Appendix 1

Gedling Borough Council

Communications Strategy

1. Overview

Effective communication is critical to the overall success of the Council.

Research from MORI carried out in 2004 shows a direct correlation between quality of communication and overall satisfaction levels with a council and its services[1].

This bears out previous research findings from the "Connecting with Communities" exercise carried out in 2002.[2]

The council reviewed its approach to communications in 2001, carrying out a Best Value Review which was then subject to Best Value Inspection by the Audit Commission the following year.

The Commission judged the service "fair" with "promising prospects for improvement".

Since then, the council has delivered a range of improvements as set out in the Best Value Action Plan, including introduction of a council magazine, redevelopment of the council's website, a review of corporate identity standards and improvements to the accessibility of printed media.

It has also developed a comprehensive Employee Communications Strategy and Action Plan, which contributed significantly towards the securing of Investors In People status for the Council in 2004.

At the time of the Best Value Review, the Council's self-assessment placed it below Level 1 against the Local Government Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) communication benchmark for local authorities (attached at **Appendix C**). In delivering the Action Plan, the Council reached Level 1 and is now close to Level 2.

This strategy seeks to build on those achievements and to set a direction for communications activity for the next two to three years. It aims to put in place approaches to allow the Council to reach Level 2 and move towards Level 3 in the years ahead.

2. Scope of the Strategy

The scope of communications is potentially wide and open to a variety of interpretations. There is potential overlap with access, ICT, customer focus, consultation and other issues.

[1] ALG/MORI BVPI survey 2004
[2] "Connecting with Communities" – a review of local authority communications – ODPM/IDeA 2002

For the purpose of this strategy, communications is defined to encompass the following activity:

- Publications (includes website)
- Publicity
- Media Relations
- Campaigns
- Corporate identity and branding

The Strategy will, however, link with related strategies including those for Access, Customer Focus, Consultation and Information Technology. It will also reflect over-arching priorities and values as expressed in the Council's Strategic Corporate Plan and in the Borough Community Strategy.

The Employee Communication Strategy, already agreed, forms a sub-set of this strategy.

Within these broad areas, the strategy encompasses work at corporate and departmental level. It also includes communication activity carried out in partnership settings to secure the Council's objectives.

3. Communications Objectives

The objectives of communication, as defined in the scope of this strategy, are to: -

- Promote a high level of public understanding of the Council's role, with particular emphasis on its vision and priorities.
- Promote high levels of public understanding of the services the Council provides, and standards to expect of those services.
- Promote the Council's achievements.
- Develop and enhance the Council's reputation amongst target audiences.
- Raise the profile of the Council, its services and the members' role.
- Develop and enhance two-way communication flows between the Council and its residents, stakeholders and customers.

Particular emphasis will be placed on communicating new and innovative approaches and activities.

Service-related communication will focus on new services/service initiatives; services undergoing significant change; services requiring residents' co-operation; services with a poorer reputation and/or that need improving; income generating services. These may overlap.

All communications activity will focus on informing, rather than persuasion, and will be consistent with the Local Government Code of Practice for Publicity.

All will be carried out in a manner consistent with the Council's Values.

4. Target Audiences

The target audiences for the communications activity include: -

- Local residents
- Service users
- Elected members
- Partner organisations and groups
- Local businesses
- Local, regional and, where appropriate, national media
- Specialist publications
- Opinion formers

Many of these groups can be sub-divided – for example, local residents may be sub-categorised as young people/older people; tenants/home owners etc. Activity will be targeted at particular sub-groups where appropriate – for example, to target younger people as part of work to address the Council's priorities – and techniques appropriate to the target audience will be used.

5. Tools and Techniques to be Deployed

A range of tools and techniques will be deployed to deliver communications activity.

These currently include: -

- "Contacts" Council magazine
- Service newsletters (e.g. "Open Door" newsletter for Council tenants)
- Press releases
- Media briefings
- Council website
- Leaflets/posters and other printed material
- Service charters
- Feedback schemes
- Noticeboards
- Direct contact (face-to-face, by letter, by email etc)

These will be complemented by use of two-way consultative techniques as outlined in the Council's Consultation Strategy including: -

- Focus groups
- Public meetings
- Opinion/satisfaction surveys

Media and publicity programmes will be planned in advance, through a Forward Communications programme updated on an ongoing basis and reported to Cabinet four times a year.

Tools and techniques will be kept under continuous review to ensure use of most appropriate and cost-effective media.

In particular, full use will be made of electronic media, consistent with the Council's e-government priorities while also recognising the impact on social exclusion of over-reliance on these media.

Tools and techniques used will have full regard to accessibility and equality issues, consistent with the Council's Race Equality Scheme and with its approach to compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act, the Race Relations (Amendment) Act and all other relevant legislation.

6. Roles and Responsibilities

Effective communication is critical for the success of the council and all its services.

Communication therefore forms part of the responsibility of all council members, managers and employees.

The Council employs a specialist communications team, who will lead on specific activities and initiatives, and will support managers, employees and members with their communications activity.

Relative roles and responsibilities of the communications team and service managers are set out in the Communications Protocol attached at **Appendix A.**

7. Training and Development

While communication impacts on all employees, there will be areas and issues where there are training needs to allow for employees to fulfil their responsibilities.

These will be considered and addressed through provision in the Corporate Training programme and through other means as appropriate.

These are likely to include: -

- Writing for the media
- Web writing skills
- Plain English
- Role of media
- Handling media enquiries
- Radio and television interview skills

8. Areas for Improvement

Considerable improvements have been made in recent years and a self-assessment suggests the Council now meets most of the criteria set for Level 2, and has some building blocks in place for Level 3.

Further improvements are proposed, consistent with the Council's desire to secure continuous improvement. Some specific actions will be necessary if the Council

wishes to reach Level 3, though care is also needed to ensure that such improvements represent good "value" for the Council. It may be acceptable for what the Council wants from its communications function to fulfil most, but not all Level 3 criteria.

A proposed Improvement Action Plan is attached at **Appendix B**.

9.   Monitoring and Evaluation

High-level outcomes are set out for each Improvement Task set out in the Improvement Action Plan.

In addition, there are a range of overarching high-level measures of overall effectiveness, details of which are set out below.

Outcome	Measure	Baseline	Target
Well informed residents	Percentage of local residents who feel they are well informed about the council and its work	66% (2003 survey)	Increase annually by 2% p.a to 72% by 2007/08
Satisfaction with the Council overall	Percentage of citizens satisfied with the overall service provided by the Authority	65% (2003 survey)	Increase to 68% (2005) and remain upper quartile or higher, and above expected level vs. deprivation
Effective communications service	Assessment against IDeA/LGIP benchmark	Level 1	Reach Level 2 by March 2006 and aim for Level 3 by March 2008
Targeted, effective media coverage	% press releases published	To be determined	To be determined
Effective publicity about the Council's priorities and achievements	No of Contacts magazines published annually	3	3

These may be added to as a result of proposed improvements to performance management set out in the Improvement Action Plan.

Appendix A

Communications Protocol

Good communication is critical to the success of the Council and, as such forms part of the responsibility of all managers. All must "own" their responsibility to communicate effectively.

The Council employs a small team of communications specialists.

They are: -

- Communications Manager
- Communications Assistant
- Publications Officer

It is their role to give a strategic corporate lead to communications activity and support departments and partners with its delivery. The team is supported by the Head of Cabinet Office (who has lead managerial responsibility for strategic communications policy).

The Communications Team includes knowledge and expertise in a range of areas including: -

- Copywriting
- Media relations/liaison
- Press releases
- Photography
- Publication design and content
- Graphic design
- Print buying
- Media monitoring

However, it is neither practical nor desirable for the Communications Team to carry out all of the Council's communication activity.

For that reason, the protocol below has been developed, setting out the respective roles of managers and the Communications team in delivering the communications function.

The Communications Team are there to help and are always available to offer advice and support to managers.

The Communications team **must** be consulted when dealing with projects fitting one or more of the following criteria: -

- Using more than one form of media
- Likely to be contentious in the public eye
- Covering services or activities covering more than one department, or in partnership with external agencies
- Includes a publication for external distribution

- Has received previous media coverage (especially where this coverage has been adverse)

It is advisable to consult the Communications Team when dealing with a project which: -

- Has political implications
- Has been requested by an elected member
- Is part of a longer-term development
- Involved production of a significant departmental publication

The Communications Team should be kept informed of all other communications activity within departments, whether or not they are involved in its delivery. This is particularly important for media related activity.

Final copies of all press releases issues must be sent to the Communications Manager.

Summary of Roles and Responsibilities

Senior Management Team is responsible for: -

- Identifying developments and proposals that might affect particular wards and ensuring that members are kept informed of these, working with relevant Cabinet members as appropriate.

- Agreeing the Forward Communications Programme for recommendation to Cabinet.

- Agreeing key messages for dissemination arising from senior management meetings.

Senior Management Team and Section Heads are responsible for: -

- Ensuring that key messages are communicated in a timely and accurate manner, using all appropriate techniques at their disposal.

- Making comment and appearing in media interviews about their service (this should usually be a responsibility of the relevant member of Senior Management Team, though some Section Heads may also take this role, as agreed within departments).

- Contributing ideas and material for inclusion in corporate publications.

Section Heads are responsible for: -

- Ensuring that sections of the website relating to their service are kept up to date.

- Identifying issues relating to their service for inclusion in the Forward Communications programme and bringing them to the attention of the Communications team.

- Initial drafting of material for press releases and related media relations work, for development by the Communications Team as appropriate.

- Preparation and publication of information and publicity material about their service.

All employees are responsible for:-

- Adopting a positive and constructive approach to communication, making full use of communication mechanisms available.

Communications Team is responsible for: -

- Managing the production of all corporate publications.

- Overall content management of the website, including lead responsibility for news pages and press releases.

- Editing and advising on press releases, issuing them where appropriate.

- Being the first point of contact for media enquiries, and co-ordinating responses to those enquiries.

- Monitoring media coverage about the Council and sharing this information with members and managers.

- Development and publication of good practice guidance.

- Providing formal and informal advice and support to all managers and employees on communication issues.

- Development and maintenance of the Forward Communications programme.

- Working with Personnel and Organisational Development to identify and, where appropriate, deliver communications related training.

Personnel and Organisational Development is responsible for: -

- Supporting managers in identifying and addressing corporate training needs relating to communications.

- Overall technical management of the website.

- Supporting managers to develop competencies relating to communication at management and other levels.