

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

VERSION 1.0

CONTENTS

1	Introduction and key influences	3
2	Aim and objectives	4
3	Links to other corporate strategies	5
4	Our communications principles	6
5	Communication mechanisms	7
6	Responsibilities for communication	8
7	Improving communications	9
	7.1 Internal	
	7.2 External	
	7.3 Action plan	
8	Monitoring and evaluation	13
	Appendix A – Action Plan September 2004 to March 2006	14

1. INTRODUCTION AND KEY INFLUENCES

Introduction

“Communication is a fundamental component in how local residents judge the overall image of their council. Getting it right is one of the simplest and most effective ways of improving satisfaction. It’s no longer an optional extra. Any council that wants to be seen as striving or high performing will need a Communication Strategy in place.” – IdeA – Connecting with Communities

Local authorities are expected to act as community leaders and to deliver a high standard of services. If they are to fulfil these roles effectively, good communications are crucial. The Council represents the interests of all its communities. It aspires to the highest standards of service provision and gives leadership to other public, private and voluntary sector bodies in a constant striving for a better quality of life. Effective communication is essential if these aspirations are to be achieved.

Key Influences

There are a number of key influences that have shaped the development of this strategy. They include:

- the commitment of the Mayor and other councillors to ensuring effective communication
- the aspiration for the Council to develop our role of community engagement and community leadership
- outcomes of internal and external audits and inspections including:
 - Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) 2002 corporate assessment feedback report
 - the review, by external consultants DTW, of the Councils communications - May 2003
 - internal audit of communication with staff December 2003
 - the Audit Commission audit of performance management and communications February 2004
 - the Audit Commission’s “access to services” inspection report

2. AIM AND OBJECTIVES

Aim

To ensure that Council communications assist stakeholders to understand, participate in and benefit from council activity.

Objectives

The objectives of this communications strategy is to contribute to the organisation being 'fit for purpose' by:

- improving understanding and support for the Council's vision and priorities
- developing a clear and positive Council identity
- ensuring all Members and staff are ambassadors for the Council
- improving internal communication
- improving external communication

3. LINKS TO OTHER CORPORATE STRATEGIES

Communications is a cross cutting issue that affects the whole of the Council. The Council's Corporate Performance Plan identifies the Council's priorities and how they contribute to delivering the aspirations of the Middlesbrough Partnership, the local strategic partnership (LSP) and the Mayor's agenda.

The aspirations of the LSP, are based on shared national and local government priorities, complement the mayor's vision and are set out in its Community Strategy. The shared priorities are:

- supporting children and learning
- promoting healthier communities and effective social care for adults
- creating safer and stronger communities
- transforming our local environment
- meeting local transport needs more efficiently
- promoting the economic vitality of Middlesbrough

The Council's priority contributions to the achievement of the LSP aspirations are based upon the "Raising Hope" agenda set by its directly elected Mayor and supported by the Council's executive and non-executive councillors.

The Mayor's "Raising Hope" agenda is built on four pillars:

- a clean, safe environment, in which people can go about their business without fear of crime and anti-social behaviour
- physical regeneration of the town's run-down sites and buildings
- a business-friendly enterprise culture which welcomes would-be investors
- a transport network which can meet the needs of a town on its way up

Education and care of young people and support to vulnerable people in the town provide a foundation for these pillars.

In addition the Council has an overarching 'Fit for Purpose' theme. This theme identifies the Council's organisational commitments and objectives which help to ensure the Council is organisationally 'fit for purpose' to act as community leader and contribute effectively to the achievement of the Community Strategy themes.

The Communications Strategy is closely aligned to these organisational priorities. This strategy provides a framework for how the Council will communicate its vision, priorities and activities to local residents, staff and stakeholders. Effective communication is key to ensuring that the Council is organisationally fit for purpose.

Good communication increases the effectiveness of all community activity. Corporate strategies, which have a particularly close link to the communications strategy, include:

- Consultation Strategy
- E-government Strategy
- Diversity Policy
- People Strategy

4. OUR COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES

The image we project as a council is important because it helps the public and our partners understand the work we do. To reflect clearly the sort of organisation we aspire to be, a set of guiding principles has been developed against which all communication in Middlesbrough can be tested. These principles are:

- clear and easy to understand
- open and honest
- accessible
- responsive
- consistent and co-ordinated

Principles	Guidance on adhering to the principles
clear and easy to understand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ simple and easy to understand ▪ concise - too much information can be confusing ▪ use plain English ▪ do not use jargon or acronyms
open and honest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ be open and honest in communication ▪ ensure the information provided is accurate
accessible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ accessible to all sections of the community ▪ appropriate for the audience ▪ understand the needs of the audience ▪ target the information according to the needs of the audience
responsive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ welcome and actively seek views and opinions on the delivery of services ▪ explain the reasons for decisions taken particularly where the Council is unable/unwilling to provide the service / decision hoped for ▪ listen to and respect views ▪ provide a quick response or provide reasons for any delays and give a date by which a full response will be available
consistent and co-ordinated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ avoid duplicating information that may be provided by other departments within the Council ▪ adhere to relevant corporate guidelines / minimum standards / policies e.g. job adverts should follow the corporate procedure ▪ do not contradict information / statements made by other areas within the Council ▪ consider using established communication channels e.g. if consultation with young people is required consider the mechanisms that the youth service may already have in place ▪ consider providing information at the same time as other areas of the Council

The principles of good communications also complement the Council's principles in relation to consultation, accessibility and diversity and community cohesion as detailed in the Corporate Performance Plan.

5. COMMUNICATION MECHANISMS

There are a variety of reasons why we communicate, for example:

- provide information
- seek user involvement
- letting people know what is happening, where and when
- informing people how they can access services
- responding to an approach for information or a service

The choice of communication mechanism depends on what and why we are communicating. Whatever mechanism is used all staff should endeavour to ensure that the principles of good communication are adhered to. Mechanisms of communication include:

- telephone
- letters
- publications and direct mail
- press and media
- meetings
- advertising
- face-to-face
- presentations
- Email
- website
- intranet
- briefings
- display boards
- complaints / compliments
- site notices
- signage (internal and external)
- consultation (questionnaires, interviews, focus groups)
- newsletter (internal and external)
- exhibitions (local, national, international)

6. RESPONSIBILITIES FOR COMMUNICATION

Everyone in the Council has a personal responsibility for making communications work both internally and externally. All members and staff need to be involved in getting the message across and in listening effectively to our partners, stakeholders and customers. Key responsibilities for special groups have also been identified:

Who	Responsibility
ALL	<p>A key message from the strategy is that everyone in the organisation has a personal responsibility for making communications work both internally and externally</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ensure that all communication meets the corporate principles of good communication ▪ be aware of their duty to inform and communicate both internally and externally as an integral part of their everyday work ▪ take responsibility for seeking information from their managers in order to combat any misinformation ▪ fully partake in corporate communications (e.g. read staff newsletters, emails, CMT minutes etc) ▪ to be an ambassador for the Council
Corporate Management Team	<p>CMT is responsible for driving the communications strategy by actively and demonstrably applying its principles to all aspects of their work. In particular</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ communicate decisions and the strategic thinking behind them to senior managers and heads of service ▪ ensure that all departments / team are aware of and apply the communications strategy
Heads of Service and Senior Managers	<p>Ensure the successful implementation of the communications strategy in their areas of responsibility in particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ensure that all staff are fully aware of the Communications Strategy ▪ establish channels of communication for staff to express their views and opinions ▪ ensure that the corporate principles of communication are adhered to ▪ where relevant, include communications ability in appraisals
Members	<p>Elected members are crucial links to the community and have a key role in ensuring the effectiveness of this strategy. They have a dual role as representatives of council services to the public and a reciprocal role as the voice of the public to council services.</p>
Communications Manager	<p>The Communications Manager is responsible for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ implementing the Communications Strategy ▪ ensuring that effective mechanisms for communication and consultation are established and co-ordinated across the Council ▪ developing toolkits to aid communication (minimum standard approach e.g. marketing) ▪ ensuring that internal and external communications meet the principles of good communication ▪ identifying and sharing best practice across the Council
Performance and Policy	<p>Performance and Policy are responsible for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ providing advice on consultation ▪ providing a minimum standard for consultation ▪ ensuring that the consultation strategy is adhered to ▪ establishing a database of consultation ▪ monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the Communications Strategy

7. IMPROVING COMMUNICATIONS

7.1 Internal Communications

Good internal communication is a key requirement in a healthy organisation. It can help to ensure that an organisation achieves its aims. Effective communication is essential to the development of a positive organisational culture.

Key Stakeholders

- **Councillors**

Elected members are the council's key interface with the public. Providing them with timely and accurate information on developments across the Council is vital. We need to ensure all councillors are properly equipped to fulfil their roles both by communicating with them and supporting them in their communications with the community.

- **Staff**

Middlesbrough Council employs approximately 7,500 staff who need to be kept well informed about the Council's role, vision and priorities. Staff need the opportunity to participate by feeding back ideas and comments. A well-informed and involved workforce is an effective tool for promoting public awareness and appreciation of the Council.

- **Trade Unions**

Relationships with Trade Unions have undergone significant improvement over the last two years. The progress made needs to be built upon.

- **HBS**

Middlesbrough Council entered into a partnership with HBS in 2001. HBS deliver both front line services and back office support to the Council. It is important the Middlesbrough Council communicates effectively with HBS to ensure a seamless provision of services and support.

Position statement and summary of progress

The Council has undertaken substantial internal work to identify our baseline position in respect of the effectiveness of our internal communications. This included commissioning DTW to undertake an audit of communications (May 2003) and also an internal review of the effectiveness of communication to staff (December 2003). In addition to these internal reviews the corporate assessment undertaken as part of the 2002 CPA process identified communications as an area requiring further development.

As a result of these reviews a number of improvements to internal communication have been introduced, they include:

- appointment of a communications manager at a senior level
- routine dissemination of CMT agendas, reports and minutes to all staff via lotus notes

- twice-yearly presentations by the Chief Executive and the Assistant Chief Executive – Performance and Policy to the management team of each department
- annual presentation to all staff delivered by the Mayor and the Chief Executive
- quarterly senior staff meetings focused on emerging corporate issues
- improvements to the employee newsletter – Middlesbrough Matters and an employee advisory board
- development of a council wide communications map
- introduction of a corporate induction programme
- introduction of a corporate appraisal scheme
- production of a People Strategy
- introduction of the works council
- improved trade union consultation
- high level engagement with employees affected by Job Evaluation
- service area away days for communication development of teams and services
- better engagement with service areas about Council information and marketing publications
- introduction of liP in some service areas, with a commitment for the whole Council to achieve accreditation by 2006

In February 2004 the Audit Commission undertook an audit of Middlesbrough Council's performance management and communication arrangements. The audit recognised the progress that the Council had made and recommended that the Council should continue to implement its plans and actions in relation to performance management and communication.

7.2 External Communications

Central government has placed a duty on local authorities to consult and communicate more effectively with their communities. Research by IdeA found that effective communication improved residents' satisfaction with the Council and that there was a demand from local people for more information about what their council does.

Key Stakeholders

- **Partners**

In the culture of partnership working and inclusive decision-making, lines of communication and feedback need to be established and maintained. The Local Government Act 2000 gave the Council powers and duties to promote the 'quality of life' in Middlesbrough. This, in turn, places an increased need to work in partnership with other service providers to improve service for our residents. It is our role as a community leader to be at the forefront of these developments.

- **Residents and Service Users**

It is essential that the public as service user and taxpayer have an informed and positive impression of the Council

- **Opinion Formers (e.g. residents groups, pressure groups etc)**

The views of opinion formers and partners play an important role in the perceived image of the Council. This is important in that impressions shape parties' responses and engagement

- **Media Representatives**

The media is an important link with our stakeholders. The local media inform and influence our customers and staff. Research proves that residents place high levels of trust in local media and so coverage of the Council can influence perceptions. Regional and national media inform our partners and opinion formers. It is vital that we have a clear strategy for communicating with the media which offers a more regular medium for reaching our stakeholders than our own publications. Relations with the Press and other media outlets need to be co-ordinated with the capability to react swiftly, but also to be proactive in the release of news items. Planning effectively is vital for dealing successfully with both negative and positive news issues.

Position statement and summary of progress

Middlesbrough Council commissioned a report, from DTW, which looked at both internal and external communications. This report identified some areas of good practice and also identified some areas for improvement. Since this study the Council has implemented a number of key actions focused on improving external communications, these include:

- appointment of a communications manager
- interim website refresh
- Mayors meetings (transport and crime)
- improved media relations
- development of a media protocol
- new logo rolled out across the Council
- development of the Middlesbrough Council identity

- improved communication with hard to reach groups e.g. Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) network established and working effectively, Middlesbrough Voluntary Development Agency (MVDA) established, 'Race together' employment initiative
- production of the Consultation Strategy
- Improvements to Middlesbrough News the paper distributed to all households in Middlesbrough
- improved external signage

In June 2004 the Audit Commission undertook a review of the Councils "access to services" the Council provided "good" access to services with "promising" prospects for improvement.

7.3 Action Plan

The Council needs to build on the substantial progress already made to further enhance its internal and external communications. Specific high level and corporate actions to improve communications are detailed in the Communications Action Plan attached at appendix A. This action plan contains details of the actions that will be taken over the next 18 months to help achieve the Council's aims and objectives in relation to communication.

8. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The communications strategy and action plan will be evaluated annually with a formal report going to CMT in July. The timing of this report will allow developments to the communications strategy to be influenced by the Corporate Performance Plan and service plans. The results of the evaluation and any further actions identified will be taken to CMT, Scrutiny and Executive.

Performance Management and Diversity will be responsible for co-ordinating the monitoring and evaluation of the Communications Strategy and Action Plan.

Action Plan September 2004 to March 2006

Action	Milestone	Responsible Officer	Links to other plans and strategies
1. Improve understanding and support for the Council's vision and priorities			
The Mayor and Chief Executive to hold a road-show for all staff on current issues – including budget, achievements and priorities.	Annually	Chief Executive Mayor	
Twice-yearly presentations by the Chief Executive and the Assistant Chief Executive – Performance and Policy to the management team of each department	2 per year	Chief Executive	
Hold quarterly senior staff meetings focused on emerging corporate issues	4 per year	Assistant Chief Executive (Performance and Policy)	
Ensure focussed Corporate Performance Plan that clearly explains the Council's vision and priorities – summary made available to all staff	Annually	Corporate Performance Manager	Communications Strategy

2. Develop a clear and positive Council identity			
Develop a proposal, with clear deadlines for implementation, to ensure a consistent approach to internal signage	March 2005	Communications Manager	Public Access SLA Access to Services Inspection Action Plan
Develop a proposal, with clear deadlines for implementation, to ensure a consistent approach to signposts to buildings for pedestrians and motorists	September 2005	Communications Manager	Public Access SLA Access to Services Inspection Action Plan
Develop a corporate approach to council-wide and service promotional activities by developing a minimum standard for marketing	March 2005	Communications Manager / Corporate Performance Manager / Principal Corporate Development Officer	Access to Services Inspection Action Plan
Promote Middlesbrough through Positive Advertising Campaigns <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximise the advertising potential of the Cleveland Show • Town branding group 	March 2005 July 2005	Communications Manager Head of Economic and Community Regeneration	
Improve the consistency of all documents by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ developing a standard for all council leaflets, posters, publications and other promotional material ▪ Undertake Plain English Checks of documents ▪ Implement and oversee the standards developed ▪ provide universal templates via the lotus notes database ▪ produce a style guide 	September 2005	Communications Manager / Communications Unit	
Development, implementation and monitoring of the correct use of the Council Logo	March 2005 - ongoing	Communications Manager	

3. Ensure all Members and staff are ambassadors for the Council			
Intranet developments ▪ online internet discussions - councillor and officers	December 2005	Principal ICT Client Officer	E – Gov Strategy
Councillors to have short individual video message on website	March 2006	Members Office	
Implement the Corporate Minimum Standard for appraisals that clarifies the link between their own personal objectives and those of the Corporate Performance Plan ▪ commence training programme ▪ monitor the use of the standard	▪ November 2004 ▪ From April 2005	HR Client	People Strategy
Further develop the Corporate Induction arrangements to cater for those staff not in standard working patterns ▪ needs and options to be discussed with service managers ▪ implement new arrangements	▪ February 2005 ▪ June 2005	HR Client	People Strategy
Provide media training for executive members in the following mediums ▪ studio interview ▪ outside broadcasts ▪ radio interviews	All Executive Members by June 2005	Communications Manager	
Provide media awareness training for all councillors	March 2006	Communications Manager	

4. Improve internal communication			
Improve the cascading of messages to staff by further development of a council-wide communications map	March 2005	Communications Manager	
Intranet developments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ online internet discussions - councillor and officers ▪ enable information sharing 	December 2005	Principal ICT Client Officer	E – Gov Strategy
Issue Middlesbrough Matters newsletters to all staff	6 per year	Communications unit	
Improve employee management and Trade Union engagement as outlined in the people strategy	September 2005	HR Client	People Strategy (Action Plan 2.8)
Provide training in Plain English programme to be in place by March 2005	March 2005	Communications Unit	
Undertake a survey of all staff to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • test employee awareness of Council vision and priorities • monitor the effectiveness of internal communications 	Annually	HR Client	
Development of staff focus groups to consult with and support under-represented groups e.g. Corporate Diversity Group	May 2005	HR Client	People Strategy (Action 2.5)
Develop a cross-service communications group, chaired by the communications Manager, that will improve communications by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ using skills and experience in a more effective and co-ordinated ways ▪ sharing and disseminating good practice ▪ using employees to help communicate important corporate messages ▪ developing and embedding corporate communications initiatives ▪ providing a key contact within each service area to develop communications initiatives 	Group established by March 2005 Programme of work agreed by May 2005	Communications Manager	

5. Improve external communication			
Website developments to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Internet bulletin board to provide information to the public ▪ Extranet development to enable controlled information sharing externally 	December 2005	Principal ICT Client Officer	
Develop, implement and monitor a media protocol that includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Written guidance for dealing with the media ▪ Encouraging proactive media activity 	March 2005	Communications Manager / Communications Unit	
Develop plans for external focus groups	March 2005	Communications Manager	
Implement the consultation strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consultation plan compiled ▪ Initial consultation forums database established ▪ Website / portal consultation established 	September 2005	Corporate Policy Manager	Consultation Strategy
Ensure that the Council understands the needs and profile of its residents in order to target communication appropriately <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Undertake a town wide survey ▪ Citizens panel 	Every 2 years 6 times per year	Corporate Policy Manager	Consultation Strategy
Ensure that the translation / interpretation needs of the population are met by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Research into the needs ▪ Developing an action plan to meet the identified needs ▪ Implementing language line ▪ Consultation through LSP consultation groups e.g. BME network, diversity Forum, disability focus group 	March 2005	Corporate Policy Manager	Access to services action plan