



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

(April 2009 – March 2012)

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INTRODUCTION

The borough council serves the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme by providing them with services, support and information to help them in their daily lives.

Research shows that the better informed people are about their council services, the more satisfied they feel.

Therefore, communications can make an effective contribution to the overall performance of a council and it should be recognised as a strategic and core function.

As well as using communications to inform residents and engage with them, the borough council also uses communications to uphold its reputation.

Good communications are therefore vital if the council is to build a strong reputation, effectively inform residents; engage and improve customer satisfaction.

The council's Communications Service will direct, advise and guide staff on all communications issues.

However, because every member of staff at the council serves the borough's residents, they all have a responsibility to communicate as effectively, accurately and positively as they can about services, events and activities.

There is a responsibility on all council staff to be clear and concise in the information they present.

This strategy is not about spin and gloss, it is about putting a framework in place so the council can inform residents of the services available to them; show them where their taxes are spent and why they should bother getting involved with Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council.

Phil Jones
Head of Communications

THE COMMUNICATIONS SERVICE

The Head of Communications reports directly to the Chief Executive and the Communications Service is responsible for a diverse range of duties including:-

Media relations – first point of contact for all media enquiries; issuing media statements and comments; producing press releases; managing media relations to defend the council's reputation; advising and guiding officers and members.

Public relations – produce 10 editions of the civic newspaper the Reporter each year; produce information and promotional literature; production of A-Z of service information.

Corporate identity/ brand – review, update and monitor the corporate brand manual; develop use of the brand and corporate identity; champion use of plain English in corporate information.

Internal communications - production of staff publications Voice, At the Depot and Leisure First; organise Meet the Leadership and Walk the Job six-monthly sessions; produce the News Bulletin for members and staff; work with Executive Management Team on the monthly core brief for team meetings; produce Executive Bulletins; distribute global e-mails.

E-communications – develop the council's website; develop the council's intranet site e-Voice; production of podcasts, blogs and video content for the website.

Marketing and events – organise the marketing and promotion of key council events, services and activities; work with partners to organise the annual Jazz and Blues Festival; organise a Christmas entertainments programme; organise town centre entertainment; supporting Britain in Bloom involvement; develop and protect the corporate brand; partnership work with agencies involved in tourism and regeneration.

Print and graphics – design and creation of artwork; photography; commission and project manage in-house and external design and print work; monitor and oversee use of the corporate brand; pre-press and printing services; finishing processes for corporate documents.

KEY PRINCIPLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Key principles

All council officers will:-

- ◆ Welcome and listen to all views and opinions on services and activities.
- ◆ Ensure communication channels are equally accessible and relevant to all people, irrespective of background and circumstance.
- ◆ Follow the principles and objectives of plain English in all communications.
- ◆ Ensure all communications have a clear purpose and are assessed, reviewed and evaluated accordingly.

Key responsibilities

- ◆ Responsibility for delivering the Communications Strategy rests with the Chief Executive.
- ◆ The Head of Communications will take the lead role in delivering the actions and values within this document with support from all executive directors, heads of service and council officers.
- ◆ The council supports the notion that good communications is part of everyone's job.

This means all managers should endeavour to:-

- (i) Work with the Communications Service to develop communication plans for their service areas as part of service and financial planning.
- (ii) Identify key corporate, service and departmental messages for communication to external and internal audiences.
- (iii) Ensure monthly corporate team meetings/briefings are taking place at all levels within their service and use these meetings to meet with staff to discuss key corporate and service issues and respond to questions.
- (iv) Adhere to the values and principles within this strategy.

All staff should endeavour to:-

- (i) Identify good news stories to their line managers/team leaders for communication to internal and external audiences.
- (ii) Take responsibility for ensuring they are aware of current issues facing the council and the service area they are involved in.
- (iii) Help to shape and influence the services provided by the borough council and have their views heard through the team briefing process.
- (iv) Act as an ambassador for Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council.

AIMS AND OUTCOMES

Aims

The Communities and Local Government report (Perceptions of Local Government in England 2006) provided strong evidence to suggest that clearly written, honest and transparent communications help to build trust among residents. Good communications therefore can lead to more effective services, a better reputation and stronger relationships.

This strategy has been written to:-

- ◆ 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.
- ◆ Increase the percentage of residents who feel they are kept informed by the council and improve satisfaction levels with services.
- ◆ 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 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.

Outcomes

A variety of evaluation tools will measure the progress of the aims set out in the Communications Strategy and ensure improvements.

These will include the Place Survey; annual General User Satisfaction Survey; Data provided by the Society of Information Technology Management (Socitm) Insight Website Take-up Service; annual customer satisfaction survey in the Reporter; People's Panel communications surveys; website statistics; Service and Financial Plan performance management frameworks; online forums; staff and customer focus groups; staff surveys; council dashboard Performance Indicators reported to Cabinet and media monitoring systems.

CORE ACTIONS

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

The borough council has already signed up to the Local Government Association Reputation campaign and this sets out the core actions for council's to focus on.

- a) Manage the media effectively to promote and defend the council.
- b) Provide an A-Z guide to council services.
- c) Publish a regular council newspaper or magazine to inform residents.
- d) Ensure the council brand is consistently linked to services.
- e) Communicate well with staff so they become advocates for the council.

Manage the media effectively to promote and defend the council

The media plays a strong role in shaping perceptions of local government, so informed reporting is vital.

The Communities and Local Government report found people were most positive about their council in areas where the council had a good relationship with the local media. Surveys among our residents show significant numbers use the local media as an important method for getting information about the council.

Key points for our effective management of media relations will include:-

- ◆ Respond to journalists in full within four hours.
- ◆ Be helpful, polite and positive.
- ◆ Never say "no comment."
- ◆ Ensure any statements to hostile enquiries are cleared by the most appropriate person - either executive directors, heads of service or Cabinet members – and keep written records of responses to journalists.
- ◆ Monitor response times to media enquiries and evaluate media coverage.
- ◆ Ensure the appropriate council spokesman is fully briefed and available for interview if required.

Provide an A-Z guide to council services

Research for the Local Government Association (LGA) Reputation campaign revealed that producing A-Z information is one of the key actions a council can take.

The information is widely used – the LGA says 55 per cent of residents find such documents a useful source of information about councils - and can also help improve the “satisfied” and “informed” percentages among people.

An A-Z can also generate savings for the council by increasing awareness among residents of self-help channels such as the website.

It is proposed to produce a stand-alone version of an A-Z of borough council services once a year. This will be supplemented by a briefer A-Z produced at least once a year in the Reporter.

Publish a regular council newspaper or magazine to inform residents

The council’s newspaper the Reporter is one of the most important tools we have to communicate with residents.

Surveys carried out in recent years – using the Reporter itself as well as the borough’s People’s Panel – show the newspaper has regularly been the single most significant source of information for residents about the council’s services and activities.

Other headline information from People’s Panel research reveals almost three quarters of respondents read most of the editions of the Reporter and three quarters rate the newspaper as “good” or “excellent.”

The council newspaper is continually developing and evolving, with many of the changes shaped by feedback from residents through the People’s Panel and also the “Have Your Say” annual survey in the Reporter itself.

That process will continue but there is also an opportunity for the Reporter to play a key role in other areas such as promoting the work of partner organisations, the Third Sector and in providing a platform for community news and information which cannot find a way into other media outlets.

Ensure the council brand is consistently linked to council services

Our brand is important to us because it is the main way that members of the public recognise our services and the fact the council provides them.

A council may be delivering excellent services but unless they are clearly branded and promoted, the authority and its 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 local people, and help people to understand what their council tax pays for.

The council's new corporate logo is a strong, visual identity and the use of the castle has ensured a link to both the council and the borough 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.

The council has also endorsed plain English guidance to ensure information produced is delivered in a clear and concise manner. This guidance has also been made available to staff through e-Voice. Training will be provided by the council to its officers on this important area.

Customer Care

How we treat our customers is an important element of managing our brand. To enable a consistent approach, the council approved Customer Service Standards in December 2008.

This document is a practical guide to providing good customer service and includes general standards such as:-

- (i) Showing courtesy, respect and sensitivity at all times.
- (ii) Answering questions as fully and helpfully as possible.
- (iii) Solving as many queries as possible at the first point of contact.
- (iv) Providing simple, clear and accurate information.
- (v) Avoiding jargon and slang.

It also laid down how customers can expect to be dealt with depending on how they prefer to contact the council.

(Full details are available in the council's Customer Charter and Customer Service Standards)

Complaints, comments and compliments

The council wants as much feedback as possible on its services - whether people want to complain, comments or compliment.

Full details are available in the council's Corporate Complaints, Comments and Compliments Policy.

Communicate well with staff so they become advocates for the council

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 for the council in the community.
- b) People who work at the borough council should get news about things that affect their working lives from the council itself.
- c) Communications is a two-way process – the council needs intelligence and feedback from staff to improve services.
- d) Every member of staff employed by the borough council should know what the organisation stands for; its priorities and values.

E-COMMUNICATIONS

The council currently has two e-communication tools - its website and its intranet system e-Voice.

Internet Strategy

This strategy forms part of the council's ICT Strategy and lays down the foundations for how the authority's website will be used to benefit customers and the council's business

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 from at work; and they want to be kept informed of the services we provide.

Our challenge is to realise the benefits of cheaper forms of communication, such as our website, to allow services to concentrate scarce resources on those who really need, or want, face-to-face contact. Development of the council's website is not just about making information available which is authentic, up-to-date and accurate.

Just as important is the need for users to be able to do business with the council. The council's goal is to move as much transactional business to the website as possible so residents who prefer this method of dealing with the council can do their business at a time and a place which suits them.

Each week, thousands of customers visit our website to do business online with the council or to search out information on services, activities and events.

In 2009, it is anticipated an average of 21,466 unique users will visit the borough council's website each month. Further development work is important to improve the "customer experience."

Web content

Information on the website is diverse and often specialised which means responsibility for its authenticity, timeliness and accuracy must sit within service areas.

A tracker tool has been devised to ensure reminders are sent out when information needs refreshing, updating or amending. Ensuring content is fully up-to-date will be included in performance management arrangements.

By ensuring customers have access to the right information and tools whenever they require them, the council will increase the instances of "avoidable contact" which is a requirement of the Government through the NI14 indicator.

Web excellence

The council's website was completely redesigned during the latter part of 2008 to put in place the foundations to enable further improvement work. This has enabled the site to improve its rating in the annual assessment of all public websites carried out by the Society of Information Technology Managers (Socitm).

In March 2009 the council's website improved for the first time from the lowest rating of "standard" to "transactional." The goal is to try and reach the next highest level of "excellent" within two years.

This goal will only be achieved by improving the website with customers in mind. This means making sure they can get accurate, timely and authentic information and can access tools enabling them to carry out transactions remotely from the council itself.

By delivering on the above objectives, the council will deliver a sustained rate of growth in unique web visitors. The target is to reach 21,466 a month by the end of this year and 23,217 by the end of this strategy.

Accessibility

There are two other important assessments carried out on the council's website each year. The Royal National Institute for Blind People carries out work to make sure the site is user-friendly for people with sight difficulties.

The website is also assessed for its use of plain English and its design standards as part of the Plain English Crystal Mark initiative.

In addition, work has been undertaken to check the 10 most common languages used in the borough. Development work has since ensured a translation tool is now in place for each of these languages. The majority of information on the website can now be translated into a language other than English at the touch of a button. This will be reviewed periodically.

The council is also introducing audio versions of the Reporter on to the website following requests from a number of residents with sight difficulties. After every edition is published, an audio version will be made available online. Information about this service is advertised in the Reporter.

An arrangement is also now in place to use the Insight Website Take-up Service tool so feedback and comments from our online customers can be used to shape our future web development.

Intranet Strategy

This also forms part of the council's ICT Strategy and spells out how e-Voice will improve opportunities for staff to do their jobs more effectively.

As part of the council's Improvement Programme launched in 2006-07, efforts were made to turn e-Voice into a key business tool for staff.

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 future

Further development work on e-Voice is planned as the council follows through its commitment to communicate openly and effectively with staff.

One of the actions which has not been fully developed from the previous development programme is the introduction of a "How do I?" section where staff will be able to ask for help and assistance over any problems, issues, difficulties they may have. This will help improve knowledge transfer and the sharing of best practice across the council

It is also planned to have the e-voice home page as the default page when all PC users log on at the council. This will ensure traffic is driven to an important communications tool.

It is also intended to highlight "live" messages on the home page such as advertising the regular Farmers' Market.

The council's Innovation and Transformation Group has developed the staff suggestion scheme and e-Voice will be key to delivering this important tool for staff engagement.

This area will be further developed through proposals to introduce online "Question Times" for staff involving Executive Directors.

Work will also take place with other service areas to develop specific "knowledge bases" such as Human Resources – a vital information source for all staff.

Other new tools and mechanisms will be developed to ensure e-Voice becomes 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.

Developing other e-communication channels

The council introduced SMS text messaging three 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 in the last year in a pilot scheme involving the council's dog wardens and the website. Wardens take photographs of dogs they have taken possession of and these are immediately loaded on to the council's 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 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 improved and work will go on with services to identify where this can bring the most significant benefits to residents.

MARKETING

The council is involved in a number of events and activities – both as an organiser and a partner - which enhance the reputation of the borough as an excellent place to live, work, visit and do business. These also help to promote social inclusion, tourism, arts and cultural development.

These include:-

Annual Jazz and Blues Festival

Britain in Bloom – national entry and local, community events

Christmas entertainment/ lights

Markets

Tourism

Regeneration

Reputation management

MARKETING STRATEGY

For Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council, marketing means activities designed to deliver one or more of the following 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.

This Marketing Strategy also makes reference to the borough council's brand although this is dealt with in more detail elsewhere in this document.

This Marketing Strategy is important because:-

- 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.
- It supports the priorities of the council by promoting change of behaviours and attitudes, for instance in recycling, community safety.
- It helps services hit key targets.
- It helps target activities to the most appropriate audiences.

How we currently market our services

The council already uses a number of different methods and channels to promote services. Some of these are controlled by marketing professionals, and some by staff for whom marketing is one part of their job. Channels used include leaflets; posters; press releases/newspaper articles; events and exhibitions; signage; civic gifts.

During the life of this strategy, the Communications Service will attempt to clearly identify the resources the council currently spends on marketing and encourage services to make them work harder for the authority.

The Service will also:-

- (i) Try to join up marketing activities to help build capacity.
- (ii) Ensure all marketing is undertaken to professional standards.
- (iii) Establish a marketing forum to plan activities and share and develop good practice.
- (iv) The forum will carry out a review of all of marketing activities before deciding how marketing and promotional resources can be provided to service areas to best support the achievement of corporate priorities, the requirements of locality working and the targets of the Local Area Agreement.

This may lead to significant changes in the way support is provided for events in future years.

The outcomes we want to achieve are:-

- (a) Make sure the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme are clear about the borough council's role, understand what it stands for, and feel more satisfied with it.
- (b) 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.
- (c) Promote transparency and evaluation of all marketing spend.
- (d) Ensure all marketing channels work to capacity.
- (e) Make sure good customer research informs our marketing decisions.
- (f) Make sure borough council produced information, our buildings and our services carry a consistent and recognisable corporate identity.
- (g) All resources used for marketing represent good value for money.
- (h) Staff involved in marketing are appropriately skilled, trained and resourced.

To meet the challenges of locality working, marketing officers will work closely with the Local Area Groups to provide marketing and promotional support and expertise to the community *in* the community.

Although locality areas have naturally been allocated geographically, expectations are that each one will have differing requirements and capabilities, so we will need to tailor support to each group or project.

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 Freedom of Information 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. For more information about the Act go to www.freedomofinformation.co.uk

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.

Both of these acts have implications for anyone communicating with service users and the general public.

Communications at the council is also affected by other Government requirements and legislation including:-

Civil Contingencies

The Communications Service plays an active role in the Joint Agency Project Group which consists of press and public relations officers from all over Staffordshire. They meet as a sub-group of the Staffordshire Resilience Forum.

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

Local Government Act

When considering all forms of communication with our audiences, Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council must 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.”

Local authorities face more legal restrictions than private bodies when it comes to external publicity. Most importantly councils cannot publish material which appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party.

Publicity during an election period

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 election period, particular care must be taken to ensure that laws surrounding local government publicity are not breached.

Defamation

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

Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council is trying to make equalities central to the way that it works, in order to create:-

- * Better-informed decision-making and policy development.
- * A clearer understanding of the needs of service users.
- * Better-quality services which meet varied needs.
- * More effective targeting of policy and resources.
- * Better results and greater confidence in public services.
- * A more effective use of talent in the workforce.

Our Corporate Equalities Scheme (CES) brings together the work done previously on Race; Disability and Gender. It also covers the new legal requirements around Age; Religion and belief; and sexual orientation.

However, equalities work within the borough council is broader than these six categories and focuses on any issues that could introduce inequalities.

Printed publications/different formats

The Audit Commission recommends using the following words on materials:-

If you require further copies of this (report, newspaper, leaflet, brochure etc – pick the appropriate word) or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape or in a language other than English, please call XXXX XXXXXX (relevant number of contact officer in here).

This wording has been included in the borough council's Corporate Brand Manual. Advice on translation services can be provided by the Communications Services and also the Customer Services Department.

Effective consultation

Consultations have been carried out with stakeholders using both the Reporter and the borough's People's Panel in 2008/09. The vast majority of stakeholders did not know anyone who would benefit from documents being produced in a range of formats. Those who did know of stakeholders who would benefit from different formats did not request the provision of information in alternative languages but in formats more accessible for people with visual impairments.

To meet this demand a number of measures are being introduced :--

- (i) Audio versions of the Reporter are being introduced to the council's website for the first time to help people with sight difficulties (see the section on Accessibility in the E-communications section).
- (ii) CD versions of the Reporter will also be made available for those with sight difficulties who do not have access to a PC.

Other measures being taken to improve equality of access to information from the council include:-

- (i) Improved translation services via Google on the council's website (see the section on Accessibility in the E-communications section).
- (ii) Plain English – guidance for all staff has been approved by the council and training will be provided annually.
- (iii) Customer care standards (see the section on Customer Care in the Core Actions section above).

Evaluations on equalities will be undertaken on a regular basis both in the Reporter and by using the People's Panel. Other organisations will also be consulted where appropriate.

Efforts to communicate and engage with hard-to-reach groups will be stepped up during the next few years. Work is ongoing to form closer working relationships between local education sites. This will hopefully result in improved engagement between the council and young people from across the borough.

The Reporter will also be used at least twice each year to produce specialist supplements. One will be aimed at increasing the flow of information to young people – hopefully with the help and involvement of local youngsters.

The second will be focused around the needs of older members of the community and will hopefully involve the Third Sector.

CONCLUSION

The Local Government Association recently explored the key drivers of resident satisfaction with councils by matching BV3 (overall satisfaction) against a host of other indicators.

The following key trends emerged:-

- a) There is no relationship at all between overall resident satisfaction and Council Tax levels.
- b) Residents who feel well-informed by their council are far more likely to feel their council is making their local area a better place to live.
- c) There is a strong relationship between overall satisfaction and perceived value for money.
- d) Despite overtures to the contrary, opportunities to participate in decision making is a weak driver of resident satisfaction with councils.
- e) The Local Government Association found that the strongest driver of perceived value for money – and the primary driver of resident satisfaction with councils – is providing effective information about council services.
Councils whose residents feel well-informed about services are the most popular and vice versa.**

This does not mean relying on spin or propaganda. This is about keeping the council's stakeholders - residents, businesses, our staff and partners - informed and involved in what the council is doing for them and with them.

This strategy audits some of the effective initiatives already happening in the council's communications and sets a course for how changes will be introduced to result in further improvement over the following three years to support the council as it strives for excellence.