

South Norfolk Council

Communications Strategy

2009-2012

1.0 Summary

1.1 This strategy is set within the context of the Council's corporate priorities, published in the annual Corporate Plan.

1.2 It concerns the corporate key messages that should be used in activities by all of our services.

1.3 It also concerns the strategic communications objectives and highlights some of the key activities to achieve them. These will be used to guide our communications and will inform service and team plans. The plans will reflect actions against these aims and objectives, wherever relevant.

1.4 Corporate Communications is not an end in itself however. The very best communications cannot make people satisfied with poor services. Indeed, our top priority is shaping the future of South Norfolk, being businesslike and efficient, providing services people value the most.

1.5 Where communications does play a key and increasingly important role is in helping local people to know the range and availability of our services, policies and initiatives, and in critically influencing their view of value for money and quality of services overall.

1.6 It also brings to a much wider audience – MPs, stakeholders, businesses, partners - information about where we are working with others to improve the quality of life of local people and to promote our district, and the wider county and region.

1.7 Research clearly shows, in survey after survey, that when people feel well informed by their Council, they are more satisfied with their Council and the area where they live and they feel more involved and engaged in the Council's decision-making.

1.8 That is why this strategy is distinct from, but sits alongside our wider work of involving the community in designing and delivering services and showing how their active engagement can directly improve standards.

2.0 Vision and Corporate priorities

2.1 Our vision is to retain and improve the district's special qualities that make it one of the best places to live and work in the country.

2.2 We have publicly committed to the following corporate priorities, which are stated every year in the Corporate Plan -

- Be businesslike and efficient providing services people value the most
- Become among the best in the country for recycling
- Get to grips with antisocial behaviour and environmental crime
- Preserve the special character of our market towns and villages
- Make South Norfolk a culturally and economically richer place to live and work
- Innovate and deliver low cost housing for local people
- Improve the general health and well-being of everyone who lives or works in South Norfolk

2.3 We believe that by working to achieve these priorities, we can continue to be recognised as a good Council by our residents, the organisations we join with in partnership, and our stakeholders.

2.4 This document sets out in broad strategic terms how our corporate communications activities can play a key part in making this happen.

3.0 Key audiences

3.1 We represent the interests of the many communities in the district. We provide a diverse range of services, and each year we are responsible for managing a gross budget of £50m.

3.2 We also lead for the district, give it a direction and a strong sense of place, and have an influence on issues, which directly affect the quality of life in South Norfolk.

3.3 It is therefore essential that we communicate effectively with our key customers and audiences -

- Local people: they need information about services so they can engage meaningfully in shaping and influencing Council plans, priorities and services, and their district.
- Partners: effective work with partners can directly improve the quality of life for local people and also promote South Norfolk as a great place to live, work and do business.
- Councillors: they have knowledge of their community and the commitment to continue to develop and improve the Council as an

effective public service organisation responsive to all the people they represent.

- Decision makers: like those in the EU, Parliament, but also local MPs, business leaders, and regional organisations which make decisions that have a huge impact on our district and its people.
- Staff: the council has around 400 staff, many live in the district and are therefore also customers. Their view is affected by the way the Council communicates with them at work and at home. The Council does not ask them to be ambassadors, but they are its advocates.

4.0 Reputation

4.1 Our reputation is affected by:

- Experiences people have when they contact Councillors, officers or visit any of the Council's offices.
- The nature and quality of the public services people receive from us, and our partners.
- How we influence key decisions, which affect the community.
- The way we consult local people and use the results.
- What people read and hear about us in the news media or from others.
- The nature of the information we publish and the way we make it available.
- How people see and experience the way we work in meetings and in partnerships.

5.0 Councillors

5.1 As the elected representatives of our community, Members of the Council have invaluable local knowledge. They understand and experience life in their communities every day, and know the issues that concern local people.

5.2 All Members are key communicators for the Council and on its behalf, and can have a huge impact on our reputation. They are the Council's most visible advocates in the community, and are the chief spokespeople for the Council in the media.

5.3 They also have a duty to represent their local community, and have to balance ward responsibilities, Councillor responsibilities and their responsibility in Cabinet and other senior positions, to the district of South Norfolk, as a whole.

5.4 Extra support through training in good communication practices can help them carry out these roles to the best of their ability and enhance the reputation of the Council.

6.0 Overall context

6.1 This strategy recognises a number of elements and pressures that make change possible and lead to improvement.

Public satisfaction

6.2 Research from Ipsos MORI, carried out on behalf of local government organisations, indicate that Councils with the highest satisfaction rates among their communities are those where communities feel most informed.

6.3 In Best Value User Satisfaction Surveys carried out from 2003/04 to 2006/07, those who felt well informed were up to four times more satisfied with their Council than those who believe they were not informed at all.

6.4 The most recent Ipsos MORI Place Survey was conducted nationally, and out of around 3,000 surveys issued to assess satisfaction across South Norfolk, 40% were returned – an excellent response rate.

6.5 The survey showed - 91% of South Norfolk respondents had a high level of satisfaction with our area; 36% felt they could influence decisions in the area, which makes South Norfolk the second highest rated district area in the country.

Reputation project

6.6 We are a signatory to the Local Government Association Reputation campaign. It identified two strands of work, which it considers key to a Council's good reputation – the environment and communications.

6.7 In its research, it identified as the greatest drivers of overall satisfaction, in ascending order of importance (with the least important first, and the most important last) -

- Direct communication: our community magazine the Link remains one of the most powerful ways we communicate directly with our people and goes to virtually every household.
- Media coverage and mood: our local print media, and broadcasters remain hugely important to the Council's reputation, and are trusted by local people as authoritative and neutral reporters of our work.
- Perceived value for money: this is directly affected by the information people receive about the money we spend on services, the amount we

charge in Council Tax and the cost of our chargeable services, from pest control to leisure centres.

- Perceived quality of services overall: this is again, directly affected by the information our people receive through direct communication and the media about the services we provide.

Key communications actions

6.8 The Reputation project identified five key communications actions a council can undertake which would improve its reputation.

6.9 Ensure the brand is consistently linked to services

- At South Norfolk Council, one of the most popular and effective services is now one of the most visible – our Environmental Crime Team, which keeps the district safe, clean and tidy.
- In mid 2007, our brand was changed and modernised to give it a brighter, simpler and less dated look, and that brand is being applied in a carefully phased roll-out to our service activities.
- Consistently linking our brand to our services means local people are better able to recognise the services they pay for through their Council Tax, and that is particularly the case with the Environmental Crime Team.

6.10 Promote and defend the Council in the media

- Our local media is a vital part of the community. It is a respected and trusted by local people as a key part of local democracy holding us, and especially our Councillors to account.
- We recognise and value that, and we work hard to maintain an open and constructive relationship with journalists, which means that more often than not, we are reported in a balanced and positive way.
- When the media is justly critical, it means we also have the confidence to admit our mistakes, apologise, and then put those matters right.
- We also respond to the national and specialist media, recognising that sometimes the national media has its own agenda and view of local councils, and so we work where necessary in partnership with the Local Government Association to promote and defend our reputation.

6.11 Provide an A to Z of Council services

- Local people receive an A to Z of our services on the back of the Link magazine, which goes to over 50,000 homes, three times a year.

- This A to Z also promotes freephone numbers so that those on low incomes are encouraged to make contact too. That is especially important in an economic recession like this one.
- The A to Z is also available on our website, which is considered among the top 20 sites in England for accessibility and ease of use.

6.12 Publish a regular Council magazine to residents

- We publish the Link community magazine three times a year, delivered to virtually all our households, currently by the Royal Mail, though we are always examining alternatives to save money.
- It is subject to constant review and change to make it brighter, more accessible and more focussed on local people and their concerns. Indeed, it has gone through just such a review, and the feedback so far has been very positive.
- It is one of the most powerful ways in which we communicate with local people, and has been significantly improved to focus more on them, and not so exclusively us.

6.13 Step up internal communications

- We are moving from simply sending information along communications channels to staff – like the staff intranet eLink - to using internal communications as a way of supporting change, modernising the Council and transforming its corporate culture.
- Many of our staff live in the district, pay Council Tax and use our services. They are critical friends of the Council, as well as informal advocates in the community.
- We are overhauling our intranet service and developing a new one making it much more interactive as well as informative for our staff.

7.0 Organisation restructuring

7.1 We have embarked on a major programme of restructuring which is reducing our establishment and costs, providing the services that people value the most, and being businesslike and efficient in the way we work. Every single officer post has been examined and revised, and every member of staff interviewed. Every service area, and every penny of spend has been investigated.

7.2 This modernisation and the need to develop a stronger and more flexible “one council” corporate culture, which crosses old silo boundaries and binds

the organisation together, means all forms of internal communications must be improved.

7.3 In addition, good communications internally will help us achieve the objectives in our People Strategy, developed by the Council's Human Resources team.

7.4 The size and geography of the district and the fact that staff are split on several sites means we must make more consistent use of a variety of communication tools and techniques to ensure that information flows effectively and efficiently, between and within teams.

8.0 Guiding principles

8.1 Our communication activities will follow guiding principles of good practice.

8.2 They will be -

- Two- way, involving and engaging people in a genuine and constructive dialogue.
- Open and transparent about the purpose of what is being communicated and what improvements result from it.
- Accessible and accountable, supporting equal opportunities and remaining committed to corporate policies and guidelines for communication activities.
- Consistent, regular and ongoing, recognising that communications is an all-year round activity that we are committed to, and where the professional skills needed to deliver good communications are valued.
- Monitored and Evaluated, so that communication tools and technologies are used to build on good practice, identify and learn from poor practice and represent value for money.
- About outcomes and not processes because our audiences and community don't want "process-ology", they expect and deserve real, practical improvements in their district and daily lives.

9.0 Strategic communications objectives

9.1 The following strategic communications objectives are underlined, and are in turn followed by more tactical delivery of those objectives.

9.2 Keeping people well informed

- Maintaining a strong media relations service.

- Consistent marketing and brand communications.
- Improved web communications.
- Greater use of plain English in all publications.
- Continuing improvements to the Link magazine.
- Regular publication of a basic A-Z of our services.

9.3 Effective internal communications

- Launching a “one council” campaign to improve the corporate culture
- Fortnightly electronic briefing by Directors to staff
- Regular Chief Executive and Directors’ blogs
- Regular and fixed team meetings, led by Directors
- Improved information to Councillors, especially on ward matters
- Interactive, redesigned eLink intranet
- Improved attendance at key staff learning hours

9.4 Public involvement and engagement

- Regular feedback in our key publications.
- Top areas of public concerns and feedback in performance reports
- A new Customer Services Strategy
- More focused and disciplined marketing, using in-house strategies
- A public involvement and engagement strategy
- Greater use of specialist residents forums
- Regular use of consultation surveys like the Place Survey

9.5 Demonstrating efficiency and value for money

- More cost effective publications, with advertising to generate savings
- More publications available electronically and less in print

- Implementing fully the existing marketing guidance and strategies
- Continued use of brand to simplify marketing and communications
- Sharing resources with others to achieve joint outcomes
- More shared communication activities and support with our partners

10.0 Desired outcomes

10.1 This corporate strategy seeks to achieve a number of different outcomes.

10.2 Here are the outcomes we are working to achieve -

- More South Norfolk people will feel we keep them well informed about our activities and services, and how they can access and influence them.
- More will feel that we listen and respond to their views and concerns, and can become involved and engaged in the key decision-making and in shaping South Norfolk.
- Users of our services will receive a consistently high standard of customer care and focus, however they chose to contact us, and be more satisfied as a result.
- We will continue to enjoy a well-deserved, positive profile locally, nationally and regionally as an authority that provides value for money services, which it delivers effectively and efficiently, and which it communicates well.
- Staff will be working within a strong and flexible, “one council” corporate culture where they feel well informed about developments and changes, are encouraged and enabled to shape and influence activities.
- Councillors will feel well informed about policies and services and well supported in their work to communicate and engage with their community and partners, locally and nationally.
- The resources we invest in communicating with all our audiences (people, time and money) will be used efficiently and represent value for money.

11.0 High level indicators

11.1 The work of communications will be embedded in service and team plans, with communications built into plans and projects at their inception, instead of as an after-thought. But where the overall performance of this

strategy is concerned, there are five high level indicators proposed to assess whether it has been an overall success.

11.2 They are:

- By 2012, more South Norfolk people will feel that we keep them well informed about our services and activities. This will be evaluated using previous and future Place Surveys, which occur every two years.
- Our Comprehensive Area Assessment will have evidence of the improvement in the way we communicate and consult with local people and service users.
- By 2012, more staff will feel well informed about our Council and service issues and are able to make their views known to team leaders and senior managers.
- By 2012, research will show continued improvement in our customer service and access.

11.3 In each of the above targets, their delivery will be assessed by already existing surveys, or new surveys will be developed.

12.0 Resource assumptions

12.1 This strategy is set firmly within the context of the tough but realistic overall assumptions placed on services by current and future budgets.

12.2 It assumes a commitment by the Council to communications as a key corporate priority and key element in improving or maintaining the Council's good reputation among all its audiences and stakeholders.