

Charnwood Borough Council

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

INTRODUCTION

This strategy describes how Charnwood Borough Council can achieve its commitment to, *“open, honest, effective communication with our staff, local and national media, our stakeholders and partner organisations and crucially the communities we serve.”*

The strategy is called ‘Communications’ using the term in its widest sense to incorporate ‘Consultations’, in part because this makes the point that like *conversation* without *listening*, communication without consultation is a one sided affair.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Strategy sets out the case for improving communications by the Borough Council. It looks at how robust our communications are currently and how improvement will be achieved.

The strategy takes in internal and external communications and proposes that, given limited resources, the Council must be realistic in its aspirations.

The strategy when implemented and given full support will dramatically improve communication by Charnwood Borough Council and will, over time, help to increase resident satisfaction figures across the Borough.

The strategy is not the full solution to communications at Charnwood, rather a leap in the right direction.

CHARNWOOD TOGETHER - A WELL-MANAGED COUNCIL

- *We will provide community leadership for the Borough*
- *We will put good communication at the heart of everything we do*
- *We will work to make dealing with the Council easier for all.*
- *We will ensure that resources are concentrated on our services to the public and that essential services are provided to the highest achievable standard.*
- *We aim to increase from 60.8% (2000/1) to 70% by 2005/6 the percentage of citizens satisfied with the overall service provided by the Council.*

(Charnwood Together)

Effective communication is essential if we are to achieve these priorities. It is traditionally the case that this point has to be made and made again until an organisation moves from the “yeah, yeah we know” to “we’re going to do something about it.” Which is why central government in its drive to promote

better value, modernisation and improvement in local government published the research summarised below.

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR COMMUNICATIONS & CONSULTATION

Communications *the service* and communications *staff* are still regarded by some as either a 'necessary evil' or worse still 'not a front line service'.

The evidence suggests that these opinions are not simply antiquated but wrong...

"Good communication improves residents' satisfaction... research found that in those councils rated as relatively poor communicators, residents' satisfaction with the council was consistently lower than might be expected, given their overall satisfaction with the area as a place to live. And in many cases, good performance on service delivery wasn't matched by satisfaction ratings. In other words, many councils have a better story than the one they are telling."

(“Connecting with Communities” Audit Commission / ODPM)

The suggestion is, that assuming a decent standard of service delivery, then the better the communication the better the perception/reputation of the council. There are few, if any, other 'front line services' that can positively affect the Council's approval ratings across all services.

CONSULTATION

"Consultation is important because listening and responding to the public, as citizens and service users, is fundamental to the work of councils. Without it, councils cannot be sure that their services are the right ones or that they are democratically accountable for their actions."

Linking consultation to wider communication strategies is vital. Too many local communities aren't even aware of the fact that their council is consulting. Most people in Britain know very little at all about their local council and many see their council as remote and impersonal. If the council is seen as uninteresting or irrelevant, there is less reason for local people to take part in consultation."

(“Connecting with Communities” Audit Commission / ODPM)

Of course, the fact that MORI research supports a case for investment in communications and consultation also misses the point... communicating or rather, talking, asking, telling, listening are all adjectives that describe democracy.

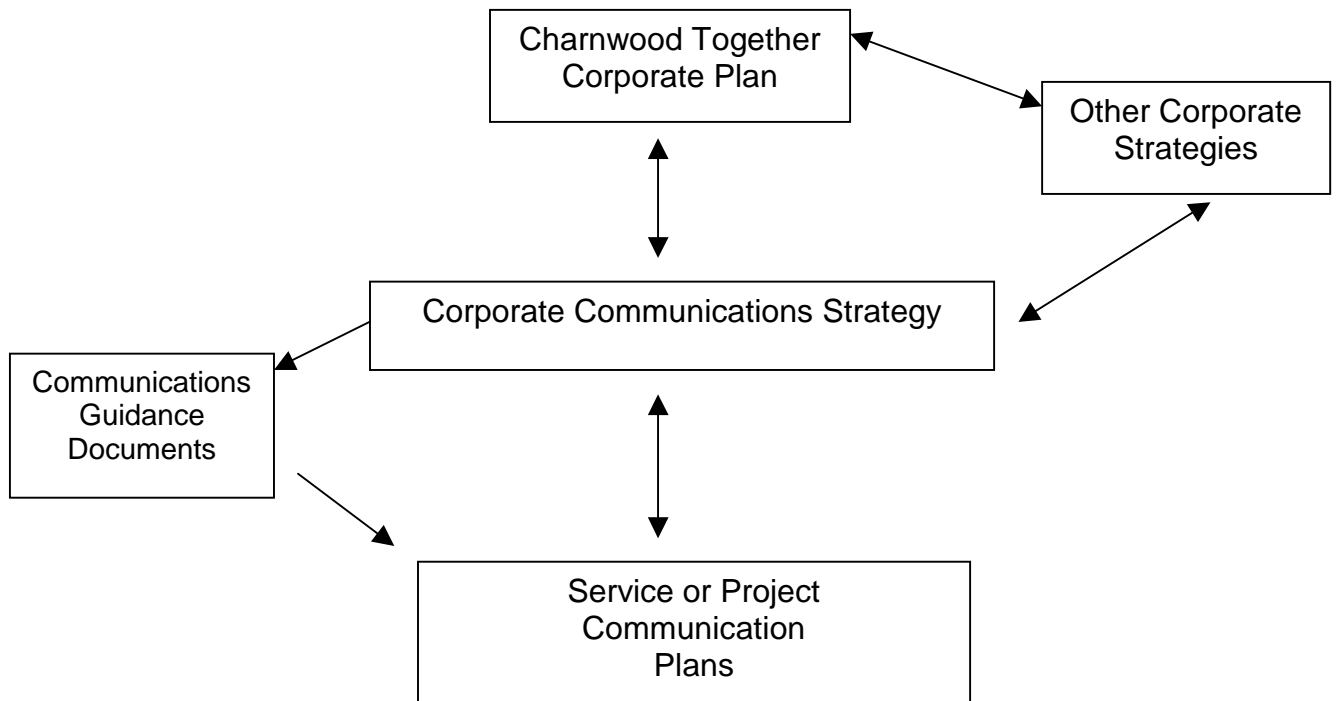
OWNERSHIP

This strategy must be a living document that influences all aspects of the Council's work. However it is mistaken to think that having a corporate communications strategy in itself will achieve the Council's commitment to 'open, honest, effective... communication'.

This strategy will succeed only if effective communication and consultation are at the heart of the Council's approach:

1. The Council adopts and actively supports implementation
2. The Executive 'own it' and are seen to own it.
3. Scrutiny monitors its implementation as an integral part of the Council's performance, both corporately and at service level
4. Senior management ensure effective implementation within the resources available.

Further and most importantly the strategy in time must join up with other key Council strategies to ensure that it does not become just a 'wish list'.



In short there is a *process* by which the case for communications will be embedded at Charnwood and there is the *cultural change* that has to take place for people to see that communications is a responsibility shared by all.

The objective of this Communications Strategy is:

To enable Charnwood Borough Council to realise its aim of “*open, honest, effective communication with our staff, local and national media, our stakeholders and partner organisations and crucially the communities we serve.*”

Progress will be measured by:

- Number of key staff trained
- Number of consultations carried out per year?
- Consultation effectiveness.
- % of press releases 'picked up'
- Annual Staff satisfaction surveys
- BVPI user satisfaction ratings (Currently 57% on 'How well informed?')
- Overall satisfaction score for the Council (BVPI)
- Survey of local media
- Local Government Equality Standard
- Plain English Award

How do we do it?

Giving Charnwood a new identity

The introduction of a new corporate identity for the Council (provisionally April 2004) is a terrific opportunity to start the new corporate year with a bang.

The strap line, "Leading in Leicestershire" which will accompany the new corporate device is a great catalyst for staff and services to start thinking through how this phrase is articulated (and delivered!) in their own communication.

The role out of the new identity will also allow us to debate the pro's and con's of the numerous sub identities that exist around the Council (Town Hall, Economic Regeneration, Recycling, Farmers Market, etc

Action 1: *Subject to the necessary approvals, introduce the new identity in line with the agreed implementation plan, produce new corporate image guidelines for staff, embed "Leading in Leicestershire" and rationalise the sub identities currently in use.*

Building a communications culture

Very often it seems that once plans have been developed, the report for Cabinet written and the agenda sent out, that is when we start to think about communication.

Through training and development (see below) we will seek to make the point that effective consultation with service users *before the planning process has started* can save the Council time, money and embarrassment. And that time spent thinking through how the service might approach the task of communicating proposals / initiatives will make the job of implementation easier.

But we will not rely on training alone!

The same principles will apply to the way the Council manages internal communications. We recognise that effective communications begin 'at home'

and that although we have been working to improve this, more needs to be done. We must therefore keep the task of effective communication between staff and management a priority.

Action 2: *That planning across the Council takes into account the views of local people gathered through consultations and the need to communicate those plans effectively both internally and externally. Communication and consultation to be integral considerations in project and service planning.*

Action 3: *The Communications Team to be directly involved in the planning and implementation of all major initiatives.*

Action 4: *The Communications Team will support fellow officers in the creation and delivery of their Consultation and Communication plans and activities.*

Action 5: *To continue our efforts to communicate and consult with staff on key issues and ensure they are informed about the Council's priorities and plans.*

Action 6: *Reader research 'The Bulletin' and other internal communication channels and conduct a communications survey with staff annually. Adapt internal communication channels in response to user feedback.*

Making sure that consultations are appropriate

We will not over load residents with consultation exercises. When we consult we will do so because we need new information to inform our decisions.

Action 7: *A consultation database will be constructed to track what information is known to the Council to prevent any waste of time / resources spent asking residents what we already know.*

Action 8: *Common data will be shared with services and partner organisations so that the sum total of consultation knowledge benefits the Council and our partners.*

Action 9: *When planning to consult we will seek the help of partners when appropriate to share resource and to ensure that we don't wear out the welcome.*

Equipping Officers with the necessary skills

We will continue to develop the communications skills of officers and members.

Action 10: *By March 31st 2005 key council staff will have had the opportunity to develop their communication, consultation and media relations skills as part of an ongoing programme of formal training, coaching and mentoring.*

Positive Media Relations

Through training and support, the backing of the executive and clear performance management, the Communications Team will encourage services to seek out good news stories and communicate them to residents, partner organisations, colleagues and the media.

Action 11: *To develop and deliver appropriate training and work with People and Performance to develop appropriate performance management arrangements.*

Making best use of Council Media (Web & Charnwood News, Housing News etc)

Research has shown that Council 'owned' media can be an effective way of sharing information and news with a district. Anecdotally some Councils have even gone as far as timing the publication of their magazines to coincide with BVPI User Satisfaction research, with the aim of boosting their approval ratings.

Charnwood News will continue to develop and reflect the big issues for the Borough and the Council.

Action 12: *Undertake periodic reader research of Charnwood News, starting with the next issue.*

The Council's web presence could become a fabulous asset for the Borough and the Council. There is potential for the site to dramatically increase our contact with residents as long as we deliver on *easy to access, informative and useful*.

Action 13: *Drive development of 'useful' by increasing the opportunities for residents to carry out transactions via the site. Exploit every opportunity to adapt E-gov initiatives to benefit local users.*

Action 14: *Monitor user statistics, conduct visitor research, monitor quality of the 'editorial' and incorporate the site address into all the Council's printed material.*

Communicating with the whole Borough

There are parts of the Borough that may be excluded or feel excluded from Council communications for many reasons including race, access to technology, income or just plain geography.

Action 15: *To continue to try to reach all communities and interests but also ask local communities how we can best reach them. We will pay particular attention to communities that may feel less affinity to Loughborough.*

Action 16: *To develop clear guidance to ensure communication and consultations follow best practice in terms of accessibility to all.*

Action 17: *Always feedback the results of consultation and how those results were used, to the people who took part in order to encourage wider participation in future consultations.*

Achieving presentational coherence

“The greatest gift a press officer can bestow on an organisation is to give it a sense of presentational coherence” Sir Bernard Ingham.

Action 18: *the Communications Team will aim to ‘join up’ the communications efforts of individual services (and the individuals within those services) in an attempt to ensure that the Council’s key messages and key policies are understood and articulated, not contradicted.*

Monitoring

By monitoring local media and the Council’s communication contained therein we can assess the degree of ‘presentational coherence’ the Council achieves in any given week.

Action 19: *The Communications Team will monitor local print media.*

Communications and Consultation Plans

Consultation and Communication plans will underpin this strategy (see Appendix). This will enable the Communication Team, Management and Cabinet / Scrutiny to monitor the delivery of this strategy.

Action 20: *To deliver this Strategy through the approved Consultation and Communication Plans, which will be reviewed and revised annually in light of progress made.*

Resource / Finance

With the establishment of a Communications Team the opportunity should be taken to review the Council’s expenditure on marketing and publications generally. To ensure value for money is being achieved and appropriate resources for delivery of this Strategy.

Actions 21: *Ask the Performance Improvement Team to carry out a review of Marketing and Communications costs for Charnwood and make recommendations based on whether the money is well spent in terms of the quality and effectiveness of the output.*

Appendices:

It is planned that the following (plus others yet to be defined) will be added as appendices in due course in line with the agreed implementation plans:

- i) Communications Implementation Plan
- ii) Consultation Implementation Plan
- iii) Consultation Protocol
- iv) Media Protocol
- v) Equality and Accessibility Guidance
- vi) Press Release Guidance
- vii) Media Enquiries Guidance
- viii) Corporate Image Guidance