



*Basingstoke
and Deane*

Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council

Corporate Communications Strategy

1) Introduction

The purpose of this strategy is to bring improved structure, quality standards and shared ownership to the way that the Council presents itself and communicates with its customers and partners. It will take us from where we are now to where we want to be.

Having a communications strategy for Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council will give the organisation – its councillors and staff – a clear direction in the way we communicate our daily business and ambitions for the future.

The strategy is supported by the Corporate Communications Service Plan which is a 'living document' detailing operational activities of the business unit whilst setting out objectives initially for three years is under constant review.

2) Setting the scene

Our vision

The Council's vision:

Basingstoke and Deane – where imaginative and creative use of resources delivers real improvements to our services, the way we work with partners and the benefits we provide for residents, businesses and visitors now and in the future.

In working towards this vision the Council has agreed the following four priorities for the period 2004-2007.

1. To maximise our resources and secure opportunities to support core services and key areas of community need within a confirmed sustainable financial Strategy.
2. To provide people with affordable decent homes within planned sustainable communities.
3. To achieve a safe, clean and attractive built environment and an attractive and diverse natural environment for residents, businesses and visitors.
4. To improve opportunities in learning and skills to support individual development, community organisations and local businesses.

Communications vision:

To support the delivery of Council priorities good communication is essential, our commitment to this is that:

We will communicate clearly, openly and regularly with the public, with our professional partners, and with each other internally, in order to promote a high level of mutual understanding, and facilitate a better service to the people of Basingstoke and Deane.

Values and standards:

Our values and standards will be explicit in all our communications and consultation activity. We will work to manage and improve the reputation and corporate image of the Council through adhering to the following values:

- **Accessible and approachable** - We will make it easy for local people to get in touch with us, in ways that suit them and that they feel comfortable with. We will make it easy for people to talk to us and tell us what they think. We will make communications available in the way that people want and in places and times to suit them.
- **Integrity, openness and honesty** – We will tell it how it is. We will respect people's confidentiality and not over promise.

- **Clear** - We will 'speak in the language of our audience', using plain English that people understand.
- **Consistent** – Will enhance the effectiveness of our communication by ensuring consistency of messages, tone, style and presentation
- **Involving and engaging** – Giving all residents a commitment that we will *inform* them in the most appropriate way and show we *listen* by acting upon what they have said and providing timely feedback.
- **Inclusive** – We will make sure we include all sectors of the community including 'hard-to-reach' groups, this includes making alternative language publications available on request. We will give proper attention to particular communications needs, for example, ensuring all documents have a minimum font size or are available in Braille or tape to assist people with sight impairment.
- **Balanced** – We will make sure our communications and consultation presents information in the most objective way possible. In terms of consultation we will be careful in our choice of wording so that customers are not led into giving a particular response.
- We will have regard to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, and all our communication will be free of political bias.
- **Accountable** – We will make it clear who is responsible for decisions taken by the Council.
- **Timely** - We will respond promptly to enquiries from third parties such as the media, partners and stakeholder groups. We will publish response standards against which our performance can be judged and will report back on our performance in meeting those standards. We will make sure that communications are up-to-date, particularly with regard to information published on the web site.
- **Relevant and appropriate** - We will target our communication and consultation effectively, for maximum impact. We will do this in our media relations work, using new technologies, through our publications and by targeting relevant information to appropriate stakeholder groups.
- **Planned** - We will ensure that Communications issues are considered as an integral part of service and project planning, at the earliest stage in the process.
- **Identifiable** - We will make clear use of branding to make sure it is clear that communication has come from the Council and is recognised as such.
- **Efficient** - We will avoid unnecessary duplication or contradictory/mixed messages.

3) Where are we now?

A new beginning:

This strategy is building on the work that took place in 2004/05 to establish a corporate communications unit which will better meet the Council's communications needs.

Internal communications:

Actions based on information from the Staff Survey 2005 are being included in the Corporate Communications Service Plan. Baseline line figures and targets have also been taken as measures for monitoring progress of the strategy itself.

External communications:

The General Satisfaction Survey results have provided us with information around how informed residents feel and also on more operational issues like preferred methods of communication. The survey is carried out annually and will continue to be used as a way of tracking progress.

Community Strategy

Currently the reality is that the Community Strategy is not properly embedded in the organisation and the public are not really aware of it (19% were in the 2003 General Satisfaction Survey).

The emerging integrated impact assessment will help to ensure that the Community Strategy is properly considered in new projects, reports, or strategy documents. The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) has taken steps to introduce its work to a wider audience with its annual conference, and the LSP Communications Group will look at publicity on the Strategy once it is reviewed following the issue of new guidance by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) 2003:

Feedback from last round of Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) specifically on communications and consultation was good.

“The council is strong on consultation and communication with residents and partners.” CPA inspectors report 2003.

Although no specific issues involving communications needed to be addressed in the Corporate Improvement Plan the Corporate Communications Strategy is being introduced in the interest of continuous improvement, better coordination and learning from best practice.

4) Where do we want to be?

As an organisation we can determine through a combination of aspirations and research evidence where we want to be. This provides us with a local/regional picture but it is also worth noting current national good practice that can be used as a learning tool and that will also have a significant impact on the Council.

National good practice:

The ‘Communicating with Communities’ toolkit produced by the Improvement and Development Agency identifies a number of key factors in successful council communications.

In summary:

- Lead communications from the very top, politically and managerially
- Have a corporate communications strategy in place
- Develop a strong and consistent brand
- Know your key stakeholders, audiences and how best to reach them
- Put special emphasis on communicating with “hard to reach” groups
- Have a clear set of messages to communicate
- Communicate in a consistent, relevant and frequent way
- Be proactive and creative
- Engender a ‘pride of place’ about the locality as well as promote the council
- Foster internal communications and encourage all staff to be good communicators
- Have a good website and use electronic communications to target information and create a dialogue with local residents
- Work with the media as partners not adversaries

- Be innovative, engaging and relevant
- Consult meaningfully
- Be brave about communicating the 'hard stuff'

Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) – next round:

The Communications Strategy, and the Community Engagement Strategy, are important components in delivering continuous improvement to the local community. They will help us to meet the expectations of the new strategy for Comprehensive Performance Assessment, which places more emphasis on user focus and access, seeking to ensure we deliver services that embrace equality and diversity. In particular CPA concentrates on

- assessing how well we communicate ambitions, priorities and decisions effectively, ensuring local people are clear about what the council and its partners are trying to achieve, and why
- exploring whether we have a strong service user focus - giving people opportunities to influence decisions that affect their lives, through effective community engagement
- evaluating whether our approach delivers value for money and optimises efficiency

5) How will we get there? – the communications direction

Strategic communications objectives:

- To ensure all communications activities support the delivery of the council's core values and priorities as outlined in the Council Plan by using the most appropriate methods of communication.
- To provide high quality, timely, accurate and relevant information to residents and businesses in the borough, so that local people are well informed about council policy, procedures and practices, giving equal opportunity to influence and access our services.
- To provide high quality, timely, accurate and relevant information to staff and elected members, so that they are well informed about council policy, procedures and practices, creating a corporate environment of trust and loyalty, creating ambassadors for the council and borough.
- To help strengthen working relationships with all our partners and stakeholders, to help improve the image, profile and reputation of the council and the borough.

Service Plan:

The Corporate Communications Service Plan forms the basis of an action plan for the strategy. The Service Plan will bring to life the work areas outlined in the strategy and give SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timebound) objectives for delivery. These objectives will be the specific areas of work the team will focus on, they support the cross-cutting strategic communications objectives and also have their own targets measured quarterly.

The Service Plan is a 'living document' that initially sets out activities for three years but is under constant review. It outlines the operational detail of delivery under the following high level headings:

Internal communications

Objective: To ensure strong two-way internal communications to provide a well-informed, involved workforce and a management team and councillors who are in touch with staff and their concerns.

In summary, what will this include?

- Developing new ways of communicating internally eg. staff newsletter and building on existing methods such as, our intranet SINBAD.
- Actively promoting internal listening, feedback and engagement activities eg. new staff suggestion scheme and mechanisms for feeding issues upward.
- Contributing to organisational development eg. Improvement Through People group and Staff Surveys.

Strengthening existing communications

Objective: To continue reviewing and strengthening our existing communications to ensure all activity is reaching the right audience in the most appropriate way.

In summary, what will this include?

- Reviewing and building on current communications activities eg. marketing campaigns.
- Mainstream good communications practice by promoting the benefits of good communication at all levels.
- Continuously improving publications and their accessibility eg. Basingstoke and Deane Today and community/local newsletters.
- Strengthening media relations locally, regionally and nationally.
- Always ensuring that communication reaches its agreed audience including 'hard to reach' groups.

Community engagement (user focus/connecting with communities)

Objective: To provide targeted and appropriate communications and consultation that reflect the diverse needs of customers and provide opportunities for feedback and engagement so that customers' views are an integral part of service planning and delivery.

In summary, what will this include?

- Ensuring that the Council's Community Engagement Strategy is followed and that the action plan continues to be delivered.
This includes:
 - effective planning and coordination of activity eg. development of a toolkit
 - reaching all stakeholder groups as appropriate eg. effective segmentation and targeting rather than always a 'blanket' approach eg. engaging the 'hard to reach'
 - increasing residents' confidence in their ability to influence decision-making processes
 - feeding back results into the decision making process
 - securing residents' confidence in consultation and the feedback process.

Branding and corporate identity

Objective: To strengthen the reputation of the council and the awareness of the wide range of services it provides by promoting a single Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council brand that is applied consistently and that stands for quality, accessible and user focused communications.

In summary, what will this include?

- Ensuring that the Council's brand is consistently used and that sub-brands are limited.
- Develop, promote and apply new guidelines for the use of the Council's brand.

Profile and reputation

Objective: To raise the profile of the Council and Basingstoke and Deane as a means of generating better awareness of our reputation for providing excellent services and for raising the borough's image as ' the place to be'.

In summary, what will this include?

- Promoting pride in Basingstoke and Deane ensuring that the borough's image is consistently and positively communicated at all times.
- Achieving a positive reputation in the media locally, regionally and nationally.

Electronic/new media

Objective: To use electronic communications effectively to communicate with key audiences about council services and policies at customers' chosen time and place.

In summary, what will this include?

- Continue improving the website as a tool for up-to-date communication and 24/7 access opportunities.
- Continue supporting the e-government programme with communications activities eg. priority outcomes and future improvements to the contact centre.
- Build on the re-development of the intranet (SINBAD) as a source of current information for providing staff, members and subsequently residents with accurate information.

Strengthening partnership communication

Objective: To improve awareness of Council activities as they affect different stakeholder groups and to encourage better two-way communication between the council, its partner organisations and other stakeholders.

In summary, what will this include?

- Promoting seamless communications to customers on partnership schemes and promoting mutual objectives that benefit local communities.
- Increased coordination of the Local Strategic Partnership communications group and other Hampshire wide forums.

6) Performance measures

Having established where we are now and set out a direction for where we want communications to be in the future it is important to set out how we intend to measure progress.

Below are two internal and two external measures that can be used to track overall improvements to communications - information will be collected by the General Satisfaction Survey and the Staff Survey. Further targets and measures will be set as SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timebound) objectives in the corporate communications Service Plan and will be monitored on a quarterly basis.

Overarching targets:

External measures: (aligned to 3 Year Council Plan)

- To increase the % of residents who feel they are kept informed about Council services and benefits by 2% a year.

Baseline: 62% (from 2003 General Satisfaction Survey)

Future targets:	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
	66%	68%	70%

- To increase the % of residents finding it easy to access local Council information by % a year.

Baseline: to be established from 2005/06 General Satisfaction Survey

Future targets: will be taken from baseline and set for 2006/07 and 2007/08

- To increase the % of influence residents feel they have over decisions that affect their local area by at least 1% a year.

Baseline: 22% (from 2003 General Satisfaction Survey)

Future targets:	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
	23%	24%	25%

Internal measures:

- To increase the % of staff that feel well informed about matters that affect them by at least 1% a year.

Baseline: 74% (from 2005 Staff Survey)

Future targets:	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
	75%	76%	77%

- To increase overall satisfaction with the service delivered by the Corporate communications team by at least 1% a year.

Baseline: 83% (from 2005 Staff Survey)

Future targets:	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
	84%	85%	86%

NB: Satisfaction is already high for the internal and external measures above therefore future targets of 1 or 2 % are stretching. The targets are under constant review and will be increased if not challenging enough.