



**Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council
Communications Strategy**

(April 2012 – March 2015)

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Introduction

Communication is at the heart of everything we do as a borough council.

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

Our borough council is committed to providing high quality, planned and sustained corporate communications.

We invest in effective channels to communicate complex, sensitive and statutory information. These include corporate publications such as the Reporter, promotional campaigns, our website and media relations activity.

During 2011 the borough council arguably received the most positive media coverage of any public sector organisation in Staffordshire. Research carried out by the Communications Service suggests positive coverage worth in excess of £300,000 a year is being achieved for the borough council.

It's vital that we talk, listen and respond to local people's needs - shaping services when necessary and our messages so everyone is informed and empowered. We will endeavour to take opportunities for people to tell us what they think.

Good quality internal communications is 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 we will actively seek their ideas and views on how we can improve services and become an even better employer.

But it is not enough just to provide those services. What has consistently emerged over recent years is that a successful council also communicates well about its services, events, activities and policies.

Research by the Local Government Association has shown that the better informed people are about their council services, the more satisfied they feel. Therefore, communications can – and does - make an effective contribution to the overall performance of a council and it should be recognised as a strategic and core function.

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 the borough council.

It should be recognised that the Communications Service now provides the major channel by which sections of the council communicate not only with the media but also the wider public.

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.

In addition, the strategy helps us to set a clear direction for communications and highlights the importance we place on good communication at Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council.

Phil Jones
Head of Communications

Key principles, aims and messages

Key principles

- We recognise that good quality communications are essential for the effective delivery of our services.
- We are keen to be as transparent, open and accountable as possible.
- We will ensure information is shared, accessible and meets equality standards.
- We will monitor and measure the effectiveness of our communications.
- We will ensure that our work complies with relevant legal requirements and conforms to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.
- All our communications - spoken, written and electronic – will:-
 - (i) Be honest, accurate, timely and up-to-date.
 - (ii) Be clear, using plain English and easily understood.
 - (iii) Be consistent and suitable for the audience - including hard-to-reach groups.
 - (iv) Meet the corporate style and be clearly identified with Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council.

Key aims

- To ensure the fullest take-up of all council services.
- To create a better understanding between the borough council and its various audiences.
- To help staff deliver services effectively, efficiently and to the best of their ability.
- To deliver key messages about the council, its services, policies and activities making full use of all appropriate channels of communication.
- To provide open access to information about the council and the full range of its services and activities.
- To support all councillors in their work as elected representatives for the borough.

- To improve accountability by ensuring accurate, timely and accessible information is easily available to the public.
- To monitor public perception and views about current and future services.
- To develop marketing and sales activities as appropriate.

Key messages

It is vital to the organisation that we all know why the borough council exists, what it is trying to achieve and how it is trying to achieve it. The Corporate Plan identifies our vision through the four corporate priorities and our three key values.

Supporting the delivery of these priorities and values is the most important reason for having a Communications Strategy in place.

Our priorities are:-

- Creating a cleaner, safer and sustainable borough.
- Creating a borough of opportunity.
- Creating a healthy and active community.
- Transforming our council to achieve excellence.

Our values are:-

- Putting people first.
- Make the best use of our resources.
- Delivering excellent and sustainable services.



Key objectives:-

- Increase awareness, involvement and take-up of council services.
- Improve accountability by ensuring accurate, timely and accessible information is easily available to the public - including hard-to-reach groups.
- Actively promote Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council as an "excellent" council and provider of high quality, value-for-money local services.
- Secure wide coverage of council decisions, activities and services in the local, regional, national and specialist media.
- Ensure Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council has a strong and coherent brand and identity.
- Create a better understanding of the council's policies, services and achievements.
- Identify and develop new and creative communications opportunities.

Key actions:-

1) Press and publicity

Media coverage has a role in shaping Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council's reputation and therefore it is vital the council manages this relationship effectively.

The borough council will take an open, honest and, at times, forthright approach to its dealings and relationships with the media and manage all of its interactions to make the best of all opportunities available.

To ensure that this excellent position is maintained the borough council will:-

- ◆ Respond to journalists in full within four hours of an enquiry being received.
- ◆ Be helpful, polite and positive.
- ◆ Never say "no comment" unless an enquiry relates to "confidential" council business.
- ◆ Ensure any statements to challenging enquiries are cleared by the most appropriate person - Cabinet members, Executive Directors or heads of service – and keep written records of responses to journalists in such

instances.

- ◆ Monitor response times to media enquiries and evaluate media coverage.
- ◆ Ensure an appropriate council spokesman/woman is fully briefed and available for interview if required.

2) Media Protocols

The Communications Service at the borough council plays a central role in the way the authority deals with external communications.

In recognition of this role, a separate document outlining the council's Media Protocols has been produced and is attached as an appendix to the Communications Strategy (see Appendix A).

3) E-communications

(i) www.newcastle-staffs.gov.uk is the borough council's corporate website and its importance as a communications channel – both in terms of doing business with the council and also as a means of receiving and giving information – has grown consistently in recent years.

(ii) Around 18,000 unique users each month visit the council's website which is on a par with the combined monthly total for phone calls made to the council and face-to-face visits.

In 2011 the borough council's website achieved a three star rating from the Society of Information Technology Management (Socitm) which assesses all public sector websites. This made it the highest rated public sector website in Staffordshire.

(iii) The Communications Service is responsible for:-

- Managing the website Content Management System contract.
- Technological development of the site.
- Managing and editing content.
- Ensuring responses are made to all website e-mail communications from residents.

(A Website Policy statement is attached to the strategy as Appendix B)

(iv) Individual service areas are responsible for the content of their pages. Information on the website is diverse and often specialised which means responsibility for its authenticity, timeliness and accuracy and its comprehensive nature must sit within service areas.

(v) An e-Tracker system is in place to ensure content is monitored and content owners are reminded when information needs reviewing, replacing or removing. An escalation procedure is in place to ensure failure to act is reported to more senior officers.

This is important because by ensuring people have access to the right information and tools whenever they require them online, the council can reduce the occasions when customers have to make contact with us either on the telephone or face-to-face.

(vi) During the life of this strategy, the council will commit itself to developing its website as part of a “Channel Shift” project which supports the Transformation Programme. This project will improve the quality and range of services, transactions and information available for customers who wish to deal with the council in this way.

(vii) Increasingly, residents want us to provide services that reflect their lifestyles.

They want services that are contactable at weekends and in the evenings; that respond quickly to their query; are easy to get in touch with from home or work; and they want to be kept informed of the services we provide.

Where possible we will ensure that customers who want to interact with the council online will be able to do so from the beginning of a transaction right through to a satisfactory completion of that transaction.

(viii) Our challenge in the next few years is to fully realise the benefits of cheaper forms of communication, such as the web, to allow services to

concentrate scarce resources on those who really need, or want, face-to-face contact.

We will endeavour to put as many services and as much information online as possible so that customers who wish to deal with, and conclude business with, the council electronically can do so in a place and time which is suitable to them and their lifestyles.

(ix) It is also our intention to support the development of the council's website by enhancing the content management system arrangements – as resources allow.

4) Reporter

The council's newspaper is a key channel of communication between the borough council and the people it serves. It is written, designed and edited in-house and our goal is to circulate the Reporter at least four times a year to all addresses in the borough.

The production cycle mirrors guidance issued by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.

The Reporter will:-

- Give residents an opportunity to shape content through an annual "Have Your Say" survey.
- Aim to keep residents involved and informed with a balance of news, features and information about the council, its services, policies and activities.
- Supplement this aim by regularly providing useful contact numbers and advice. Articles will also be provided on occasion by partner organisations where space allows.
- Play a key role in other areas such as promoting the work of partner organisations, the Third Sector and in providing a platform – where

opportunity arises and space allows - for community news and information which cannot find a voice through other outlets.

There are five core communications actions which, when delivered well, have a marked impact on a council's reputation and the perceptions of residents.

The Reporter contributes to three of these five areas – as outlined in the Local Government Association's Reputation Campaign – which are:-

- a) Councils should publish a regular council newspaper or magazine to inform residents.
- b) Councils should provide information to residents outlining an A-Z guide to council services – the Reporter will do this at least once a year.
- c) Councils will ensure the council brand is consistently linked to its services.

Surveys carried out in recent years show the Reporter has regularly been the single most significant source of information for residents about the council's services and activities.

The challenge in the years ahead will be to continue producing a quality newspaper which enables residents to be kept informed over where their Council Tax is being spent and which keeps them informed and involved in council events, services and activities.

5) Social media

This is a fast growing communications channel and harnessing its capabilities in an efficient and effective way is a challenge for the council.

If used appropriately, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, MySpace and many other platforms offer the council opportunities for sharing information, engaging with hard-to-reach groups and consulting on some issues.

However, as part of this Communications Strategy the council will ensure:-

- Any proposals to set up sites to market and communicate the council's services or activities are still the responsibility of the council and must therefore be signed off by the Head of Communications before they are launched.
- Twitter works best when personalised. Few will engage with heavy-handed, corporate accounts overseen by cautious communications or marketing departments.
- Common sense prevails when using social media on behalf of the council. The council will avoid online arguments or confrontations; allow customers to have their say and to criticise; only correct misinformation; leave the politics to the politicians.
- Considerable care is taken to assess the type of information shared on social media.

Guidelines for using social media platforms are included in the Media Protocols which form Appendix A to this strategy.

In conjunction with these protocols, the council also has guidance in place for staff and elected members on the use of professional forums, professional and social networking and other third party websites such as blogs, microblogs and personal web space.

It must be remembered that publication on social media sites is no different to other forms of communication or marketing undertaken on the council's behalf and all our normal standards, policies and practices apply.

6) Working with other e-communication channels

SMS text messaging

The council introduced SMS text messaging several years ago and this has proved a useful addition to the channels the public use to contact the council.

Currently, texts sent to a designated text number are converted into e-mails and they arrive in the Webmaster e-mail box at the council.

Picture messaging services have also been introduced and a pilot scheme involving the council's dog wardens and the website proved successful.

Wardens take photographs of dogs they have taken possession of and these are immediately loaded on to the council's website using the camera facility on their mobile phones.

Owners are able to view rescued animals on the council website and can speak to staff in the council's contact centre about reclaiming their pet once some security issues over ownership have been dealt with.

The council's Communications Service acknowledges that the use of mobile phone technology – both SMS text messaging and picture messaging - could be enhanced and where resources permit, work will go on with services to identify where this can bring the most significant benefits to residents.

Quick Response Codes

The council will also need to be able to respond quickly and appropriately to other emerging technologies such as QR (Quick Response). This is a matrix bar code or two dimensional code.

This is readable by only dedicated QR code readers or any mobile phones with a camera. Mobiles with camera facilities take a snapshot of the QR code and process it by a QR code reader application. The code can take the mobile phone directly to a web area.

This facility has already been used by the council in some areas of work with younger people, for instance encouraging students at Keele University to take part in elections.

Work will continue to ensure the council makes the best and most appropriate use of this new technology.



Bluetooth/Wi-Fi

The council has a Bluetooth/Wi-Fi transmitter and work will go on to ensure as many services as possible have access to this communications channel so they can deliver key messages as frequently and as widely as possible.

For instance, installing the mobile transmitter in recycling vehicles could ensure messages are sent to thousands of council service users in one day via their mobile phones.

Other areas which could undoubtedly benefit include community safety where the device can transmit to people involved in the town centre's night-time economy throughout a whole weekend without supervision.

Despite the UK population standing at around 61.5 million, there are in fact almost 76 million mobile phones owned in the country. And in June this year, more than half of those are expected to be Smart phones.

That means an unprecedented level of access to mobile phone technology such as QR (see above), Bluetooth and Wi-Fi.

Capitalising on this saturation of mobile phone availability is another key challenge facing communications at the borough council.

However, it could pay significant dividends particularly with younger people who tend to favour mobile phone communications more than any other channel.

Internal Communications

Key objectives:-

- To improve employee understanding and commitment to the council's vision and key themes.
- To improve and create effective and systematic channels of internal communication.
- To raise the level of communication skills across the authority.
- To involve employees in the improvement of their own and other council services.
- To develop more opportunities for staff feedback.
- To recognise, appreciate and embrace the contribution staff can make in shaping council policies and in delivering high quality services.
- To create an environment of trust, honesty and openness at and between all levels of the organisation.

Internal communications is the process through which the council shares information and knowledge with its employees and members in order to build the commitment necessary to achieve strategic and operational objectives and to assist in the management and implementation of change.

Good communications within the council can lead to greater commitment from employees, an improved customer experience and increased productivity, which all contributes to a positive brand image.

The council will promote excellent internal communications because:-

- a) Staff are residents as well as employees – well-informed staff can be ambassadors and advocates for the council in the community.

- b) People who work at the borough council should get news about things that affect their working lives and working environment from the council itself rather than from a third party.

- c) Communications is a two-way process – the council needs intelligence and feedback from staff to improve services. It is not simply enough to deliver information - processes must be in place to receive information back.

- d) Every member of staff employed by the borough council should know what the organisation stands for; its priorities and values.

- e) Ensuring all elected members are kept informed and involved will enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the council.

Therefore, the council will:-

(i) Produce a regular Core Brief from Executive Management Team which will keep staff informed of key corporate messages. This brief will form one part of team meetings which all services and departments should organise on a regular basis.

A corporate agenda should be followed and this, together with guidance on how to conduct briefs, is on e-Voice (the council's intranet system).

(ii) Produce a staff magazine which focuses on staff excellence and achievement as well as key corporate messages.

(iii) Hold Meet the Leadership/Walk the Job sessions each year to promote visible leadership; open up lines of communication at the council which are not only top down but also bottom up; identify and consider service improvements; encourage and support staff in delivering services.

(iv) Produce news bulletins/executive bulletins on an ad-hoc basis to ensure the speedy delivery of key developments or urgent corporate messages.

(v) Produce electronic summaries of Cabinet meetings (e-Cabinet) and also monthly round-ups of key service information (e-News). These will be circulated to staff and elected members.

(vi) Design corporate screensavers for all PCs which are activated after a period of keyboard inactivity and are changed regularly. As well as highlighting the council's corporate priorities they can also be used to raise awareness of the corporate values.

(vii) Produce a weekly media update for elected members which highlights coverage of the borough council locally. Councillors can follow links which enable them to look at council press releases, listen to the council's podcast and review articles online from the local media.

Intranet Strategy

In a previous inspection at the borough council, the Audit Commission recommended a central resource for planning and co-ordinating internal communications.

E-Voice – the staff intranet system – has since become that key platform.

Combining notice boards and other features, such as a revolving news/image banner, have helped to attract and build an audience so that other key corporate information can be shared effectively.

Further development work on e-Voice is vital if the council is to follow through its commitment to communicate openly and effectively with staff. As a result, the council will:-

- Ensure e-Voice remains as the default page when all PC users log on at the council. This practice will be retained as it ensures traffic is driven to an important internal communications tool.

- Further develop and enhance bespoke “knowledge hubs” – many of which are already in place on e-Voice such as Human Resources – to ensure vital information sources are available for staff.
- Develop systems which encourage staff to come forward with initiatives and ideas.
- Develop tools and mechanisms for e-Voice which are in line with best practice to ensure it continues to be a device which helps engage and involve staff; boosts knowledge transfer and efficient working; provides the tools and resources staff need to work efficiently and effectively.

The benefits of making the intranet available to staff are now well recognised:-

- Better internal communications.
- Improved processes.
- Sharing best practice.
- Improved efficiency.
- Reduction in paperwork.
- Avoiding duplication of effort.
- Information sharing/knowledge transfer.

The Communications Service will also continue to support development which ensures best use is made of the elected members’ internet area so information can be accessed and transferred in a safe and secure electronic environment.

Consultation

Key objectives:-

- To monitor the council's progress against its vision and key themes.
- To identify issues that are important to local people, partners and staff.
- To target individuals and key groups of service users to establish satisfaction levels.

- To direct changes to services and to service delivery.
- To prioritise council activity and make the best use of resources.
- To encourage participation and dialogue between the council and its stakeholders.
- To secure benchmarking information to measure performance against other local authorities.

Consultation Strategy

Introduction

Consultation with the public and stakeholders is now an integral part of how local authorities operate. 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 strategy, a Consultation Toolkit has been produced and has been placed on e-Voice within the “Research and Consultation” element of the Communications Service section.

This toolkit gives advice and guidance to service areas to help and support them in consultation or engagement activities they undertake.

The Government has given a very clear signal that it wishes to see local people involved in shaping the way their local council provides services to the community.

It has also signalled it wishes to see the end of the more traditional attempts at large scale consultation such as mass postal surveys. Indeed, it abolished the Place Survey and is encouraging councils to be more inventive.

Our approach

Visits to councils deemed as “beacon” authorities in consultation have indicated a heavy emphasis on face-to-face methods with events and engagement held in communities whether it is the local market, neighbourhood open day, summer fete or other attraction.

In other words, go 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 borough council commits itself to this “qualitative” approach in this strategy.

Key front-facing services will be encouraged to sign-up to this approach which will primarily involve the Communications Service with support from the services themselves to ensure robust, widespread and inclusive views of users are gathered.

The Communications Toolkit will be used as a support mechanism for services to ensure they are adhering to corporate standards and guidelines for harvesting information from service users and the wider public.

Aligned to this “face-to-face” approach will be the use of some other channels such as the newly established E-Panel (which has replaced the People’s Panel) and an annual survey which appears in the council’s newspaper the Reporter.

Research Officer

All consultations carried out on behalf of the borough 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.

Major consultations

For any major consultation the council will follow current Government best practice which outlines seven criteria:-

Criterion One - When to consult - Formal consultation should take place at a stage when there is scope to influence the policy outcome.

Criterion Two - Duration of consultation exercises - Consultations should normally last for at least 12 weeks with consideration given to longer timescales where feasible and sensible.

Criterion Three - Clarity of scope and impact - Consultation documents should be clear about the consultation process, what is being proposed, the scope to influence and the expected costs and benefits of the proposals.

Criterion Four - Accessibility of consultation exercises - Consultation exercises should be designed to be accessible to, and clearly targeted at, those people the exercise is intended to reach.

Criterion Five -The burden of consultation -Keeping the burden of consultation to a minimum is essential if consultations are to be effective and if consultees' buy-in to the process is to be obtained.

Criterion Six - Responsiveness of consultation exercises - Consultation responses should be analysed carefully and clear feedback should be provided to participants following the consultation.

Criterion Seven - Capacity to consult - Officials running consultations should seek guidance in how to run an effective consultation exercise and share what they have learned from the experience.

It is also recommended that to increase transparency, these criteria should be reproduced in consultation documents where possible.

Councillors

Elected members play a pivotal role in listening to the views of residents and acting on their behalf.

Therefore, it is essential that the council makes the best use of this resource and therefore all consultations which begin during the life of this strategy should carefully consider the involvement of an appropriate scrutiny committee.

Corporate Plan and the Budget

Each year, Cabinet members will consider whether it is appropriate for a consultation process to take place in these two key areas and what format that consultation will take.

Staff

It has often been said that the council's staff are its greatest asset and it is vital their views are considered as we continue on our journey to excellence. This recognition of our "Employee Voice" will be done through a combination of elements over a two-year cycle.

Year One

The council will take part in The Times Best Place to Work (Public Sector) survey. This will allow us to benchmark against other public sector bodies in quality research which is independent.

A "pulse survey" will be carried out in-house to gather information on team briefs, whether staff feel informed etc.

Year Two

The council will involve independent researchers to carry out focus groups with staff to delve below the surface of findings from The Times Best Place to Work (Public Sector) survey.

A "pulse survey" will be carried out in-house to gather information on team briefs, whether staff feel informed etc.

Internal communication channels will be used by Executive Management Team to communicate key messages to staff from the above.

Marketing and Sales Strategy

Key Objectives:-

- To raise awareness or build reputation.
- To change behaviour.
- To generate income.
- To better understand the needs of customers and use this understanding to design and develop services.
- Highlight what we do and where we do it.
- Celebrate success and achievement.

Why have a Marketing Strategy?

This strategy is important because:-

- a) It will ensure people who live, work and do business in the borough can easily and clearly identify services provided to them by the borough council using the Council Tax they pay.
- b) It supports the priorities of the council by promoting change of behaviours and attitudes, for instance in recycling, community safety, health and well-being.
- c) It helps services hit key targets such as income generation or participation levels.
- d) It helps target activities to the most appropriate audiences.

Marketing our services

The council already uses a number of different methods and channels to promote services. Some of these involve marketing professionals in the Communications Service; some are carried out by staff for which marketing is one part of their job and in some specialist areas services are bought in.

Channels currently used include leaflets; posters; press releases/newspaper articles; events and exhibitions; social media; signage; civic gifts; mail shots.

However, consideration will be given to new and developing channels as they emerge.

During the life of this strategy, the borough council agrees to:-

(i) Establish a marketing forum which will be chaired by the Head of Communications or his deputy.

The forum will be responsible for planning and reviewing all marketing and sales activities across the whole council. This forum will report to the Executive Management Team.

(ii) Try to join up marketing activities and resources where appropriate to help build capacity, impact and income.

(iii) Ensure all marketing is undertaken to professional standards.

(iv) Ensure the borough council has a clear, strategic direction and focus for its marketing activities which support and promote services in their efforts to hit key performance measures in council priority areas.

(v) Use council marketing experience and resources in a more pro-active way to work with partners in promoting Newcastle town centre and the wider borough in a way which boosts the district's visitor economy.

(vi) Promote transparency and evaluation of all marketing expenditure.

(vi) Make sure borough council produced information, our buildings and our services carry a consistent and recognisable corporate identity.

Key objectives:-

- * The council's brand promotes a visible link between the council and the services/activities it provides and ensures the council gains recognition of the services/activities it provides.
- * The style guide ensures consistency in use of the council's brand.

A council may be delivering excellent services but unless they are clearly branded and promoted, the authority and its elected members will not get the credit and recognition they deserve.

A strong brand for council services is essential to improve satisfaction, build relationships and trust with residents and to help people understand what their Council Tax pays for.

The council's corporate logo – produced by the Communications Service and agreed by Cabinet just over two years ago - is a strong, visual identity and the use of the castle has ensured a very visible link to Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council and Newcastle-under-Lyme itself.



Rules on how this brand/logo can be used have been laid down in a corporate brand manual which will ensure branding is done in a corporate, consistent and high quality way.

Use of the logo by any external organisation, partner or interested party should be approved in the first instance by the Head of Communications as its use is covered by UK copyright law.

Copyright law originated in the United Kingdom from a concept of common law; the Statute of Anne 1709. It became statutory with the passing of the Copyright Act 1911. The current act is the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

The law gives the creators of literary, dramatic, musical, artistic works, sound recordings, broadcasts, films and typographical arrangement of published editions, rights to control the ways in which their material may be used.

The rights cover; broadcast and public performance, copying, adapting, issuing, renting and lending copies to the public.

Types of work protected include song lyrics, manuscripts, manuals, computer programs, commercial documents, leaflets, newsletters and articles, maps and logos.

Copyright is an automatic right and arises whenever an individual or company creates a work. To qualify, a work should be regarded as original, and exhibit a degree of labour, skill or judgement.

Names, titles, short phrases and colours are not generally considered unique or substantial enough to be covered, but a creation, such as a logo, that combines these elements may be.

(A Corporate Identity Style Guide is attached to this strategy as Appendix C)

The council has also endorsed plain English guidance to ensure information which is produced is delivered in a clear and concise manner.

This guidance has also been made available to staff through e-Voice. Training and refresher sessions are organised by the Communications Service in conjunction with Human Resources.

(The council's Plain English Guide is attached to this strategy as Appendix D)

Evaluation

Evaluation and the measurement of how successful initiatives have been – or otherwise – is fundamental to ensuring the council gets value-for-money and is effective and efficient in the communications tools it uses.

There are already a number of mechanisms in place which help us to evaluate what we are doing. The Communications Service will continue to use these mechanisms as part of its evaluation processes.

The Society of Information Technology Management (Socitm) website review is an annual assessment which looks at all public sector websites from the customers' point of view and rates them accordingly.

This enables the council to benchmark itself against the rest of the public sector.

An Insight Tool is used on the website to gather user comments on the usability, navigability and usefulness of the council's website.

An annual survey is published each year in the Reporter. This gathers information on a range of services including Customer Services; Recycling and Waste; Streetscene and Communications.

In the Communications element, questions are asked over whether residents feel the council keeps them informed, whether they require information in

other formats or are aware of somebody who would benefit from this alternative method of communication, whether they would be interested in joining out E-Panel.

Face-to-face customer engagement takes place throughout the year to gather information on a range of services. One question which is present in all surveys measures customer satisfaction with the council as a whole.

This is a key evaluation tool because Local Government Association research has shown that the better informed residents are the more satisfied they are with their council and its services.

Staff are asked each year in an internal “Pulse Survey” a range of questions including – Does the council keep you informed? Do you have a monthly team meeting? Are you aware of the council’s priorities?

An annual survey is carried out with the council’s key media customers to ensure that the services being provided are sufficient to meet their requirements.

Ongoing monitoring also takes place which ensures media enquiries are dealt with inside a four hour period; the tone of coverage e.g. positive, negative or neutral. And work is carried out each year to assess the advertising equivalent value of media coverage of borough council related issues.

Monthly meetings with finance officers give an indication of how income levels are performing in areas where marketing and sales activity is taking place.

During the period covered by this strategy, the Communications Service will endeavour to undertake bespoke marketing and sales campaigns each year – where resources allow.

This will be new territory for the council and it is therefore imperative that appropriate evaluation measures are in place to measure effectiveness and value-for-money.

For these campaigns, evaluation will focus on a model pioneered by Westminster City Council called ROSIE:-

Research **O**bjective **S**trategy **I**mplementation **E**valuation

Legislation

The council's communications activities must support the key priorities set out in the Corporate 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.

Requests for information

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 however dealt with principally by the Head of Central Services for Freedom of Information Act issues and the Head of Human Resources 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.

If senior officers cannot show that they have taken all reasonable steps to prevent the authority from providing certain forms of assistance to an election candidate, they will be charged with committing indictable criminal offences.

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.

Equalities and diversity

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 Appendix E)

(A corporate Risk Assessment is attached to this strategy as Appendix F)

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.

And whilst we should obviously have a keen focus on external communications, the council will also bear in mind that internal communications and the way we give and receive information from staff is equally important for the impact it can have on morale and productivity.

This strategy is about keeping the council's stakeholders - residents, businesses, our staff, elected members and partners - informed and involved in what the council is doing for them and with them.

The challenge facing the council is how it can achieve this in an ever changing and evolving world.

Residents are becoming less reliant on more traditional communication channels and are increasingly getting their news and information from areas which have previously been uncharted territory for public sector organisations.

As well as the technological challenges, the council must also embrace the continuing change in the demographics of the borough to ensure all residents have equal access to authentic, accurate and up-to-date information.

This strategy outlines some of the effective initiatives already happening in 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