

MAKING THE RIGHT CONNECTIONS

A COMMUNICATIONS AND CONSULTATION STRATEGY

Purpose

To achieve our objectives, specifically providing high quality services and effective community leadership, the Council is committed to consistent and sustained communication. Our residents and communities 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. The performance of our employees is vital to the achievement of our priorities and communication and consultation with them is an important to ensure that this happens. To be effective our communications need to be “two-way”; the way we engage with our communities and employees is as important as the information we give to them.

The purpose of this strategy is to provide a framework and a consistent approach to our communications and consultation activities. The strategy will be supported by guidance and an action plan, which will be based on the principles of this strategy 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.

National and local experience suggests that failure to invest in communications and consultation is likely to result in low satisfaction rating of local residents in the services we provide and of the Council generally. However, communication and consultation are intensive and costly activities and high spending does not always result in good communication. This strategy, associated guidance and action plan will ensure that our communications and consultation are effective and provide good value for the investment we make in them. Importantly effective communication and consultation about the Council and the services we provide will help to ensure that we maintain a good reputation.

The Appendix – Knowing our Communities – highlights some of the 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. It will be used to test and develop guidance, action plans and good practice. As well as identifying individuals and communities, it is important to evaluate appropriate ways to communicate and consult with them. As a Council we have placed a special emphasis on communications and consultation with individuals or communities who do not traditionally engage with us, such as young people or minority ethnic groups. Effective involvement cannot happen without a good understanding of the make up, needs and interests of all those different groups and their capacity to engage. An inclusive approach will be used by the Council to ensure that different groups have the opportunity to participate and are not disadvantaged by our processes.

Local Residents, Communities and Partners

Local residents, the media and other groups have told us that they want clear, factual information about–

- ◆ our services and what they can expect
- ◆ 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;
- ◆ how to complain, comment or simply get in touch; and
- ◆ our priorities and how they relate to them or the district.

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

The local residents have told us also that their preferred sources of information about Council information are –

- ◆ Council newspapers;
- ◆ local newspapers;
- ◆ websites;
- ◆ leaflets;
- ◆ local radio & TV.

However, we recognise that it is vital to deliver information people want using the methods which are most effective to them. Preferences will vary depending on the information to be communicated and will change over time. We will keep under review the means we use to communicate.

This strategy identifies the following outcomes we want to achieve from the way in which we communicate, with our residents, communities and our partners and how we will measure our success. The Action Plan for 2005/06 sets out the key activities which will contribute to achieving those outcomes.

Outcome	Measure
Local residents are well informed about the Council and the services we provide	% of local residents who feel well informed about the Council and the services we provide.
Local residents believe the Council has a good reputation	% of local people who feel that the Council has a good reputation.
Partners understand the Council's role and the services we provide.	% of partners who feel they understand the Council's role and the services we provide.

Councillors

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 this process. How Members undertake their roles has an impact on how the Council is perceived and ultimately our reputation. Effective communication and consultation is essential to support Members.

Our system of political management also demands clear and effective communication to support the principles of transparency and accountability.

Members 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 and ethical standards;
- ◆ our priorities;
- ◆ the delivery of services: do we do what we promise;
- ◆ our behaviour: how do we treat users of our services and residents, employees and other members?

Members are elected to represent their communities and are accountable to them. Members take decisions on behalf of their communities, but at the same time must seek to balance competing priorities in the best interests of the district as a whole. Consultation and communication support this process and helps to provide a more detailed picture to assist the development of policy and priorities.

Outcomes	Measure
Members are supported in their communications	% of Members who feel that they are supported in communicating with their relevant communities

Employees

Effective communication with our employees is essential to ensuring that we achieve our priorities. They need to feel informed about our services, priorities and what the Council stands for and as a result will be more effective in the way they do their job and the way they communicate with residents, communities, service users and our partners.

This strategy identifies the following outcomes that we want to achieve from the way in which we communicate, with our employees and how we will measure our success.

Outcome	Measure
Employees are well informed about the Council, its priorities and the services we provide	% of employees who feel well informed about the Council, its priorities and the services we provide
Employees understand what the Council stands for and believe it has a good reputation	% of employees understand what the Council stands for. % of employees who believe the Council has a good reputation
Employees share information and knowledge	% of employees who feel that we are a learning organisation

Consultation

The purpose of our consultation is to support our system of democratic representation by ensuring that our communities, local residents and employees have appropriate opportunities to be actively involved in the Council's decision-making and service planning.

We recognise that effective consultation –

- ◆ supports representative democracy;
- ◆ informs decision making on services;
- ◆ informs the design, delivery and take-up of services
- ◆ identifies community needs, which enable the Council to fulfil its community leadership role, including bidding for resources and influencing others;
- ◆ informs the development of policies and strategies;
- ◆ provides information on the use of and degree of satisfaction or otherwise with our services; and
- ◆ provides information on conflicting priorities, key choices, resource decisions and options for change.

Our employees are experienced and committed and many are also users of our services. Their views are important. It is essential that there are ways for them to make their views known.

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.

Keeping residents, communities, partners and employees informed of the results of consultation is an important part of building long-term relationships and engagement. The Council will provide feedback on the results of consultation through appropriate means including DistrictWide, the Council's newsletter, our website or the local media. As a minimum our feedback will include the findings of the consultation and an explanation of how things will change or not as result. Feedback in this way is an opportunity for managing expectations about the Council and the services we provide.

To ensure that our consultation is effective and does not result over burden residents, communities, service users and partners we will establish an annual programme. This programme will balance Council –wide consultation with the consultation needs of specific services or proposals.

This strategy identifies the following outcomes we want to achieve from the way in which we consult and how we will measure our success.

Outcome	Measure
Local residents can make their views known and that we will listen and consider them.	% of local residents who feel that they can make their views known and that we will listen and consider them.
employees can make their views known, that we will listen and consider them.	% of employees who feel that they can make their views known, that we will listen and consider them.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Review

Monitoring and evaluation are critical to ensuring that we achieve the outcomes.

To ensure we are making progress we will:

- monitor our performance against local (and national, if any) measures;
- report performance on communications and consultation as part of the Council's comprehensive performance management framework; and
- collect and publish evidence of good practice throughout the Council.

Performance in the achievement of the strategy outcomes will be incorporated into the Council's comprehensive performance management framework.

This strategy, associated guidance and action plan will be kept under review so that we can set specific targets for the future.

A comprehensive review will be carried out every two years.

Knowing our Communities

The key issues identified are ones which we will need to keep evaluating to ensure we achieve the outcomes in the consultation and communication strategy.

Who do we communicate with?	Key Issues to evaluate
Local Residents	<p>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 consult with groups and communities that traditionally don't engage with the Council?</p>
The Media (local, regional, national and specialist)	<p>Do we have a constructive 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?</p>
Partners (The Huntingdonshire Strategic Partnership and other partners)	<p>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?</p>
The Business Community	<p>Have we established two-way communication and consultation? Do local businesses think that we have a good reputation? Do they know what services we provide for them? Are they aware of our key messages?</p>
Employees	<p>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?</p>

Members	<p>Do our communications and consultation support democratic representation?</p> <p>Do our communications and consultation support our political management system?</p> <p>Do members have support in enhancing their communication skills?</p> <p>Do our communications and consultations support our community leadership role.</p>
Town and Parish Councils	<p>Have we established two-way communication and consultation?</p> <p>Do Town and Parish Councils think that we have a good reputation and standards?</p> <p>Do we know what each other stand for and what our objectives are?</p>
Governmental and non-governmental organisations (Civil Servants, Government Office, Minister, national organisations such as the Audit Commission and the Local Government Association, etc)	<p>Do they know what the Council stands for?</p> <p>Do they think we have a good reputation and standards of service?</p>
Suppliers	<p>Do they know what the Council stands for?</p> <p>Do they think we have a good reputation and standards of service?</p> <p>Do they know what opportunities are available to them?</p>