

**SEDGEFIELD BOROUGH
EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS
STRATEGY**

FOREWORD

By Chief Executive Officer

The 'Modernising Government' agenda has provided the Council with new challenges and opportunities, together with the responsibility for providing the strategic lead to our communities through the promotion of economic, social and environmental well being of the Borough.

It is most important that the Council effectively communicates with stakeholders interested in the well being of the Borough so they are able to understand the changes, developments and initiatives that are shaping the Borough. Our partners all need to know and understand what Sedgefield Borough Council does, the decisions it makes on providing and funding services, the plans for the future and the challenges to be faced.

The Council realises that it must fully engage with its stakeholders for this to happen and to ensure that the decisions it makes are fully informed. This Communications Strategy sets out how we will work to achieve this.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Both the Government and the Audit Commission clearly state that strategic communication should be at the heart of any organisation and that communication, in its broadest sense, is the lifeblood of local government.
- 1.2 The Council believes that communication is necessary to ensure that its community leadership role is properly carried out, to keep stakeholders informed, to allow effective input from and dialogue with key stakeholders and to build confidence in the Council as a decision maker.
- 1.3 Greater awareness and better understanding of the Council, the context in which it operates and the services it provides is essential for the realisation of its key corporate ambitions:

Corporate Ambitions
A Healthy Borough: A place where people can live healthy, active and fulfilling lives as part of vibrant and strong communities
A Prosperous Borough: A place where high quality businesses can prosper and local people have the confidence and skills to access jobs that are on offer
An Attractive Borough: A place where the natural and built environment is valued conserved and enhanced
A Borough with Strong Communities : A place where people can access the housing they want in attractive and safe neighbourhoods

- 1.4 At any one time the Council may wish to communicate with a range of audiences. The means of communication with and involvement with each group may be different. A targeted approach is required and this strategy is externally focused in order to ensure that effective communication takes place between the Council and all its stakeholders.
- 1.5 The recently published Comprehensive Performance Assessment Report on the Borough Council in March 2004 highlighted communication with the community as an area for improvement. Consequently, in addition to this strategy for communicating with external stakeholders, the Council is preparing strategies for communicating with elected members and employees and a strategy for external consultation. These strategies will be inter-linked.
- 1.6 It is essential that our stakeholders are fully engaged in and communicated with regarding the strategic changes taking place and this strategy will help co-ordinate communication and consultation exercises through out the Council.

2. CURRENT SITUATION

- 2.1 Existing communication methods range from face to face contact, by telephone, letter and e-mails to presentations, media relations and promotional campaigns. The 'Modernising Local Government' agenda has brought consultation and communication closer together by highlighting effective communication as a two

way process – the dominant theme is dialogue. This means listening to our stakeholders as well as informing them.

- 2.2 Communication with our stakeholders is currently not done in a co-ordinated, consistent and coherent way across the authority. Some departments have undertake their own marketing activities (Leisure Services for example), whilst all press and public relations activities are co-ordinated through Democratic Services.
- 2.3 Effective communication is essential if the Council is to fully engage with its stakeholders. This will take time and commitment and must become integral to the way we work and should not just be an 'add on'.
- 2.4 Attention must be given to minority and hard to reach groups and the Council has recently engaged with Language Line so that communication can take place with groups for whom English is not their first language. It is also essential to increase the capacity for providing information in other formats, such as audiotapes for those who may have a physical impairment or who have literacy or numeracy problems (30% of the population of the Borough have poor literacy and numeracy skills).
- 2.5 The Council has recently become a corporate member of the Plain English Campaign and is in the early stages of ensuring external documents and publications are written clearly and concisely and become accessible to all.
- 2.6 One of the primary means of communicating with stakeholders is through front-line staff and elected Members – including the Customer Service Centre, Housing Staff, Benefits Staff, Receptionists, Bar Attendants, Craftspeople, Refuse Collectors and so on). The Council is aware that improvements can be made in this area in order that front-line staff are communicating the correct facts and messages to stakeholders. The Internal Communication Framework will be key to this. However, it is important that front-line staff and elected members are seen as a primary external communication tool.

3. STAKEHOLDERS

- 3.1 At any one time, the Council may wish to communicate with a variety of stakeholders, which may include:
 - Residents (including families, young people, senior citizens, 'hard to reach' groups such as single parents, disabled people and ethnic minorities)
 - The media
 - Service users
 - Voluntary groups and organisations
 - The business community
 - Opinion formers (including MPs, national government, parish councillors, government agencies and other partners)
 - Parish and Town Councils
 - Partner agencies (service delivery)
- 3.2 How the Council communicates with these groups may be different, but each needs to be addressed in order to make the External Communication Strategy effective.

In order to maximise stakeholder involvement, it will be necessary to find out the preferred methods of communication and engagement from each group.

4. AIM OF THE STRATEGY

- 4.1 The overall aim of this strategy is to manage external communication effectively and in a timely manner in order to promote the Council's key ambitions and enhance its reputation as a provider of high quality services.
- 4.2 In order to achieve this, the strategy will concentrate on the following key objectives:
 - 4.2.1 Develop a sense of corporate identity and the consistent application of key messages
 - 4.2.2 Raise the public's awareness of the Council's role as a provider of services and in fulfilling its community leadership role
 - 4.2.3 Determine the most cost-effective communications channels for providing access and service to each customer group

5. LINKS TO OTHER COUNCIL STRATEGIES AND INITIATIVES

- 5.1 The External Communications Strategy will help promote and inform stakeholders of the priorities highlighted by the following:
 - Sedgefield Borough Community Strategy
 - Council's Corporate Plan
 - CPA High Level Action Plan
 - Best Value Reviews/Service Improvement Plans
- 5.2 Additionally, the Strategy overlaps with almost every strategy and initiative within the Council

6. MONITORING, EVALUATION AND REVIEW

- 6.1 The Chief Executive's Department (Democratic Services) is responsible for monitoring the implementation of this strategy. This will be achieved through the series of action points attached at Appendix A.
- 6.2 Adherence to the strategy will be monitored and its success will be based on the difference it has made to stakeholders perception. This will be tested through an annual survey which will be sent to a cross section of stakeholders.
- 6.3 The effectiveness of the strategy will be monitored by the Lead Member for Welfare and Communications via the Performance Improvement Group and by Scrutiny Committee 1 on a six monthly basis.

7. TRAINING

- 7.1 Training needs of staff will be identified via the Employee Development Programme Interviews and will be incorporated into the Corporate Training Directory.
- 7.2 Training needs of elected members have been identified via the training needs analysis conducted by NEREO and incorporated into the elected Member Development Programme (Media Skills, Internet/E-Mail Skills, Community Engagement Skills).

THE EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

Action Points

Objective 1: Develop a sense of corporate identity and the consistent application of key messages				
Action	Who	When	Success Measures	Resource Implications
Agree and implement a corporate protocol and standards for dealing with press briefings, news releases and media statements	Democratic Services	Nov 2004	Increased profile of Sedgefield Borough	Staff time
Promote and implement the use of plain English in all council publications and correspondence	Democratic Services	On-going		£43 per 500 words (Minimum charge £150)
Develop and implement a corporate protocol and approach for the delivery of the Communication Strategy which all departments have signed up to	Democratic Services and Directors	Dec 2004	Uniformed approach across the Council when engaging with its stakeholders	None
Deliver a series of training sessions on the External Communication Strategy to Heads of Service and nominated staff through the Performance Management Development Programme.	External Facilitator	Jan 2005	Uniformed approach across the Council when engaging with its stakeholders	Staff time Course costs estimated £1,000.
Ensure that all Council documentation and publications include the Language Line statement regarding translation	Heads of Service	Oct 2004	Evidence on documents	None
Develop Council documentation so that it is accessible to people with disabilities or	Heads of Service	Jan 2005	Increased number of requests for information	Production of materials in other formats Estimated

physical impairments				£1,000.
Use existing satisfaction surveys to inform a customer-focused approach to communications	Customer Relations/ Complaints Team	Dec 2004	Increased levels of satisfaction on customer surveys as awareness is raised	Staff time
Maintain Media training needs for Members and officers	Heads of Service and Section Heads	Nov 2004	Evidence in corporate training plan	Staff time Facilitators fee – Approx. £1,500.

Objective 2: Raise public awareness of the Council's role as a provider of services and in fulfilling its community leadership role				
Action	Who	When	Success Measures	Resource Implications
Publicise achievements and successes of the Council	Democratic Services and Heads of Service	On-going	Press coverage	Staff time
Develop 'Inform' as the Council's flagship communication method	Democratic Services	Dec 2004	Annual satisfaction survey with readers	None
Ensure that the Council's website is kept up to date and introduce on-line forums so that the public can engage in two way communication	ICT Dept	Jan 2005	Number of comments/questions via on-line forums. Number of hits on website	Staff time
Carry out annual communications surveys to ascertain stakeholders perceptions and produce a report of the results	Democratic Services	Dec 2004	Increased satisfaction ratings at next survey as communication methods mirror what stakeholders want	Staff time. Costs associated with possible use of NWA - £3,000
Develop and implement methods of communication based upon the above findings, identify news opportunities and produce timely press releases for all media mediums within given deadlines	Democratic Services	Feb 2005	Evidence of articles in media	Staff time
Integrate departmental systems with the	ICT Dept and Heads of	March 2005	Number of hits on website	Staff time

Internet where possible and where security can be assured	Service			
Develop and implement a controlled corporate approach to the flow of information going to stakeholders	Democratic Services and Heads of Service	On-going	Stakeholder satisfaction with the amount and content of information received	Staff time

Objective 3: Determine the most cost effective communications channels for providing access and service to each customer group

Action	Who	When	Success Measures	Resource Implications
Ask our stakeholders how they would like to be communicated/engaged with	Democratic Services	Dec 2004	Better communications methods	Staff time and production of questionnaires. Use of LSPs
Develop and implement a comprehensive, useful and relevant on-line library of Council agendas/minutes and other documents (such as policies etc) – link with FOI Publication Scheme	Principal Democratic Services Officer	March 2005	Number of hits on website	Staff time
Develop interactive transactions for all relevant services	ICT Dept and Heads of Service	April 2005	Usage of interactive transactions monitored over a year	Staff time
Undertake a review of present key opinion formers and analyse their communication needs	Democratic Services	Dec 2004	Increased satisfaction as communication methods mirror what stakeholders want	Staff time
Investigate new guides such as 'Who is your Councillor', 'A-Z of the Borough' and 'Frequently Asked Questions – Our Guide to Services'	Democratic Services	May 2005	Number of requests for information	Production costs - £1,500. Staff time

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