

Essential Reference Paper B

Communications Strategy

1. Introduction

The way we communicate is key to helping us achieve the council's vision and priorities. This strategy provides a framework to ensure that we enhance the reputation of East Herts by proactively and systematically providing clear, co-ordinated and effective communication and engagement.

The strategy sets out:

- what we aim to achieve through communication.
- the principles that we will follow in communicating with the people who live in, work in and visit the district
- the audiences that we want to communicate with
- the channels of communication that we will use
- a structure and process for generating and delivering key messages
- the protocols and training that we need to establish to enable us to use new media efficiently, effectively and safely.

Our overarching aim will be to systematically target identified audiences through a range of channels with key messages and campaigns designed to protect and enhance the reputation of the council. By taking an audience-led proactive approach we will increase the relevance of the information we provide and improve the efficiency with which we deliver it.

This strategy is also designed to complement the council's engagement with its communities and stakeholders by communicating through partnerships and networks of influence.

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity has seven principles (lawful, cost effective, objective, even handed, appropriate, have regard to equality and diversity, and be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity) which will be built into all our communications activity.

This strategy will be supplemented with guidance to officers and councillors and will be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure that it remains relevant.

2. Audiences

East Herts Council is responsible for the delivery of a wide range of services. Delivery of these services, our strategic vision and future plans can have different impacts on groups, organisations and individuals across the district. The target audience of any communication, therefore, will vary depending on what is being communicated. In some case people may belong to more than one audience group.

Our audiences include:

- Council tax payers and residents
- Those working in and visiting East Herts
- Prospective residents
- Specific civic, residential and community groups, including communities in rural or urban areas, or ethnic minority communities, faith groups, older, young and disabled people and vulnerable and socially excluded groups
- Businesses in the district and those who may relocate or invest here
- Voluntary organisations and groups
- Stakeholders and partners, including town and parish councils
- Central Government and Government offices
- The local, regional and trade media (press, radio and television)
- East Herts councillors and employees
- Key influencers/community leaders
- Service users
- Shared services

3. Messages

Strategic messages will largely be determined by the Corporate Strategic Plan which sets out our vision on a 4 yearly basis, and the priorities and objectives that will action that vision. For 2012 the vision for East Herts Council is:

To improve the quality of people's lives and preserve all that's best in East Herts

The communications service will continue to operate an account management structure, where every service, executive member and committee chairman will have a nominated communications representative. Within the strategic framework and through the account management system the communications service will identify the messages that need to be communicated and these will be categorised as follows:

- Good news stories
- Change management
- Topical messages
- Service messages
- Event promotion
- Reputation management.

The account management process will:

- develop a coordinated formal arrangement by which the communications service actively identifies topical messages in consultation with its clients: executive members, committee chairs, councillors, heads of services and senior managers affording regular opportunity to raise and discuss potential communications issues.
- provide a coherent framework by which the communications service can evaluate communications need across the council and both prioritise and focus resource in order to be more strategic, effective and efficient.
- enable the communications service to align its activity with key corporate measures (priorities, service plans, etc.) with the expectations of senior management, and with the news agenda as it develops and/or is set by external forces.

4. Communication channels

It is important that we use the most appropriate channels of communication for our identified audiences and for the messages that we want to communicate. Our various audiences have very differing requirements and needs and therefore require to be

treated in a variety of ways. Our main communication channels are outlined below.

External Communications

Printed Media

- **Press Statements, Media Releases and Features**
The communications service runs a press office function, producing responses to media enquiries and proactive releases to publicise council services, decisions and performance.
- **Link Magazine**
Link is the council's magazine that provides information and features about the council and its services, as well as details of council events in the district and issues on which specific council teams and members want to consult with the public. We are also able to accept paid advertising which provides a small amount of income. Each councillor will receive twelve copies of Link magazine to distribute in their ward.
- **Service Information**
The communications service should be consulted with regards to front facing documents to ensure they meet corporate branding guidelines. These include leaflets about council services and procedures, strategy and consultation documents, as well as newsletters targeted at specific groups or service users.
- **Third Party Outlets**
East Herts Council will look to communicate with the community through mediums already available such as parish magazines (as recommended by the Community and Public Engagement Task and Finish Group 2011).

Broadcast Media

- **Television and Radio Interviews**
These are arranged where the council feels it is appropriate in order to communicate a particular message or on request from the local media.

Electronic Media

- **Email**

Recent studies show that email is still one of the preferred channels of communication. It is proposed that email mailing lists are established for key audience groups, which will allow people to sign up for the information they want and need, directly to their inbox.

- **New Media**

Social and new media has changed the way millions of people communicate. It encompasses a wide range of networks, tools and mediums through which people can communicate in multiple ways and formats. People are able to share content, opinions, information and ideas through text, images, video and audio. The council has recently increased its usage of social media especially Twitter and this is starting to prove beneficial to the quality of communication exchanges. In addition it is proposed that the communications service will actively pursue engagement in online conversations with the messages identified in the action plan.

There are many benefits to ensuring we maximise the use of social media. These range from reduction in costs associated with face to face interaction, to harder to quantify qualitative reputational changes achieved through more sustainable conversations rather than confrontations.

The council primarily uses the following forms of social media:

Twitter – The council has an active Twitter account that is currently used solely by the communications service. Our strategy will be to extend the authority to Tweet to heads of service, senior managers, the executive and committee chairs. The authority to Tweet will only be activated on completion of appropriate training which will be arranged by the communications service. In addition councillors will be encouraged and supported to set up their own twitter accounts that will enable them to effectively engage with a wider cross section of their communities.

MySpace – East Herts Council currently has a MySpace page. However this has not been an effective tool for engaging with our audiences and with the re-introduction of Facebook it will be redundant. It is therefore proposed that the account is deleted.

Facebook – This will be reintroduced and be available to communicate time limited initiatives and special projects. The communications service will be responsible for the Facebook page, working alongside services to determine and create suitable content.

A set of online social media principles is included as an appendix to this strategy. The principles are intended to outline how East Herts Council's values should be upheld by authorised users in the online social media space when engaging as officers and members of the council.

- **Website**
Our website, www.eastherts.gov.uk, is an increasingly important forum for public communication and transactions. The communications team will continue to support the quality of content on the website, provide guidance and apply best practice to ensure good use of the site for communicating with residents. Our strategy aspires to develop intelligent links that add value to customers engaging with our website.
- **Network**
The e-bulletin sent out fortnightly to subscribers keeping them up to date with East Herts Council news. It is based on recent press releases.

Engagement and Partnerships

- **Councillor engagement**
Members are a unique and natural conduit for communication and engagement with our communities and stakeholders. They have the highest mandate to engage. Officers will support members with information, funding advice and access details where appropriate. The Task and Finish Group on Community and Public Engagement

(2011) recommended greater levels of member engagement in line with the Localism agenda.

- **Partnerships**

East Herts Council has a variety of established partnerships that promote our vision, and assist us in realising our ambitions. These include but are not limited to the Local Strategic Partnership and its sub partnerships. We will aim where possible to work with partnerships to deliver joint messages, for example, the low crime rate in East Herts and the repeated ranking as one of the best places in the UK to live.

- **Key influencers**

During 2012 the communications service will be tasked with identifying our key influencers. Influencers are vital to improving our communications. The extent and type of influence they have will be determined to assess their:

1. Expertise
2. Impact and frequency of impact
3. Connections
4. Trends
5. Market reach.

This will enable us to increase awareness of East Herts Council and the services it provides, with the aim of turning influencers into advocates. Key influencers will be identified from a range of business, community and voluntary interests.

Internal Communications

Electronic

- **Team Update**

We have an established monthly staff magazine. We will develop a volunteer staff editorial board to increase corporate ownership of this publication. The volunteer editorial board will be refreshed every four editions subject to volunteer buy in. The communications team will retain overall editorial control. Staff on the board will be acknowledged in Team Update each month.

- **Intranet**
The intranet includes the 'message of the day', other news and service specific content.
- **All-staff/group emails**
Emails should be used sparingly to communicate corporate information for immediate release when no other suitable channel is available.
- **Members' information bulletin**
The effectiveness of the regular members' information bulletin will be reviewed as part of this strategy.

Face to Face

- **Team Brief**
The monthly corporate core brief that is delivered verbally to staff by their manager.
- **Staff Briefings**
Four sessions held quarterly. Staff will be able to nominate suitable subjects via Team Brief.
- **Open Door**
Regular monthly dates are made available for all staff to speak to the directors.
- **Staff Awards**
An annual event to thank all staff for their dedication, and to honour staff that have performed especially well during the year.

Following the 2011 Staff Survey results, internal communications activity will be reviewed during 2012 to establish effective tools for staff communication.

5. Corporate and Partnership Branding

Successful brands have a single external identity. All materials relating to East Herts Council services must carry the council's branding correctly used. In certain cases, individual initiatives can

be branded to give a sense of identity to those involved in and affected by the initiative, and produce quick results in encapsulating what the initiative is about. It can also raise awareness of a project; explain its function and how it is relevant. Partnership branding is currently primarily under the banner of Everyone Matters and this 'brand' will be reviewed and developed through the LSP and its sub partnerships. The correct level of branding will be considered for all corporate messages. A light touch review of the East Herts Council branding will be undertaken during 2012 to enhance it where necessary.

6. Evaluation

Working out what works is integral to our communications strategy. East Herts campaign research will inform everything we do. It will allow us to make incremental improvements that increase mail open rates, publications read and online media hits to improve the strength of our communications and act as an aid to enhancing our reputation.

There will be seven key measures that we will use to evaluate our communications:

<u>Measure</u>	<u>2011/12 Score</u>	<u>Target for 2012/13 or 2013/14 where the data is unavailable until the Residents Survey results are presented</u>	<u>National Benchmark</u>
Resident satisfaction rating	49%	65%	61%
Value for money rating	23%	50%	42%
Resident informed rating	63%	70%	54%
Staff informed rating	35%	50%	<u>N/A</u>
Media influence rating	<u>N/A</u>	<u>TBA</u>	<u>TBA</u>

*			
Online influence rating **	<u>N/A</u>	<u>TBA</u>	<u>TBA</u>
Call volume	<u>TBA</u>	<u>TBA</u>	<u>TBA</u>

* Media type/ circulation/ ACE value/ favourability

** Reach/ amplification/ network

7. Monitoring

The delivery of key messages and the content, quality and scope of those messages will be agreed and monitored on a six weekly basis by CMT using the communications action plan. An indicative action plan for 2012 is attached as appendix to this strategy.

On a monthly basis the communications service will review our media and online influence rating. On a bi-annual basis we will review our targets against the resident's survey.

An overall annual review of communications will be presented to Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee.