

Making the Right Connections

A Communication and Consultation Strategy

PURPOSE OF THE STRATEGY

The Council is a community leader and aims to deliver high quality services. If we are to fulfil this role effectively, consistent and sustained communications are essential. Our residents have high expectations and there is a demand for information about what the Council does and an anticipation that their views will be recognised and taken into account. To be effective our communications need to be “two-way”: the way we consult and listen to our communities is as important as the information we give to them.

Communicating and consulting with our communities can be an intensive and costly activity. National and local experience suggests that high spending does not always result in effective communication. However, it is acknowledged also that a low investment in communications is likely to result in low satisfaction rating of local residents in the services we provide and of the Council generally.

The strategy identifies our objectives in the way in which we communicate, consult and listen to our residents and communities together with principles and activities, in the form of an action plan, which will help us to achieve our objectives. An important measure of the effectiveness concerns reputation – the widespread beliefs about the Council and the services we provide – in short, what we say we will do, what we do and what others think and say about us. Effective communication with local residents about services, which are delivered at the level and in the way we say we will provide them, will help to ensure that the reputation we have is one we would choose.

The strategy will be supported by guidance, which will be based on our policies and decisions and good practice generally. Both the strategy and the guidance will be conditioned by and help us to follow the Government’s Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.

While the strategy and guidance defines longer term principles it has to be dynamic and respond to our changing environment and to meet changing needs and priorities. It will be reviewed regularly and a significant action will involve reviewing and assessing the results of our communications and consultation activities so that we can set specific objectives and targets in future action plans.

OBJECTIVES

Our broad objectives are –

- ◆ that local residents feel that they are well informed about the Council and the service we provide;
- ◆ that local residents understand what the Council stands for and believe it has a good reputation;
- ◆ that local residents feel that they can make their views known and that we will listen and consider them;
- ◆ that local organisations and communities understand the Council's role and want to work with us; and
- ◆ that staff feel informed and their energies are directed towards meeting the Council's overall objectives.

It is a necessity that this strategy is dynamic and, along with the action plan, is reviewed frequently so we have specific objectives and targets which meet particular needs of the Council and local people and contribute to achieving the broad objectives.

CONSULTATION

The Council, in common with other local authorities and public bodies, has long had a responsibility and tradition of consulting and involving the public. Consultation – providing an opportunity for local people to comment - is a key part of our communication activity. The requirement to consult on certain issues has also increased.

We recognise that effective consultation –

- ◆ supports representative democracy;
- ◆ informs decision making on services;
- ◆ informs the development of policies and strategies; and
- ◆ provides information on the use of and degree of satisfaction or otherwise with our services.

Successful consultation requires a clear purpose and to be effective needs to –

- ◆ be proportionate and appropriate;
- ◆ ask the right questions and be clear in the questions that are asked;
- ◆ be regular but not intrusive;
- ◆ use the right method(s), which is also convenient to consultees;
- ◆ include proper analysis; and
- ◆ include feedback on how we have acted on the results.

In addition to actively consulting on issues it is important we must establish a culture of listening and collecting and using comments and/or complaints to improve perceptions about the Council and to improve our services .

SUPPORTING PRINCIPLES

There are a number of important principles which support this strategy and the achievement of our objectives –

Leadership

Effective communications relies on commitment from across the whole of the Council's organisation. This commitment will not happen unless there is leadership from both Members and management.

The Cabinet and elected Members have identified communications and appropriate consultation as key objectives.

Senior management have emphasised the importance of communication both within our organisation, as an integral part of the way in which we deliver services, and generally in the way we provide information and deal with local people.

Knowing our communities

The following table highlights some of the individuals or communities that will be affected by our communications and consultation and identifies some of the key issues which affect them. It is not intended to be exhaustive and will change as the environment in which we operate changes. As well as identifying these stakeholders, it is important to evaluate the most appropriate ways to communicate and consult with them. As a Council we have placed a special emphasis on communications and consultation with "hard to reach" people or communities.

The key issues identified are ones which we will need to keep evaluating to ensure we meet our objectives.

Who do we communicate with?	Key Issues to evaluate
Local Residents	Have we established two-way communication and consultation? How do local people tell us what they think? Do we listen to our communities? Are the physical means of communication adequate? Do we know what local people think about the Council and the services we provide? Do we provide information in a way which our residents want? Do we provide information and engage with the hard to reach groups and communities?

The Media (local, regional, national and specialist)	Do we have a positive relationship with the media? Does the media think that we have a good reputation and standards? Does the media use the information we provide to it?
Partners (The Huntingdonshire Strategic Partnership and other partners)	Have we established two-way communication and consultation? Do our partners think that we have a good reputation and standards? Do we know what each other stand for and what our objectives are? Do we know where the overlaps and the gaps are?
The Business Community	Have we established two-way communication and consultation? Do local businesses think that we have a high reputation and standards? Do they know what services we provide for them? Are they aware of our key messages?
Staff	Do we have a culture of two-way communication? Have we developed communication skills across the Council? Do staff know the key messages and do they communicate them as part of service delivery and in their communities?
Members	Do our communications and consultation support democratic representation? Do our communications and consultation support our political management system? Do members have support in enhancing their communication skills?
Town and Parish Councils	Have we established two-way communication and consultation? Do Town and Parish Councils think that we have a good reputation and standards?

	Do we know what each other stand for and what our objectives are?
National opinion formers (Civil Servants, Government Office, Minister, national organisations such as the Audit Commission, etc)	Do they know what the Council stands for? Do they think we have a good reputation and standards of service?

What do we communicate?

National research over a lengthy period indicates that Councils which provide clear information about services and how to access them lead to higher levels of satisfaction. Communication therefore must be seen as an essential part of service delivery. It is important also that we communicate information about what we stand for as a Council – our key objectives and messages.

In addition local residents, the media and other groups respond to clear, factual information about some basic things –

- ◆ news about local events and activities;
- ◆ reasons why decisions are made and how local views were taken into account;
- ◆ information on how the Council spends money;
- ◆ planned improvements to services or our area; and
- ◆ how to complain, comment or simply get in touch.

This range of information should form the basis of our communications, along with specific news or information as appropriate.

How do we communicate?

The preferred sources of information about Council information, identified nationally, are –

- ◆ Council newspapers and magazines;
- ◆ local newspapers;
- ◆ posted leaflets;
- ◆ local radio & TV; and
- ◆ websites & e-mail

Maintaining and developing our investment in a Council newsletter, providing guide(s) to Council services and a range of coordinated publications about specific service activities, good relationships with the local media and an easy to use website are our priorities.

However, we recognise that it is vital to deliver information people want using the methods which are most effective to them and that

preferences will change over time. We need to keep under review the means we use to communicate.

Supporting Members

The Council operates in an environment of democratic representation. The role of elected members as leaders of our communities and in representing local residents is vital to our democratic processes. Effective communication and consultation is essential to support this role.

Our system of political management also demands clear and effective communication to support the principles of transparency and accountability which are at the centre of the new forms of political structure.

Members also contribute to effective communications by collectively defining and taking responsibility for the factors that make up the overall reputation of the Council –

- ◆ our purpose: what are we here to do;
- ◆ our underlying values;
- ◆ the key messages;
- ◆ the delivery of services: do we do what we promise;
- ◆ our behaviour: how do we treat customers, staff and members; and
- ◆ how do we go about our business?

Internal Communications & Staff

Internal communications are significantly important to ensuring the effectiveness of our external communications. Our staff deliver services and the majority live in Huntingdonshire. If they feel informed about our service, objectives and key messages then they will be more effective in the way they communicate with local residents, service users and our communities. The personal contact, either by 'phone or face to face, that our staff have with users of our services and local residents generally, are vitally important to our reputation and effective communications.

Our staff are also local residents and users of our services and their views are important in the way we provide services and communicate. It is important that there are ways for them to make their views known and that we promote a culture of internal communication.

Developing our internal communications and the communications skills of our staff are strategic objectives.

Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are critical to ensuring that we meet our objectives and measuring the effectiveness of this strategy. An essential part of the action plan is to establish a baseline against which

we can set targets and identify detailed measures to support those implicit in the objectives and principles of this strategy.