

TITLE OF REPORT: COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report introduces the draft Communications Strategy.
- 1.2 PARC is invited to make suggestions on the draft before the Strategy is presented to Cabinet for eventual adoption by Full Council.

2. FORWARD PLAN

- 2.1 This report does not contain a recommendation on a key decision and has not been referred to in the Forward Plan.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Corporate Plan undertakes to implement a comprehensive Communications Strategy.
- 3.2 A draft Communications Strategy was passed by CMT in January 2007 and agreed by PARC on 22 March 2007. However, with a change of portfolio holder in May 2007 its introduction to Cabinet was deferred. Subsequently the Peer Review has raised communication as an important issue for the Council, including Members, while the Audit Commission has also commented on the Council's communications focus. All these factors have prompted a review of the proposals and a revised Communications Strategy, attached as Appendix A, is now being put forward.

4. ISSUES

- 4.1 In helping the Council respond to the recent Annual Audit letter, communications has a valuable role to play in achieving good "buy in" and awareness of the plans put in place in response to the actions suggested by the Audit Commission. In addition Communications has a wider role in helping NHDC to improve value for money; as one element of VFM is the public's perception of NHDC and its services, which good communications can influence.

- 4.2 The Peer review which took place in October 2007 has now concluded and as a result of its suggestions, greater emphasis within the Strategy is placed on the role of Members and senior officers in promoting good communication and playing a full role within the Strategy.
- 4.3 The revised Strategy specifically sets out the role of Members, both Executive and non-executive, all staff, Directors, Heads of Service and the corporate Communications team. It seeks to promote communication as an important consideration in the activities of everyone who works for the Council.
- 4.4 It is supported by an action plan at appendix B, which will effectively become the service plan for the Communications Team. This seeks to direct the proactive communications work of the authority to the areas identified as priorities.
- 4.5 The Council already has a Consultation Strategy, which is currently being reviewed in light of the introduction of the new National Indicators, and so consultation is not included in this strategy, however it is an important tool in checking public, partner and staff and Member satisfaction with our communications, so references to this work have been retained.
- 4.6 The opportunity has been taken to redesign the draft Strategy into a simple easy to read format, for ease of use and to encourage understanding and participation. It is intended to be read by everyone.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Due to time constraints this paper has not been reviewed by the legal team. Any update will be given at the meeting. The Council operates within the code of recommended practice on local authority publicity 1988, as amended 2 April 2001 following the Local Government Act 2000.

6. FINANCIAL AND RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The Communications Strategy does not of itself have any financial implications and any costs arising will be expected to be met from within existing budgets.
- 6.2 The Communications Strategy, if successfully implemented, will have a positive effect on the Council's reputational risk.

7. HUMAN RESOURCE AND EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 It is expected that some training in communications skills may be identified during the implementation of the Strategy. These needs are likely to be contained within existing training budgets, which already provide for communications skills training.

8. CONSULTATION WITH EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS AND WARD MEMBERS

- 8.1 Advice has been taken from a number of other local authorities and the Herts Communications Group, which consists of Communications managers from the Herts Districts and from HCC.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 That PARC add their comments and suggestions to the draft Strategy
- 9.2 Subject to any alterations by PARC, the draft Strategy be passed to Cabinet then for adoption by Full Council.

10. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10.1 Achievement of the Corporate plan objective to implement a comprehensive communications strategy. A corporate strategy for communications is expected to significantly enhance our effectiveness.

11. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 11.1 None.

12. APPENDICES

- 12.1 Appendix A – Draft Communications Strategy
- 12.2 Appendix B – Draft Communications Action Plan

13. CONTACT OFFICERS

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14. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Code of Practice on local authority publicity – CLG 2001



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COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY 2008-2011

We will communicate openly and regularly with the public, with our partners and with each other, in order to promote mutual understanding, and high quality services to the people of North Hertfordshire.

February 2008



North Hertfordshire District Council

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INTRODUCTION

The North Hertfordshire District Council Communications Strategy is a corporate document that is relevant to all levels within the Authority.

The Communications Strategy will:

- Demonstrate our communications commitment to the people of North Hertfordshire and our partners.
- Endorse communication as a priority issue for North Hertfordshire District Council.
- Support the delivery of North Hertfordshire District Council's Corporate Plan.
- Provide clear guidance to all North Hertfordshire District Council staff and elected Members on Communications issues.



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KEY PRINCIPLES

Our communications should be transparent, honest, open and two-way. Strong communications supports how we work and how we provide our services. Therefore:

- Information should be shared and made available in a range of formats to everyone in our District.
- All communications- spoken, written and electronic - should be clear, informative, accurate, easy to understand, timely and up to date.
- All published materials should adhere to our accepted corporate style and be easily and instantly identifiable as originating from North Hertfordshire District Council.
- Our “tone of voice” is important. We should be authoritative but not patronising, understanding not indignant.

KEY AIMS

To establish and maintain clear and regular channels of communication:

- With our many external audiences (residents, businesses, and visitors etc) in order to create a positive, informed and recognisable profile for North Hertfordshire District Council.
- With our staff, in order to create a corporate environment of trust and loyalty in which our aspirations to excel are valued and encouraged.
- With Members, in order to support their work as elected representatives.
- With Central Government and other councils in order to share best practice and provide the public with the highest standards of service.
- With our partners and stakeholders, in order to create effective working partnerships that achieve the outcomes best for our local community as a whole.



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RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

1. Directors

The Chief Executive and the Directors will be responsible for driving the Communications strategy by actively, and demonstrably, applying its principles to all aspects of their work.

They will communicate their decisions, and the strategic thinking behind them, clearly to the Heads of Service in order that essential information can be cascaded to staff at all levels (as appropriate) in an accurate and timely manner.

They should also ensure that effective communications is included as a key competency in the annual appraisal of all Heads of Service.

2. Heads of Service

All Heads of Service will take particular responsibility for ensuring the successful implementation of the Communications Strategy within their areas of responsibility. They will also:

- Ensure that all staff are fully aware of the Communications Strategy, and act upon it.
- Provide regular feedback to the Head of Communications.
- Encourage two-way communications within their own service areas.
- Provide regular feedback to their own Director.
- Advise corporate Communications of any issues which may require a communications plan so that appropriate communication can be considered.
- Make communications a key competency area in staff appraisals.

3. Corporate Communications Team

The Corporate Communications Team will hold responsibility for supporting the organisation in its wider communications issues and for driving up levels of communication internally, and externally. This will include:

- Planned implementation of all aspects of the Corporate Communications Strategy with the CMT.
- Working with all personnel who have communications needs to provide help and support where appropriate.
- Specifically the Corporate Communications Team will drive the Communications strategy through activities in the following specific areas.
 - Internal Communications
 - Media Relations
 - Corporate identity
 - Public Relations and Consultation
 - Information Management

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INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Strategic Aim

To maintain a strong two-way flow of information with the Council that supports and encourages teamwork, trust, loyalty and effective working.

Key Principles

- We will inform all our staff and Members of issues and events that affect North Hertfordshire District Council and the impact it will have on them.
- We will consult our staff through formal and informal channels about the development of policies, practice and procedures.
- We will listen as well as talk in our daily dealings with colleagues and elected members.

Measures of Success

- Regular staff survey with specific questions relating to communication, to show improvement over time.
- By monitoring the use of our internal communications channels and capturing staff feedback through them.

MEDIA RELATIONS

Strategic Aim

To recognise the value of the media as a means of communicating information to the public, and to be open, honest and proactive in our dealings with them.

Key Principles

- We will follow the Code of Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2001
- We will establish and maintain strong professional links with local media providers.
- We will respect the rights of the media to represent all views on any given issue.

Measures of Success

- By conducting an annual media survey on our performance that allows us to establish benchmarks and improvement over time..
- By monitoring and recording the quantity and quality of the media coverage we achieve, showing year-on year improvement.

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CORPORATE IDENTITY

Strategic Aim

To ensure that the services, literature and overall image of North Hertfordshire District Council are constantly presented in a recognisable corporate style.

Key Principles

- We will provide information in a clearly branded, concise fashion to both internal and external audiences.
- We will promote the individual services provided by North Hertfordshire District Council but always be mindful of their contribution to the corporate body overall.
- We will always follow the guidelines as set out in the North Hertfordshire District Council Corporate Style Guide.

Measures of Success

- By completing an annual audit of all publications and advertisement to identify problem areas and setting targets for improvement in the future.
- All published material meets Corporate Style/identity guidelines
- By measuring improvement in our residents survey statistics

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND CONSULTATION

Strategic Aim

To create and maintain links with other agencies, our partners and the public that inform and direct the way in which we conduct our business and provide services to the community.

Key Principles

- We will actively educate and inform the public about North Hertfordshire District Council, its practices and its services through a range of media including *Outlook* our quarterly resident's magazine.
- In recognition of NHDC's commitment to equality we will endeavour to communicate equally to all communities and demographic groups
- We will review our consultation processes regularly to ensure that they are inclusive and appropriate and are delivering value for money.

Measures of Success

- By recording the number and types of consultation carried out annually across the Council.
- By increasing response rates for external surveys and questionnaires.
- By monitoring the public's perception of North Hertfordshire District Council through the regular District Wide Surveys.

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INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Strategic Aim

To continually develop and exploit the opportunities presented by new methods of communication (particularly electronic means) to benefit North Hertfordshire District Council and the communities it serves.

Key Principles

- We will support the use of electronic communication by training our staff and elected members in its use.
- We will use the Website to promote the Council and its services and to facilitate channels of communication that the public can use to speak to us.
- We will use the intranet to communicate fully with our staff and elected members, and actively encourage its use
- We have adopted a Data Quality policy and we will regularly review its implementation.

Measures of Success

- The number of visits to both our website and the intranet.
- Use of the Govmetric feedback tool to measure specific areas for improvement and general satisfaction.
- By monitoring our compliance with Freedom of Information and Data protection legislation.

CONCLUSION

All North Hertfordshire District Council staff have a responsibility to help deliver the communication strategy, but it will be led by the Corporate Communications Team.

A programme of specific tactical activity, spread over 2008 to 2011, is available on request. It has been developed to meet the aims of the communications plan but it is subject to adaptation to meet changing organisation needs.

If you would like any help or advice on any kind of communication issue please contact the Corporate Communications Team.

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Media Officer**

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COMMUNICATIONS ACTION PLANS 2008- 2013

Strategic Objective	Reasons for Action	Organisational Action	Service Area Action	Learning and Development Required to achieve action	Lead Officer (job title)	Target Date
Sustainable Communities	Corporate Plan promise	Support the communications & consultation work relating to Town Centre Strategies which are under development	Work with the Town Centre Strategy owners to develop Communications Plans to ensure wide understanding of the goals and achievements of the strategy and NHDC role within them.	Understanding of the Town Centre Strategies, Regular briefings from Strategy owners.	Communications Manager, Media Officer & Consultation Officer	Linked to actions of strategy
Sustainable Communities	Corporate Plan promise	Support the communications & consultation work relating to Sustainable communities and controlling developmental pressures on the District	Work with the Project owners to develop and implement Communications Plans in order to ensure wide public understanding of the goals and achievements of NHDC. Including promotion of the Local Development Framework	Need an understanding of the work programmes to achieve sustainability in NHDC. Understanding of LDF	Communications Manager, Media Officer & Consultation Officer & Consultation Officer	Linked to actions of strategy
Sustainable Communities	Corporate Plan promise	Undertake a Transport Fundamental Service Review and develop an action plan for improvement. Consultation through questionnaires and focus groups as required	Contribute to the review process as requested.		Communications Manager & Consultation Officer	Nov-08
Satisfied Communities	Continuous Improvement actions	Internal Communication/ Public Relations and Value for Money	Review the effectiveness of Members information service and the What the Papers Say . Are they meeting the needs of their users, is the format correct? Annual tracker survey via SNAP Software questionnaire		Communications Manager & Consultation Officer	Annual review - September

Strategic Objective	Reasons for Action	Organisational Action	Service Area Action	Learning and Development Required to achieve action	Lead Officer (job title)	Target Date
Satisfied Communities	Service Improvement Plan	Ensure that the outcomes of the consultation work NHDC undertakes with North Herts can be used widely to inform the plans of NHDC and its partners for the benefit of the community.	Ensure details of NHDC communications plans, key findings and actions undertaken are recorded on the CAR database and published on the internet.	Staff training in SNAP	Consultation Officer	Main surveys are programmed, others ad hoc
Satisfied Communities	Government Legislation	Undertake the required consultation in order to measure perceptions of NHDC performance and to meet the needs imposed upon the authority. Measures to include the biennial District Wide Survey and ad hoc Citizens Panel exercises.	Ensure arrangements are in place to undertake The District wide survey (2008, 2010, 2012) in North Herts.	Awareness of Coprotae Priorities	Consultation Officer	July 2008 and bi annually thereafter
Satisfied Communities	Service Improvement Plan	Undertake the required consultation in order to measure perceptions of NHDC performance and to meet the needs imposed upon the authority. Measures to include the biennial District Wide Survey and ad hoc Citizens Panel exercises.	Ensure arrangements are in Place to undertake The new Place Survey in North Herts.	(Currently awaiting guidance)	Consultation Officer	Autumn 2008
Satisfied Communities	Continuous Improvement actions	Media Relations and Value for Money	Review the effectiveness of Media Relations. Are we meeting the needs of the our media partners? Annual tracker survey via SNAP Software questionnaire		Communications Manager & Consultation Officer	Annual review September

Satisfied Communities	Continuous Improvement actions	Undertake the required staff consultation in order to measure perceptions of NHDC performance and to meet the needs imposed upon the authority.	Ensure arrangements are in bi annual Staff Survey for NHDC.		Consultation Officer	Autumn 2009,2011 & 2013
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