

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY 2015-2018

Submitted by: Head of Communications

Portfolio: Communications, Policy and Partnerships

Ward(s) affected: All

Purpose of the Report

To seek Cabinet approval for the Communications Strategy which covers the period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2018. This document outlines how the Council will use good communications to build a stronger reputation, involve and inform residents, engage effectively with stakeholders and improve customer satisfaction.

Recommendations

That Cabinet approves the Communications Strategy 2015-18.

Reasons

Providing information which is clear, accurate and authentic using channels which are extensive and inclusive can make a significant and effective contribution to the overall performance of the Council and should therefore be recognised as a strategic and core function. This strategy commits the Council to continue its provision of quality communications to ensure stakeholders are aware of how we spend public money and how they can get involved with, and feel informed about, Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council, its services, events, policies and activities.

1. **Background**

- 1.1 The Council's current Communications Strategy covers the period to the end of the financial year. It has been in place for three years and has been used to provide a framework for communications activities.
- 1.2 The new Communications Strategy and its associated appendices aims to build on the strong foundations which are in place at the Council for providing quality information to stakeholders in an extensive and inclusive fashion.
- 1.3 It also recognises that the "information landscape" continues to develop and change and if the Council is to maintain its stance of being as open and transparent as possible then quality communications which embrace all channels are vital.
- 1.4 Good communications have an important role to play in modern local government. Research from the Local Government Association (LGA) has shown a direct link between good communications and satisfaction levels among residents.
- 1.5 Good communications has also been shown to enhance stakeholder participation and engagement while also protecting and building reputation.

- 1.6 A detailed work plan will be produced annually during each year that this strategy is in place. This will form part of the Service Plan process for the Communications Service. This will outline the work streams, actions and milestones which will take place on an operational level to ensure the key principles outlined in the strategy are delivered.
- 1.7 The strategy is supported by a range of other documents which include media protocols (which form part of the Council's Constitution); a Website Strategy; Social Media Guide; Plain English and House Style Guide; Corporate Style Guide; Consultation Framework and Toolkit. All these background documents have been made available for consideration.

2. **Issues**

- 2.1 During the life of the current Communications Strategy there have been significant developments and changes in the local, regional and national communications landscape. This is certain to continue in the future with the only uncertainty the actual pace at which changes will come.
- 2.2 Although the channels the Council uses may alter and change to meet these new challenges, the key principles outlined in the Communications Strategy will remain constant.
- 2.3 The new strategy sets out a "communications pledge" for the Council which is:-

We will communicate clearly, openly, accurately and regularly with our residents, with our partners and with each other, in order to promote mutual understanding and give a better service to the people of the borough.

- 2.4 It also clearly states the purpose of the strategy:-

To establish and maintain clear and relevant two-way channels of communication in order to create an informed and recognisable profile for Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council and a positive image of the borough as a whole.

- 2.5 And it also outlines:-
 - a) What the Council will communicate.
 - b) How we will communicate.
 - c) Who we will communicate with.
 - d) How we will measure whether our communications are effective to ensure resources are being used in the most efficient way.

3. **Options considered**

- 3.1 Research carried out by the Local Government Association (LGA) and also organisations such as the pollsters Ipsos MORI has shown that councils have higher resident satisfaction ratings when residents feel they are kept informed.

- 3.2 Communications can therefore help to underpin much of the work carried out by services to deliver the Council's priorities.
- 3.3 Good communications has been shown to ensure stakeholder engagement, involvement and awareness in council services, events and activities thereby nurturing a sense of satisfaction and value-for-money among residents. Therefore it is felt that the Council's best option is to have a Communications Strategy in place.

4. Proposal and Reasons for Preferred Solution

4.1 The Communications Strategy sets out a framework to enable the Council to continue to develop and enhance the way it involves and informs key stakeholders.

4.2 A successful strategy will enable the Council to:-

- Maintain a culture of two-way communication with all our stakeholders.
- Keep Newcastle-under-Lyme residents informed.
- Raise awareness of the Council's priorities and vision.
- Address negative or potentially damaging information about council services.
- Support council staff in their roles as ambassadors for the organisation.
- Promote the Council as an employer of choice.
- Support elected members in their role as community leaders.
- Reach all sections of the community.
- Keep abreast of technological developments and embrace them where feasible and resources allow.
- Promote respect and trust between the Council and its stakeholders.
- Raise the regional and national profile of Newcastle-under-Lyme.

5. Outcomes Linked to Sustainable Community Strategy and Corporate Priorities

5.1 Providing accurate and authentic information for all stakeholders using channels which are as inclusive and extensive as possible makes a vital contribution to the delivery of all of the Council's corporate priorities.

5.2 Without the availability of accurate and authentic information, there would be reduced opportunities for stakeholders to be involved with, and informed about, our priorities and the services, events, actions and activities which contribute to the delivery of those priorities.

6. Legal and Statutory Implications

6.1 The Council is under no legal or statutory duty to have a Communications Strategy in place.

7. **Equality Impact Assessment**

7.1 An Equality Impact Assessment on the Communications Strategy has been completed and is among the supporting documents referred to in 1.7.

8. **Financial and Resource Implications**

8.1 The Communications Strategy will help the Council to make the maximum use of existing resources by ensuring a strategic approach to communications.

8.2 In recent years the Communications Service has been involved in a range of proposals which have contributed to the Council's drive for more efficient and effective means of delivering services. This has resulted in significant savings and subsequent reductions in the overall budget for Communications as outlined below (please note these figures are taken from the Council's Revenue Budget books which are available for public inspection on the authority's website and do not include internal service recharges):-

2010/11 - £775,710

2011/12 - £699,790

2012/13 - £669,590

2013/14 - £629,520

2014/15 - £569,860

8.3 The figures above show that during the last five financial years, revenue expenditure by Communications Services at the Council has reduced by 26.5 per cent.

8.4 It should be noted that further savings have been put forward by Communications for the next two financial years as the Council continues to try and plug the budget "gaps" identified in its Medium Term Financial Strategy.

8.5 The Communications Strategy sets out the means by which the continued production of targeted, quality information can help to sustain the "informed" and "satisfied" levels currently seen among key stakeholders in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

8.6 However, it also outlines in the section on the "Wholly Owned Company" for communication services a recognition that part of the changing landscape for the delivery of information will also involve the financial element.

8.7 The creation of the company is intended to provide a mechanism for the Council to reduce its demand and the associated costs of its communications service as the Council's budget reduces.

8.8 The Council will have an annual Service Level Agreement for communication services which it anticipates may well need to reduce as the Council's budget reduces.

8.9 Through the vehicle of the company, the capacity which is released will be traded. Over time it is accepted that the Council's demands upon the Communications Team are likely to reduce and the aspiration is that this will be balanced by growth in the traded element of the service through the company.

9. **Major Risks**

9.1 Risks associated with the Communications Strategy have been updated on the corporate system and will be periodically reviewed with the relevant Risk Champion.

10. **Key Decision Information**

10.1 Whether to have a Communications Strategy is not a key decision as defined in the Council's Constitution. However, it has been included in the Forward Plan for information purposes.

11. **List of Appendices**

- Communications Strategy 2015-18
- Media protocols
- Website Strategy
- Social Media Guide
- Corporate Identity Style Guide
- Plain English Guide and House Style
- Consultation Framework
- Consultation Toolkit
- Equalities Impact Assessment