COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY 2012-2015

Submitted by: Head of Communications

Portfolio: Customer Service and Transformation

Ward(s) affected: All

Purpose of the Report

To seek Cabinet approval for the Communications Strategy which covers the period 1 April 2012 to 31 March 2015. 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.

Recommendation

That Cabinet approves the Communications Strategy 2012-15.

Reasons

Good communications can make an effective contribution to the overall performance of the council and it should be recognised as a strategic and core function. This strategy strengthens mechanisms already in place while introducing others which will allow the council to inform stakeholders of the services available to them – showing them where their taxes are spent and how they can get involved with Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council, its services, events, policies and activities.

---

1.   **Background**

1.1   The borough council's current Communications Strategy covers the period to the end of the current financial year. It has been in place for three years and has been used to provide a framework for communications activity at the council.

1.2   This replacement Communications Strategy not only continues that focus on the development of external and internal but also includes information to guide work in other associated areas such as consultation and engagement; marketing and sales; electronic communications.

1.3   Members are well aware that good communications has 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 improved satisfaction levels among residents.

1.4   Good communications has also been shown to enhance stakeholder participation and engagement while also protecting and building reputation.

1.5   A detailed work plan for each year the strategy is in place will be produced annually as part of the Service Plan for the Communications Service. This will outline the milestones and work streams which are to take place on an operational level to ensure the key principles outlined in the strategy itself are delivered.

1.6   The strategy is supported by a range of other documents which are attached as appendices and include media protocols; a web content policy; corporate brand guide; Plain English guidance; an Equality Impact Assessment and a Risk Assessment.

2.   **Issues**

2.1   During the life of the existing Communications Strategy there have been significant developments and changes in communications activity at the borough council. Some of the key highlights are outlined in the bullet points below.

2.2   The Reporter

2.2.1   Changes introduced by the Government in 2011 to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity saw changes to the guidance on the number of publications which councils should produce each year.

2.2.2   The Government now recommends no more than four each year and the council currently complies with this recommendation. Despite this substantial reduction from the 10 editions produced each year previously, recent research has shown the Reporter is still the most important single source which the majority of residents rely on for information about the council.

2.3   Social media

2.3.1   Although social media has been around for a number of years, these information platforms are still relatively new and unchartered territory for the public sector. However, they are constantly increasing in popularity and the council is now using them more effectively than ever before in communicating with residents.

2.3.2   Latest figures show around 1,000 people follow the council on Twitter and a similar number access information from us via Facebook.

2.3.3   The council has managed to treble these figures during 2011 and will continue to develop how it uses these and other channels such as YouTube and Flickr.

2.4   Media relations

2.4.1   The council has an excellent working relationship with the media and in particular the local media. During the last year it could be argued the council had the most positive coverage of any public sector organisation in Staffordshire.

2.4.2   The two main ways the council interacts with the media is through the production of press releases and through responding to media enquiries.

2.4.3   An evaluation of the financial worth of good media and public relations was carried out in 2011 and from this it is estimated the council achieved local media coverage during the last 12 months to the value of £293,834. When the national picture is added into the equation, it is estimated the council generates a further £15,000 a year in good media and public relations.

2.5   Marketing and sales

2.5.1   During 2010/11 the borough council increased its marketing and sales activities with a focus on giving appropriate support to several key service areas. The primary goal was to help

generate income – a key area for the council which is becoming increasingly important in the current economic climate.

2.5.2 In many of the areas where income generation has been identified as an issue and where some support has been given, current estimates suggest income levels will be either up on the same period for last year or indeed on a par with them.

2.5.3 The strategy outlines how the council will align lessons learned in this new area of work with making the best use of available corporate resources to ensure it makes the most of the marketing and sales opportunities available to us and continues to boost income levels.

2.5.4 The strategy also recognises the important role the council can play by using its 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.

2.6 Design and print

2.6.1 Flexible working practices have been introduced in this section in the last two years to ensure the team is best placed to meet the ebbs and flows of work. A recent independent assessment of the unit was carried out by a company of specialists on behalf of Improvement and Efficiency West Midlands and the experts who conducted the work described the unit as one of the best they had visited in the region.

2.7 Consultation

2.7.1 A series of best practice visits have been undertaken to see how beacon councils carry out customer engagement and consultation. This took place at the same time as the Government ended the Place Survey and urged councils to look again at how they engage with residents.

2.7.2 The borough council is now in the infancy of a new way of working modelled on beacon councils which involves more qualitative, face-to-face engagement and a focus on key front line services.

2.8 E-communications

2.8.1 The borough council's website is the top rated public sector website in Staffordshire at the moment according to the Society of Information Technology Management (Socitm) which carries out an annual assessment of all public sector websites nationwide. About 18,000 unique users do business with the council online each month.

2.8.2 The Communications Strategy makes it clear that the council intends to continue developing its website in recognition of the important role it plays in helping residents to business, and engage, with the council.

2.8.3 To support this development it is the council's intention to enhance the website's content management system arrangements – as resources allow – in the near future.

2.9 Internal communications

2.9.1 Significant strides have been taken to ensure staff at the council are kept involved and informed of key issues and decisions. This helps to ensure they are ambassadors and advocates for the council, its services, activities and events.

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 service areas to deliver the borough 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 which could enable the council to continue to develop and enhance the way it involves and informs key stakeholders.

4.2   A clear, concise and effective Communications Strategy will:-

   - Contribute to the delivery of the council's priorities.
   - Ensure the production of information about the council's services and activities which is up-to-date, accurate, relevant and in formats which are accessible by all residents.
   - Maintain or increase the percentage of residents who feel they are kept informed by the council and improve satisfaction levels with services.
   - Maintain or Increase the percentage of staff who feel they are kept informed by the council and improve satisfaction levels with working for the council.
   - Develop communication channels which seek to improve the way information is shared to all sections of our community.
   - Strengthen the council's image and increase public awareness and satisfaction of its services and activities through the use of consistent corporate identity and branding.
   - Engage more effectively with residents from all sections of our community.

5.   **Outcomes Linked to Sustainable Community Strategy and Corporate Priorities**

5.1   Good communications can make a significant contribution in helping the borough council achieve the delivery of outcomes linked to the council's four corporate priorities and also the Sustainable Community Strategy.

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.

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.

8.3   In July 2009 the annual budget for the Communications Service was just under £1.1 million. Following a restructure of the service and budget reviews, this has reduced to £708,140 in the current financial year.

8.4   And of this figure, a total of £188,400 is for corporate expenditure and includes the budget for all of the council's multi-functional print devices and the centralised print and publicity budget which pays for election materials, statutory advertising, recycling leaflets, signage for buildings and so on.

8.5   Further savings of £15,000 have been put forward for the 2012/13 financial year as the service continues to strive for more efficiencies while delivering effective ways of communicating with residents.

8.6   Contracts for the printing and distribution of the Reporter are due to expire at the end of the current financial year and a procurement exercise will be undertaken once the Communications Strategy is in place and agreed by Cabinet. Until that procurement process is undertaken it is difficult to be explicit over the financial implications but efforts will be taken to minimise those and a further report will be brought back to Cabinet in due course before any new contracts are put in place.

9.   **Major Risks**

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

10   **Sustainability and Climate Change Implications**

10.1   Communications has already played a key role in raising awareness of, and also involvement in, the sustainability and climate change agenda both within the council and also with external stakeholders.

10.2   Significant sections of the Reporter have in recent years been devoted to efforts to encourage residents to support recycling and waste initiatives; there has been a "green issues" supplement; the council's website carries large amounts of information in a bespoke "climate change" section; information is regularly made available for staff to encourage them to embrace these issues.

10.3   As well as playing an important role in communicating information on sustainability and climate change issues, procurement practices undertaken by the service in the delivery of its corporate role also make a contribution.

10.4   For instance, paper from renewable sources is used to print the Reporter; the print company has its own environment impact strategy to reduce the harm paper requirements and chemical disposal have on the environment; paper purchased by the borough council for its design and print requirements is sourced from renewable sources where appropriate.

11.   **Key Decision Information**

11.1   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.

12. **List of Appendices**

Appendix A - Communications Strategy

13. **Background Papers**

None