

Making the Right Connections

Communications and Marketing Strategy

Purpose

The Council has many roles, but to achieve our aims and objectives in our corporate plan, Growing Success, we are committed to consistent and sustained communications and marketing.

Contribution to the Council's Corporate and Strategic Framework

"Growing Success", the Council's Corporate Plan, includes the following objectives –

- **to provide high quality customer services** – by making it as easy as possible for customers to access our services and get appropriate information;
- **to be good at communicating with and listening to people and organisations** – this will entail regular and effective communication with local residents about Council services, seeking their views on new proposals, and regularly asking them their opinions and considering what they say;
- **to strengthen our commitment and capacity to achieve equality, diversity and inclusion** – by maintaining or establishing statutory equality schemes which consider gender, race and disability equality issues and the needs of disadvantaged groups at all levels of services, policies and practices;
- **to enable Councillors to carry out their leadership role effectively** – determining Council priorities and allocating resources, scrutinising and examining relevant issues as advocates and promoting the interests of the Council and communities;
- **to be clear about what we can do and aspire to achieve** – by regularly publishing our plans and services standards and information about our performance.

The achievement of these objectives means that the Council must be excellent at understanding the needs of the users of our services and those we represent and in organising services around those needs. This requires excellent customer service standards and practices, communications, marketing, consultation and engagement activities.

In addition, a series of strategic policies, including the Corporate Equality Policy, Consultation and Engagement Strategy and Customer Service Strategy, all contain objectives and activities which require effective communications and marketing and/or contribute towards the approach adopted within this strategy.

The strategies are mutually supportive and are inherently connected in terms of the objectives they are seeking to promote.

Background

National and local experiences suggest that failure to invest in communications and marketing is likely to result in low satisfaction of local residents in the services we provide and of the Council generally. An extensive piece of research on behalf of the Improvement and Development Agency and Local Government Association for a series of reports 'Connecting With Communities' showed clearly that people who felt well-informed also felt more positive about their Council. The research demonstrated that they felt less likely that their Council was remote and impersonal or out of touch and more likely to feel they received good value for money and good overall services.

Communications

Our residents and communities have high expectations that the Council will meet their needs. There is a demand for information about services and facilities and how the Council represents the interests of Huntingdonshire and its communities, for example our leadership role on issues which affect quality of life. We also need to make sure that those people that visit the area or come to work here are also aware of services and what we provide in Huntingdonshire generally. We work in a complex environment and on occasions there are difficult matters to communicate for example decisions that may have been enforced upon us or decision that may be unpopular with some sections of our community. We aim to communicate these issues in a balanced and sensitive way.

Marketing

Increasingly the Council is required to "market" the services we provide – either because we are in competition with other providers or we need to increase the number of people using our services in a cost-effective way to meet our aims and objectives. By marketing we mean the processes we put in place to identify, anticipate and satisfy the needs of local residents and communities. We need to have a clear insight into the requirements of our customers and provide services in a way that they want from us. For example we must recognise that the needs and aspirations of young people are different from those of elderly people. In order market our services effectively we must gather and analyse information from many sources. This research will lead to more knowledge, better insight and more informed decision making.

Communications and Marketing

To be effective our communications and marketing activity must be "two-way". The way we engage with our communities and listen to them, encourage and act upon feedback, is as important as the information we give to them. We need to be clear in our communications and marketing about what the Council can do and what we aspire to achieve. The Council must take decisions about competing demands. Clear and effective communications will help our communities to understand these decisions and play an important part in the Council's leadership role.

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 communications and marketing is essential to support members. Our system of political management also demands clear and effective communications 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, visitors and other members.

Members are elected to represent their communities and are accountable to them and must seek to balance competing priorities in the best interests of the district as a whole. Marketing and communications support this process and helps to provide a more detailed picture to assist the development of policy and priorities.

Effective communication with our employees is essential to ensuring that we achieve our priorities. Our employees deliver services and the majority live in Huntingdonshire. If they feel informed about our services, priorities and what the Council stands for then they will be more effective in the way they do their job and the way they communicate with residents, communities, service users, visitors and our partners. They can use their knowledge of our priorities and what the council stands for in their day to day contact with customers to communicate key messages. An important part of effective communication is recording feedback from customers, particularly compliments and satisfaction with the level of service provided. An important 'spin-off' of good levels of customer satisfaction is that employee morale, and productivity is better too. Training and development opportunities are paramount to ensure officers have the key skills they need, and help us to achieve our objective that we are a learning organisation that shares knowledge.

Successful partnerships and relationships with other agencies and organisations are an important aspect of many areas of our work, particularly when we need to share resources towards communications and marketing aims and objectives. When communicating as part of a partnership, care must be taken to ensure all parties are happy and communications are consistent. Opportunities should be identified to promote and implement partnership working for campaigns and initiatives when possible.

This strategy is based on the principle that responsibility for communications and marketing must remain with individual services but that there should be a corporate approach and that services should be supported in these activities. The purpose of this strategy is to provide a framework and a consistent approach to our communications and marketing activities. It will be supported by guidance, protocols and an action plan, which will be based on the principles set out in this strategy and good practice generally. The strategy the guidance and protocols will be conditioned by and help us to follow the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. In addition organisational changes already in place will ensure that the Communications and Marketing Service will carry out corporate activities and support services in their communications and marketing activities.

Communications and marketing are intensive and costly activities, however, high spending does not always result in good results. This strategy, guidance, protocols and action plan will ensure that our communications and marketing are effective and co-ordinated, and provide good value for the investment we make in them. Importantly effective communications and marketing about the Council and the services we provide will help to ensure that we maintain a good reputation.

Where are we now?

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

Information requirements	Examples of what we provide
◆ Our services and what they can expect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ News releases ◆ District Wide ◆ Website ◆ Publications
◆ What's on in the area, facilities and activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Publications, including visitor guide ◆ District Wide ◆ Website ◆ News releases
◆ Reasons why decisions are made and how local views were taken into account	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ District Wide ◆ Reports in print and on website ◆ Consultation
◆ Information on how the Council spends money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ District Wide ◆ News releases ◆ Leaflets ◆ Website
◆ Planned improvements to services or our area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Exhibitions ◆ Reports ◆ News releases ◆ District Wide ◆ Website
◆ How to complain, comment or simply get in touch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Complaints policy and procedures ◆ All publications and forms ◆ Website
◆ Our priorities and how they relate to them or the district.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ District Wide ◆ News releases ◆ Website

This range of information has formed the basis of our communications to date along with specific news or information as appropriate.

In our communications and marketing we use the following methods:

- ◆ Council publications, such as District Wide
- ◆ local newspapers

- ◆ websites, e-mail and other electronic means (e.g. potential use of RSS feeds)
- ◆ leaflets and other information material
- ◆ local radio and television
- ◆ specialist publications
- ◆ face to face contact
- ◆ exhibitions, including mobile information unit
- ◆ DVDs, e.g. Huntingdonshire in Perspective
- ◆ advertising
- ◆ events
- ◆ telephone.

In selecting an appropriate medium care must be taken to ensure maximum cost effectiveness in accordance with the Code of Practice on Local Authority Publicity.

New media is becoming an ever-increasing method for communications and marketing. This is something that must be taken into account in this three-year strategic document, as more customers opt to receive electronic messages.

The council website is an important channel for communications and marketing activity. Our website, driven by Government requirements and structures, is led by the web team, and each directorate remains responsible for its own pages. Opportunities to communicate with our residents and visitors and to market our services through the website need to be identified and developed to help us achieve our objectives. However, this channel may not always be the best option for the service or the customer and traditional channels still need to be made available.

Knowing our communities

The Appendix – Knowing our Communities – highlights some of the individuals or communities that will be affected by our communications and marketing and identifies some of the key issues which affect them. This “segmentation” is not intended to be exhaustive and will change as the environment in which we operate changes and as we develop better insight into the needs and preferences of our communities. 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 with them and to market our services. 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.

As a Council we have placed a special emphasis on communications and marketing with individuals or communities who do not traditionally engage with us, such as young people, those with disabilities 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. Equality Impact Assessments are being carried out on all our services and policies and they will highlight issues that need to be addressed through customer service activities. It is important that we have a coordinated approach to the use of information from these assessments.

Overall the Council has a good reputation for communicating and marketing its services, but this varies because of different capacity and understanding of the effectiveness in communications and marketing of service delivery. The Council and its services provide a range of communications and marketing material but there are some areas that are better than others. In order to be effective we need to make sure we are consistent across the whole organisation.

We have a range of communications and marketing skills, but we recognise that we need to develop these skills across the Council.

Objectives

This strategy identifies the following objectives we wish to achieve from the way in which we communicate, with our residents, communities and our partners and how we market our services and how we will measure our success.

Objective	Measure
Be good at communicating with and listening to people and organisations	% of residents are satisfied or very satisfied with Council services and plans
Be clear about what we can do and aspire to achieve	% of residents feel well informed about service standards
To promote attractions, facilities and events, to local residents and visitors to the district	% of people satisfied with the information we provide
To undertake appropriate marketing of services	Number of marketing plans developed
To ensure Members are supported in their communications	% of Members who feel that they are supported in communicating with their relevant communities
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 share information and knowledge	% of employees who feel that we are a learning organisation

Action Plan

This strategy is supported by a three-year action plan which will help to ensure a consistent approach across the whole of the Council. The Council's Communications and Marketing service will be responsible for monitoring and implementation of the plan and will work with other services to make sure this happens.

Monitoring and Evaluation

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

To ensure we are making progress we will:

- monitor our performance against local (and national, if any) measures
- report performance on communications and marketing
- collect and publish evidence of good practice throughout the Council.

This strategy, associated guidance and action plan will be reviewed annually so that we can set specific targets for the future. A comprehensive review of the strategy will be undertaken every three years.

Risks

The Council's Corporate Risk Register identifies a large number of risks that would damage the council's reputation, attract bad publicity or have a negative effect on staff morale.

An effective communications and marketing strategy is imperative in order that the appropriate messages can be conveyed in the appropriate manner in the event of a risk becoming a reality or to prevent it.

The following factors would adversely affect the delivery of this strategy – and therefore the ability to respond to the situation, to rebuild the council's reputation, counteract the bad publicity, or boost staff morale:

- budgetary restrictions
- staffing/resources issues
- lack of knowledge/expertise
- lack of understanding by services/partners
- lack of support by services/partners
- national government changes.

Action Plan 2008-2011

Objectives	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
Be good at communicating with and listening to people and organisations	Publication of District Wide	% of residents are satisfied or very satisfied with Council services and plans	70 % of residents are satisfied or very satisfied with information provided about Council services and plans by 2011	Communications and Marketing Team	Ongoing –publication currently four times a year
	Identify key messages from Growing Success to be built into all communications	% of local residents who feel the council has a good reputation	To be determined following baseline assessment after the next annual survey	Communications and Marketing Team Customer Service Teams	March 2008
	Develop communications with partners	% of partners who feel they understand the council's role and the services we provide	Baseline to be determined	Heads of Service, Communications and Marketing Team	Ongoing
	Use the results of Equality Impact Assessments in the planning of communications and marketing activities	Number of actions arising from EIA's which are used to inform communications and marketing activities	100% of appropriate actions	Heads of Service	On going
Be clear about what we can do and aspire to achieve	Publication of District Wide	% of residents feel well informed about service standards	70% of residents feel well informed about service	Communications and Marketing Team	Ongoing –publication currently four times a year

Objectives	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
			standards by 2011		
	Seek out and promote positive news stories on corporate initiatives	% of news releases used by at least one media outlet	70 % of news releases used by at least one media outlet	Communications and Marketing Team	Ongoing
	Support services in identifying and preparing positive news stories	% of news stories published	70% of news releases used	Communications and Marketing Team, Heads of Service, Activity Managers	On going
	Ensure the handling of reactive news inquiries is carried out in a co-ordinated and corporate way	% of news coverage that is neutral or positive	Baseline to be obtained from media analysis	Communications and Marketing Team	Ongoing
	Continued development, and updating of web-based material, e.g. the potential use of RSS feeds	% of customers satisfied that web-based information meets their needs	Obtain information from web team	Communications and Marketing team and the Web Team	Ongoing
	Support implementation of corporate identity guidelines		Attend all team meetings across the organisation by April 2008	Communications and Marketing Team, Heads of Service, Activity Managers Communications and Marketing Team, Heads of Service	Ongoing from February 2008

Objectives	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
	Record feedback from customers, particularly compliments and satisfaction with the level of service provided	Baseline to be determined through Customer Service Strategy			On going
To promote attractions, facilities and events, to local residents and visitors to the district	Publication of visitor and accommodation guide	% of residents and visitors with greater awareness of the attractions and facilities of the district	To be determined following baseline assessment after the next annual survey	Communications and Marketing Team	February 2008
	Publication of specifically targeted information e.g. Countryside guide	% of people satisfied with the information we provide	70% of people satisfied with the information we provide by 2011	Communications and Marketing Team working with relevant service area e.g. Countryside Services	Ongoing
	Supporting services and external partners in raising the awareness of attractions the district has to offer	Increased visitor numbers to attractions	At least one annual promotion	Communications and Marketing Team, Sustainable Economic Development Team	Ongoing
	Seek opportunities for positive news coverage in appropriate publications	Number of articles in local/national/specialist publications	Baseline to be established	Communications and Marketing Team	On going
	Recognise the growing use of new media and use where appropriate and ensure the existing information on the website is more		Baseline to be established	Communications and Marketing Team and work with Web team	On going

Objectives	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
	accessible				
	Review and update tourist information points			Communications and Marketing Team	Annually
To undertake appropriate marketing services of	Support services and work with partners in the provision of effective marketing opportunities using a combination of the following methods: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Printed material • Promotional launches and events • Media coverage • New media, e.g. RSS feeds, a website which contains visitor/resident attraction, leisure and culture information 	Number of marketing plans developed		Communications and Marketing Team with support from the Web team when relating to new media	On going

Objectives	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
To ensure Members are supported in their communications	Provide training for members to assist them in communications and marketing activities	% of members who feel they are supported in these activities	100% of members who attend training	Communications and Marketing Team	Ongoing
Employees are well informed about the Council, its priorities and the services we provide	Representation on groups such as corporate communications group and marketing group	Number of meetings attended	Corporate Communications group held four times a year	Communications and Marketing Team	On going
	To produce and improve the publication - Team News for officers and members	% of employees who feel well informed about the council, its aims and objectives and the services provided	60% of employees feel well informed about the council, its aims and objectives and the services provided	Communications and Marketing Team	Ongoing – publication currently 12 issues a year
	Publication of information and briefings or drop-ins on specific topics – e.g. new accommodation project	% of employees who understand what the council stands for and believe it has Good reputation	60 % of employees who understand what the council stands for and believe it has a good reputation	Communications and Marketing Team	On going
Employees share information and knowledge	Ensure employees know how to share and use knowledge	% of employees who believe we are a learning organisation	85% employees believe we are a learning organisation by	Communications and Marketing Team, Policy and Research Team, Human Resources Team	Ongoing

Objectives	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
			the next survey		
	Production of protocols and good practice guidance for communications and marketing activities			Communications and Marketing Team	April 2008
	Provide training for officers on external communications	% of officers who feel that they are supported with communications	Two courses a year	Communications and Marketing Team	On going

Knowing our Communities

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

Who do we communicate with?	Key Issues to evaluate
Local Residents	Have we established two-way communication and marketing? 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? Raising awareness about what is on offer in Huntingdonshire Marketing Huntingdonshire to our local residents Communities of interest Communities in place Family and friends Means of getting message across
The Media (local, regional, national and specialist)	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?
Partners (The Huntingdonshire Strategic Partnership and other partners)	Have we established two-way communication and marketing? 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 marketing? 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? Potential business who may re-locate
Employees	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 marketing support democratic representation? Do our communications and marketing support our political management system? Do members have support in enhancing their communication skills? Do our communications and marketing support our community leadership role?
Town and Parish Councils	Have we established two-way communication and marketing? 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?
Governmental and non-governmental organisations (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?
Suppliers	Do they know what the Council stands for? Do they think we have a good reputation and standards of service? Do they know what opportunities are available to them?
People who come to work in Huntingdonshire (including migrant workers from other countries)	Do they know what the Council stands for? Do they think we have a good reputation and standards of service? Do they know what opportunities are available to them? Are they aware of the services and what we provide in Huntingdonshire?
Visitors to the area	Do they know where to stay and what to see and do in Huntingdonshire? Are they aware of the services we provide to help enhance their experience?

Appendix

Further appendices to be available as part of the strategy and on the Communications and Marketing Sharepoint site to include:

- Overview of Code of Practice of Local Authority Publicity and reference to the full code
- Writing techniques for District Wide
- Handling media relations
- Writing news releases (including who gets quoted when)
- Handling broadcast interviews
- Plain English and general advice for all published matter
- Correct use of corporate identity
- Civic protocol
- Event management