

the business case for communications

why investing in good
communication makes sense



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foreword

Councils are among the most important institutions of our society. They are there to represent the interests of all our communities. At their best, they aspire to the highest standards of service provision. They give leadership to other public, private and voluntary sector bodies in a constant striving for a better quality of life.

Communications lie at the centre of these roles.

Communications with local people – to increase awareness, interest and engagement.
Communications with local organisations – to reflect a transparent willingness to work in partnership for the common good. Above all, communications within the council – to harness the energies of staff and members.

We want councils to be worth working for, organisations with good reputations and an ambition to succeed. Staff speaking well of their jobs away from work matters. Local perceptions and awareness matter. Given the opportunity, local people can drive service standards up; they alone create citizen-centred government.

Good communications is both a duty and an opportunity. A duty to reach out to all people, whoever and wherever they are, to bring them into community life. An opportunity to learn from others, to share excellence, to give direction, to celebrate success, to acknowledge weakness.

Communications can tell the local community what their council stands for.

The Connecting with Communities project has begun to identify and disseminate best practice. It has been looking at how focused external support to councils can reap dividends. It has identified typical strengths and weaknesses in communications as the foundation on which to build capacity.

We are grateful to those 14 case-study councils who have participated in this project. But this is only the beginning. Our challenge now is to reach out to all councils across the country in support of better communications.

Nick Raynsford
Minister for Local Government

Sir Jeremy Beecham
Local Government Association

18 June 2002



connecting with communities

All local authorities need to engage effectively with local residents. Under the Modernising Local Government agenda, local authorities are expected to act as community leaders and to deliver a high standard of services. If they are to fulfil these roles effectively, good communications are essential.

Recognising this, a group of key partners has embarked on a long-term project called Connecting with Communities to improve communications in local government. The group, led by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, has commissioned the most in-depth study of its kind into local authority communications. The aim is to share best practice and to encourage a top-level commitment to communications from chief officers and councillors.

The Business Case for Communications is a concise review of why investing in communications makes sense, written for leading members and chief executives.

For more information on the outputs of the project, please see the back cover of this report.

The partners are the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), the Local Government Association (LGA), the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and the Audit Commission (AC).

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council, what council?

good communication improves residents' satisfaction

Interviewer: Did you see this?

Resident: Oh yes, but I thought 'council', and threw it in the bin.

[comment from a MORI focus group with residents]

Research tells us 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 can't name their local councillor.
- Nine out of ten people have never heard of 'best value' in relation to local government.

The less people know about an organisation, the less they are likely to rate it. 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 (graph 1).

We also know that people aren't always impressed by what they see in local government and the public sector in general.

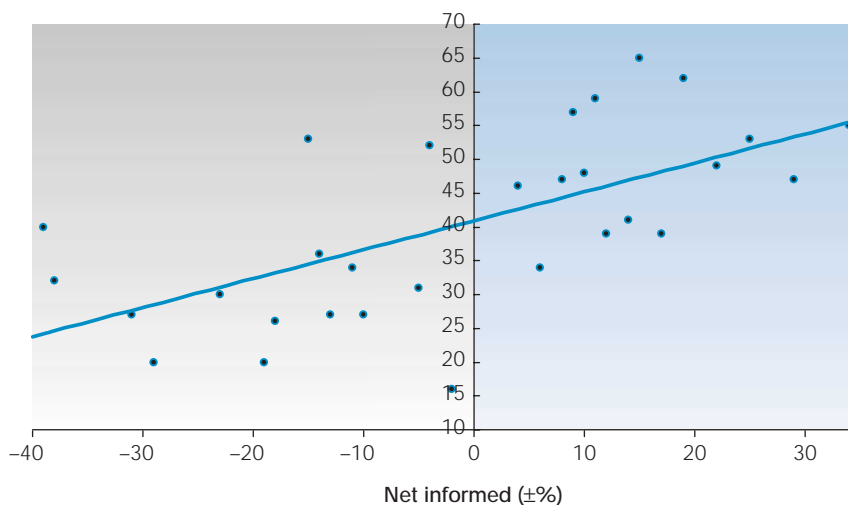
- Only one in three see public services as 'friendly' and 'hardworking'. The same number think of them as 'bureaucratic'.
- People do not tend to associate 'openness' and 'honesty' with public services – only 9% and 14% applying these words.
- One in four people rated their local council as the worst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

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. And as the 'information age' matures, it will be vital for local authorities to deliver the messages that people want to hear, using the channels that are most effective.

The Connecting with Communities research 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. And in many cases, good performance on service delivery wasn't matched by satisfaction ratings. In other words, many councils have a better story than the one they are telling. We're not talking about 'spin', but open and honest two-way communications with residents. The research shows that telling it more effectively results in improved resident satisfaction (see chart below).

Satisfaction with Council vs Level of Information

Net satisfaction with Council (±%)



Base: Individual authorities



everything to play for, but the game's getting faster

public expectations are rising –
and councils need to catch up fast

The picture is improving...

'Some councils communicate well and have worked hard in the last five years to improve information provision. Some have gone the extra mile and created a more interactive relationship with customers.'

[non-local government communications practitioner]

The good news is that perceptions of local councils are improving as more and more councils take communication and service delivery seriously.

- Research for individual councils has shown that residents' perceived levels of information have generally risen over the last decade.
- In an LGA survey last year, over three-quarters of councils responding said communication with the media and the public had been agreed as a corporate priority.
- Half of all councils responding in the LGA survey said they were planning to increase their communication budgets.

...but expectations are rising and many councils still rely on hope over experience.

'The amount of information pumped at people has grown over the last 10 years. Councils have to run faster to stand still. People are more choosy now.'

[non-local government communications practitioner]

The picture across the country is patchy and commitment is often not matched with resources:

- In the same LGA survey, nearly three quarters of councils agreed that members and senior officers viewed communication as a major strategic factor for building a successful council. Yet only a third thought members were willing to back this support with proper investment and resources.
- Two thirds thought that, in overall terms, the communication function was not getting the support it needed to do an effective job.
- A significant minority (15%) of councils still have no-one dedicated full-time to the communication function.
- MORI research shows a huge diversity of performance in keeping local people informed, with differences of up to 35% between the best and the worst over the past few years.
- High spending does not guarantee a good image, but the Connecting with Communities research project shows that low spending on communications almost always results in low resident satisfaction ratings.



where does my council tax go?

good communication is not about spin. residents want practical information about council services delivered to their door

'All they are interested in is patting themselves on the back.'

[MORI focus group with residents]

The research has shown a demand from local people for more information about what their council does. All the findings suggest that people respond best to clear, factual information about some basic things:

- Information about which services are provided by the local authority and how they can get access to them. Simply raising awareness of who does what and where it is available generally leads to higher levels of satisfaction.
- News about local events and activities.
- Reasons why decisions are made, ideally telling local people how their views were taken into account.
- Information on how the council spends its money – 'Where does my council tax go?'
- Planned improvements to services (although councils should take care when raising expectations).
- Tangible targets.
- How to get in touch, and who to get in touch with, particularly in larger authorities.
- Information about how to complain.

We also know from the research the things that residents are less likely to be interested in:

- A council's standards of service and bland promises about service delivery.
- How well the council is performing in Audit Commission terms (although people do like to see simple comparisons with national averages and neighbouring areas in some cases).
- Too much information about politicians and officers, including photographs of them in council publications.

Discussions about investing in communication can result in confusion about the best channels of communication. The research suggests the following:

- The most preferred sources of council information are council newspapers/magazines, local newspapers, leaflets posted through the door and local TV and radio. This points to an integrated approach to communications with a strong focus on information provision and active media relations.
- Those councils that publish a council newspaper or magazine regularly tend to see improvements in residents' overall levels of feeling well informed and satisfied. The most effective examples are well written and well designed, contain useful information, create a dialogue with local residents and avoid 'trumpet blowing'. These factors, plus good distribution, seem to be more important than frequency of publication.
- Councils can normally expect increases in satisfaction if they publish something as basic as an A-Z of council services and update it regularly.
- Councils should avoid thinking in 'silos' when planning communication activities and consider how different groups of residents live their lives and like to receive information. An integrated approach can lead to significant cost-savings as well as improved perceptions. A thematic approach could include various partner agencies (such as GPs, health authorities, hospitals, private sector providers, the police), to make sure information is precise, complete and cost-effective.



it's not rocket science

there are some common ingredients to success.
the communications toolkit can help you

'Communications Services is regarded as one of the most important departments in this council, but while it is their responsibility for promoting communications internally and externally, everyone recognised the importance of communicating well. Everyone was aware that the council had a brand that needed projection.'

[extract from research report on a high performing authority]

The research has uncovered a wealth of good and improving practice on communication. Although there is no one blueprint for the ideal approach, the best councils understand communications as an integral part of effective service delivery and not a bolt-on at the end. These councils link their own corporate priorities to their residents' wishes and develop communications that fit local needs.

Some common elements emerged in the research. The best councils:

- Lead communication from the very top, politically and managerially.
- Have a strong and consistent brand identity.
- Recruit, retain and value professional communications staff.
- Have a corporate communications strategy and a clear set of messages.
- Know their key stakeholders, audiences and how best to reach them.
- Put special emphasis on communicating with 'hard to reach' groups.
- Communicate often and in a consistent, relevant and creative way.
- Consult well and act on the results.
- Are brave about communicating the 'hard stuff'.
- Promote a 'pride of place' about the local area as well as the council.
- Have one or two personalities as key spokespeople.
- See the local media as partners, not enemies.
- Prioritise internal communication and encourage all staff to be good communicators.
- Have a good web site and use electronic communication to target information and create a dialogue with local residents.
- Benchmark their communications and set themselves tough targets for improvement.
- Concentrate on 'outcomes' not just 'outputs'.

The research and consultancy work with improving councils has also identified some common approaches to prioritising future investment and improvement in communication. If you are thinking of changing the way your council communicates, this can serve as a useful checklist.

- **Be corporate:** taking an honest look at how and why your council communicates across all departments. Often the cost and time savings of a more corporate approach can fund new communication activities.
- **Ensure focus:** developing a simple, prioritised set of key messages to local residents, staff and stakeholders.
- **Be systematic:** developing a communication strategy that outlines how these messages will be communicated to all key audiences, with clear deadlines, budgets and responsibilities.
- **Sharpen the brand:** getting rid of departmental logos, ensuring the council looks and acts like one organisation and making sure all communications are produced in a professional way.
- **Invest in communication with local people:** investing in a regular newspaper/magazine for residents, an A-Z guide to council services, a range of co-ordinated publications about specific services and a user-friendly website.
- **Prioritise internal communications:** identifying a clear responsibility for internal communication and developing a range of two-way communication channels with staff.
- **Invest in decent staff:** finding and keeping high quality, well-motivated communication professionals.
- **Be ambitious:** benchmarking against the best in class and setting targets for improvement.

The good practice toolkit for communication professionals, free to all councils on the IDeA's Knowledge website at www.idea.gov.uk/knowledge represents the collective intellectual capital of local government's communication expertise and tells you more about how to implement these changes.

reputation, reputation, reputation

the behaviour of leading players in the council will have a significant impact on the council's brand and reputation

'Councillors need to understand their role as guardians of the corporate reputation.'

[national journalist]

We know from research that awareness of local councillors is very low but when probed, people have clear priorities for what they want members to be doing. In particular, people want them to spend more time consulting them and dealing with their problems and less time in meetings. We also know that members, among all public servants, are felt to have the most influence on local issues, and that qualities of honesty, trustworthiness, accessibility and competence are seen as most important.

The behaviour of leading players in the council will have a significant impact on the council's brand and reputation. A brand is much more than the council's crest or logo. It is sometimes defined as an organisation's 'personality' and members are often the most important influence.

To get an accurate feel for perceptions, some councils ask themselves the question: if the council were a person, what kind of person would it be? In response, one cross-party group of members described their local authority as a retired, male, bank manager, who lived in a big house a bus ride from the town centre, was friendly enough when you got to know him, but didn't mix very much with his neighbours. He seemed well off but no one quite understood where he got his money from and what he did with it.

Throughout the Connecting with Communities research, the vital role of council members was reinforced. Members hold the key to good council communication because:

- They are the public face of the authority in the local area and with the media.
- They are the guardians of the council's overall brand and reputation.
- Their commitment to effective communication is often the driving force behind improvements across the council.

In the best councils, strong political leadership re-inforces the council's communication aims, promoting clear messages, a strong brand and a perception that the council listens to and acts on behalf of local people.

But the attitude and behaviour of members can also have a negative impact on perceptions:

- Perceived 'in-fighting' among members is one of the most potent ingredients in damaging a council's reputation with the public.
- Lack of interest or understanding and political 'point scoring' can affect overall levels of investment and professionalism in communication.
- A 'we know best' attitude can mean that the council's communications serve members' rather than residents' needs.
- Pictures of members in the council's magazine are a turn-off.

The research found that it is important to make the distinction between legitimate political debate and representation and the kind of behaviour that has a lasting effect on the council's reputation, whoever is in political control.

Members can contribute to effective communication by collectively defining and taking responsibility for the factors that make up the overall reputation of the council:

- Its overall purpose: what is it there to do?
- The values that underpin it: what drives it to do the things it does?
- The key messages: what is it saying about what it can offer residents?
- Its delivery: does it give people what it promised?
- Its behaviour: how does it treat customers, its own staff and members?
- The 'look and feel' of how it goes about its business.

they won't believe it if you don't

top level commitment to corporate communication has to be backed by action to break down the 'silo' mentality, with an honest look at how departments could use resources to communicate more effectively

'Councils that do a good job in promoting themselves externally also promote internal self-belief and help to visualise that for their staff. If you're proud of what you're doing externally, the people inside feel that as well.'

[chief executive of an improving authority]

Many chief executives and senior managers now recognise the wider importance of communication in delivering corporate objectives. A common message from the research is that they are now looking for 'more than just PR' and understand:

- The key role of communication in improving residents' satisfaction with the existing performance of individual services and the authority as a whole.
- How communication drives culture change and performance improvement.
- The wider benefits to partnership working and inward investment of a credible and high profile reputation.
- Communication is everyone's responsibility – from the leader and chief executive to front line staff.

Internal communication is now seen as one of the most crucial components of an overall communication strategy. MORI research shows that staff who feel well informed are twice as likely to feel involved in their organisation, to understand objectives and to feel they can make the best use of their skills and abilities.

This is backed up by research for the Government's Public Services Productivity Panel which found that high performing organisations place a premium on highly motivated staff as a key to their success. The interpersonal skills of managers and their ability to communicate the leadership's vision and values to staff are critical factors in improving public services.

Independent research has also identified a direct link between levels of staff satisfaction and advocacy. The more dissatisfied staff feel about their organisation, the more likely they are to speak critically about it. The more satisfied they are, the more likely they are to be good ambassadors. When a high proportion of council staff are also residents, this has a great impact on the local perception of the council.

As the top management teams of councils seek to move beyond 'more than just PR', the research identified a number of changes that need to be put in place to support a more corporate approach to communication:

- Top managers need to back their commitment to corporate communication with firm action to break down the 'silo' mentality which still exists in many councils.
- In practice, this means a willingness to use departmental resources in a different way and to sign up to corporate messages and communication standards.
- While a basic level of communication should be part of everyone's 'day job', communications is as much a professional discipline as finance or IT. There is no substitute for investment in high quality communications staff.
- Where the role of a small central communications team is expanding, this needs to be backed up with investment and training. Better use of departmental resources can often deliver this at no extra cost.
- Change can only be sustained by ongoing commitment from the top and communications staff need regular, high level access to the right people.

they would say that, wouldn't they?

This section gives answers to some of the common questions about communications asked by leading members and senior managers during this research.

What's the point of developing a communication strategy?

Communication is a fundamental component in how local residents judge the overall image of their council. Getting it right is one of the simplest and most effective ways of improving satisfaction. It's no longer an optional extra. Any council that wants to be seen as striving or high performing will need a communication strategy in place.

Why all this concern with 'brand identity' or 'reputation management'?

We're not Nike or Tesco.

Councils aren't private companies. But the principles of and rationale for brand and reputation management are the same: clear, consistent messages, a professional and recognisable 'look and feel' to communications, and the credibility that comes from delivering on your promise to the customer.

Why bother to invest in internal communication when resources are tight – surely money is better spent on the front line?

Research shows a direct link between high performance and staff motivation. Investing in internal communication is investing in the front line. The link between information and satisfaction applies as much to your own staff as it does to local residents. In many local authority areas, the vast majority of staff are also your local residents. If you can influence their perceptions about the council, you can turn them into ambassadors.

Our managers are too busy doing 'the day job'. How are they expected to have the time to carry out communication tasks as well?

Communication is part of the day job, an integral part of everyone's role in the same way that managing a budget or a team is integral to their work. Investment in communications training and support to managers pays dividends: in better service delivery, more satisfied customers, and better informed and motivated staff. Communication professionals can support this.

We want to invest more in communication, but how much, and where?

The best place to start is to invest in professional staff, internal communications and direct communications with residents. Making better use of departmental resources can often release money and staff time at no extra overall cost. The good practice toolkit is full of practical examples of low cost improvements to communications. But you should be prepared to invest properly in the things that matter.

Our local media is biased against us. What's the point of trying?

A poor relationship with the local media can arise for all sorts of reasons including personality clashes and lack of understanding of how the media operates. Most journalists take their role seriously. Most local residents get most of their information about their council through the media and prefer this as one source of news. And many councils have positive and flourishing relationships with the local media. So if the relationship has soured, then it is up to the council to try and repair the damage. Like it or not, you have far more to lose.

If we marketed our services properly, we wouldn't be able to cope with the demand. It's better to stay just as we are.

Encouraging poor communication as a form of gatekeeping is not good practice and doesn't even work very well as a rationing device. The best way to inform residents and to manage their expectations is to communicate with them honestly and accurately. Good two-way communication can help to inform service delivery options, even when difficult choices have to be made about budgets and demand.

How can I support extra spending on communication when really it's all about spin?

The research shows that the satisfaction levels of local people, and council staff, are influenced by information, not 'spin'. There is clear evidence about what people want to know and how they want to receive that information. Basing council communication on firm evidence and making sure it stays within the law on local government publicity are the ingredients for successful council communication.

beware 'all froth and no beer'

good communication is essential but it cannot compensate for poor services

'When you visit some councils, there are torn notices on the boards stuck up with blue tack, the carpets are filthy, the furniture is broken and, when you have worked out who the receptionist is (they don't wear a uniform or name badge!), they are on the phone to a friend. This gives you a good idea of what the chief executive or leader is thinking – and it is rarely wrong.'

[head of a national local government body]

This booklet, and the whole Connecting with Communities project, has focused on the important role of communication in influencing local residents' perceptions of local government. We hope it has given you clear reasons to value communication and provided some clear pointers to those councils committed to improving their dialogue with local people.

Communication is a vital part of councils' corporate strategies but it is important to remember that it is not an end in itself. When asking local people what it was most important for their local council to do, telling people about the council came in the top five answers. But the top answer, not surprisingly, was 'to maintain good quality services'.

Better communication can make people feel more satisfied with existing services but the best communication in the world cannot make people satisfied with poor services. Communication should be part of an overall strategy to drive up corporate performance and service delivery, not a mechanism to paper over the cracks in a 'silo' culture or to cover up poor practice.

All those interviewed as part of this research – local people, communications professionals, members, chief executives and senior managers – agreed that it was important to avoid what one called the 'froth and no beer' syndrome. The toolkit on communications gives plenty of examples of good practice which, if applied over time and backed from the top, will result in sustained and credible improvements in communication. We hope you find it useful.

This report is part of the *Connecting with Communities* project funded by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister with the LGA, IDeA and Audit Commission. The project is designed to help improve communications in local government, using original research in 14 case study authorities and best practice from across local government.

The three main reports are:

The business case for communications: a concise review of why investing in communications makes sense, written for leading members and chief executives.

The case study evidence (Part 1): a report on the key issues identified from the 14 case study authorities so far, and from local government opinion formers and partners, highlighting areas for action by all authorities. It is available as a full report and a summary.

Five years of communications: a detailed report showing what the last five years of MORI research highlights about how local government communicates and key issues and trends to focus on.

To view these publications, please log on to the *Connecting with Communities* toolkit or call the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister Free Literature on **0870 1226 236**.

Connecting with Communities toolkit: practical help is available to anyone working in local government communications on-line.

The toolkit contains professional advice, best practice and hundreds of documents you can download for free, helping to spread good practice and saving you time and money.

The toolkit includes comprehensive sections on:

the business case for communications – **including downloadable PowerPoint presentation**; the communication strategy; communications and the law; brand and image; managing communications; internal communications; media relations; communicating with residents; partnership working. You can view the toolkit at www.idea.gov.uk/knowledge from 3 July 2002