

DRAFT
Central Bedfordshire Council
Communications Strategy 2010 - 2012

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1. Introduction

Communication is vital to all local authorities.

It allows our **customers** to be informed about the services the Council offers, how they can access and comment on them.

It assists **Members** in their role as representative of local residents and enables Central Bedfordshire people to influence the decisions of the Council.

It supports the Council's management, by facilitating dialogue with **employees** so they are aware of the organisation's direction, understand how their own role fits in and are engaged with the Council.

It helps the Council to maintain good working relationships with **partners** and stakeholders so that its vision and priorities for the area are clearly articulated and widely understood.

Communications activity should position Central Bedfordshire so that it is able to attract high quality staff and influence local, regional and national policy debates.

And the ultimate outcome of effective communication, both internally and externally, is increased customer satisfaction.

Whilst the need for good communications is clear, the challenge in delivering it is to maintain clarity and focus in our activity, when the Council operates in a highly complex and dynamic environment.

This strategy seeks to address the challenge by setting a framework for all corporate communications activity undertaken on behalf of Central Bedfordshire Council and providing a detailed plan of action for the next two years.

2. Strategic Aim:

To protect and enhance the reputation of Central Bedfordshire Council amongst its residents.

Achieving this aim will be dependent on planned, sustained and two way communications with the public, staff and other stakeholders.

3. Key Objectives:

To:

- a) raise awareness and understanding of the organisational purpose, vision, priorities and values
- b) develop and improve our channels of direct communication with customers and stakeholders
- c) prioritise core campaigns that have the greatest influence and impact on reputation
- d) enhance internal communications to facilitate change and increase staff engagement
- e) enhance media relations to enable accurate reporting of the decision making and service developments of the council
- f) raise the profile of Central Bedfordshire Council nationally to increase our influence with opinion formers and attract high quality staff.

4. Critical Performance Measures:

The core measure of any Council's reputation is the level of customer satisfaction it achieves.

Research commissioned by the Local Government Association (LGA) and conducted by Ipsos MORI shows that there are a number of key drivers of customer satisfaction with local councils.

These are:

- The customer's general perception of the **quality of services** provided by the Council
- The customer's understanding of **how resources are spent**
- The customer's understanding of **how to influence the Council** and feel their views are listened to
- The quality of the Council's **direct communications** with its customers
- The experience of **customer's contact** with the Council
- The perception of the Council's **community leadership role** and how it is working to make Central Bedfordshire a great place to live and work
- An awareness of how the Council is working to **create a cleaner, greener and safer local environment.**

There is also a well researched correlation between customer satisfaction and those organisations that have high levels of staff advocacy. That is, employees who speak highly of their organisations and therefore act as its ambassadors and champions.

Central Bedfordshire Council's communication strategy is influenced by these drivers. During 2009 research was conducted to establish baseline performance against these measures and it is anticipated that the Government will require the Council to conduct further customer research in September 2010 through the national Place Survey exercise.

This work, combined with staff research conducted within the authority will allow the council to monitor levels of awareness and perception in the critical areas of overall satisfaction, perception of service quality and value for money, communication, customer service and community leadership.

All campaigns and programmes will have specific outcome and output measures. The Communications Team will also will monitor a range of service measures.

Local Government Association Reputation Index:

The national Reputation campaign directs local authorities to pursue a range of activities which are likely to drive increased customer satisfaction (see Appendix One). The LGA have devised an evaluation system for local authorities against which they can assess their performance on output measures recommended by the campaign. We propose to reach the “Gold Standard” for our corporate communications by 2012 through the delivery of this strategy.

5. Priority Audiences

Communications needs to be directed to be successful. This table sets out the priority audiences who form the target groups for our corporate communication. Further segmentation of these audiences and assessment of their specific needs is assessed in discrete campaign plans.

External	Internal	Partners
<p>Customers of Central Bedfordshire</p> <p>(including active and passive service users).</p>	<p>Elected Members</p> <p>(including all Members as community representatives and those with specific Executive and Committee roles).</p>	<p>Stakeholders</p> <p>(including those who share the agreed vision and priorities for Central Bedfordshire).</p>
<p>Influencers/Opinion Formers</p> <p>(including the business community, the local and national media, Members of Parliament and relevant Government Ministers and Officials)</p>	<p>Directly Employed Staff</p> <p>(including those working across all services and locations, at varying levels of engagement and responsibility).</p>	<p>Contractors</p> <p>(including those providing high profile/impact services such as Leisure, Road Maintenance, Street Cleaning and Waste Management).</p>

6. Key Messages

Simplicity is a virtue in terms of communications.

Given the myriad of information that Central Bedfordshire Council needs to communicate, it is important that this is given coherence by underpinning our communications with consistent key messages.

The strategy therefore recommends that Central Bedfordshire Council develops consistent definitions to explain:

- Our overall purpose – to serve and represent our communities
- Our vision – to improve the quality of life of all in Central Bedfordshire to enhance the unique character of our communities and our environment.
- Our priorities for our customers -
- Our priorities for the organisation – as outlined in our organisational plan.

Consistent and comprehensive use of these messages will strengthen awareness and understanding of our Council amongst our critical audiences.

7. Our Strategic Approach

Central Bedfordshire Council is a large and complex organisation that requires sophisticated communications throughout its operations.

It is neither realistic nor desirable for a corporate communications function to directly manage all such activities. However, it is appropriate for a corporate communications team to support and enable effective communication across the organisation, whilst prioritising its directly managed programme to core campaigns and channels that affect all staff, customers and key stakeholders.

This is the approach recommended in the strategy, predicated on the assumption that Central Bedfordshire operates as one council, working to a shared vision.

8. Delivering Communication Services

a. Enabling Services

The Corporate Communications team will offer training and advice to service colleagues on a range of key areas including event management, campaign planning, writing for the web, writing for the media and conducting consultations.

The team are also able to advise on the constitutional and statutory guidance on communications and consultations in Central Bedfordshire Council, including the national Code of Practice on Local Government Publicity and the Voluntary and Community Sector Compact (code of practice on consultation).

For more specialist training, Communications work with the Learning and Development Team on bespoke training exercises.

Through the development of forward planning systems, the team advises on upcoming communication and consultation activities. The communications grid will provide this information, enabling colleagues to avoid duplication and to maximise the opportunities that exist for them to join forces with other corporate communication initiatives.

b. Specialist Services

To maximise opportunities to positively raise awareness, understanding and perceptions of the council, we must ensure consistency. We will seek to manage our communications coherently, as one organisation, rather than as a federation of different services.

To achieve this, core services are provided for universal use across the Council in the following specialist areas:

Brand management – providing information and direction on how the brand should be applied and managed on the full suite of corporate products, media and vehicles ranging from stationery and advertising to uniforms and fleet livery.

Media Relations – managing the processes through which the Council provides the local and national media with information and services to support their critical role in reporting Council service and policy developments.

Market Research – conducting core research projects on behalf of the authority including the Place Survey, use of the Citizens' Panel and six monthly tracking surveys with both residents and the public.

Procurement of creative services – to ensure that the Council maximises value for money, the core team will manage procurement of creative services including design, print and marketing, via an approved list of suppliers.

c. Working with partners

To overcome customer confusion about access to public services and to increase our efficiency we will work with colleagues in other organisations across Central Bedfordshire and in the region. Key partners will include public, private and third sector organisations within Central Bedfordshire Together (e.g. Bedfordshire Police,

NHS Bedfordshire, Fire and Rescue Service, Higher Education establishments and sub regional economic partnerships). We have recently established a Communications Network for professionals working across the public and will continue to play an active role in the East of England Communications Network.

9. Communication Priorities 2010 – 2012

Through the proposed model of working, it is recommended that a detailed service plan for Communications be established in order to deliver the strategic objectives outlined in this document.

The following seven core strands of activity will be developed in the service plan.

a. Enhancing our channels

- Revitalising our on line presence so that we can deliver efficiencies, improve customer service and enhance participation.
- Develop News Central so that it better reflects the information sought by the public and is deliverable at significantly reduced cost.
- Launch an e.zine to support communication between the Council and its key partners in a cost effective and efficient manner

b. Clarifying our Stakeholders

- Develop a database Council stakeholders who have critical roles to play in implementing the future vision for the area
- Identify current approaches to communication and relationship management with these stakeholders and develop a plan of action to ensure that these individuals/organisations are kept informed and engaged with corporate developments.

c. Deliver core campaigns

- Our Central Bedfordshire – a public engagement campaign to shape the Sustainable Communities Strategy through a combination of conventional and social networking techniques.
- Every Penny Counts – a sustained communication exercise to raise staff awareness of the critical need to increase organisational efficiency and value for money by sharing information about good practice, engaging staff in developing ideas for new approaches and implementing specific initiatives on key areas of action to save resources. The campaign will also be mirrored in public communication relating to the Council's budget processes, including adoption of new efficiencies throughout the period of this strategy.
- Safer, Greener, Cleaner Central Bedfordshire – a programme of targeted marketing activity to unify various discrete exercises in relation to waste and recycling, environmental protection and community safety.
- Your Space – a communication programme to support the organisational change programme that will lead to the relocation of staff from a variety of office locations across Bedfordshire, to three core bases in Bedford (Amphill Road), Shefford (Chicksands) and Dunstable.
- Customer Excellence – internal and external promotions to increase awareness of our customer service standards and commitment to customer excellence, combined with initiatives to develop our internal focus on the importance of customer focus.
- Our Values – an internal communications programme to articulate and promote the behaviours expected from all members of staff at Central Bedfordshire Council.

d. Internal communications

- Enhance Member information to support councillors in their community leadership roles
- Increase staff engagement – so that colleagues across the council have increased levels of loyalty, understanding of corporate goals and involvement with the Council
- Refresh Team Talk – a cascade briefing system that enables all staff to be aware of key developments

- Increase Senior Management visibility – to strengthen understanding of corporate goals and personal responsibilities to deliver these
- Revitalise our intranet so that we can deliver efficiencies and improve staff engagement.

e. Media relations

- Develop forward planning systems – to ensure proactive, topical distribution of news stories about the work of the Council in a format and style that will assist local media contacts.
- Evaluate, report and learn from media relations work so that the impact of our news and features can be monitored from an efficiency and effectiveness perspective.
- Build relationships – with local and national media colleagues so that the Communications function of the authority develops to be regarded as a reliable and responsive service provider.
- Prepare for crisis situations – through joint working with partners in the Central Bedfordshire Warn and Inform network.

f. Raising our profile

- Supporting the organisation in achieving national recognition for service excellence
- Developing the profile of the Council as an excellent employer to attract the best calibre of staff
- Promote the interests of Central Bedfordshire in a national context through communication in debates and policy developments

g. Improving our ways of working

- Strengthening partnership working to avoid duplication, increase efficiency and assist customer service
- Implement publication review to reduce unnecessary production, improve quality and save money
- Review brand management to areas of service delivery not yet addressed

10. Conclusion

Communication priorities for different services and individuals vary greatly,

Rather than simply offering Communications to deliver services to individual parts of the council, the new approach determines a whole organisation plan, with Communications engaging the wider organisation in the delivery of the agenda. Keeping this focus will be critical, particularly given the scale of change within the council.

Maintaining the confidence of all services will also be important. Balancing the corporate and service agendas will require new models for engagement, forward planning and service delivery. Our team will also need to be sufficiently flexible to adapt to changing corporate demands and circumstances that will inevitably influence the nature of our plans.

Resources for delivery of this strategy are limited. We will need to generate efficiencies in our own ways of working to be able to introduce innovations in communication. We will work across services and with our partners to avoid duplication and create consistency of process to unlock resources.

Whilst the challenges are significant, the collective ambition of senior officers and members to improve the impact of our communication is vital.

We have strong baseline information on our performance, a corporate commitment to succeed and an enthusiastic team to deliver the strategy.

Appendix One: The Local Government Association Reputation Campaign

This initiative was launched by the LGA in recognition of the fact that the sector is generally less well regarded by the public than other public service providers.

The research commissioned by the LGA and underpinning the campaign suggests that whilst public satisfaction with council services is improving, the overall approval of local government is not keeping pace.

Ipsos MORI research has identified 12 core actions that, when delivered well, are proven to have a marked and positive impact on a council's reputation.

Achievement of these measures demonstrates that an authority has met the LGA 'Gold Standard' for communications.

Cleaner, Safer, Greener

- A highly visible, strongly **branded** council cleaning operation.
- No gaps in council **cleaning** and maintenance contracts.
- Set up **one phone** number for the public to report local environmental problems.
- Deal with '**grot spots**'
- Remove **abandoned vehicles** with 24 hours.
- Win a **Green Flag** award for at least one park.
- **Educate** and enforce to protect the environment

Communications

- **Manage the media** effectively to promote and defend the council.
- Provide an **A-Z guide** to council services.
- Publish a regular **council magazine** or newspaper to inform residents.
- Ensure the **council brand** is consistently linked to services.
- Communicate well with **staff** so that they become advocates for the council.

Local measures and national guides give us a clear idea of the benchmarks for communications. MORI argues that satisfaction with local authorities is primarily driven by key factors of which three – overall perception, media coverage and direct communication – can be directly addressed through this strategy. Others, including perceived Value for Money and quality of environmental services, can be strongly influenced by a coherent communication strategy.

