

# 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 Business Plan.

1.2 It concerns the vision and corporate key messages that should be used in activities by all of our services, and the values which underpin those activities.

1.3 It also concerns the strategic communications objectives in this strategy 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 vision is to retain and improve the quality of life in South Norfolk for now and future generations to make it one of the best places to live and work in the country. We do that being businesslike, customer focussed and consistently can-do.

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 set out above.

2.2 We are also committed to the following corporate priorities, which are stated every year in the Business Plan –

Enhancing our quality of life and the environment we live in

Promoting a thriving local economy

Supporting communities to realise their potential

Driving services through being businesslike, efficient and customer aware

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 the Council via its website, see its magazine, meet Councillors or visit the Council office.

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.

5.5 It is therefore essential that we operate the Member protocol and keep our Members appropriately informed, involved and engaged through frequent contact.

## **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 South Norfolk 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 brown bins 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.

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 South Norfolk 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. It is undergoing constant review and improvement and is developing into a transaction site and into a single access point for information about South Norfolk.

#### 6.12 Publish a regular Council magazine to residents

We publish the South Norfolk 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 recently by the Council's Scrutiny Committee (2011) and is being redesigned including carrying more adverts to generate income.

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 have overhauled our intranet service and we are always in the process of developing and improving this service to better engage staff with the Council's vision, priorities and values.

### **7.0 Organisation restructuring**

7.1 We have concluded a major restructure which cut establishment and costs, driving our services by being businesslike, efficient and customer aware. Our Moving Forward Together programme and performance reviews have sharpened our key priorities of being businesslike, customer focused and consistently can do.

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 are being improved.

7.3 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. We are innovating ways of communicating with operations staff at Ketteringham using screens and daily briefings on corporate priorities and key messages.

## **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 South Norfolk 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

### 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 surveys.

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. We need to find savings of £2.5m by 2014/15.

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.