

**Cheltenham Borough Council
Communications Strategy
2004 to 2007**

Draft Strategy Document

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Contents

Contents	2
1 Introduction	3
2 Why do we need a communications strategy?	4
National picture.....	4
Local picture	5
3 Communications audit	6
4 Responsibility for the communications strategy	9
Board of Directors.....	9
Assistant Directors.....	9
Policy and public relations division	9
Divisional public relations officers and marketing managers	9
All employees	10
Members.....	9
5 Corporate business plan.....	11
6 Key messages	13
7 Strategic aims	14
8 Controls, monitoring and review	15
Questions or comments.....	15
9 Action plan to deliver the strategic aims of the communications strategy	16

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Communications is at the heart of everything the council does. Whether it is dealing with members of the public on service issues, lobbying central government for a change in proposed legislation or handling media enquiries, if the council does not communicate effectively then it fails in its ability to be an excellent council. Effective communication is also a two way process – it is not merely about imparting information it is also about listening and responding, openly and honestly.
- 1.2 This strategy provides a framework for communication across the council. Over the last few years, we have corporately recognised the importance of communications and have made a number of improvements to the way we deliver the service. But we acknowledge more improvements are needed and that these should be made within the framework of a comprehensive communications strategy, which is driven by our corporate priorities as set out in our business plan.
- 1.3 In 2002 the council completed a best value review of communications. As part of this review, a five-year improvement plan was produced which included a requirement for the development of a communications strategy. The recent CPA peer review also recognised the benefits of having a strategy in place, particularly to address some of the issues that have been raised through the self-assessment and peer review process. This strategy brings together the issues raised in these reviews, drawing on examples of best practice and with reference to existing corporate strategies which link to communications such as the consultation strategy, e-government strategy and the internal communications strategy.
- 1.4 The key aims of the strategy (on page 14) will establish channels of communication which will create a positive, informed and recognisable profile for the council as well as creating a corporate environment where aspirations to excellence are encouraged and our values are upheld.
- 1.5 This communications strategy will support the council in the delivery of the corporate business plan and will be reflected in service plans and group plans. The strategy provides guidance to all employees and members and will demonstrate the council's commitment to communicate effectively with the people of Cheltenham, our partners and also with ourselves.

2 Why do we need a communications strategy?

2.1 Honest and open two-way communication is the lifeblood of any organisation. All communication – spoken, written, or electronic – should be clear, easily understood, up to date and timely. The council has acknowledged that it needs to improve the way it communicates and that this should be done within the framework of a comprehensive communications strategy. The strategy needs to take account of what national and local trends and what the audit of existing communication tools told us.

National picture

2.2 National research indicates that people know little about councils or what they do.

- Nationally, only half of local residents feel their council keeps them well informed.
- Nine out of ten people cannot name their local councillor.

2.3 The less people know about an organisation, the less they are likely to perceive how well it is performing. This is borne out by MORI research, which has consistently found a link between how familiar people are with a service or organisation and how favourable they are towards it. Research also shows that people are not always impressed by what they see in local government and the public sector in general.

- Only one in three see public services as ‘friendly’ and ‘hardworking’. The same number think of them as ‘bureaucratic’.
- People do not tend to associate ‘openness’ and ‘honesty’ with public services – only 9% and 14% applying these words.
- One in four people rated their local council as the worst agency at providing information, compared to other public and private sector communicators.

2.4 These are key issues at a time when local government is seeking to re-invigorate itself, engage more closely with local people and improve voter turnout. As the ‘information age’ matures, it will be vital for councils to deliver the messages that people want to hear, using the channels that are most effective.

2.5 The MORI research also found that in those councils rated as relatively poor communicators, residents’ satisfaction with the council was consistently lower than might be expected, given their overall satisfaction with the area as a place to live. In many cases, good performance on service delivery was not matched by satisfaction ratings. In other words, many councils need to tell a better story than the one they are telling. The research shows that telling it more effectively results in improved resident satisfaction.

2.6 Recent guidance from the Audit Commission also indicates the importance of communication. The guidance states that there should be good intelligence gathering and community consultation mechanisms, which take account of different interests and perspectives and are used to inform priority setting. It also states that councils should provide feedback to those involved and be more efficient at getting input from service users and acting on it. The council’s priorities should respond to both national and local priorities, and these should be effectively communicated internally and externally.

Local picture

- 2.7 Locally we know the council's image may not be as positive as it should be and our partners consistently tell us that we undersell ourselves. Recent public satisfaction figures show that the council has a satisfaction rating of 55%, down from 68% in 2001. Given the MORI research some of this could be attributed to poor communication.
- 2.8 However, we must note the high level of satisfaction with individual services, with waste collection, parks and open spaces in particular having satisfaction levels above 85%. In fact the only service area to have a lower satisfaction rating than the council as a whole is sports and leisure and it is noted that this survey was carried out prior to the opening of the refurbished leisure@cheltenham. It would seem that our component parts add up to more than the whole and this is a strong indicator that our overall image is weaker than individual services.
- 2.9 This strategy therefore recognises that there is room for improvement and we need to develop strong communications both externally and internally to help us deliver excellent services to the public. We know that in the past our cautious approach to self-promotion and reputation management has cost us dearly. Our relationship with the local media has also been reactive rather than proactive. Our internal communications, although improving, needs to be developed to ensure that staff receive key corporate messages regularly.
- 2.8 The overall success of this strategy will result in greater awareness of the council's actions and increased satisfaction ratings. The communications strategy is not a stand-alone document and therefore has taken into account the following key strategies and initiatives:
- corporate business plan;
 - community plan;
 - equalities policy;
 - consultation strategy;
 - customer access strategy;
 - e-government initiative; and
 - local democracy.
- 2.9 Communication covers a wide range of target audiences and the strategy aims to cover:
- Cheltenham residents;
 - Cheltenham businesses and their workforce;
 - media, local national and regional;
 - council members;
 - stakeholders and partners, eg Police, primary care trusts, MPs, etc;
 - employees of the council;
 - other councils regionally and nationally;
 - sponsors;
 - national government; and
 - trade unions.

3 Communications audit

- 3.1 The council currently uses a range of different tools to communicate its services and these are:

council newspaper

- 3.2 The Clarion is distributed to all households in Cheltenham and is one of the most important tools for communicating with residents of the borough. Anecdotal evidence tells us that this publication is well read and enjoyed by Cheltenham's residents. However, further research will be carried out on readership preferences. As from summer 2004 the Clarion will carry paid advertising in an attempt to reduce the costs of production.

local media

- 3.3 The Gloucestershire Echo is Cheltenham's daily paper and has a daily circulation of 24,000. It is the primary means of information for Cheltenham's residents and businesses and is the council's primary media contact. While the Echo may print critical stories, the council enjoys a good relationship with the paper and receives a fair amount of positive coverage. However during our consultations in preparation for CPA, we found that our partners identified the council as having a weak media image, which largely arises from the coverage we receive in the paper. We also need to develop relationships with the three local radio stations who are very willing to cover council initiatives.

regional media

- 3.4 This includes BBC local radio such as Radio Gloucestershire, independent radio stations such as Severn Sound, Central Television news programmes, BBC regional news programmes such as Points West and Midlands Today. BBC Radio Gloucestershire covers a high number of the council's media releases. Severn Sound will cover some council stories, however as they have a specific younger target market it has to appeal to them. Television news coverage is more difficult as Cheltenham lies on the boundary of the two BBC television regions and therefore Midlands Today will only cover a limited number of Cheltenham stories as do Points West. Further work is being carried out to increase the take up of council coverage. Central Television will cover more council stories and a good relationship has been developed.

specialist media

- 3.5 This includes media such as the Municipal Journal, Local Government Chronicle and other professional publications. More work needs to be done to place stories in these publications about ground breaking initiatives.

national media

- 3.6 There is a limited amount of coverage of the council by the national media.

printed leaflets

- 3.7 The council produces a number of leaflets on a wide range of services. These can range in style and format and sometimes are not effective in reinforcing the brand image of the council.

website

3.8 The council has a well regarded website which won the New Statesman Award in 2002. Council services are increasingly available on-line and the website is an excellent source of council information.

reception and customer liaison

3.9 It is recognised that this is an important tool of communication and a customer access strategy is being implemented which includes the development of the new unified reception area. The council is also developing a customer relationship management system which should mean that the council is able to deal with customer queries in a much more robust fashion. The council also has a complaints system, which provides a useful tool for receiving feedback from the public.

vehicles, uniforms and other branded items such as parking permits

3.10 These are an important way for the council to communicate its visual identity often in high profile situations. Corporate guidelines indicate how the council's logo should be displayed.

advertising

3.11 The council places adverts in the local paper and other media sources. These can range from public notices through to adverts for jobs and marketing adverts for services. These are not co-ordinated and a more joined-up approach needs to be taken on placing advertisements to ensure that a consistent marketing and branded image is portrayed.

council logo and visual identity

3.12 The council uses a crest as part of its visual identity. Work was underway at the beginning of 2004 to examine whether there is a need to review the council's brand and update its visual identity, which has resulted in the development of a potential new logo. This work is ongoing which will include further public and member consultation. No final decision has yet been reached on the way forward.

council meetings (public)

3.13 The council holds a number of meetings, which are open to the public. These can range from formal meetings such as council held in the council chamber through to consultation meetings held in community venues. At formal council meetings the public have an opportunity to ask questions, subject to certain procedures, but very few members of the public take up this opportunity. Meetings are advertised on the internet and on posters displayed in our offices but more could be done to encourage public attendance, which tends to be higher at consultation meetings when there is an issue which is of concern to the public. There are no guidelines for officers about holding meetings and good practice guidelines.

other print, eg letterhead, council reports etc

3.14 The council communicates in a formal basis through letters and reports, and has guidance on the use of plain English in its communication. Printed matter will contain the council's logo to reinforce the brand image.

consultation

3.15 The council undertakes consultation using a variety of tools and techniques appropriate to the matter in hand. An area where the council is known to be weak is in providing feedback on consultation and how the results have been used to inform the decision making process. A consultation strategy was approved in 2004 which sets out guidance on how consultation should be undertaken. It is recognised that consultation is a key form of communication and that any consultation needs to be undertaken within the framework of the communications strategy.

internal communications

3.16 The council communicates internally using a variety of methods including e-mails, intranet, meetings, memos, briefings, corporate events and newsletters. The board of directors approved an internal communications strategy in 2003. In 2004 the council will approve its human resources strategy, which clearly has linkages to internal communications. Although communications have improved over the last twelve months it is recognised that more work can be done to improve the communications and in particular ensure that employees demonstrate the values adopted by the council. Internal communications within the council must be undertaken within the framework of the communications strategy.

4 Responsibility for the communications strategy

4.1 Everyone has a role to play in delivery of this strategy.

Members

4.2 Guidance has been produced which sets out the media protocol for members and members will be asked to adhere to this protocol. Members should also expect that they will receive timely information and advice from officers.

Board of Directors

4.3 The board of directors will be responsible for driving the communications strategy by actively and demonstrably applying its principles to all aspects of their work. They will ensure that decisions and strategic thinking is communicated to assistant directors so that they can cascade essential information to employees in a timely manner and to stakeholders and the public as necessary. They will also monitor the council's media image and identify to the policy and public relations division major strategic initiatives, which will require careful and sensitive planning with regards to reputation management.

Assistant Directors

4.4 All assistant directors will take particular responsibility for ensuring the successful implementation of the communications strategy within their area of responsibility. They will ensure that all employees within their division are aware of the strategy and the need to have effective, honest, two-way communications with the public and stakeholders. They will establish channels to ensure that everyone has an ability to express their views and opinions, and will ensure that there is an upward flow of information as well as top down. Assistant directors will ensure that the communications team is advised of key issues, which may attract media attention and will involve the team in future planning of communication issues. They will ensure that they identify media spokespersons within their division who are able to respond in a timely fashion to media enquiries. Assistant directors will encourage mechanisms for meaningful public consultation which includes feedback to consultees.

Policy and public relations division

4.5 The division, through the communications team, will manage and monitor the strategy and implement key actions as outlined in the action plan. They will work with the board of directors and assistant directors on planning key communication issues and messages, and will provide regular monitoring reports to the board. They will work with the human resources division to plan and monitor the effectiveness of internal communications.

Divisional public relations officers and marketing managers

4.6 Some functions within the council have their own specialised communication and marketing officers. These officers will need to work within the framework of the communications strategy recognising that they have a specific role in terms of marketing their service. They will ensure that the council's brand should be reflected in all written communications even if they show various identities, which are tailored to suit their target market. They will also ensure that any communications support the council's key corporate messages and do nothing to undermine the image of the council.

All employees

- 4.7 All employees have a role to play in delivering the council's communications strategy. They have a responsibility to ensure that they communicate clearly, in a timely fashion, avoiding jargon and allowing for a meaningful, open and honest dialogue with customers, members and stakeholders. Employees are our greatest ambassadors and need to be aware of the positive impact their actions can have on the reputation of the council.

5 Corporate business plan

- 5.1 Our communications strategy takes into account the council's key priorities, aims and objectives and therefore links closely to the work carried out for Cheltenham's Community Plan and in turn the council's business plan. Communications will be at the heart of ensuring that the corporate business plan is delivered. The council has agreed the following purpose:
- provide leadership to our community;
 - provide high quality services to the people who live in, work in or visit Cheltenham;
 - aspire to deliver a high quality of life for the people of Cheltenham
- 5.2 In order to demonstrate that it delivers high quality services and provide leadership it will need to engage with the community and its employees to ensure that there is a meaningful dialogue.
- 5.3 The council has also set out its values in its corporate business plan. These values provide key messages that the council needs to convey to the public and stakeholders and to demonstrate that our values are upheld. These values and key messages are that the council is:

Meeting our customers needs

Through effective communication and consultation we will find out the needs and aspirations of our customers, citizens and the community as a whole, irrespective of age, sex, race, marital and financial status or physical or mental ability

Working together

Through effective communication, we will work in partnership with individuals, groups and other agencies in serving the community and meeting its needs and aspirations.

Aspiring to be excellent

We will work to continuously improve our communication activities and ensure that services are of a high standard. We will regularly monitor what we do to ensure that we are effective and that we providing services which are valued and relevant

Innovative

We will continue to seek innovative ways of delivering our communication activities in order that they can better meet the needs of our communities

In touch with the community

Through effective communications, we will seek to empower, develop and support local communities to enable them to meet their needs

Clear and open

We will provide responsive, courteous and fair communications in order that we are clear and open about what we can achieve and what we cannot.

Valuing each other

Through effective internal communications, we will ensure that everyone who works for, or represents, the council, will feel valued and supported

Equality of opportunity for all

Our communication activities will promote equality of opportunity

A well respected employer

Through our internal communications, we will be able to enthuse and motivate staff and celebrate their achievements.

5.4 The council has identified its priorities and the communications strategy will play a key role in ensuring that we convey these priorities to the community and stakeholders and that they understand why the council has chosen to adopt such priorities. The strategy will also play a role in devising consultation methods, which will help determine priorities in the future. Our seven corporate priorities are:

- we will increase the provision of affordable housing, particularly in the social rented sector, and work towards a balanced housing market;
- we will reduce crime and disorder and the fear of crime in our communities;
- we will protect and improve the environment of Cheltenham and ensure the organisation becomes more sustainable
- we want to reduce reliance on the private car and increase the proportion of trips made by public transport, cycling and walking
- we want to re-dress the imbalances in our communities and build strong healthy geographical communities and communities of interest;
- we want to enhance the town's reputation as national and international cultural centre, promote a healthy and sustainable economy and provide opportunities to broaden and enrich sport, play and cultural experiences along with an organisation priority of:
- we want to be an excellent authority delivering high standards of service

6 Key messages

- 6.1 Based on the council's values and priorities the council can identify a number of key messages that the council wants to convey to its target audiences. These will be used to inform all our communications including media liaison, the Clarion, the website and internal communications. These messages are:

We are an excellent council with excellent services.

We are a community leader.

We listen to and welcome your views.

We are open and honest.

We work in partnership with our community.

We are working to make the town a better place to live in.

We are innovative.

When mistakes are made we will put them right.

We are a well respected employer.

We value diversity and work for all sections of our community.

There are also more specific messages which will need to be conveyed and updated on an annual basis. For 2004 to 2005 these include:

- Telling people about our priorities in the business plan
- A business as usual approach despite the on going dispute
- Comprehensive Performance Assessment results
- How we are spending residents council tax

Strategic aims

- 7.1 Based on national research, the local picture and our own audit of current communication tools and techniques the council has identified a number of strategic aims which should improve communication both internally and externally.

To create and maintain links with the public, our employees and our stakeholders that inform and direct the way in which we conduct our business and provide services to the community.

To manage the reputation of Cheltenham Borough Council so that it earns understanding and support for the organisation, while at the same time influencing opinion and behaviour.

To maintain a strong two way flow of information within the council that supports and encourages teamwork, trust and loyalty.

To recognise the value of the media as a means of communicating information to the public, and to always be open, honest and proactive in our dealings with them.

To ensure that the services, literature and overall appearance of Cheltenham Borough Council buildings and vehicles are constantly presented in a recognisable corporate style.

To continually seek out and exploit the opportunities presented by electronic communication, internally and externally, to benefit Cheltenham Borough Council and the communities it serves.

- 7.2 Set out in section 9 is an action plan of how the council intends to meet these strategic aims.

8 Controls, monitoring and review

- 8.1 The development of the strategy and action plan is only the start of the process. Regular monitoring and review will need to be undertaken to ensure that the council is meeting the strategic aims set out in the strategy.
- 8.2 It is proposed that monitoring reports will be presented to the board of directors on a regular basis and annually a report will be made to the economy and business improvement overview and scrutiny committee setting out progress and identifying areas where the strategy requires updating.
- 8.3 It will be the responsibility of the policy and public relations division to monitor the strategy and provide updates. It is recognised that some baseline performance data is unavailable and one of the first tasks will be to set up performance management systems, which can capture this baseline data and provide a base from which to monitor progress and improvements.

Questions or comments

If you have any questions on the strategy please contact:

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9 Action plan to deliver the strategic aims of the communications strategy

No	Strategic aim	Action	Outcome	Measure	Target or implementation date	Budget
1a	To create and maintain links with the public, our employees and our stakeholders that inform and direct the way in which we conduct our business and provide services to the community.	Carry out biennial residents satisfaction survey to include perceptions of the council.	To highlight strengths and weaknesses and measure implementation of communications strategy. To also gauge the best way to communicate to the council's various audiences.	Measurable and tangible targets can be set.	To include further question by 2006 survey.	None for the communications team
1b		Set up performance indicators for communications service.	To set measurable targets for improvement.	To set measurable targets for improvement.	Jan 2005	none
1c		Produce an accessibility of information policy for communicating with groups that are hard to reach or that may have specific communication needs.	Improve council's reputation with harder to reach groups.	Consultation with groups.	March 2005	Not yet known
1d		Investigate options for producing a joint publication with private sector and public partners.	a) As an alternative to the Clarion. b) To promote the key messages and implement the communications strategy of the council.	Residents' satisfaction survey. Performance indicators.	Feb 2005	The clarion budget could be used to contribute to the joint cost of the publication
1e		To implement the council's consultation strategy including the need to improve feedback to the public on the results of consultation	To improve consultation within the council and provide a more co-ordinated approach.	Number of surveys with % responding % of consultations using more than one method	As set out in the consultation strategy	As set out in the consultation strategy

2a	To manage the reputation of Cheltenham Borough Council so that it earns understanding and support for the organisation, while at the same time influencing opinion and behaviour.	Promote the work of key partnerships such as the Cheltenham Strategic Partnership to build reputation as a community leader.	Improve reputation of council as a community leader.	Consultation with partner organisations.	Sept 2004	none
2b		Implement high profile campaigns for key corporate messages, corporate priorities and results driven projects (eg recycling).	To build awareness of key issues with local residents.	Residents' satisfaction survey.	April 2005	none
2c		Set up project review group of communications and marketing people around the council to work on image and brand.	a) To ensure there is a consistent approach. b) To build a better image and brand for the council. c) To ensure communications strategy and key messages are used in all council communication functions.	Policing of new brand. Residents satisfaction survey.	Sept 2004	None
2e		Encourage the use of the key messages so that they are included in all council communications as appropriate	Public have a better understanding of the councils purpose and values	Residents satisfaction survey	Ongoing	None
3a	To maintain a strong two way flow of information within the council that supports and encourages teamwork, trust and loyalty.	Continue work of internal communications plan to improve internal communications.	Employees to be better informed, more motivated and dedicated to the council.	Feedback from employee forum that was recently set up.	Some work already complete Sept 2004	none
3b		Develop more effective internal communication with members of the council including the use of briefings and bulletins and executive summaries for reports	Members to be better informed	Feedback from members.	Dec 2004	none

3c		Promote and build awareness internally of the new communications strategy.	a) All employees understand the importance of good communications. b) There are consistent messages presented to our audiences about the council.	Employee forum Residents survey.	October 2004	none
4a	To recognise the value of the media as a means of communicating information to the public, and to always be open, honest and proactive in our dealings with them.	Implement a media strategy.	To build further on the improved public relations service and ensure that the key elements of the communications strategy are used in all media relations work.	Residents survey. Press cuttings and media analysis. Performance indicators.	Feb 2005	none
4b		Implement crisis management strategy in the event of a serious emergency or crisis.	Manage the risk of the council's reputation being damaged.	Media monitoring	Oct 2004	None
4c		Continue rolling programme of media awareness training for members and officers on the press contacts list.	To further improve media relations work.	Media monitoring.	March 2005	£5000 already included in budget
4d		Introduce regular media briefings with key local media and the Cabinet, Directors and Assistant Directors.	Lead communication from the Board of Directors and Cabinet.	Media monitoring.	March 2005	none
5a	To ensure that the services, literature and overall appearance of Cheltenham Borough Council buildings and vehicles are constantly presented in a recognisable corporate style.	Continue the work to review the council's brand and visual identity.	a) To consider a new logo for the council and further enhance the council's brand. b) To review the policy for use of the brand in light of any decision on a new logo.	Residents' survey.	Oct 2004	Any re-branding would be met from existing budgets by introducing it on a phased basis
5b		Review the council's key corporate publications to improve their image and style in line with the new brand.	a) Improve brand and image of the council.	Residents satisfaction survey.	Following implementation of new brand March 2005	Literature to be updated as stocks replenished or revised

5c		Complete with human resources reviewing job application literature to build the council's reputation as a good employer.	a) Improve communication of application process. b) Improve image and brand of the council.	Employee survey Feedback from job applicants.	May 2005	Literature to be updated as stocks replenished or revised
6a	To continually seek out and exploit the opportunities presented by electronic communication, internally and externally, to benefit Cheltenham Borough Council and the communities it serves.	Continue to implement the council's e government strategy	To improve the range of options for communications with the public	As set out in the strategy	As set out in the strategy	As set out in the strategy
6b		Develop a news section on the website in conjunction with the head of service development to further engage visitors to the site.	a) To capitalise on website and e-communications b) To build the council's reputation using one of its key communication tools.	On line surveys, e-government surveys.	Oct 2004	none
6c		Further enhance the publicity and PR for the council's website.	a) to increase visits to the council website.	On line surveys, e-government surveys.	Oct 2004	none