



April 2015

March 2018

Communications Strategy

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Introduction

Information is one of our most important “front line” services.

Ipsos MORI and others have carried out research which confirms the more informed residents are, the more satisfied they are with their council.

And if they aren't informed then the chances of them being involved with us – our services, our activities, our plans and proposals – reduce dramatically.

This means that communications and delivering quality, clear and accurate information to residents using channels which are as extensive and as inclusive as possible is absolutely vital.

Not only is this key to strengthening links with local people, service users, partner organisations and staff, it is crucial to ensuring we continue to deliver our priorities and our vision for the borough.

Our research shows that 80 per cent of residents questioned feel satisfied with the Council. The “Putting People First” survey carried out by the Local Government Association showed nationally the figure for district councils stands at 54.6 per cent.

Despite the ratings in Newcastle-under-Lyme being significantly above the national average, there is no room for complacency as there is obviously much which can still be done.

And for that to happen we need to make sure that, despite the difficult financial pressures which continue to impact on local government, our Council will carry on with its commitment to provide high quality, planned and sustained corporate communications. We want our residents to feel informed about, and involved with, our services, activities, events and policies.

*Cllr. Mike Stubbs
Leader of the Council
Cabinet member for
Communications,
Policy and Partnerships*



“

*Information is one
of our most important
front line services.*

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Background

This strategy demonstrates our commitment to clear and consistent communications that meet our needs and those of all our stakeholders.

It's vital that we talk, listen and respond to local people so that they are informed and empowered.

We will endeavour to take opportunities for people to tell us what they think and we will support the consultation mantra – “you said, we listened, we did” wherever possible.

Quality internal communications are also crucial.

We value the contribution made by each of our employees and are committed to making sure they are well-informed so they understand our priorities and values and can transmit this understanding into the delivery of quality services which are used and valued by our residents.

We will actively seek residents' ideas and views on how we can improve services and become an even better employer.

Good communications are therefore vital if the Council is to continue to build a strong reputation; effectively inform residents; engage and improve customer satisfaction and contribute to improved services provided by us.

This Communications Strategy is intended to provide the framework for a consistent approach to what we say, how we say it and when we say it.

Work Plans to deliver the required outcomes of this strategy will be produced each year as part of the Communications Service Plan.

Supporting the main strategy document are a number of “sister” documents which have been attached as appendices.

These are intended to guide our activities in related fields such as website content, social media and brand management.

The full list of appendices is outlined on the right.



Appendices

- *Media Protocols.*
- *Website Strategy.*
- *Social Media Guide.*
- *Corporate Identity Style Guide.*
- *Plain English Guide and house style.*
- *Consultation Framework.*
- *Consulation Toolkit.*
- *Equalities Impact Assessment.*
- *Risk Assessment.*

Our pledge and our purpose

As a Co-operative Council, Newcastle-under-Lyme embraces the support and partnership of organisations and residents.

We work with people who use council services to explore different ways of providing and managing those services to the mutual benefit of everyone involved.

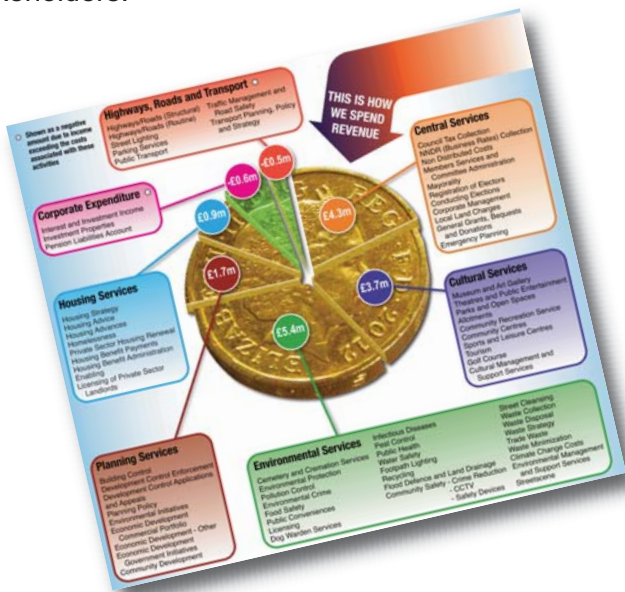
The Communications Strategy supports the Co-operative Council principles and communicates the Council's aims and achievements to all stakeholders.

Our communications pledge:-

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.

The purpose of the Communications Strategy is:-

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.



Why we make a difference and measuring our impact

Communications needs to be able to prove its strategic importance in local government by showing the impact it has.

Paragraph 4 of the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2011 says that all publicity by local authorities should:-

- be lawful;
- be cost-effective;
- be objective;
- be even-handed;
- be appropriate;
- have regard to equality and diversity and,
- be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.

Four of these principles - be lawful, objective, even-handed and be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity - are the responsibility of communications professionals who must ensure these are followed.

The other three principles - be appropriate, cost effective and have regard to equality and diversity - must be assessed using research evidence.

The continually evolving media landscape combined with difficult financial times for local government means that our communication/information resources – both financial and human – have to deliver outcomes.

This means there is no place for “SOS – Send Out Stuff” – communications in this strategy.

It is vital that with limited resources we understand why we are producing information, who our stakeholders are and to measure the impact of what we do with those stakeholders.

The purpose of this Communications Strategy is:-

- 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.

A successful strategy will enable us to:-

- Maintain a culture of two-way communication with all our stakeholders.
- Keep Newcastle-under-Lyme residents well 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.



With all our communications activities our aims are to:-

- Maintain a strong and consistent identity for the Council.
- Raise awareness of council services in order to maximise access and involvement with them.
- Keep staff and elected members informed and promote understanding.
- Promote opportunities for residents, community groups and other stakeholders to engage with the council through partnership working.
- Support efforts to maintain high customer satisfaction levels with the Council.

The Communications Team will be committed to making all of its activities:-

- Two-way.
- Relevant and appropriate for their target audiences.
- Easily available.
- Easily understood.
- Consistent.
- Honest and accountable.
- Timely.

We will regularly monitor our communications activities in order to gauge their success. Where appropriate, we will adapt our methods and messages to ensure that we continue to meet our objectives.

Performance management mechanisms will indicate:-

- 1) The percentage of residents who feel the Council keeps them informed.
- 2) The percentage of residents who feel satisfied with the Council.
- 3) The number of media releases produced.
- 4) Percentage of media releases/activity which generates coverage.
- 5) Positive media coverage for the Council.
- 6) Annual value of council media actions.
- 7) The number of unique users visiting the Council's website each month.
- 8) Satisfaction with the Council's website.
- 9) The number of residents following the Council and accessing information via social media.
- 10) The percentage of residents who value The Reporter as their prime source of information about the Council, its services, activities and policies.
- 11) Annual rating of the Council's website from the Society of Information Technology Management (Socitm).



Who are our stakeholders?

A stakeholder is a person, group, or organisation that can affect, or be affected by, an organisation's actions, objectives and policies.

Stakeholders have varying needs and different stakeholders are entitled to different considerations. The Council will take these varying needs into account when considering how to share information and communicate with its stakeholders.

Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council's stakeholders include:-

- Residents of the borough.
- People and organisations who use the Council's services.
- Borough council staff.
- Borough and county councillors.
- Newcastle-under-Lyme businesses and their staff.
- Visitors to the borough.
- The Council's partner organisations.
- Local, regional and national media organisations.
- The Third Sector.
- Local community organisations.
- Our neighbouring councils.
- Staffordshire County Council.
- The Local Enterprise Partnership.



How we will communicate

The Council uses a number of communication channels which include:-

- The Reporter.
- Our website www.newcastle-staffs.gov.uk .
- Our customer service centres.
- Local, regional and national media.
- E-mail.
- Our corporate Facebook and Twitter profiles.
- Councillor surgeries.
- Monthly team briefings for staff.
- Neighbourhood forums.
- Consultation processes.
- Meetings with council staff.
- The intranet.
- Council meetings.
- Councillor surgeries.
- Reports and policy documents.
- Events, roadshows and displays.
- Leaflets, posters and pop-up banners.
- SMS text messaging.
- Our vehicles.



What we will communicate

We will actively engage with our various stakeholder groups about the Council's services and facilities. Information will be provided on:-

- a) What services the Council provides.
- b) Where and how to access these services.
- c) How we spend public money.
- d) Changes to services.
- e) How the Council works.
- f) Who local councillors are and what their role is.
- g) Where and how the Council can help and support stakeholders.
- h) Where to go if we can't help.
- i) How stakeholders are involved with the Council's services.
- j) What the Council's priorities, values and policies are.
- k) The Co-operative Council principles.
- l) Council events and activities.
- m) How stakeholders can influence the Council's policies, plans and activities.
- n) How to contact council officers and elected members.
- o) How to provide feedback and opinions on different council policies, decisions and activities.
- p) Who our partners are and how we work with them.
- q) The Council's role in the wider community.
- r) Achievements.



Consultation

Consultation with the public and stakeholders is an integral part of how Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council operates. It is the mechanism we use to establish what the local community is thinking and what it wishes the Council to do on its behalf.

To support the delivery of this area of activity, the borough council has a Consultation Framework in place as well as a Consultation Toolkit. Both are available on the Council's intranet system for staff to access.

The framework and toolkit give advice and guidance to service areas to help and support them in any consultation or engagement activities they undertake.

Our approach to consultation has been shaped from visits to councils deemed as "beacon authorities" in this field.

This places a heavy emphasis on face-to-face methods with events and engagement held in communities, whether it is the local market, neighbourhood open days, summer fetes or other attractions such as local shopping or leisure facilities.

In other words, going to the community rather than expecting the community to come to us.

This emphasis on "qualitative" information on specific services and service areas can be crucial in helping to shape services and deliver the things which residents view as important to them.

The Council commits itself to the "qualitative" approach in this strategy.

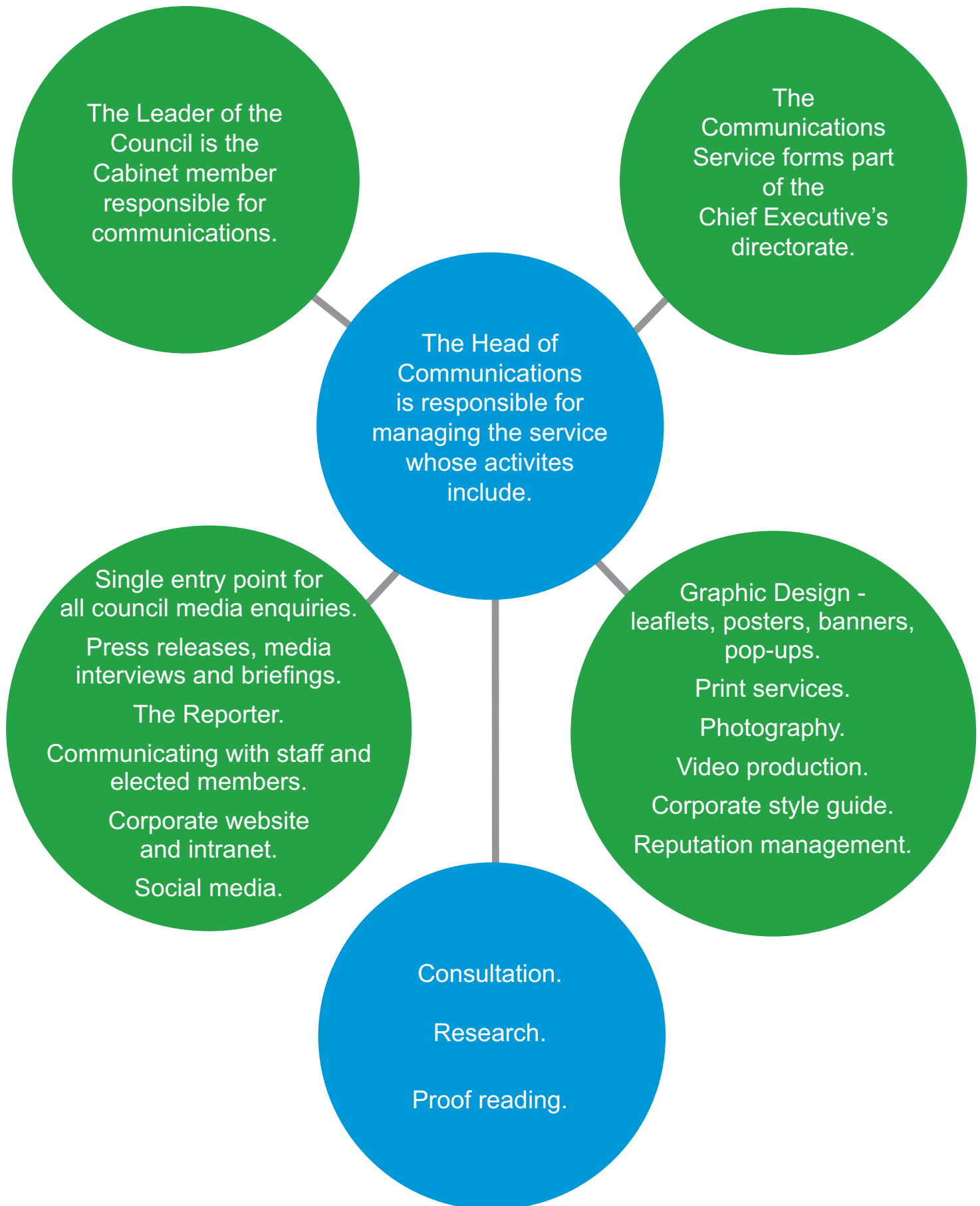
All consultations carried out on behalf of the Council must involve its Research Officer at the earliest opportunity.

This is to ensure national standards and guidelines are adhered to and current best practice is applied to ensure the maximum opportunity possible for specific stakeholders and also the wider public to be involved.

The Corporate Consultation Framework and Toolkit are attached to this strategy as appendices.



Corporate communications



Legislation, equalities and diversity

The Council's communications activities must support the key priorities set out in the Council Plan.

At the same time, the Council must also fulfil its obligations, both legal and otherwise, in relation to a number of areas of legislation.

The Freedom of Information Act came into force on 1 January 2005 and it gives the public the right to ask any public body for all the information they have on a wide range of subjects.

The Act covers almost all public authorities and is retrospective, which means it covers historical documentation as well as that generated after the Act came into being.

Similarly, the Data Protection Act 1998 gives people the right to access information we may hold about them.

It doesn't matter if we are not using that information in any way other than storing it. The Act governs how we are allowed to use the personal information we hold and how we acquire it, store it, share it or dispose of it.

Freedom of Information Act requests and Data Protection Act matters have relevance to the Communications Services as both can lead to media interest and reputation issues for the borough council.

These processes are dealt with principally by the Head of Business Improvement and Partnerships for Freedom of Information Act issues and the Executive Director Resources and Support Services for Data Protection Act matters.

The council has a duty under the Civil Contingencies Act to produce information which helps to "warn and inform" the people of Staffordshire, its visitors and businesses on preparations for, and responses to, emergencies and major incidents within the county.

When considering all forms of communication with our audiences, Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council should conform to the Government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity (made under the Local Government Act 2000).

This code covers the rules around content and style of publicity, advertising, promotion of individual councillors and restrictions during the election period. Paragraph 20 of the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity says:-



"The main purposes of local authority publicity are to increase public awareness of the services provided by the authority and the functions it performs to allow local people to have a real and informed say about issues that affect them, to explain to electors and ratepayers the reasons for particular policies and priorities; and in general to improve local accountability."

The Representation of the People Act 1983 prohibits expenditure on promoting or procuring the election of

a candidate other than through an election agent.

It imposes on senior officers an obligation to broadly ensure that the council does not assist the election candidate with their campaign.

During the six-week period leading up to an election, care must be taken to ensure that laws surrounding local government publicity are not breached.

The Defamation Act of 1996 places a number of responsibilities on publishers of information including councils.

It is important that knowledge of these responsibilities is always retained within the Communications Service.

The Local Government Transparency Code 2014 has been introduced to meet the Government's desire to place more power into citizens' hands to increase democratic accountability and make it easier for local people to contribute to the local decision making process and help shape public services.

Transparency is the foundation of local accountability and the key that gives people the tools and information they need to enable them to play a bigger role in society. The availability of data can also open new markets for local business, the voluntary and community sectors and social enterprises to run services or manage public assets.

The Government believes that in principle all data held and managed by councils should be made available to local people unless there are specific sensitivities, for example, protecting vulnerable people or commercial and operational considerations, to doing so.

It encourages councils to see data as a valuable resource not only to themselves, but also their partners and local people.

The Council is committed to ensuring the fullest possible take-up of its services and benefits by local people. Clear, appropriate and timely communications can help to deliver this goal.

An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out on this Communications Strategy to ensure that where this is practicable, it is taking place.

The assessment is attached to this strategy as an appendix.

Risks associated with this strategy are on the corporate risk system and will be reviewed and monitored regularly.



Wholly Owned Company

The Council gave approval during 2014-15 for a Wholly Owned Company to be set up for communications services.

SubLyme Creative Solutions Limited has now been established and formally registered with Companies House.

This year (2015) will be the first full year of trading for the company.

The creation of SubLyme Creative Solutions Limited 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.

A Service Level Agreement is in place between the council and its Communications Service. It is anticipated this will need to reduce as the council's budget reduces.



Through the vehicle of the company, the capacity which is released will be traded.

Over time it is accepted that the borough council's demands upon the Communications Service will reduce and that this will be balanced by growth in the traded element of the service through the company.

The Service Level Agreement between the Communications Service and the council gives indicative periods for when surplus capacity may be used for trading purposes.

In addition, it confirms that the council only has finite communications capabilities stemming from the resources it makes available.

Therefore it is absolutely vital that the council fully utilises those resources to achieve the outcomes woven into this strategy.

Establishing a trading company for communications services using the model outlined previously to Cabinet is a significant step forward for the borough council.

There are significant benefits as the company will be a trading shell with no full-time staff or assets in the initial stages.

This means there are no TUPE issues or liability risks to the council as the sole shareholder.

It also means that the primary focus can remain on providing core communications services to the Council through the Service Level Agreement while using any spare capacity to trade services in a way which allows staff to learn how to run a business, take commercial decisions and find their feet in a completely new environment.

Over time, as business confidence grows, opportunities should arise for developing income streams.

If this is successful then longer-term aims – say over the next five years or so – could see a new model develop such as an employee-led mutual, arm's length trading company or a staff buy-out.

The formation of a wholly owned company for communications services will allow the Council to explore trading in a way that optimises expertise, skills and resources within the Council's current staff.

It will also be an opportunity for staff to develop greater business and associated technical skills which will benefit the council, their careers and promote the professional "can do" attitude which is already widespread within the authority.

SubLyme Creative Solutions Limited will initially operate by using existing staff resources from the Communications Service at the Council. Their services will be contracted on an hourly rate or commission basis between the council and the trading company.

This removes the complications around the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (TUPE) and directly employed staffing (HR, payroll, pensions etc) as the staff will remain in the employment of Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council.

SubLyme will have its own operating strategy which will be considered by the board of directors as part of the business planning process.

However, it should be stressed that income targets will only be achieved if:-

- The Service Level Agreement is adhered to.
- Additional requirements which are added would impact on periods allocated for trading purposes.
- Corporate support for securing external work with partners is delivered.
- Officers in the Communications Service successfully make the transition to securing and delivering work for clients.
- Marketing and promotion activities support efforts to generate business.



Conclusion

Research carried out by the Local Government Association has found that the strongest driver of perceived value for money – and the primary driver of resident satisfaction with their councils – is providing effective information about council services. Councils whose residents feel well-informed about services are the most popular.

However, in this age of austerity, other issues are becoming increasingly important, such as trust in the Council to spend taxpayers' money wisely and ensuring residents are involved in decisions made in their local area.

Another important factor in boosting trust is whether residents feel involved in decisions the council makes in the local area. Residents who feel involved are significantly more likely to trust the Council to spend taxpayers' money wisely than those who do not feel involved.

In order to maintain reputation, councils must be seen to be on the side of residents and working to improve their everyday lives. Engagement is core to increasing trust and by creating opportunities for involvement local authorities can make their residents the decision makers, rather than council officers.

Quality information, which is clear and understandable and delivered using methods residents can access easily, is the way in which our council will continue to inform, involve and engage local people.

This strategy outlines some of the effective initiatives already happening as part of the Council's communications and sets a course for how further improvement will take place over the next few years to support the council as it strives for excellence.

Phil Jones
Head of Communications

“
... our council will
continue to inform,
involve and engage
local people.
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