



Draft Communications and Community Engagement Strategy for Cuckfield Parish Council

Produced for and on behalf of Cuckfield Parish Council by



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Section 1: Executive Summary

This document sets out a Communications Strategy for Cuckfield Parish Council ("CPC"). The Strategy includes key recommendations for CPC to consider, as well as a proposed Action Plan. CPC commissioned Breakthrough Communications, a specialist council communications and compliance agency, to review its approach to how it communicates and engages with the community of Cuckfield. This project included the development of a comprehensive strategy to build on CPC's existing communications and community engagement successes.

Following a pre-meeting with the CPC Clerk, Breakthrough Communications held an in-person, evening workshop with CPC councillors. During the workshop we:

- Explored CPC's communications aims and objectives,
- Explored who the council is seeking to communicate with through its range of communications channels (its "audiences");
- What it is seeking to say to those people (its "messages");
- Considered strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in relation to current ways of communicating and engaging with the community.

Following the workshop, we have now developed this strategic document. It seeks to create a narrative of how CPC currently communicates and engages with people in Cuckfield, together with a strategy to enable CPC's communications to further grow and develop. We have also set out ways in which Breakthrough Communications can support the implementation of the strategy via its Council Hive (Premium) service. This will be provided to CPC at no extra cost for a period of 12 months following the adoption of the strategy.

The ways councils like CPC communicate and engage with their communities is continually evolving and changing. This includes everything from social media to communicating in-person and through more traditional methods. Therefore, for CPC to get the most from this strategy, it is crucial that it is regularly reviewed. It should also be updated at appropriate intervals to reflect changes in approach to communications, as well as CPC's priorities and objectives.

We commend this strategy to CPC and invite the council to endorse it. This includes the key recommendations and Action Plan as set out at Appendix A.

Section 2: Introduction

Cuckfield Parish Council

CPC is the local authority responsible for the administration of the civil parish of Cuckfield, which is a thriving village in the heart of Mid Sussex district, with close rail and road links to London and Gatwick Airport. The Council has 10 elected councillors who serve four-year terms, elections having just taken place in May 2023. CPC has six members of staff. CPC provides a range of services and benefits to the community including:

- Providing access to two community centres, which are available for hire, namely:
 - Cuckfield Village Hall, which was purchased by the council in 2015. As well as being utilised by a local playgroup during term time, the hall also provides a great location for parties, dance classes as well as evening activities;
 - Queen's Hall, which the council describes as being 'at the centre of village life' and provides a large facility spread across multiple rooms suited for a range of activities. The hall is also used for larger events including weddings. The council also provides a free 'Community Hub' facility at Queen's Hall every Tuesday;
- Owns and operates the Cuckfield burial ground
- Owns and operates local allotments
- Provides a skate park at Whitemans Green
- Provides grants and awards to local organisations
- Provides a range of maintenance and amenity services to the village, including maintaining the village clock, benches around the village, bus shelters, bins and some street lights on footpaths. The team also provide hanging basket displays and liaise with WSCC as the highways authority on traffic and road safety issues
- Provides public toilets in the Broad Street car park
- Acting as a communications hub to disseminate news, information events from other councils including WSCC and MSDC, as well as local organisations

CPC's current approach to communications and engagement

The council takes a proactive and positive approach to community engagement and communications. CPC has a policy on community engagement on its website, in which it makes clear its ambition to engage regularly and strategically with the community.

The council currently makes use of a number of communications methods to reach and engage with residents generally.

Its primary digital communications tool is the council website, which is very effective at conveying current news and information, whilst making it easy for residents to access services and find specific information. There are also other community websites used to disseminate information.

When it comes to social media, the council is very active on its Facebook page, and has a placeholder Twitter account that is not currently utilised.

CPC uses its Facebook page to share information relating to the work of the council as well as information relating more generally to the community, including news and events. Its current number of Facebook followers is more than 10% of the population of Cuckfield.

The council also makes use of local printed publications, such as Cuckfield Life, to share content with the community, as well as through the council's noticeboards and, when relevant, high-visibility banners and posters.

The nature of Cuckfield as a village with a strong sense of community means word of mouth engagement is also really important, whether it's from council officers or councillors.

Section 3: Pre-workshop Communications Survey Feedback Received

Ahead of the in-person workshop with councillors, we conducted a survey. This was done to ascertain perspectives on a range of issues relating to how CPC currently communicates and engages with the community, and how this could be improved.

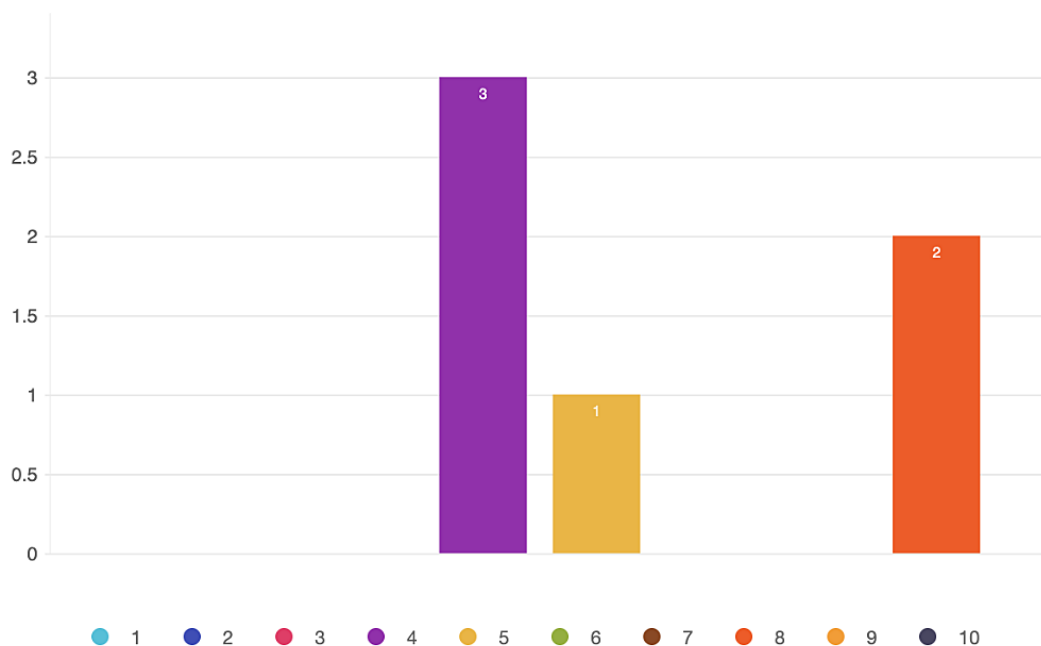
We shared the results at the beginning of the workshop, to frame the session and to get everyone thinking strategically about areas of strength and improvement. Responses to the survey were anonymous, in order to encourage everyone to have their say.

In summary, the survey responses paint a picture of how officers and members feel about CPC's approach to community engagement through its communications. There was a general feeling that there is significant room for improvement in ensuring the council is proactively and systematically reaching and engaging with different parts of the community.

A summary of responses is set out below:

Q: To what extent do you personally feel you have clarity and understanding as to what the council's current strategic communications goals and objectives are?

Average rating 5.5



Q: Thinking about the purpose of the council's communications, what do you believe the its key communications objectives should be?

Verbatim responses included:

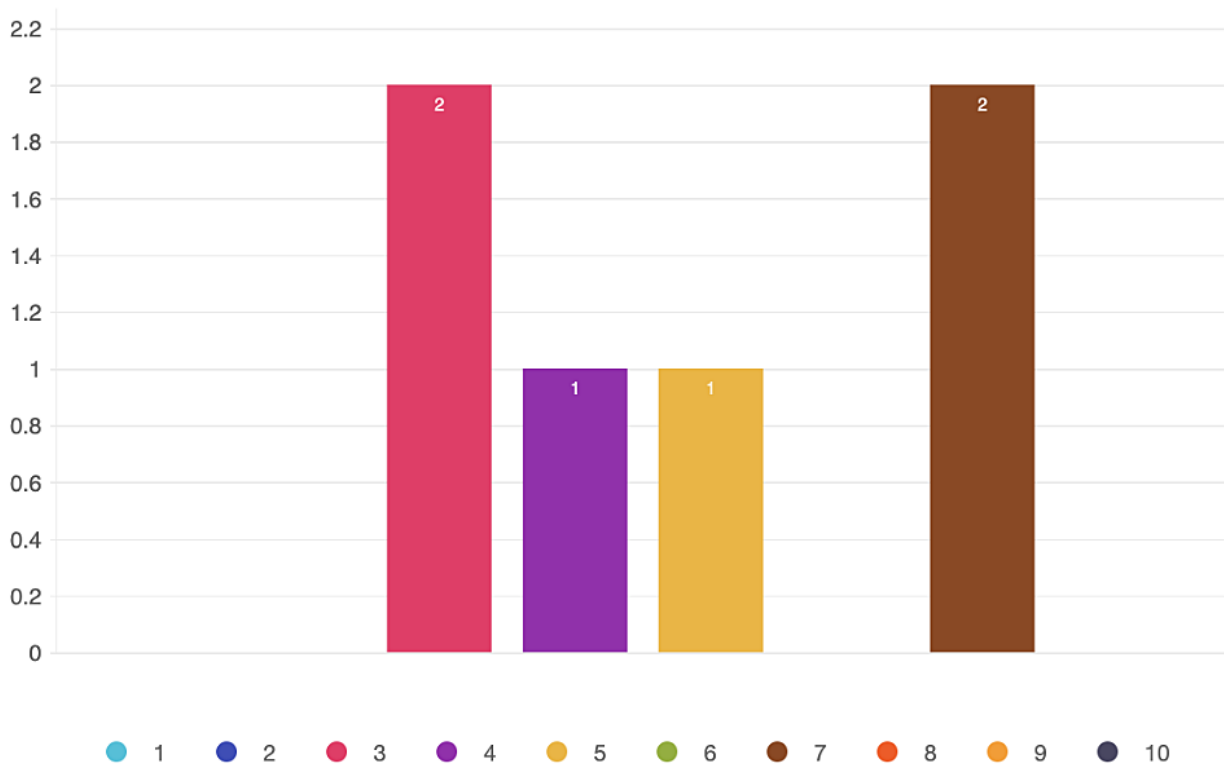
- Letting the parish know what the council is doing so they can see value for their money.
- Also being a central hub of information for services and latest news that could affect parishioners.. Like the hub in the middle of a spoked wheel.
- To help the parish feel connected and part of a community.
- Engagement with all of the community.. the well off, the unemployed, the youth and the older residents. Each needs a different approach.
- To provide the community with information about the Parish Council's role in local government, planning etc. and the activities and different events they put on for Parishioners throughout the year.
- Make residents aware of who we are, what we do and our role locally
- Engagement with all a wide range of demographics as possible, with a tailored approach for each
- Informing people about services, events, functions and news
- Engage in a way that residents look out for our communications and are able to give feedback regarding key issues
- Reaching all in the community
- Sharing news with the community, finding a way to motivate engagement so residents look out for our communications, sharing event news that encourages people to attend and welcoming feedback regarding issues the PC wants to address.
- To reach relevant (variable) target groups accurately and timely
- Reaching all in the community

These comments can also be represented as:



Q: To what extent you believe that the community feels engaged with the work of the council?

Average rating 4.83

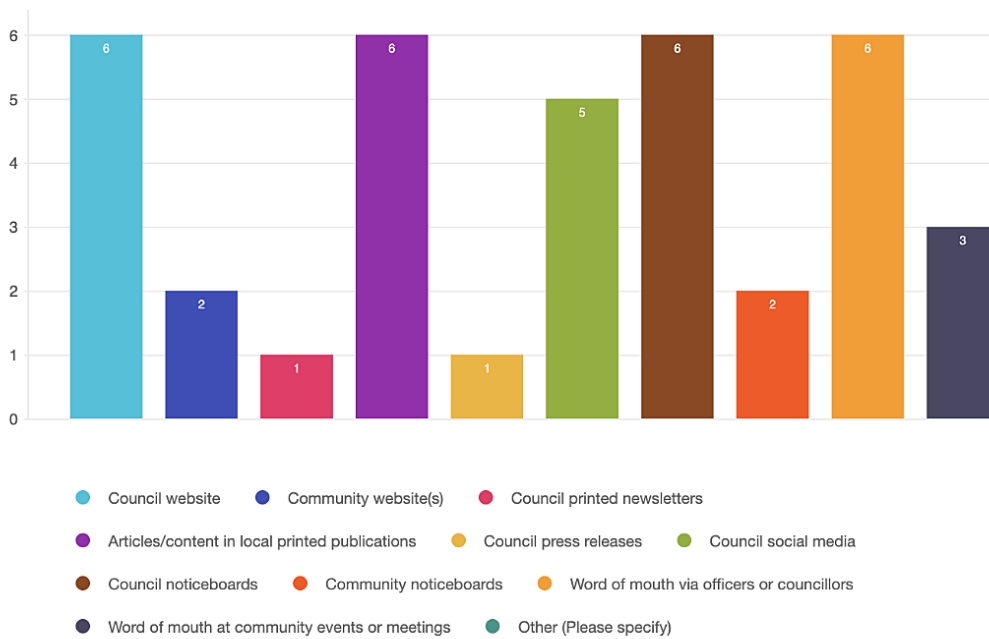


Q: What top three things would you like the community to know and understand about the council?

Verbatim responses included:

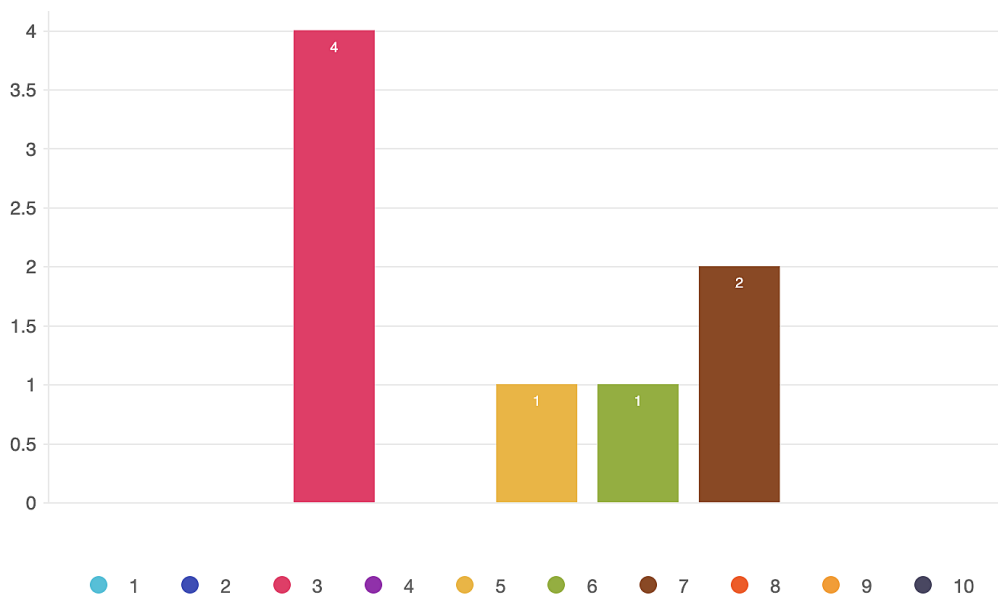
- What they do, what it costs, how and where to get help
- Their purpose and responsibilities
- The services they provide
- How hard the Parish Council, who are all volunteers, work on behalf of the community.
- What the council does (and doesn't do), why we do it, who we are and what we're planning to do
- We care about this community and are working to get the best for Cuckfield
- We want to hear what you have to say - we welcome ideas and suggestions
- What support is available - businesses, community groups etc
- What we do, how we operate, the important role of the council in planning and housing developments
- We are on their side and apolitical.
- We welcome ideas and practical suggestions.
- Shout out what we already do.
- What we are responsible for/cannot do
- Details of the events we run and how they can attend
- Role of Council.
- Activities and plans

Q What are the ways in which you are aware that the Council currently communicates with the community?



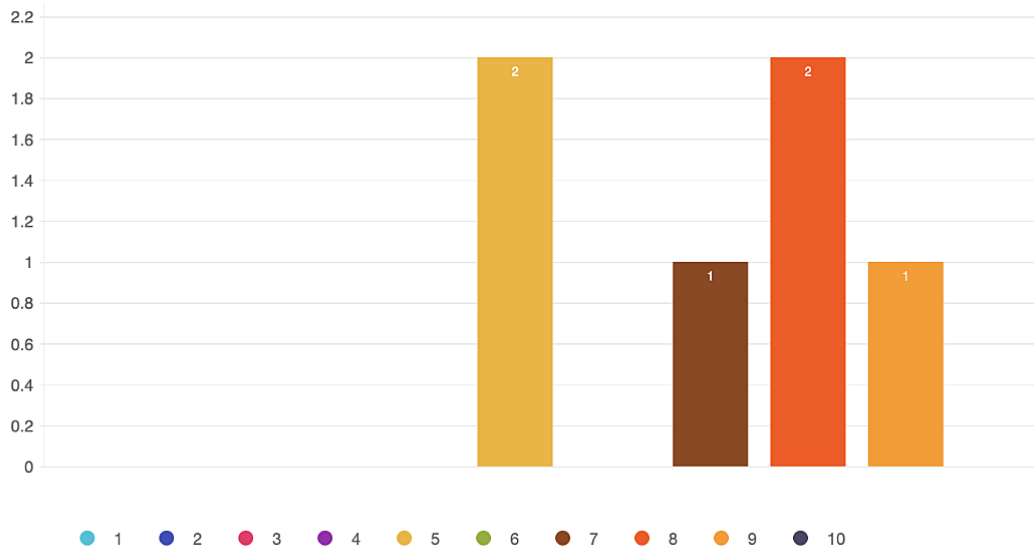
Q: To what extent do you feel that the community has a good understanding of the Council's functions and services?

Average rating 4.67



Q: Overall, how well do you think the council currently communicates with the community?

- Average rating: 7.0



Q: In your view, what are the biggest barriers preventing the Council from communicating effectively with the community?

Verbatim responses included:

- People are not aware of the council website or Facebook. Elderly people don't use either.
- Not all want to walk up to the Queens Hall to read the notice board, it would be better outside Nisa or the chip shop.
- Apathy - huge number of young people don't understand or want to understand the purpose of the council.
- There are quite a lot of older people who do not use the internet/social media regularly and therefore do not see the regular communications via the Council website, Facebook etc. and can be totally unaware of what goes on in the village.
- Maybe something like the weekly roundup should be publicised, maybe emailed to all. People could submit their email address if they want it. Lack of engagement or lack of

public interest or perceived relevance

- Do people want to engage or are their needs being met without the Council?
- Are we already doing enough?
- Better social media tagging - do we need to expand to other platforms?
- Finding the the right communication tools to reach more people
- Getting people's attention (channels/technology/messages)
- Limited resources - time, funds, people
- Newer residents not knowing much about the Parish Council (its role and work)
- No clear communication strategy

Q: If you had to name just one thing that would help the council to communicate with the community more effectively in the future what would it be?

Verbatim responses included:

- Widen the means of communication
- Cuckfield has many organisations run by volunteers. The council could have a more public face at such events. What is done by council currently is unseen and behind the scenes, and not always appreciated.
- Hold a regular slot at the monthly market, meet your councillors for a coffee and chat.

Section 4: Identified Council and Communications Strengths and Weaknesses

A key aspect of the workshop was exploring CPC's communications strengths and weaknesses. During the workshop we also considered the external opportunities and threats that might impact the way CPC communicates in the future.

Communications and council strengths

Verbatim feedback included:

- Cuckfield Life
- Assets central to village
- Nice place to live
- Proactive community
- Comms to Drs / School
- Wealth of historical local knowledge
- Councillors are active in the community
- Easy and accessible Queen's Hall location
- Quick to respond to issues raised
- Notice boards and social media updated regularly
- Regular updates in Cuckfield Life
- Use of banners in village
- Good mix of events
- Great Clerk!
- Council works well between Members

- Strong and active Clerk
- All members voted in by the community
- Regular items in local magazine
- Sam and office are a good team
- Central venues for both Queen's Hall and CVH
- Website regularly updated
- Facebook is good
- Noemi and Paul
- Aware of communications and the importance of it, and the need to improve
- Facebook groups locally
- Website is clear and easy to use
- Tech savvy residents
- Local community websites
- Staff
- Council events well advertised
- We have a business plan
- Compact village
- Make use of online tools
- Website
- Visible presence

Communications and council weaknesses

Verbatim feedback included:

- Youth engagement challenging
- Community not necessarily in need of our services all the time so hard to regularly engage
- Time
- Training on social media
- Target members of the community as mouthpieces
- Missing out on other social media channels
- Engage more with schools to reach parents as well as younger people
- We don't always reach the elderly, especially those who are not tech-savvy
- Push new initiatives such as What's On and Visit Cuckfield
- Poster design with 'wow' factor
- Older generation not tech savvy
- Not engaging effectively with new residents
- No regular youth activities (two per annum)
- More involvement with other Cuckfield activities
- Communications easily lost in the mix
- Poor exposure to councillors
- Commuter belt community / people whose life is really in London
- Lack of understanding of CPC vs MSDC vs WSCC

Section 5: A forward-looking Communications Strategy for Cuckfield Parish Council

Purpose of the Strategy

The purpose of creating a Communications Strategy for CPC is to bring together and consolidate the council's existing work in this area. The goal is to create a holistic and council-wide approach to how CPC plans to communicate and engage with the community it serves over the coming years.

The strategy outlines the specific goals and objectives that CPC wants to achieve through effective online and offline community engagement, with residents generally and with specific audiences. This will enable better alignment between CPC's communications efforts and its wider organisational and strategic goals.

The strategy sets out which audiences CPC is seeking to engage with at different times. This allows for the creation of content and messaging that resonates with each audience and therefore is likely to help boost engagement with that audience.

The communications strategy is designed to inform and help officers determine the type of content that could be created and shared through each of the council's communications platforms.

The communications strategy aims to establish a consistent CPC voice and tone across all of its communications platforms. This ensures that all communications are linked more positively and consistently to the work of the council and help to build brand recognition as well as trust with residents and the wider community.

The communications strategy also seeks to define how CPC can build relationships with its social media followers and engage with them through comments, likes, and shares. This in turn helps to build a community around CPC's social media brand, which as we set out, should also expand to at least one more social media channel.

Finally, the communications strategy helps to track and measure the success of CPC's social media. This includes tracking engagement, followers, and click-throughs to determine the effectiveness of social media efforts at different times and for different purposes.

Strategic Goals and SMART Objectives

DRAFT Communications and community engagement goals:

Taking into account the purpose of the strategy, and following the workshop held with councillors, we propose the council creates four overarching communications and community engagement goals, that sit across everything the council does with its public-facing communications:

1. **Educate and signpost:** Build even stronger awareness of who we are as a council (our people) what we do (our facilities, services and council priorities) and how we do it (demonstrating the council's approach, transparency and value for money). Offer a seamless customer service experience by signposting what CPC's facilities and services, as well as facilities and services provided by MSDC, WSCC and other public sector and third sector organisations. This will regularly include signposting to centralised information and resources such as the council's website.
2. **Update, inform and celebrate:** Continue to provide information and timely updates on topical and general issues affecting the community. Act as a conduit for the sharing of information relevant to the community and celebrate the work and successes of the council, as well as of individuals and organisations across the parish.
3. **Listen, engage and respond:** Take the pulse of the community through the seeking of proactive feedback and through online and offline surveys. Increase the council's digital reach across Facebook and other social media channels. Build sustainable long-term engagement and convey the council's tone of voice by responding as appropriate to questions and feedback from the community, especially on social media where appropriate, in order to provide a platform for residents to voice their concerns or offer suggestions for improvement.
4. **Measure success and adapt:** On social media and website communications, use easy-to-access analytics to measure the success of engagement and reach and identify areas for improvement, including engagement by demographic and understanding optimum times for engagement. This can help to ensure that digital communications efforts are effective and aligned with the council's overall goals and objectives.

DRAFT S.M.A.R.T. communications objectives

Based on the goals set out above, we propose the following as starting-point communications S.M.A.R.T. objectives. Once agreed, these objectives need further breaking down with owners assigned to each. It is possible that some objectives could have multiple owners.

Goal	SMART Objectives <i>(Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound)</i>
Educate and signpost	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use photos, videos and interviews to communicate who CPCs councillors are in their new term of office. Do this through print and digital communications across 2023 and beyond. 2. Generate at least 20 click throughs to our website per month across all social platforms by end of December 2023. 3. Reduce requests to the council relating to services provided by either MSDC or WSCC by 10% by December 2023.
Update, inform and celebrate	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Share at least 5 posts from public sector, third sector and local organisations on social media per month, either for wider community benefit or to celebrate success. 2. Create or re-use at least 1 post on social media per week celebrating or showcasing a council service or project per month, linking into the council's priorities, explaining not just what is happening but why it is taking place. 3. Post 1 video per month with the aim of humanising the council. This could be a simple look at the work of the council, 'meet a member of the CPC officer team' or 'meet a councillor'. CPC could consider one live 'Question and Answer' or feedback live video.
Listen, engage and respond	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Consider carrying out an Annual or Biannual Cuckfield Parish Council Survey, in both print and digital formats, to better understand to community's views and attitudes to the work,

	<p>services and priorities of the council, and in order to track change in these views and attitudes over time.</p> <p>2. Consider the production and distribution of CPC-branded e-newsletters per annum, in order to more strategically update the community on the work of the council.</p> <p>3. Create an e-newsletter system for the council, at no cost. This would enable residents to sign up to hear from the council and enable the council to communicate in an even more timely manner with residents.</p> <p>3. Create an Instagram account for the council with the aim of gaining at least 300 followers by the end of 2023.</p>
<p>Measure success and adapt</p>	<p>1. Identify a demographic that the council is getting low engagement from, and once a month create at least one piece of content designed to reach and engage with that group and disseminate through the council's communications channels.</p> <p>2. Use website and social media analytics to identify the best times of day for communication with different audiences on each social media channel, and adapt content plan based on these findings.</p>

Key Audiences

During the workshop carried out with officers it was identified that, as well as seeking to convey messages to **the whole community** throughout the year. CPC might wish to create content specifically designed to engage with the following audiences:

- The whole community
- Elderly residents
- Parents
- Younger people
- Vulnerable parts of the community
- People who commute to London
- New residents
- People who moved in within the last 5 years
- Developers
- Businesses
- Non-profit and community groups

Key Messages

CPC should consider how, in conjunction with the identified communications objectives above, its communications output and messages can effectively and appropriately target specific audiences. Targeting is likely to change depending on the time of the year or topic.

At any given time the council will wish to communicate a range of topical and time-sensitive content, such as information relating to current council priorities, meetings and events and local matters and issues.

However, it is important that CPC continually promotes its *core messages* throughout the year, which will enable the council to communicate its strategic aims and objectives more effectively. CPC's core social media messages are:

1. **What CPC does and what others do**

Communicating the services and facilities we provide to Cuckfield, the facilities we operate and the events we run, as well as those run by other organisations within and around our community.

2. **Who we are and what CPC stands for**

Who our Officers and Members are, whilst demystifying the roles that our Officers and Members have, and breakdown barriers between the council and its community. Communicating that CPC is a proactive, trusted and accessible council, continually working to a high standard on behalf of the whole community.

3. **Current CPC priorities**

Promoting and seeking engagement with key council priorities and matters, as required and throughout the year. Crucial in particular for the new council as it refreshes the council's business plan for the four year term ahead.

A significant proportion of communications output should convey these 'core' messages. This is known as 'evergreen' content and it should form a key part of the council's mix of output. In any given period of time, we recommend at least 40% of communications output reflects, in a clear way, some or all of the three core messages identified above. The remaining 60% can therefore be 'topical' in nature, such as forthcoming events, urgent information such as flooding, TTROs etc.

Both topical and evergreen content creation and output should be communicated in differentiated ways. For example using an appropriate mix of articles, video, infographics,

photographs and other engaging content to build awareness and engagement. Repetition of messages is important to turn the messages into a narrative. This is most effectively achieved by ensuring that core messages are repeated and built upon in volume over time.

Methods of communicating

CPC already uses many communication methods to reach and engage the community, including through its website, its Facebook page, through the Cuckfield Life publication, through its noticeboards, through in-person communication and events, and more.

However, we suggest that, in order to achieve the identified communications goals and objectives, consideration should therefore be given to:

- Social media - setting up an Instagram account for the council
- Digital communication - setting up a free e-newsletter account for the council
- Printed communication - distributing a twice yearly publication through letterboxes across Cuckfield
- Engagement - carrying out a digital and printed Annual or Biannual Parish Survey

Approach to Two-Way Engagement, especially on Social Media

CPC should approach two-way engagement and responding to questions using the following guiding principles:

1. **Be led by the council's communications strategy and other policies:** CPC should ensure policies outline how engagement will take place. This should include the tone and language used. Civility and respect issues should also be taken into account, as well the council's policy on dealing with abusive behaviour.
2. **Monitor social media channels:** CPC should monitor their social media channels regularly to identify public questions and comments . This can be done by setting up alerts and notifications for specific keywords and phrases.
3. **Respond in a timely manner:** It's important for CPC to respond to questions and comments from the public in a timely manner. Ideally, responses should be provided within one to two working days. The council should ensure that the information they provide in response to questions and comments is accurate and helpful. If they don't know the answer to a question, they should acknowledge this and commit to finding out the answer. If a question or issue raised on social media requires follow-up action, the council should make sure that this is done in a reasonably timely manner. They should also keep the person who raised the issue informed of any progress or updates if this is relevant.
4. **Use a conversational tone:** When responding to questions and comments on social media, CPC should use a conversational tone that is friendly and approachable, and consistent across each of the council's social media brands. This helps to build trust and rapport with the public.
5. **Encourage feedback and participation:** The council should encourage proactive feedback and participation from the public on social media by asking questions, running polls or signposting to surveys and consultations, and inviting comments on their posts. This helps to build engagement and a sense of community on social media.

Appendix A - Suggested Key Recommendations and Proposed Action Plan

Acti on No.	Priori ty	Suggested Recommendation	Suggested Timeline	Officer lead
1	High	Refine and adopt the proposed communications goals and S.M.A.R.T. objectives, together with the strategy outlined in this document.	ASAP	
2	High	Develop and implement a resource-appropriate content strategy and plan for all of CPC communications, ensuring that communication outputs better reflect the key communications messages identified. This plan should also take into account the proposed communications goals and S.M.A.R.T. objectives. <i>This can be supported by Breakthrough Communications at no cost to the council through access to our Council Hive service.</i>	1-3 months	
3	Medi um	Create a free e-newsletter system for the council, enabling residents to sign up to hear from the council and to enable officers to communicate information in a timely manner and when appropriate to do so. Ensure the system is GDPR compliant. <i>This can be supported by Breakthrough Communications at no cost to the council through access to our Council Hive service.</i>	3-4 months	
4	Medi um	Create a 'professional' Instagram account, and integrate it with the council's existing CPC Facebook page, in order to reach and		

Acti on No.	Priori ty	Suggested Recommendation	Suggested Timeline	Officer lead
		engage with younger demographics in particular. <i>This can be supported by Breakthrough Communications at no cost to the council through access to our Council Hive service.</i>		
5	Medi um	Update and refresh the CPC's existing communications and social media policy documents and consider adopting the suggested Civility and Respect policy supplement.	1-3 months	
6	Medi um	Create and implement a plan for more video content on each of the CPC's social media channels. A 'quick win' for this could be introducing both new and returning councillors.	1-3 months	
7	Low	Create a plan to seek feedback from the community generally on their attitudes towards the council's services and priorities and other areas, through a community survey or similar. This is also a great opportunity to convey key council messages.	6-9 months	
8	Low	Consider what opportunities there are in the 2023/4 budget and calendar for carrying out social media advertising on Facebook and Instagram platforms. This would allow for the testing of advertising in order to reach and engage with a wider audience, who do not currently follow or engage the council on	6-12 months	

Action No.	Priority	Suggested Recommendation	Suggested Timeline	Officer lead
		<p>social media.</p> <p><i>This can be supported by Breakthrough Communications at no cost to the council through access to our Council Hive service.</i></p>		