



Bracknell Forest Council

Communications and Marketing Strategy 2024-28



Foreword

Effective communication is the cornerstone of any successful organisation, this includes public sector organisations and indeed Bracknell Forest Council.

We have a duty to make sure that everyone we serve knows what we are doing, when and why. This is where good communications play a crucial role.

Easy to read, consistent and timely communication can inform, educate, and change behaviour. It can change lives for the better, provide support and guidance, and be vital in the time of crisis.

This strategy sets out what good proactive communication is and how we will achieve it. It gives us a clear plan of action and sets out the aims and objectives based on what residents, staff and councillors have told us is important to them.

It also considers that communication channels are ever evolving, with many digital platforms and opportunities available. While we need to embrace these channels and grow with them; we recognise that not everyone in our community has the ability or desire to access vital information electronically.

Residents and communities are at the heart of Bracknell Forest and this strategy further solidifies the council's commitment to put residents first, working together to grow sustainable, resilient, and inclusive communities.

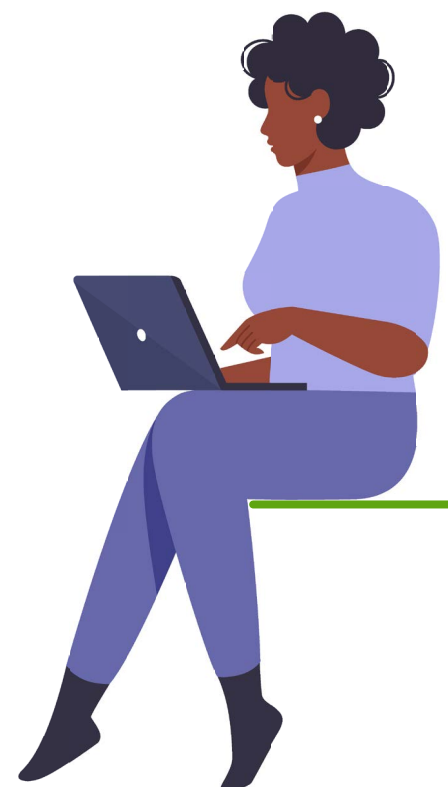
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Executive member for economic development and regeneration (with responsibility for communications and marketing)



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Introduction

Bracknell Forest is a small unitary authority that has big ambitions for the borough, working jointly with residents and our partners.

The Council Plan 2023-27 puts residents at its core and recognises the need to grow with the community now to shape tomorrow.

Council services must champion the clear commitment to putting residents first and to grow sustainable and inclusive communities. This includes communications and marketing, so this strategy and subsequent action plans will reflect that important ambition.

All our communications must reflect the council’s key priorities:

- **Engaged and healthy communities**
To help create opportunities where people can succeed, be happy and feel safe.
- **Thriving and connected economy**
The local economy includes many different aspects, such as businesses, jobs, skills, accommodation, and services.
- **Green and sustainable environment**
Our environment includes everything around us, our parks, our cycleways and our road networks.
- **An ambitious, resilient, inclusive and sustainable organisation.**



They must also support the principles that underpin the overarching plan:

- Equality, diversity, and inclusion
- Health in all policies
- Climate and sustainability

The responsibility for delivering marketing communications, in line with the ambitions in the Council Plan, lies with the council’s corporate communications and marketing team. Council-wide routine publicity officers will also support the strategy, while the responsibility for day-to-day communications (for example letters, emails, presentations) lies with all council staff.

This strategy does not cover emergency communications, a separate plan is established for reactive and crisis communications. It also does not cover the council’s approach to community engagement or consultation but will support work in those areas.

Research and feedback

To produce this strategy, the communications and marketing team carried out extensive online research, surveys with the public and staff and several staff and councillor workshops. (See Appendix B for details). This feedback has shaped the aim, objectives and approach.

Aim

The overall aim of the strategy is to keep communities informed by sharing easy to understand and timely updates on issues and services that matter.

We will explain our decisions, clear up any misunderstandings, and make sure our community knows what services the council provides.

By doing this, we hope to build trust, maintain and safeguard the council’s reputation and make sure the community feels connected and well-informed.

Themes and objectives

Following a series of workshops, surveys and significant research, several common themes became apparent for how we communicate with stakeholders.

The themes are:

- Being clear, accessible and inclusive
- Being accurate, timely and responsive
- Challenging misconceptions and inaccuracies
- Being human and less corporate in tone and content
- Being open, honest and transparent
- Being conscious of digital exclusion

In addition, councillors were clear there was a desire to take the council to the public with the theme of ‘bringing the council to you’ emerging as key.

Using these themes and the Council Plan’s priorities, the objectives for the strategy are:

1. To develop compelling and informative campaigns that align to the Council Plan and/ or emerging issues using the OASIS model (Objectives, Audience, Strategy, Implementation, Scoring). This will help to provide accurate and up-to-date information to stakeholders in a timely manner.
2. To enhance clarity and use appropriate translation and interpretation. This will ensure information can be easily understood by diverse audiences.
3. To simplify language, use visuals, and make full use of communication platforms for accessibility. This includes developing non-textual communication such as videos, podcasts, imagery, and livestreams.
4. To provide regular updates that myth bust misconceptions, provide clear reasoning for decisions and explain emerging issues. This includes proactively challenging inaccuracies in the media, social media or in the community – quickly, openly and honestly.
5. To make content more human through using case studies, examples, real people and places; making it more relatable, celebrating our successes and aiding connection.
6. To be digital first in approach but not digitally exclusive – using traditional channels where there is a need or gap. This includes more frequent use and development of drop-in sessions and events – bringing the council to people.



Audience

The key groups we will communicate with over the next four years are identified below. This is not an exhaustive list, but they are considered the main stakeholders for Bracknell Forest Council. Communication may be direct or by third parties or partners.

- Residents (everyone who lives within the borough)
- Businesses (big, small and medium business and representative groups)
- Staff (and contractors, where appropriate)
- People who work in or visit the borough regularly
- BFC councillors
- Town and parish councils – staff and councillors
- Voluntary, community, and faith sector organisations
- Partners (e.g. The Lexicon, health and emergency services)
- Local business organisations (e.g. (Business Improvement District, chamber of commerce)
- Business representatives from significant and/or national organisations, who may impact on local issues
- MPs and national government, where appropriate
- Local, regional and trade, national media
- Neighbouring local authorities



Channels

The council has access to many communications channels both free and paid for.

Given current financial constraints, free channels must be used as default. If free channels are exhausted and/or underperforming or there is evidence that free channels will not reach a particular group, then paid for channels should be considered.

Digital channels should be used as default as they are cheaper and have a lower carbon footprint. However, we recognise that not everyone is online and a small percentage of people still prefer traditional forms of communication. Therefore, we will need to use some traditional/print channels from time-to-time to be effective, inclusive, and accessible to all.

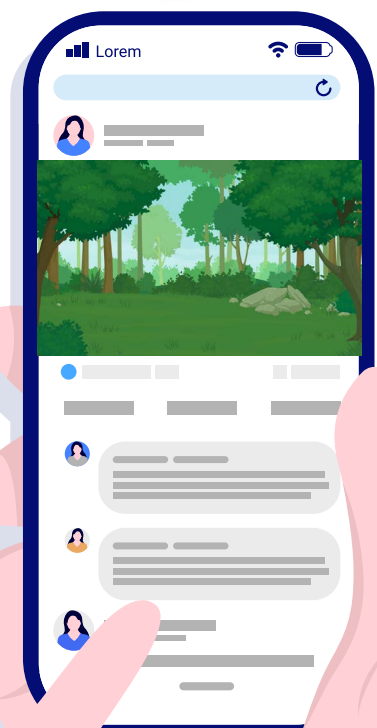
Free channels the council has access to:

- Social media (organic)
- Website/intranet
- E-newsletters and email
- Word of mouth/onward sharing (including councillors)
- News releases/press briefings (although, final messaging cannot be guaranteed)
- Briefings/webinars – online and offline
- Drop-in sessions (if held in council buildings)
- Partner magazines, websites and social media
- Town centre digital screens

There is the opportunity to communicate more widely through engagement activities and events too. This may include public two-way communication meetings (sometimes referred to as Town Hall meetings).

Paid channels or channels with a cost (e.g. printing)

- Social media adverts/Google display ads
- Influencers
- Paid for press/broadcast adverts
- Residents' hard copy magazine
- Posters/billboards/out of home (e.g. ad vans/ bus shelter ads, bus backs)
- Leaflets, letters and brochures
- Drop-in sessions (non-council buildings) and events
- Geo-targeted digital adverts



Spokespeople

The council will always use the most appropriate spokesperson for each proactive and reactive communication. As per the council's media protocols, executive members will be offered first refusal for anything that is within their portfolio (unless pre-election publicity rules apply).

If the executive member is unavailable or it is during the pre-election period, then the relevant executive director or assistant director will be approached. It may be appropriate for a subject matter expert or head of service to act as a spokesperson, but this will be agreed by the relevant executive or assistant director first.

All spokespeople must undertake full media training. Councillors should not comment on anything other than what is within their portfolio.

Third party publicity

The council has an agreed approach to providing third party publicity to organisations, which safeguards its position and reputation. This is available on the intranet. Comments should not be given outside the terms of that policy.

Partnership publicity

The council will always support its partners in helping to get information to local audiences, where appropriate.

The council will share this information via its relevant channels but is not responsible for drafting the messages or taking the communication lead for third parties or partners.

Emergency and reactive communications

This strategy sets out the council's approach to planned and proactive communications. Reactive communications, including emergencies, should always be directed to the communications team, which will look in to the most appropriate response and action.

The team has an emergency plan that will be followed in a crisis. Comments should not be given without consulting the communications team.

A communications officer is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Out of hours support for emergencies must be requested through Forestcare.



How we will achieve our goals

We will develop campaigns linked to organisational priorities that use the most relevant channels and target the appropriate audiences. This will include working with partners and other council teams.

These campaigns can be internal, external or both. They will be set and reviewed annually and will be prioritised in three categories:



Gold – full communications and marketing support required. High profile project/issue with significant reputational risk or gain. Likely to require support for at least six months.



Silver - full communications and marketing support required. Medium profile project/issue with a reputational risk or gain. Likely to require support for at least six months.



Bronze – light touch communications and marketing support required. Important campaigns linked to Council Plan priorities or underpinning strategies but time limited or low risk to reputation.

Anything out of the above scope will fall to routine publicity officers.

We will use the well-recognised OASIS model for all campaign planning and delivery. This comprises: Objectives, Audience, Strategy, Implementation, Scoring (evaluation).

To support the above in achieving the communications strategy objectives, a number of one-off projects will also be undertaken over the next four years.

Projects to achieve objects include:

Activity	Objective	Year 1 priority?
To develop an annual campaign plan based on the gold, silver, bronze level of support needed.	1	Yes
To introduce a communications request form based on the OASIS model for comms and a general request form for graphic design to aid prioritisation/ resources linked to Council Plan themes and objectives.	1	Yes
To carry out a review of campaigns for success and measured outcomes.	1	Yes
To plan a new campaign focussed entirely on promotion of 'what the council does'/its services – using all channels available. Like the previous 'Our Day' campaigns but with longevity.	1, 4, 5	No
To procure a new translation and interpretation contract and provide an accompanying accessibility guide and training for staff.	2, 3	Yes
To carry out a thorough review and update of the council's corporate identity standards and consistently challenge poor, off brand or inaccessible materials.	2, 3	No
To create a new digital communications plan looking at what channels should be used and developed, when, why and how.	3	No
To trial the effectiveness of regular (quarterly) press briefings on critical/emerging themes and subjects.	4, 6	Yes
To carry out a full refresh of the council's emergency communications plan.	4	No
To provide refreshed training and guidance to routine publicity offers - including regular face-to-face contact.	4, 5	Yes
To refresh of the council's media protocols, third party publicity standards and social media policy/guidance.	4, 5, 6	No
To develop a new internal communications plan, which is refreshed and evaluated annually.	4, 5, 6	No
To move away from a news release first approach – trialling other methods of communication and/or marketing as first approach (e.g. podcasts, webinars)	5, 6	No
To thoroughly review the council's all-household magazine – rebranding and relaunching and developing an accompanying e-magazine.	6	Yes
To carry out a skills gap analysis annually and identify appropriate training for communications staff and routine publicity officers.	1-6	Yes
Produce additional guidance and provide appropriate training for councillors on channel management, when to communicate and how they can support central communication campaigns through their networks.	1,4,6	Yes

This table will be refreshed each year with progress, evaluation and new priorities linked to the overall objectives.

Evaluation

Feedback from staff and councillor workshops suggested that evaluation was an area for improvement.

There is now a bigger demand and desire for this level of detail and understanding given the recent change in political administration.

Therefore, we will develop a quarterly tracker for executive members, corporate management team and the assistant director lead for communications.

It will cover:

- Campaign successes/milestones/risks and issues (including tangible outcomes).
- Media monitoring for issues, successes, challenge and sentiment. (This needs to take in to account newspaper licensing restrictions.)
- Survey results
- Social media statistics
- Click through rates and e-newsletter distribution
- A horizon scanner of media opportunities/risks
- Intranet and website news statistics

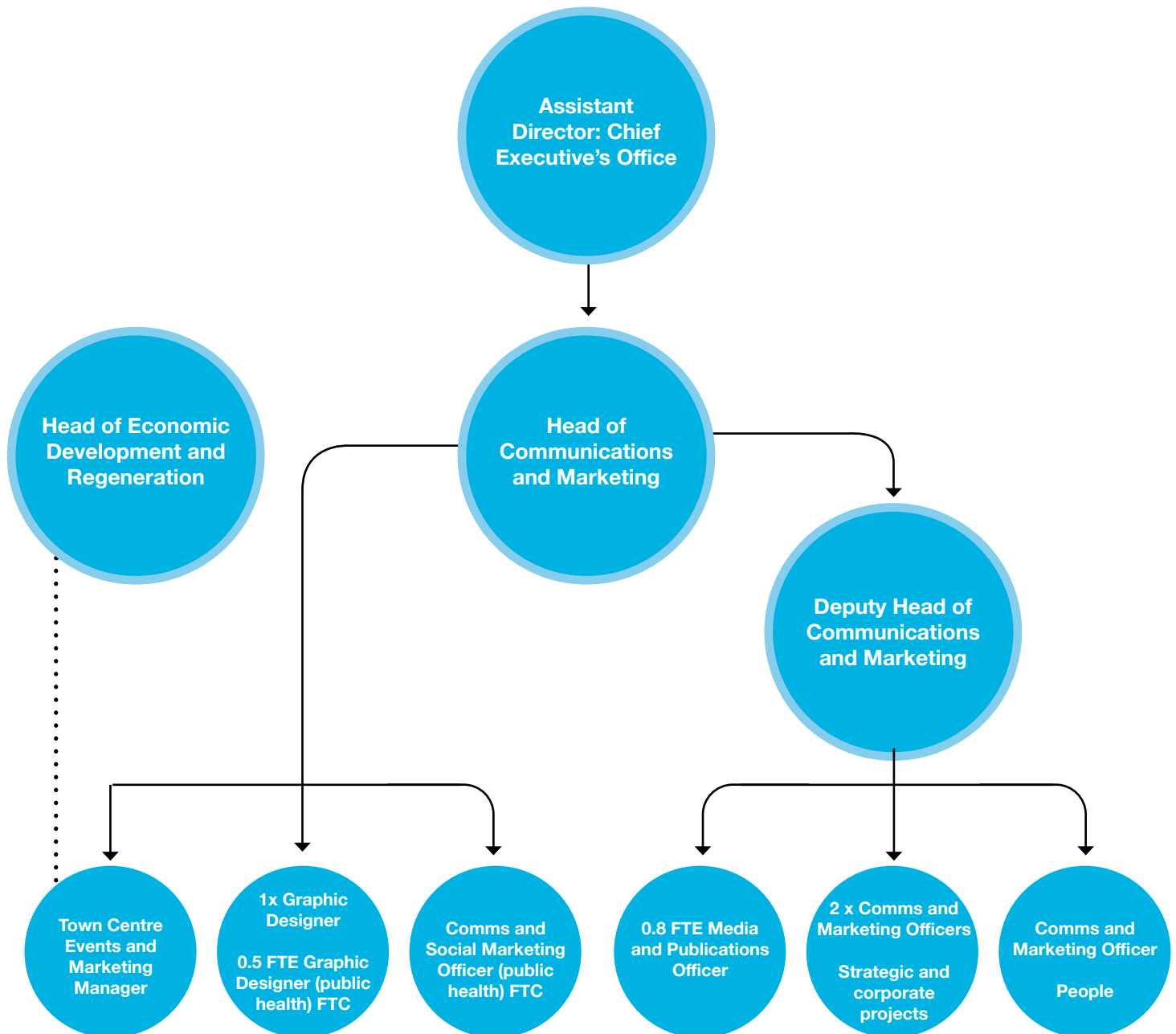
It will also be made available for all staff on the intranet in the interest of being accountable and transparent.

The success of the overall strategy will be measured against:

- The percentage of people saying they find the council's social media channels are informative and useful (see Appendix C for 2023 results). Aim is for at least 50 per cent 'extremely' or 'sometimes'.
- The percentage of people saying the council's social media channels are easy to understand (see Appendix C for 2023 results) Aim is for at least 95 per cent 'yes' or 'sometimes' / 'most of the time'.
- An increase in followers of 10 per cent on main social channels.
- Engagement on social media channels being at least 3 per cent (averaged).
- The percentage of people saying they find Forest Views and Forest Views Extra a good source of information, they are enjoyable and easy to read (see Appendix C for 2023 results). Aim is for at least 85 per cent agree or strongly agree.
- The percentage of people saying Town & Country/ Town & Country extra (re-branded) is a valuable source of information (see Appendix C for previous results). Aim for over 85 per cent 'yes' / agree.



Appendix A - communications team structure and responsibilities



Following a transformation review of the communications and marketing service in 2016/17, the council's approach to communications and marketing was split into two distinct functions: strategic/ high level and business as usual/ low level.

Corporate team

The council's corporate team focuses on strategic communications for major projects and transformation/business change as well as anything that poses a significant risk to reputation or requires large scale behaviour change. [Responsibilities - Comms or routine publicity \(sharepoint.com\)](#). The corporate team also runs the council's press office and is the lead for out of hours emergency communication support. A communications officer is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year for emergencies.

Routine publicity

Council directorates are responsible for low-level and day-to-day news and events promotion via their trained 'routine publicity' officers. Routine publicity is defined as business-as-usual internal or external marketing communications. This could be routine awareness campaigns, events, warning and informing, consultations, announcements, and recognition. A list of routine publicity officers and a toolkit is available on the intranet: [Routine publicity toolkit \(sharepoint.com\)](#).

Staff

Subject matter experts are responsible for routine and general stakeholder updates. All staff have a responsibility to communicate day-to-day and business as usual information to residents and other stakeholders.

Graphic design and branding

Our graphic designers safeguard our overall visual presence. Our brand must be used on all communications including, social and digital media, promotional materials and presentations. Our identity standard sets out how the brand is presented visually. We have an [in-house design service](#), which is free of charge to all council services. Anything that is of brand and/or inaccessible must be reproduced and redistributed in the correct brand and format.

Advisory services

The communications team can also advise on:

- photo consent and copyright for publicity
- the local authority code for publicity ([Recommended code of practice for local authority publicity - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#))
- the pre-election period publicity restrictions (previously referred to as 'purdah')
- third party endorsements and publicity protocol
- social media protocol and policy for personal, professional and corporate use
- plain English
- translation and interpretation
- media training

While the communications and marketing team supports work being carried out under engagement, formal responsibility lies with the council's community engagement and equalities team.



Appendix B - research

Desk-based research

- LGA head of communications surveys and residents' satisfaction surveys.
- OFCOM surveys (news consumption in the UK 2023, communications sector, children's media use and attitudes).
- Sector experts: Comms 2.0, Dan Slee, Comms Creative (blogs and insights in news consumption, analytics and trends).
- Other public sector communications plans, including other councils, NHS trusts, fire services, and the Government Communication Service/ UK Government Communication Plan 2023/24

Local surveys

- Bracknell Forest Council residents' surveys
- Internal communications survey
- Town & Country/ Town & Country Extra readership surveys
- Social media and local news survey

Workshops

- Staff workshops x 5 (approximately 55 attendees)
- Councillor workshop (approximately 20 attendees)
- Executive member for economic development and regeneration (lead councillor for communications and marketing)
- Leader of the council and chief executive

Workshops focussed on three key questions:

1. How accessible are our communications?
2. What do we do well in terms of communications?
3. What improvements could we make?

The results from the workshops can be summarised as follows:

How accessible are our communications?

We've made progress but not all communications are accessible.

There are inconsistencies, specifically with staff-led/ business as usual communications. Some people with disabilities/ who are neurodivergent may struggle to understand some of our communications.

We rely too much on digital communications, there is a smaller demographic (possibly older people and/ or frontline staff) who are not online or do not wish to go online to get out communications. More use of community assets like noticeboards, GP surgeries, poster sites should be considered.

What do we do well?

We are very agile and responsive in approach.

We have a consistent tone of voice for external marketing communications.

The use of more video recently has been valued and welcomed.

Branding by the graphic design service is always strong.

Newsletters are well written and presented – segmenting external newsletters into topics is useful.

We have improved our use of plain English and using more visual communications.

Town & Country is well received by older residents.

Internal roadshows are valued and make information easy to understand.

Organisational goals and priorities are well represented.



What do we do less well/ where could we make improvements?

Not enough non-textual communication – explore things like podcasts, webinars, live streams, infographics, easy read.

Accessibility needs to be more consistent across the whole council as a first thought rather than an add-on.

Evaluation could be stronger in terms of highlighting our communications successes/ metrics and learning.

Streamlining staff communications (content and channels) would help people focus on what's important.

Communications team could host drop-in sessions for staff wanting more information, help or support.

Too many recognition/ awareness days publicised – make these more human/ use case studies to make more relevant.

A more consistent approach to misinformation/ questions on social media is needed.

Staff communications are too Time Square centric.

Use more Bracknell Forest photos/ images and local people – less reliance on national/ stock images.

More information about what services we cover, what our staff do.

Using real case studies in campaigns – help to break down corporate tone/ be more friendly.

A staff guide to what channels work best for certain demographics/ frequency etc would be helpful.

General comments

To consider how the website fits with communications – these have two distinct strategies.

There are a host of online tools available or tools within Microsoft that help with accessibility but not everyone knows they are there/ how to use them.

Consider using QR codes more regularly.

We have accessibility and better writing guides available but staff aren't always aware of them or know where to find them.

We need a definition of what is accessibility and how to communicate effectively with each group.

Distribution of Town & Country – does it go to all flats?

Non-corporate communications are not always laid out as well as they should be and sometimes have typos.

Highways updates are well received – especially with a map (although, maps are not always accessible).

Consider all formats – is the user going to get information via phone/ tablet/ laptop? What works best.

More consideration needs to be given when conducting consultations – do we need all the data we collect/ is this a barrier to people giving opinions?

There was a split between some people saying we advertise events too much/ too far in advance against we don't publicise things far enough in advance/ widely enough.



Appendix C - headline survey results for evaluation benchmarking

Do you find the content of Bracknell Forest Council's social media informative and useful? (social media survey 2023)

Yes, extremely - 21.48%
 Yes, sometimes - 32.89%
 It's okay - 24.16%
 Not really - 8.05%
 Not at all - 7.38%
 No response - 6.04%

Do you find the content of Bracknell Forest Council's social media easy to understand (social media survey 2023)

Yes - 71.14%
 Sometimes - 14.09%
 No - 8.05%
 No response - 6.71%

Forest Views is a good source of information to update me as to what's happening across the council? (Internal comms survey 2023)

Strongly agree - 41.18%
 Agree - 52.94%
 Neutral - 5.88%
 Disagree - 0%
 Strongly Disagree - 0%

I enjoy reading Forest Views? (Internal comms survey 2023)

Strongly agree - 41.18%
 Agree - 52.94%
 Neutral - 5.88%
 Disagree - 0%
 Strongly Disagree - 0%

Forest Views is easy to read? (Internal comms survey 2023)

Strongly agree - 32.35%
 Agree - 58.82%
 Neutral - 5.88%
 Disagree - 2.94%
 Strongly Disagree - 0%

I enjoy reading Forest Views Extra? (Internal comms survey 2023)

Strongly agree - 17.65%
 Agree - 61.76%
 Neutral - 14.71%
 Disagree - 0%
 Strongly Disagree - 0%
 No response - 5.88%

Forest Views Extra keeps me up-to-date on what's going on across the organisation? (Internal comms survey 2023)

Strongly agree - 23.5%
 Agree - 67.65%
 Neutral - 5.88%
 Disagree - 0%
 Strongly Disagree - 0%
 No response - 2.94%

Forest Views Extra is easy to read? (Internal comms survey 2023)

Strongly agree - 23.5%
 Agree - 70.59%
 Neutral - 2.94%
 Disagree - 0%
 Strongly Disagree - 0%
 No response - 2.94%

Town & Country provides valuable information on council news and updates (T&C readership survey 2023)

Yes, always - 25%
 Yes, sometimes - 50%
 No, never - 25%

Town & Country provides valuable information on council news and updates (T&C readership survey 2021)

Yes, always - 57.14%
 Yes, sometimes - 37.76%
 No, never - 4.08%
 No response - 1.02%





If you have a disability or long-term condition and require a 'reasonable adjustment' to communicate with us, please let us know: 01344 352323 or comms@bracknell-forest.gov.uk