

Copeland Borough Council

Communications Strategy 2006/7

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INTRODUCTION

Why Communicate?

There are two parts to the answer to this question.

Firstly, the Council has a duty and an obligation to communicate and engage with the community it serves.

Secondly, effective communication is key to how the Council is perceived by that same community. There is an overwhelming body of evidence and research to show that there is a direct link between good communications and customer satisfaction ratings. In short, the more informed people are about something, the more likely they are to feel positive about it.

Research carried out by the IdeA's Connecting With Communities project found that in many cases good performance in service delivery is not matched by good satisfaction ratings. In other words, even the things we do well and so would expect to be rated highly are often not.

An Audit Commission report based on MORI research, 'Exploring Trust In Public Institutions', also highlighted communication as a key area for improvement in order to re-engage the public with local government. "Effective communication is the lifeblood of effective local government" (The Audit Commission).

There have been more than 30 independent studies of the impact good and bad communication has on local authority target audiences and every one has concluded that councils that communicate well achieve higher customer satisfaction ratings than those that communicate poorly. We cannot expect the community we serve to understand or welcome our values and objectives if we don't explain them.

The most recent Corporate Performance Assessment and Copeland itself identified communications as a key area for improvement and the development of a communications strategy as a priority.

The Council's core values, spelled out in the Corporate Plan 2005/7, underline a clear commitment to improving and sustaining effective communication:

- putting the community at the centre of everything we do
- treating everyone fairly and with respect
- being open and accountable so that people trust us
- fostering pride in the area and in the Council
- achieving excellence through continuous improvement
- working in partnership and developing teamwork across the Council

Implicit in each of these values is a need to communicate effectively. Communication will help bring these values to life by taking them off the page and communicating what, why and how the Council is putting its values into practice.

But there is also a final and crucial point to be made. Writing and adopting a communications strategy is, of itself, not enough. The Council also has to be genuinely committed to putting communication at the heart of everything it does. That means valuing communication and recognising it not simply as a duty but also as a potent force for good.

The communications challenge falls into two separate but complimentary parts:

1. Communicating with people and organisations – our external audiences
2. Communicate with colleagues – our internal audiences.

PURPOSE:

What is a communications strategy and what is it for?

The strategy sets out the things we have to do to improve our communications

why do we need to communicate?

who are we communicating with?

what are we communicating?

how are we going to do it?

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

All external communications will be driven and informed by a set of underlying principles:

- Customer service will be at the heart of all external communications activity
- We will use communications to better inform and engage the community we serve in an open and transparent way.
- Communication will be clear, concise and accessible, especially for ‘hard-to-reach’ groups
- We will critically and regularly examine our external communications and seek the views of our external audiences

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

All internal communications will be driven and informed by a set of underlying principles:

- we will communicate with staff honestly and promptly
- we will ensure that communication is two-way
- staff will have a clear say in how internal communications is improved and delivered

Good internal communication produces clear benefits:

- a workforce that feels it is kept properly informed is more likely to have a positive attitude and pride in the Council and the work they do as individuals
- a senior management (elected members and senior officers) that is in touch with the views and needs of 'frontline' staff
- improved service delivery produced from a sense of ownership of performance and a willingness to embrace change
- better understanding of organisational, team and personal objectives

Poor internal communication can and does result in:

- negative speculation, rumour and uncertainty
- a widening gulf between staff and 'management' and an atmosphere of mistrust
- an assumption that change is to be feared and resisted

STAKEHOLDERS – WHO ARE WE COMMUNICATING WITH?

These are many and various but all are important audiences:

- the public\service users, especially vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups (eg the elderly, the young, the unemployed)
- partnership groups (eg West Cumbria Strategic Forum, West Cumbria Strategic Partnership, West Lakes Renaissance)
- Council staff
- elected members
- senior management
- media
- local businesses and business groups
- neighbouring councils
- MPs, government departments and other political influencers
- trade unions

WHAT ARE OUR COMMUNICATIONS OBJECTIVES?

- raise and maintain the profile of Copeland Borough Council among external target audiences
- support and assist service improvement objectives and departmental service plans
- generate positive media coverage for the Council (and those it is working with) and its activities
- foster and develop a communications culture within the Council, its elected members, senior management and staff through effective internal communications
- further develop the website as an external communications tool
- create and manage a crisis management strategy

HOW WILL WE ACHIEVE THESE OBJECTIVES?

Raise and Maintain The Profile of Copeland Borough Council Among External Target Audiences

- gain positive media coverage by identifying key corporate messages and communicating these to the media through face-to-face briefings and interviews, press releases.
- give Copeland Borough Council a voice and influence by taking an active role in and working jointly with strategic partnership groups (eg West Cumbria Strategic Forum, County Communications Group and Neighbourhood Forums)).
- further develop the editorial quality and design of Copeland Matters

Support and Assist Service Improvement Objectives and Departmental Service Plans

- pinpoint communications opportunities within each service department through weekly communications meetings with service heads and, where ever possible, by attending team meetings (this is already happening in some areas).
- provide communications support and expertise to individual service departments through planned and agreed communications 'mini-plans' aimed at specific issues, service developments and changes.

Generate Positive Media Coverage For The Council and Its Activities

- further develop positive working relationships with the Council's target media and key journalists
- maintain an effective press office that responds to media enquiries swiftly
- establish a routine of daily telephone contact with key journalists

Foster and Develop a Communications Culture Within The Council, Its Elected Members, Senior Officers and Staff Through Effective Internal Communications.

- re-think and re-design 'Team Brief' to make it a more effective and relevant two-way communications tool
- organise a series of communications workshops for elected members, officers and staff to explain how and why communication is important, the role they should play in it and to gain feedback and suggestions
- exploit the intranet more fully as an internal communications tool
- involve staff in the development and delivery of improved internal communications methods

Further Develop The Website As An External Communications Tool

- establish (already in place) a Web Group that will meet weekly to 'brainstorm' new website additions and changes, pinpoint and fix problems and serve as a source of help, guidance and advice.
- Create a wider website group including members to look at the overall development of the Copeland website.
- undertake a user survey to find out what users think of the website, what they would like to see on it and to promote its use.
- the communications team will take ownership of the website and serve as a 'clearing house' for all non-technical content.

Create and Manage A Crisis Management Strategy

- devise a clear and simple strategy and set of protocols and from that produce a 'What To Do Next' action sheet to be followed by all elected members and staff in a crisis situation
- communicate the purpose of the strategy internally through the internal newsletter, intranet and briefings.

HOW DOES THE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY FIT INTO OUR PLANS?

Communications is cross-cutting and should support the Council's plans and priorities.

The Council has identified five priorities in its Corporate Plan and they are listed below with an explanation as to how communications will contribute towards achieving them.

Managing The Impact Of The Nuclear Industry On The Local Community

The communications contribution: raising awareness and understanding of the issues among stakeholders through media coverage, Copeland Matters, the website; working with strategic partners to ensure messages are consistent; ensuring that the communications team is aware of current developments.

Creating and Sustaining a Healthy Local Economy

The communications contribution: identifying and publicising externally Council initiatives, campaigns and successes; working with partnership groups (eg West Cumbria Strategic Forum) to identify and exploit opportunities for positive media coverage locally, regionally and nationally.

Improving Quality of Life and Social Inclusion

The communications contribution: support the quality of life and social inclusion agenda through positive media coverage; provide communications support to the Local Strategic Partnership; take a lead in communicating key issues (eg health, transport); encourage involvement and debate through targeted consultation exercises.

Developing The Council's Services To Customers To Increase Accessibility and Efficiency.

The communications contribution: raise awareness among the community of what we are doing and why; through positive communication, help the people of Copeland get more out of Council services; promote the website as a means of using and understanding services.

Ensuring That Services For Which The Council Is Responsible Are Well-Managed and Provide Value For Money

The communications contribution: publicise service improvements and developments; publicise efficiencies achieved through smarter working and innovation.

CONSULTATION – THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATIONS

A significant part of our communications effort should be aimed at supporting stakeholder consultation projects. Consultation plays a vital role in helping the Council shape policy, develop and deliver services and introduce change.

The role of communications is not to dismantle current consultation platforms – some departments are actually good at engaging service users - but rather to help them become more effective.

Consultation works best when everyone knows when and why its happening and it's constructed and promoted in a way that encourages people to participate.

The communications team will:

- undertake a thorough review and appraisal of all current consultation methods
- identify improvements and make recommendations accordingly
- draw up a calendar of consultation projects and devise communication plans aimed at raising awareness of them and participation in them.
- explore ways of engaging hard-to-reach groups, especially young adults
- devise methods of 'e-consultation' using the website and text-messaging

DEALING WITH THE MEDIA – PROTOCOLS

The media is fundamentally important in shaping perceptions of the Council. It is, at any time, a help and a hindrance.

The way we manage our relationship with the media is crucial both to the Council's corporate reputation and to the services it delivers. Media management is not an exact science and expectations of just how effectively the media can be "managed" are sometimes wildly optimistic.

The essential goal is to manage relationships with the media in such a way that coverage of Council issues, especially controversial and potentially damaging issues, is accurate, informed and fair. Negative publicity is a reality the Council has to accept as a fact of local authority life but it should not and will not accept unfair coverage. Even when a potentially negative issue arises we should always have an opportunity to have a fair hearing.

Relationships with the local media are steadily improving but that progress could be jeopardised if we do not have protocols in place. Of course, the democratic process means that elected members are rightly free to express their views and opinions and these protocols are not designed to limit that freedom in any way. What should be made clear, however, is that elected members are also ambassadors for the Council with some degree of responsibility for its image and reputation, as well as a duty to follow their Code of Conduct.

The following protocols are aimed at making our handling of the media more effective. They will help us deal with media enquiries more quickly and efficiently and help avoid inaccuracies and mistakes.

The protocols are:

- All media enquiries regarding Copeland Borough Council policies and services should be directed to the Communications Manager and/or the Communications Officer.
- No members of staff, including senior officers, should give interviews, quotes or comment to the media without first consulting with the Communication Manager and/or the Communications Officer.
- No written materials (except for agendas and other documents currently supplied to the media) should be sent to the media or any other external source without it first being seen and approved by the Communications Manager and/or the Communications Officer. This includes promotional leaflets, service fact sheets (eg waste collection leaflets).
- Any media enquiry should be logged (ie time, date, nature of the enquiry, source) and passed to the communications team.

CORPORATE BRANDING

Copeland Borough Council has no clear corporate identity. The current logo is outdated and conveys nothing of the Council's values. The Copeland 'brand' is confused and inconsistent.

Creating a strong, recognisable and consistent Copeland brand will greatly help in raising the profile and awareness of the Council. Strong brands (eg BMW, Virgin) convey powerful messages, they 'say' something to people about a company or organisation, its products and services.

A consistent and easily identifiable brand directly influences the perceptions people have about an organisation.

We currently do not have the resources to undertake a root and branch re-branding of Copeland Borough Council but we can make a start by tackling some of the most obvious shortcomings.

- a new logo will be developed
- a Style Guide will be produced and made available on the intranet.

These two things can be handled internally by the communications team but a comprehensive examination of the wider corporate identity issue will be undertaken in the last quarter of 2006. This will include all aspects of corporate branding including signage and vehicle livery.

Following this branding review a costed report will be produced.

Note: As a result of the transfer of CBC's sport and leisure facilities to North Country Leisure the communications team is working with NCL's marketing team to identify and exploit promotional opportunities for both CBC and NCL. A series of joint marketing meetings have been scheduled over the next 12 months.

COMMUNICATIONS – HOW DO WE EVALUATE IT?

It is important that we evaluate our communications performance in order to see what is working, what isn't working and where improvements are needed.

In seeking to measure outputs and outcomes it is also important to avoid using the number of press releases issued\published as a key indicator. Using press releases as the mainstay of media coverage is misleading and simplistic. The majority of press releases the communication team issues are published but much more important in terms of press coverage is personal, direct contact with individual journalists. This kind of daily contact produces positive coverage and helps us deal more effectively with potentially negative coverage.

Externally, communications will be evaluated and monitored by several means:

- two communications surveys a year will be undertaken in Copeland Matters.
- a system of scoring media coverage (positive, negative, neutral) will be introduced and the results produced quarterly.
- the percentage take-up of press releases by our target media will be monitored and evaluated.
- a communications satisfaction element will be included in future Customer Satisfaction Surveys.
- A minimum of ten press releases will be issued each month and the ratio published will be monitored.

Internally, communications will be evaluated and monitored as follows:

- an annual internal communications survey will be undertaken using both the intranet and the internal newsletter
- a communications "suggestion box" will be created on the intranet

Note 1: The communications strategy itself will be reviewed annually by Corporate Team.

Note 2: An Action Plan will be developed from this strategy and this is turn will delivered and monitored through the communications service plan.