use and effectiveness of graphics service client satisfaction survey</td>
<td>September 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review trial of internal graphics workflow programme</td>
<td>September 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task</td>
<td>Start Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct surveys and focus groups to review communications with key internal groups</td>
<td>September 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve access to information and website user experience to help improve rating of website for annual SOCITM review</td>
<td>October 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create staff user guides for website and intranet (including writing and style guides) to ensure services know how to get the most out of these platforms</td>
<td>November 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upgrade intranet software to SharePoint 2013</td>
<td>December 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further develop virtual newsroom/press office on Council website</td>
<td>December 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review public affairs spend across the Council to ensure best value is achieved at all times</td>
<td>January 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduce annual residents/customer survey to gauge views on how the Council communicates and where our customers look for information</td>
<td>January 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduce annual staff satisfaction survey to gauge views on communication with employees and communications support available to services</td>
<td>January 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trial new methods for internal communications, based on consultation feedback</td>
<td>January 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore software options and costings for management of social media accounts</td>
<td>March 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore options, costings and benefits to replace in-house developed website with one built on a commercial Content Management System (CMS)</td>
<td>March 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore options for introducing Citizens’ Account functionality to the website</td>
<td>March 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create Council-branded templates for standard publications that reduce the need for design input while ensuring brand protection and integrity</td>
<td>March 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore and implement options to better improve communications with non-office based staff</td>
<td>March 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore opportunities for more strategic/corporate</td>
<td>April 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>campaigns linked to Council objectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review communications and coverage around Council/Panel meetings – in advance and post meeting</td>
<td>June 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further review and redesign of intranet to suit user requirements</td>
<td>June 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work with services to make more use of the personal sites facility of the intranet</td>
<td>June 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore partnership opportunities for media training programme for Councillors and officers</td>
<td>June 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliver training for intranet site administrators</td>
<td>September 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review information and website user experience in preparation for annual SOCITM review</td>
<td>October 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieve Plain English Campaign Crystal Mark for website</td>
<td>March 2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

April 2015