

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

2020-23

Delivering a Gravesham to be proud of

Gravesham
Borough Council



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INTRODUCTION

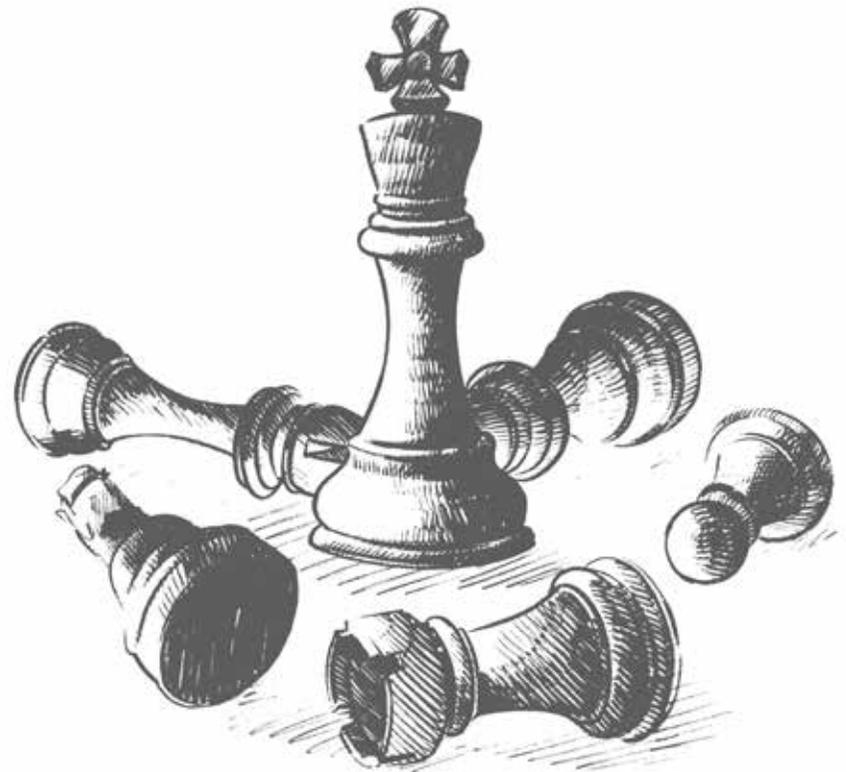
Gravesham Borough Council is committed to delivering a Gravesham to be proud of for residents, businesses and visitors and building a strong and trusted brand.

The effectiveness of how we deliver our vision is determined to a significant extent by the quality of our communications and engagement.

This strategy outlines the approach we will take to ensure our communications and engagement activity is the best possible and helps to achieve our vision.

Effective communications is the responsibility of all councillors and officers across the council and this strategy has their support.

Communications and engagement sits at the heart of all the council does. It is vital the we engage with our residents, businesses, partners and stakeholders, especially in challenging times and periods of national political uncertainty that often reflect (unfairly) on local politicians and authorities.



AIMS

The Communications Strategy will ensure the work of the council to deliver a Gravesham to be proud of is communicated clearly and concisely to our residents, businesses, stakeholders, councillors and officers.

The strategy will support the aims and objectives of the council's Corporate Plan 2019-2023.

We will communicate clearly, openly, accurately, regularly and at appropriate times with residents, business and our partners, and throughout the council. Our communications will recognise the diverse nature of the Borough's communities and will promote and support a culture of inclusion and cohesion.

Communication and engagement will be two-way, with channels freely and easily available for our community to engage with us, recognising that there are sections of all communities that do not have access to, or a desire to use, digital channels.

Above all, this communications and engagement strategy will build a strong and trusted brand for the council.



SUPPORTING THE CORPORATE PLAN

The council's Corporate Plan 2019-2023 has the over-arching aim of 'Delivering a Gravesham to be proud of' and is based on three core objectives:

People: Delivering a proud community, where residents can call a safe, clean and attractive Borough their home;



Place: Delivering a dynamic Borough, defined by a vibrant and productive local economy, taking advantage of growth in the area and supported by its strong and active community.



Progress: Delivering an entrepreneurial authority, commercial in outlook and committed to continuous service improvement, underpinned by a skilled workforce and strong governance environment.



All proactive council communications activity for the period of the local plan will relate directly to one of these.

Above all, this Communications Strategy will be clearly linked to the promotion of one or more of the core objectives, and will therefore support the Corporate Plan.

AN EVER-CHANGING EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

The impact of COVID-19 on the council and the community it supports is still to be fully understood and the recovery from the pandemic will shape much of our communications work during the period of the Corporate Plan.

As with all local authorities, before COVID-19, Gravesham was emerging from a period of austerity where the focus has been on financial prudence and the resulting pressures on frontline services.

The day-to-day impacts of those pressures will not have gone unnoticed by the people we represent and work for.

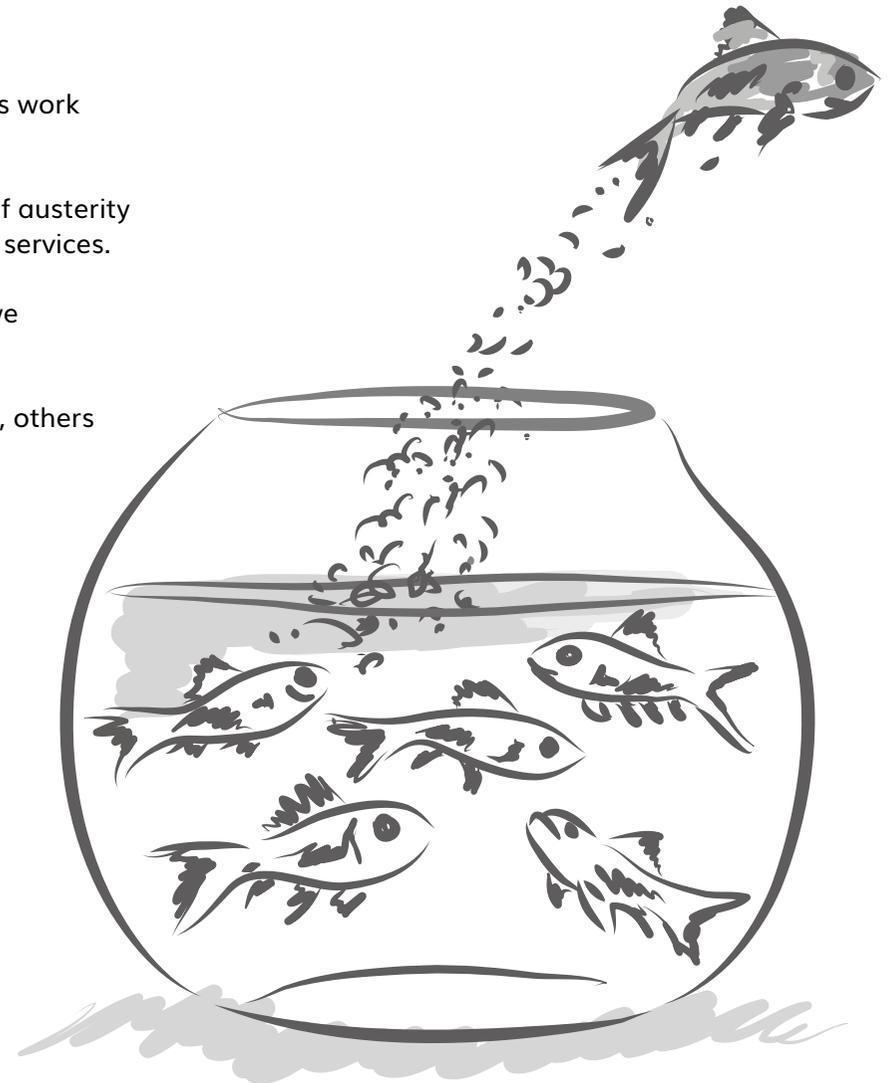
While some will have had an understanding of the twin challenges the council has faced, others will not and will see the authority in a bad light.

COVID-19 apart, the future remains challenging with the uncertainty surrounding the implications of Brexit coupled with continued reductions in central Government funding requiring the council to adopt a more commercial approach to its operations.

The council must also comply with central Government policies such as meeting targets for the number of new homes in the Borough, which will necessitate open and honest consultations with local people.

All this is set against a backdrop of a proliferation of media channels, social media networks and other methods that local people and businesses can use to get local news, voice their opinion and influence others, both positively and negatively.

The Communications Strategy must recognise the fast-changing environment in which the council operates and allow for flexibility in messaging and the choice of channels used to engage with our audiences.



EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Gravesham lies within an area of growth and opportunity.

Pre-COVID-19 the economy of the south east was one of the best performing in the UK. The Borough falls within the Thames Gateway where central Government has pledged to support the creation 1.3 million jobs and one million new homes in north Kent, South Essex and East London by 2050.

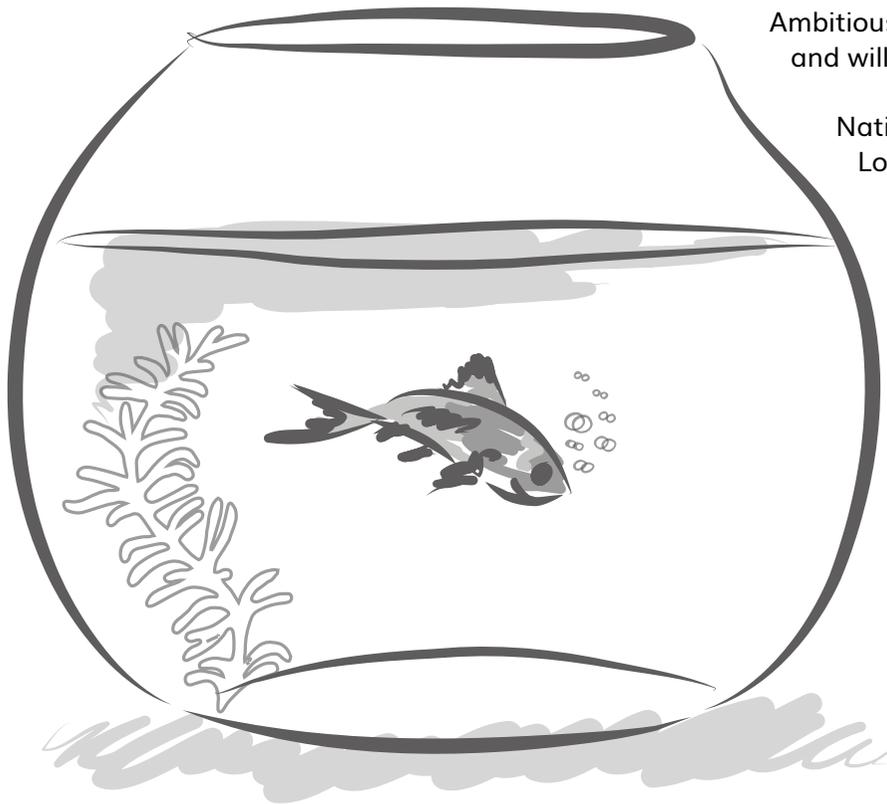
Ambitious plans for the regeneration of Gravesend town centre are beginning to bear fruit and will move ahead at pace over the period of the council's Corporate Plan.

Nationally significant infrastructure projects such as the Lower Thames Crossing and London Resort will present opportunities as well as challenges.

Through working in partnership with the agencies and developers delivering these and other projects, this Communications Strategy will ensure our local residents and businesses are informed of progress every step of the way.

Through our communications, we will show how the council is working to achieve the best outcomes for those who live and work in the Borough and to minimise any negative impacts on their day-to-day lives.

Through engagement, we will ensure the voices of those we represent and work for are heard when decisions are being made and while these and other projects are being delivered.

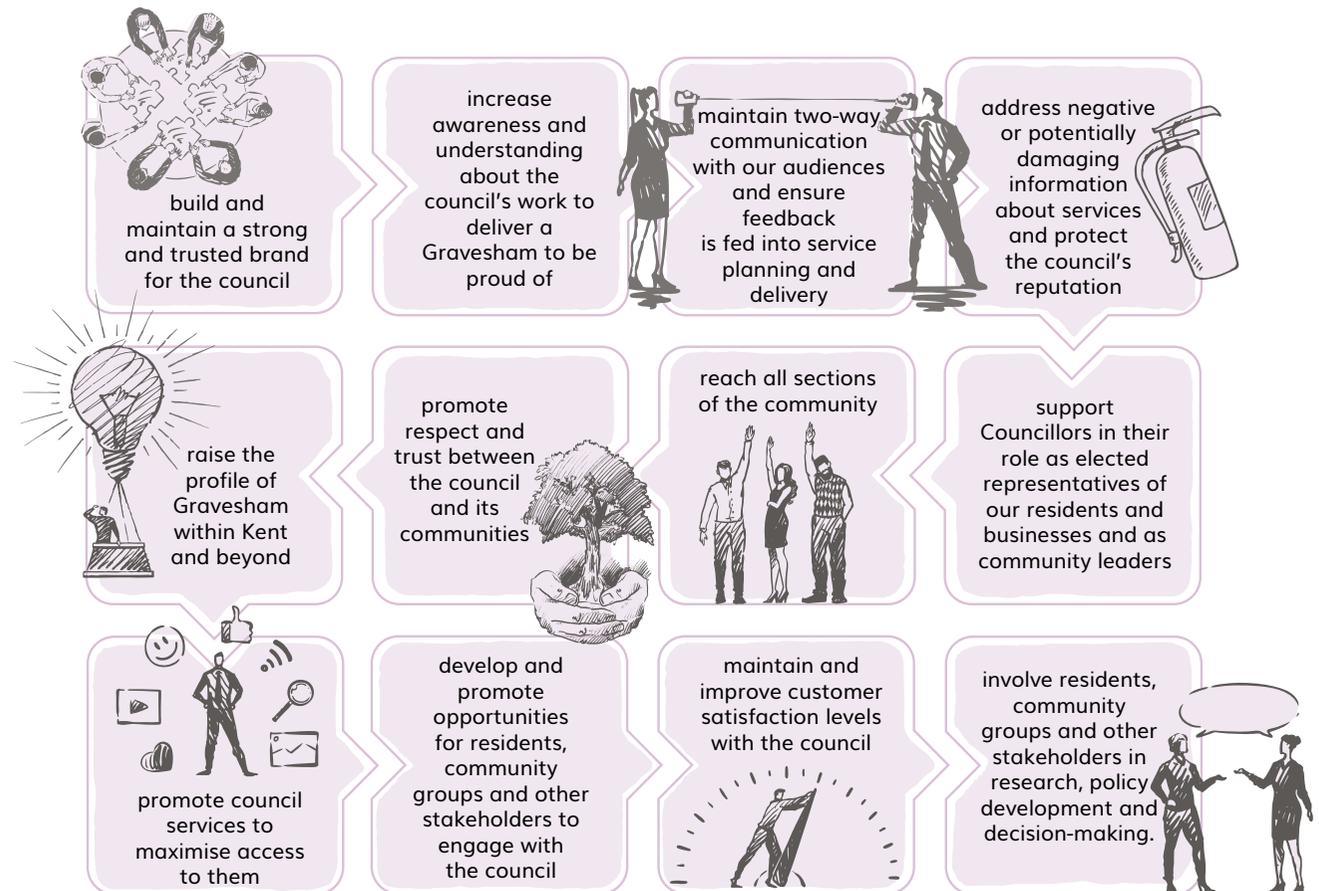


COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

Our external communications and engagement activities will be:

- two-way – both informing and listening
- relevant and appropriate for target audiences
- cost-effective
- easily understood by all
- consistent and timely
- honest, open and accountable

Our objectives are to:



Our internal communications will:

- **Enable and support members and staff in maintaining a strong trusted brand for the council**
- **ensure that our workforce is involved, informed and engaged so that they can represent and champion the council in the community**
- **promote and uphold the council's reputation**

A strong internal communications strategy ensures officers are well informed and supported, helping them deliver their objectives.

Internal communication takes many forms, from email newsletters and bulletins to all staff, posts on the council's intranet, to more formal cascading of information via team briefings, annual appraisals, regular one-to-ones with managers and informal conversations within and between teams and through trade union representatives.

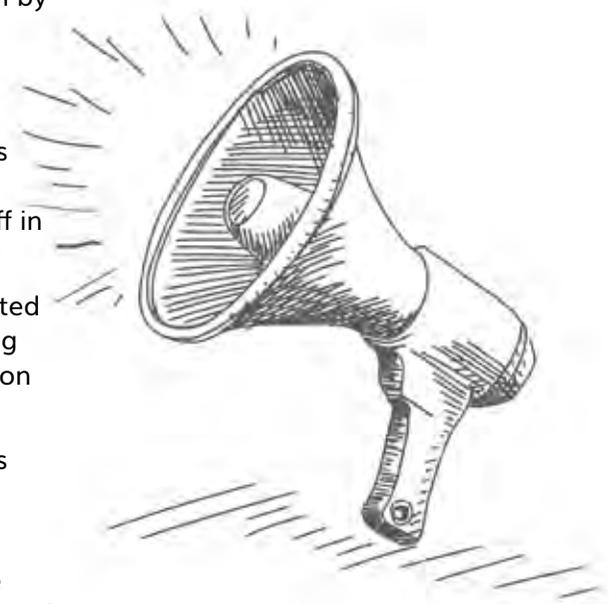
Some but not all of these routes will be driven by the communications team.

However, the Communications Manager is available to advise on the most appropriate method for communicating specific messages and will work with colleagues to ensure our internal communications are reaching all staff in a timely and efficient manner.

We recognise that some colleagues have limited access to digital channels during their working day and alternative methods of communication need to be employed.

Staff feedback will be encouraged at all times and our response to that feedback will be communicated clearly and promptly.

How we communicate with colleagues will be regularly reviewed, including seeking the views of staff on how we can best keep them informed.



HOW WE COMMUNICATE AND ENGAGE

The council communicates with its various audiences through a variety of channels, from telephone call handlers, via the internet and webchat, through social media and via the media, and through its own publication, **Your Borough**.

Our audiences can be defined as:

- Residents
- Businesses
- Members
- Staff
- Visitors
- Local, regional and national media
- Partners
- Peers
- Stakeholders

Local media

The council recognises the role the local media plays in holding us to account on behalf of residents and businesses. As a public body, it is right that we are open to scrutiny in this way.

We will work to nurture a positive and open relationship with our local media, responding promptly to requests for information and comments and proactively issuing press releases and offering briefings detailing council activity and policy decisions.

Regional and national media

Regional and national titles, including sector press, will be targeted to help raise the profile of the council, its successes and initiatives among our peers and influencers. The communications team will work to build relationships with relevant titles and journalists to identify opportunities to contribute to articles and features where relevant to the council's strategic objectives contained in its Corporate Plan.



Your Borough

Your Borough is the council's own publication, distributed quarterly to all households and businesses within the Borough.

It provides the opportunity to talk directly to these audiences and to deliver our messages in friendly and easy to understand language.

The editorial and advertising content of Your Borough will at all times comply with the Government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, published in 2011. The Code is based around seven principles to ensure that all communications activity:

- **is lawful**
- **is cost effective**
- **is objective**
- **is even-handed**
- **is appropriate**
- **has regard to equality and diversity**
- **is issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.**

This last principle, to ensure special care is taken during periods of heightened sensitivity, is of particular relevance during pre-election periods.

Paid-for advertising must comply with the Advertising Standards Authority's Advertising Codes.

While Your Borough will remain our principal method of communicating with and inviting feedback from our residents and businesses without access to digital and social media platforms, we will continually investigate other methods of carrying out such dialogue.



Digital

Our digital platforms provide the ability to communicate directly with and listen to and interact with our audiences.

We will continually review and evolve our digital offering, taking note of relevant technological developments and employing them where appropriate.

We will develop new platforms, such as our bespoke council news website news.gravesham.gov.uk, to enable us to keep our residents and businesses both fully informed of council activities and policies, able to respond easily to consultations and carry out transactions with the council.

We will encourage feedback from our audiences on the accessibility and effectiveness of our digital platforms and seek to make improvements in delivery where the need for this is identified.

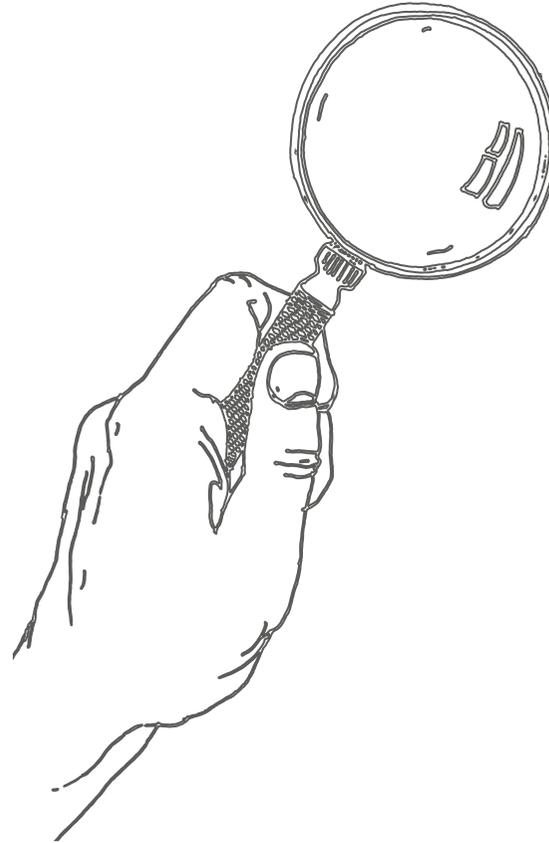
WHO COMMUNICATES

Social media

We recognise the importance of social media in communicating with our audiences, along with the risks it presents to the reputation of the council through its ability to spread bad news stories rapidly and widely and in the way it allows individuals and groups to comment critically on the council's activities.

We are committed to continually reviewing existing and emerging social media channels to ensure we are using the those most likely to help us reach the widest possible audience.

A full Social Media Policy is attached as an appendix to this Communications Strategy.



The Communications Manager and Communications team ensure the strategy is tied to the council's Corporate Plan.

While the majority of all formal communications and consultations will be carried out either by or through close liaison with the Communications Team, there are social media accounts associated with the council - for example those promoting The Woodville, Gravesend Borough Market and Visit Gravesend – for which the administrators are not members of the communications team.

Administrators of these accounts are responsible for ensuring the accounts adhere to the Social Media Policy and reflect the core objectives of the council as set out in the Corporate Plan.

All council members and officers should be aware that they communicate with elements of our audiences either formally or informally during the course of their work.

Campaigns and consultations

Campaigns and consultations are a key part of the council's Communications Strategy, and as such the Communications Manager should be consulted during their planning and involved in their execution.

With the aim of campaigns and consultations being to inform and listen to our audiences, the language used should be simple, plain and easily understandable, avoiding jargon and with any necessary technical terms clearly explained.

Audiences for each campaign and consultation should be clearly defined and the appropriate channels to reach them and to receive their feedback identified. Our consultations will be open and accessible to all.

Start and end dates for each campaign or consultation should be agreed in advance and adhered to.

The Communications Manager will manage the prioritisation and programmes with the aim of minimising overlaps between projects.

Crisis communications

A Crisis Communications plan is included as an appendix to this Communications Strategy.



Reviewing

Media coverage and social media interaction will be monitored, reviewed and reported to Directors and the Leadership group to ensure the Communications Strategy is succeeding in promoting the Core Objectives as set out in the Corporate Plan and that negative coverage is managed appropriately.

ENGAGEMENT

Gravesham Borough Council is a listening authority, committed to engaging fully with our varied communities, encouraging feedback and ensuring communication is two-way.

We must have clear strategies and policies to allow us to deliver services that meet the needs of our local communities while making the best use of resources. Agreeing these strategies and policies is the responsibility of our elected representatives.

Making sure that we can be held accountable for our decisions is important in strengthening people's trust in the way we make decisions, and in encouraging more of the public to take part in influencing the decisions. To achieve this, we need to manage our decision-making processes effectively and be transparent in what we do, and make sure those who make our decisions are accessible.

Our engagement will inform, consult, involve and support our communities, and give them the confidence and ability to build their skills and achieve the outcomes they desire.

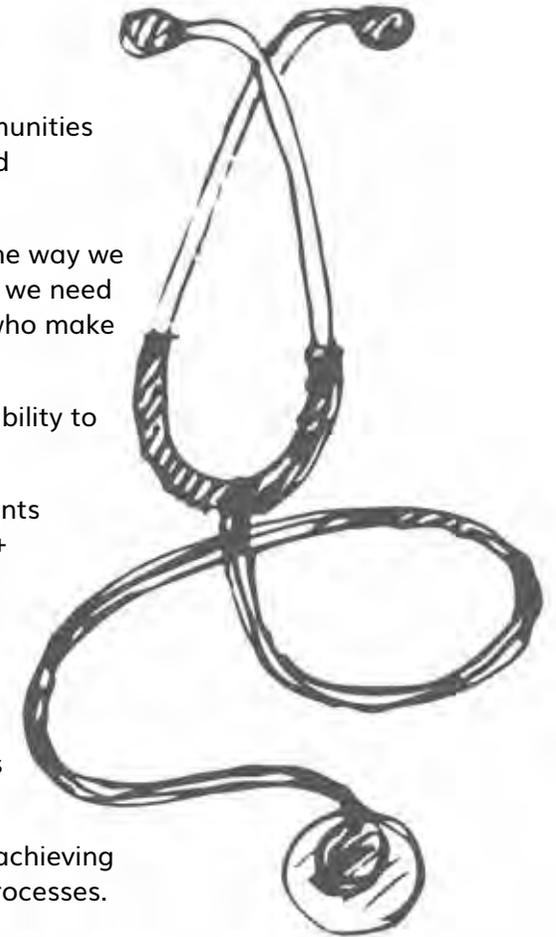
We will ensure the views of all parts of the Borough are listened to, including minority communities, older residents and our young people. To do this, we will support the work of the Gravesham Youth Council, The Gr@nd, the 50+ Forum and Age UK and other organisations and partners.

We will adopt an open door policy to suggestions from the community while understanding that not everything will be within the gift of the council to deliver, nor may we have the resources to deliver on all suggestions.

Our elected representatives have an important role to play in helping people understand the democratic process (how we elect representatives and influence how the council makes decisions) and helping communities to make use of the opportunities available to them.

Likewise, the council will use the channels open to it to communicate decisions being made, report on how it is achieving its objectives and inform our audiences of the options open to them in participating in those decision making processes.

Our engagement will help break down barriers between our communities and the council and help us work in partnership with them, giving them a greater role in designing and delivering local services and policies.



Engaging with our communities

Gravesham is home to a diverse demographic of communities. To engage effectively with all sections of our community we will undertake research – for example the 2020 Origins Cohesion Atlas survey – to understand how the local population is changing, how successfully communities are integrating and anticipate changing demands on services.

Local involvement in events, fundraising initiatives and through volunteering can help bring communities together, foster a spirit of integration and help build a Borough people are proud to call home.

The council will support the community through appropriate initiatives, for example the Street Champions programme and the Gravesham Community Awards.

The council is committed to supporting community cohesion through a year-round programme of events and celebrations of dates important to our various communities.

Local businesses play an important role in both the economic and community well-being of the Borough. We will encourage

business engagement with the council through the work of our economic development team and its programme of business networking events and promotions, and the day-to-day work of the Town Centre Manager.



Engaging with older generations

The council supports the work of both the Gravesham 50+ Forum and Age UK North West Kent.

The Gravesham 50+ Forum has 400 members and meets four times a year at The Woodville. It is a network, a forum and a platform for persons 50 years of age and over living in the Gravesham area, raising the needs, values and interests of its membership and speaking up about social, economic and community matters affecting them.

Age UK North West Kent supports older people to live independently, access appropriate services and enrich their lives.

The council will identify suitable opportunities to engage with members and clients of both organisations through presentations and publicity material relating to campaigns relevant to the audience.

We will use the communications channels open to us to report on the work of the council towards meeting its commitments to residents.

Engaging with younger people

The Youth Council will operate from the Civic Centre and in collaboration with the youth democratic structures at the other levels of youth democracy such as the Kent Youth County Council (KYCC) and the UK Youth Parliament (UKYP).

The council works continually to ensure links with schools, youth groups and voluntary section youth organisations are enhanced and strengthened so that the young people from all walks of life start buying into their local community because they have a say and a stake in it.

Young people's voices on decisions that affect them are a 'golden thread' throughout council policy making.

The council is working to build active citizens and believes this should start from a younger age than 18.

The council also supports the The Gr@nd which works to improve the wellbeing, health and happiness of the community, but particularly young people.

Both organisations provide a direct route for the council to engage with our younger residents.

In line with the Communications Strategy and Social Media Policy, the council will regularly review new and emerging social media channels to assess their suitability and effectiveness for communicating and engaging with all audiences, but particularly younger generations.

