



# BEST PRACTICE GUIDE



# INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

Good internal communication involves regular and effective two-way communication with all members of staff at all levels and is a critical success factor that should be at the helm of any organisation. It not only leads to increased morale and staff engagement, it has a knock-on effect on the performance of employees and, in turn, on the reputation of the organisation. This guide has been devised to establish what good internal communication is, why it is needed and how best to implement it. It also looks at the most effective ways of evaluating internal communication.

The best practice guide is aimed at local government communications and public relations officers and has been compiled using input from members of the Lancashire Communications Network (LCN) (appendix 1), together with key points from the Improvement and Development Agency's (IDEA) Connecting with Communities research.

## RESPONSIBILITY

Internal communication is fundamentally a people and relationship process.

It is owned by the entire organisation. Once an effective system has been implemented, it is essential that each individual member of the organisation, from senior management to front line staff, is committed to improving and maintaining it.

The role of a communications team is to support and enhance this process.

## IMPORTANCE OF GOOD INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Research carried out by MORI (can be found at [www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk](http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk)) found that successful organisations align their business and communications objectives. Where staff understand what is required of them and morale is high they become ambassadors for the organisation. This is reflected in improved reputation for the organisation – happy staff equals happy customers.

Internal communication is also crucial when implementing or considering a cultural change programme within an organisation. Changes naturally concern staff, and a change programme will not be successful where staff do not feel involved, or worse, feel left behind. Therefore good communication is vital to ensure everyone is informed and up-to-date and to help employees understand why change is necessary and to sign up to the vision.

Even without a specific programme of change, organisations, particularly councils, are changing constantly and good communication is the best way of retaining the support of staff and the key to long-term improvement.



IDEA website

## BENEFITS OF GOOD INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Having already established that good internal communication is important, it must therefore have significant benefits to an organisation. Research carried out within the LCN and by the IDEA identified reasons why good internal communication is vital to any organisation and the benefits it brings. These are:

- Enhanced staff engagement and understanding
- More effective management
- Increased staff moral and motivation, which is also linked to lower sickness rates
- Staff satisfaction promotes good customer service, which leads to value for money and residents' satisfaction
- Ownership – staff feel like they belong and are more likely to feel that any changes are partly their idea, which makes them less resistant to change
- Internal communication complements external communication systems meaning that everyone has the same information
- All staff are able to communicate the organisation's key priorities and vision, which helps build a brand
- Improved perceptions of council reputation and image
- Helps towards assessments such as higher Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) cores and achieving excellence
- Two-way flow of information
- Informed decision making
- Can create departmental communication ambassadors, which ensures all sections of the organisation are represented and involved



*Staff satisfaction promotes good customer service, which leads to value for money and residents' satisfaction.*


## BARRIERS TO GOOD INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Once it is clear that effective internal communication is important and that there are distinct benefits to it, it is necessary to identify any barriers that prevent that happening. Barriers can be different for different organisations, and some may be more obvious than others, but until you identify what they are, it will not be possible to see a way around them. Common barriers include:

- Culture/structure of the organisation
- Leadership and management styles/attitudes
- Departmental silos
- Training
- Lack of understanding and importance of internal communications and of communications as a profession
- Staff attitudes
- Limited resources/funding
- Lack of measurement/evaluation
- Corporate priorities
- Lack of staff/manager involvement/contribution/interaction
- Cynicism

## GOOD PRACTICE – GENERAL

As previously outlined, good internal communication leads to greater commitment from employees, an improved customer experience and increased productivity, which all contribute to a positive brand image. Therefore it plays a vital role in an organisation's reputation and should be treated with the appropriate respect and priority. Time and effort needs to be invested in internal communications to ensure its success. Employees can only work effectively if they participate in the organisation and they can only participate effectively when they are fully informed. Good practice involves a continuous two-way process. Employees need to be informed, but equally, they need to be heard. To increase response through internal communications, employees need to be emotionally involved. They must want to come to work, and want to take part. It is important to gain and retain their trust.



*Employees can only work effectively if they participate in the organisation and they can only participate effectively when they are fully informed.*

## GOOD PRACTICE – METHODS

Internal communication is not only about producing a corporate newsletter. In order to work effectively and achieve optimum results it needs to combine a series of communication methods. These methods are outlined below.

### Up-to-date communications strategy

- This ensures everyone knows what communications is, what the aims are and how they are going to be achieved. It should take the organisation from where it is now to where it wants to be.
- It should include a comprehensive action plan setting out the activity, target, deadline and resources needed to implement each element of the strategy. Examples of good strategies can be found at [www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk](http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk).

### Audit

- Carrying out an audit helps identify any strengths and weaknesses within an organisation. This information can then accurately inform a communications strategy which should outline how any weaknesses will be overcome.

### Staff surveys

- Conducting regular staff surveys is an important way to gauge employee satisfaction, measure progress and listen to new ideas.
- It is also important to include the views of councillors as they play a crucial part in the success of internal communications.

### External research

- Focus groups, residents' attitude surveys and citizens' panels also provide useful information on local people's perception of the council, how they rate key services and their priorities. A council with good communications is more likely to have a positive image. Therefore carrying out this research before drafting a communications strategy could help identify particular areas where communication is weak.

### Regular team briefings

- It is important that all members of a team are informed about developments within the organisation and meeting regularly gives people the opportunity to ask questions or bring up any issues that may arise. It also reinforces group motivation and helps make managers better communicators.
- In order to be successful, briefings should at a set time, day and place so everyone has them in their diary and they become routine.
- Fylde Borough Council has developed a good set of team briefing guidelines that are available on IDEA Knowledge's Connecting with Communities website [www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk](http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk).



### Face-to-face communication

- In the age of modern technology, it is vital that email and telephone communication does not surpass face-to-face contact. It is much more personal and makes employees feel like they are not just a number.
- Employees value face-to-face contact and it is the most favoured approach for communicating important issues. IDEA Knowledge states that bad news should always be communicated in person, to give staff a chance to ask questions, but less important information can be communicated through top-down approaches such as team briefings, email or the intranet.

### Accessible staff notice boards

- A simple, but effective, communication tool that can work both for staff and managers.
- South Ribble Borough Council operates a system where any notice posted on a notice board is repeated on all 30 notice boards across the council within two days.

### Core briefs

- Outlining a core brief to be delivered throughout the organisation ensures that the same key messages are being delivered across each department at every level and creates a sense of unity and helps enforce a brand image. (See Evaluation section for ways of evaluating core briefs.)

*Being a good communicator is an essential part of being a good manager. Managers should own communications and constantly strive to improve it.*

### Management training

- In the main, managers will take a front-line role in promoting internal communications and need to understand its importance. They will more often than not be responsible for leading team meetings and will be a point of contact for numerous members of staff. Therefore, being a good communicator is an essential part of being a good manager. Managers should own communications and constantly strive to improve it.
- IDEA Knowledge claims that good management includes letting go, giving staff discretion and empowerment. This requires even better communication so that staff understand clearly the context, the corporate strategies and the changing environment in which they work.
- It is important to establish a comprehensive management development programme to guide and inform managers on their role within internal communications.

### Appraisals

- Appraisals provide an opportunity for employees to have an in-depth one-to-one discussion with their line manager and are the ideal platform to air any concerns or make suggestions. However, staff must be aware that they do not have to wait until their appraisal for this sort of conversation.

### Email

- Email has made sharing information much simpler, but there is a risk of clogging up inboxes with too much irrelevant information. Also, it can be one-way and you cannot be sure emails have been read or digested.

### Suggestion scheme

- A staff suggestion scheme, either electronic or manual, provides a portal for staff to bring new ideas to the table as and when they arise.
- Staff often have the best ideas for efficiency, innovation and cutting bureaucracy and this would provide them with a way to offer them.

### Staff awards scheme

- Employees may be encouraged to participate more readily if there is a personal goal for them. Research shows staff want to feel recognised and valued for the work they do.
- IDEA Knowledge suggests celebrating achievements through a combination of publicly acknowledging colleagues on away days, sending congratulatory letters to staff from the director or Chief Executive and highlighting their achievements in the internal newsletter.

## Newsletters

- Internal newsletters and magazines provide a regular update on activities and developments within an organisation and often play a key role in internal communications. (See next section for a detailed look at internal newsletters.)

## Intranet

- An intranet allows staff to access and share a wide variety of information as and when they need or want it. It is a fast, interactive and cost effective way of distributing information and messages to a large number of people.
- The number of hits can also be monitored, allowing evaluation of how popular individual sections of the site are.

## Webcast

- An innovative idea used by West Lancashire District Council involves the Chief Executive giving a weekly recorded video webcast on the intranet. This enables staff to see the Chief Executive on a regular basis and prevents the risk of people seeing them as someone that is behind the scenes and out of reach.

West Lancashire District Council's webcast



## E-zines

- Producing an e-zine as opposed to a hard copy newsletter could have numerous benefits. For example, it would be cost effective and people could access it from their computer whenever they want. However, it is important to remember that not everyone has access to a computer and that some people may prefer to have a hard copy of the newsletter for whatever reason.
- Fylde Borough Council successfully operates a weekly e-zine which includes comments from the Chief Executive.



Fylde Borough Council's e-zine 'Grapevine'

## Corporate roadshows

- By going out to different sections of an organisation managers will have an opportunity to engage with employees and show that they are available. Corporate roadshows can become almost a face-to-face annual report.
- Pendle Borough Council invites all staff to twice yearly corporate roadshows where chief directors and senior managers give presentations on major issues before offering the chance for questions and answers.

### Ambassadors

- There are several benefits of securing willing communications champions. Firstly, they are out in the field so able to bring forward ideas and issues they come across on a daily basis. Secondly, they are directly involved with communication which will give them a better understanding of its importance, keeping them better equipped to 'spread the word'.
- Bringing together communications champions from different departments could help to process through and develop their ideas.

### Charity/social events

- Boosts staff moral and helps them integrate better with employees from other departments/ levels. Helps break down barriers between staff and encourages more social relationships.

### AGM

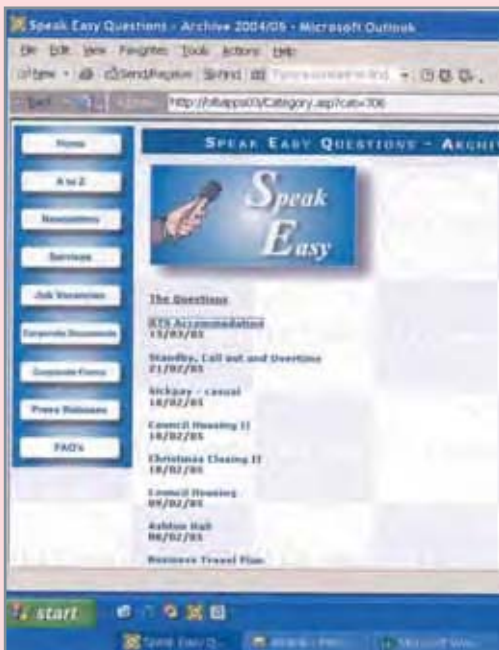
- Offering all staff an opportunity to attend an annual general meeting with senior managers, where they can ask questions and give contributions, could ensure that senior managers are seen to be available and open to suggestions.

### Staff forums

- These are a good way of encouraging interaction between staff, whether it be about work-related or non-work-related subjects and are a good place to pick up ideas for stories for internal publications.

### Speak Easy

- Lancaster City Council operates a system where employees can email or send questions to the Chief Executive's PA, who is responsible for obtaining an answer from the relevant officer and posting both the question and answer on the intranet under the banner 'Speak Easy' within a week of receipt. All questions and comments remain anonymous.



Speak Easy screen grab

## GOOD PRACTICE – NEWSLETTERS/MAGAZINES

For most organisations, particularly councils, an internal publication plays an important role in internal communications. Therefore it is important to make sure the publication you create is the right one for your organisation in order to ensure it delivers the right messages, to the right people in the right way.

In establishing an effective publication, there are several decisions to make and various considerations to take, all very much dependant on the individual organisation.

In some organisations, departmental newsletters are produced as well as – and sometimes instead of – a corporate staff newsletter. While these are useful at communicating news from within a department, they are less useful at reinforcing the ‘one-council’ view.

In addition to containing key messages and information about any change programmes, newsletters can also be used to help celebrate council and staff achievements, including milestones reached in the change programme, as well as softer information such as starters and leavers, and ‘for sale’ columns, which reinforce the human side of the council.

Using examples of their own publications, the LCN drew up the following list of best practice guidelines specifically for internal newspapers and magazines.



*It is important to make sure the publication you create is the right one for your organisation in order to ensure it delivers the right messages, to the right people in the right way.*

### Know the audience

- This is the most important starting point for any publication. Often within a large organisation, the audience will be wide reaching, including people of all ages and of all backgrounds. Therefore it is essential the publication reflects this.

### Choose style/language/tone

- Once the readership has been established, the style, tone and language of the publication must be decided to suit the audience.
- This could be a formal, corporate tone, or a more informal chatty approach, but either way it must remain consistent.

### Identity - format/frequency/content

- All three of these factors are decisions that must be based on background knowledge of the organisation, for example, its structure and culture.
- Once decisions on these aspects are made it is important to stick to them. This will help give the publication a recognisable identity.

## Non-corporate content

- Although the internal publication is, to a certain extent, a corporate communication tool, it is vital that employees want to read it. Employees naturally want to read positive news stories about their organisation, but they also enjoy hearing about colleagues, social events and other non-work-related items, so it is important that the publication strikes the right balance.
- Lancashire County Council's Your Magazine is mainly made up of non-council news and features. It focuses on the surprising hobbies of staff, staff achievements and information, offers and messages for employees.

## Human interest stories

- Often corporate stories can be made more readable by giving them a personal appeal. For example focussing on the people within a department to outline the role of that section.

## Encourage contributions

- Staff will be more inclined to read a publication if they have been actively involved in it. Allowing and encouraging employees to participate in the newsletter gives them a platform for debate, and can often bring new ideas to the table.

## Should be staff-led

- This can be difficult to implement, as staff are often reluctant to take part, but research shows that if they begin to feel ownership of the publication, they will soon want to become involved.

## Department specials

- Blackpool Council has a system whereby it incorporates an in-depth feature on a specific department in every other issue. This gives each section an equal opportunity for coverage and also helps employees gain a better understanding of the various functions of the council.



### Quality photographs

- A picture tells a thousand words and, in the case of publications, good photographs are essential to support and enhance an article and break up the text.

### Eye-catching design

- Design should be in keeping with the publication's overall style and should be decided at the outset. It should aim to be bold and eye-catching, but easy to read.
- An excellent example of professional and imaginative use of graphics is in Lancashire County Council's quarterly Your Magazine. To order a copy visit [www.lancashire.gov.uk](http://www.lancashire.gov.uk).

### Regular features/columns

- Including regular items within the newsletter helps give it an identity and familiarity. It also helps readers navigate their way, as they know what to expect in each edition.

### Competitions/quizzes/fun sections

- The aim of an internal newsletter should be to engage, inform and entertain the reader. It should be something employees choose to read because they enjoy it, which means it needs to include some of the fun elements of mainstream magazines and newspapers.

### Delivery

- It is important to find an efficient delivery system that works and stick to it. People naturally like routine and should know in advance when and how they will receive their newsletter. One option is to distribute them with payslips, as this ensures every member of staff receives one at the same time.



eye-catching design  
- Lancashire County Council's Your Magazine

### Editorial board

- This links in with establishing communications ambassadors. There should be a representative from each department and they should be willing and enthusiastic to be involved.
- The board should meet prior to every issue to discuss forthcoming ideas and suggestions.
- Chorley Borough Council does this and finds it encourages people to get involved and is a good way of bringing in copy and ideas.

### Intranet

- More and more people prefer to access documents online, which makes posting your newsletter on the intranet not only cost-effective, but means it sits alongside all other internal documents, and could increase its readership.

### Chief Executive column

- Including a column written by the Chief Executive raises their profile among employees and could work particularly well in large organisations where staff work on several sites and do not often come across them.
- Lancashire Fire and Rescue includes a comment column from its chief fire officer in every edition of Burning Issues.

### Diary dates

- An internal newsletter is a key communication tool and therefore a good place to list diary dates for staff. This could include everything from training courses and workshops to social events and bank holiday arrangements.

### Day-in-life features

- Similar to departmental specials, day-in-life features on individual staff help other employees understand what the organisation is about and the varied roles within it.

### Human Resources surgeries

- HR plays a vital role within any organisation and it is important that employees know how they can access the services should they need to. Some people will avoid making a call or asking how to get help with an issue, so making details of any surgeries readily available could help them take the first step.

### In spotlight section

- Staff generally read local newspapers and it can sometimes be the first they hear of an issue within the workplace. By including a spotlight section listing stories that are expected to be covered over coming weeks, staff feel like they have unique knowledge and will feel less alienated.

### National/regional issues

- Often organisations, particularly local government, are affected by decisions or issues at a national and regional level. An internal newsletter is a good place to explain how any of these would directly affect staff or the organisation and any changes they may bring about.
- It is also important that staff are aware of wider issues that could have an impact on their organisation, or role within it, in the future.

## EVALUATION

Once an effective internal communication system has been established it is vital to carry out continuous evaluation to ensure it remains effective, appropriate to the target audience and continues to deliver key messages.

Evaluation should not be an add-on, it should be written into the internal communications strategy from the outset.

The initial aim of good internal communication is to engage and motivate staff. Private companies may be able to measure success by translating motivational changes into financial benefits for the organisation, but this does not apply in the public sector.

Here success can largely be measured in terms of sickness and departures as well as levels of staff productivity and involvement.

There are two separate perspectives to consider when evaluating internal communications – managers and staff – and each needs to be approached in a different way.

### Regular staff surveys

- These are a good way of determining what people think about what is already in place and what they would like to see in the future. If staff survey ratings show no significant increase over the first year it would suggest communication methods need to be re-assessed.

### Electronic questionnaires

- Having a questionnaire available online is cost-effective as it can be completed regularly and allows managers to continuously track trends.



Electronic suggestions

### Electronic suggestions

- Setting up a facility enabling people to contribute ideas, comments or suggestions could lead to a constant flow of feedback from staff. It also allows people to make their comments as and when they arise, rather than wait for a survey to take place.
- Pendle Borough Council runs an electronic suggestion scheme called The Big Idea. Every quarter a panel chooses three of the best ideas and small cash prizes are awarded. Each suggestion made receives an automated response and a performance indicator tracks responses for evaluation purposes.

### Tracking spreadsheet

- An innovative approach to evaluation carried out by Chorley Borough Council involves monitoring the delivery of the core brief using a colour-coded spreadsheet.
- All core briefs are listed on the spreadsheet and a colour-coding system tracks progress, showing when managers have delivered each brief. The Chief Executive is informed of the progress.
- This gives a clear picture of performance within departments and can help in working towards increasing communication productivity.

### Consultation groups

- Incorporating qualitative research methods such as focus groups alongside quantitative methods such as broader questionnaires gives a fuller picture of people's perception of the overall internal communications system.
- It offers an opportunity to gauge strengths of the system and any weaknesses that could be addressed.

### Monitor feedback and make changes

- The most important aspect of evaluation is monitoring the feedback that is collected and using it to make changes. If this does not happen, the evaluation process is not worth anything.

*The most important aspect of evaluation is monitoring the feedback that is collected and using it to make changes.*

## SUMMARY

Internal communication plays a vital role in the success of any organisation, not least local authorities, which are constantly under public scrutiny and must strive to maintain a positive image at all times.

Staff loyalty and commitment are key to building and maintaining a good reputation, therefore engaging employees and gaining their trust is paramount.

Disney is a prime example used by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) in its internal communications workshops. Internally, employees buy in to the brand 100 per cent and their enthusiasm, commitment and love of the brand is clearly visible externally. This leads to happy customers and in turn a happy profit cycle.

This guide is about pointing communications officers in the direction of good practice, offering ideas, examples and background theory to support them.

However, it is important to remember that every organisation is different and that there is no magic wand. What works for one council may not work for another.

What is clear is that a properly resourced framework needs to be put in place, incorporating key elements of team briefs, intranet, management commitment and development and a staff newsletter.

Good internal communication should incorporate a variety of methods, and should be owned by and involve everyone in the organisation.

Effective management relies on good communication, and establishing a comprehensive management development programme is an essential first step on the road to improving internal communications.

The role of a communications department involves ensuring that an effective communications strategy is followed and regularly updated. It is also about providing continuing support and guidance across the organisation in order to achieve the strategy goals and make internal communication a success.

Good internal communication should be as much about listening to people as disseminating information. Therefore monitoring, evaluating and making changes accordingly must be an integral part of any communication system.



## APPENDIX 1

The Lancashire Communications Network (formerly Lancashire Public Relations Officers) was formed in 1998 and meets quarterly for alternative meetings and workshops. It brings together communications professionals from across Lancashire to collaborate, share experiences and good practice.

### Members of the Lancashire Communications Network (LCN):

- Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council [www.blackburn.gov.uk](http://www.blackburn.gov.uk)
- Blackpool Council [www.blackpool.gov.uk](http://www.blackpool.gov.uk)
- Burnley Borough Council [www.burnley.gov.uk](http://www.burnley.gov.uk)
- Chorley Borough Council [www.chorley.gov.uk](http://www.chorley.gov.uk)
- Cumbria and Lancashire Strategic Health Authority [www.clha.nhs.uk](http://www.clha.nhs.uk)
- Fylde Borough Council [www.fylde.gov.uk](http://www.fylde.gov.uk)
- Hyndburn Borough Council [www.hyndburnbc.gov.uk](http://www.hyndburnbc.gov.uk)
- Lancashire Constabulary [www.lancashire.police.uk](http://www.lancashire.police.uk)
- Lancashire County Council [www.lancashire.gov.uk](http://www.lancashire.gov.uk)
- Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service [www.lancsfireandrescue.org.uk](http://www.lancsfireandrescue.org.uk)
- Lancaster City Council [www.lancaster.gov.uk](http://www.lancaster.gov.uk)
- Pendle Borough Council [www.pendle.gov.uk](http://www.pendle.gov.uk)
- Preston City Council [www.preston.gov.uk](http://www.preston.gov.uk)
- South Ribble Borough Council [www.south-ribblebc.gov.uk](http://www.south-ribblebc.gov.uk)
- Ribble Valley Borough Council [www.ribblevalley.gov.uk](http://www.ribblevalley.gov.uk)
- Rossendale Borough Council [www.rossendale.gov.uk](http://www.rossendale.gov.uk)
- West Lancashire District Council [www.westlancsdc.gov.uk](http://www.westlancsdc.gov.uk)
- Wyre Borough Council [www.wyrebc.gov.uk](http://www.wyrebc.gov.uk)

## NOTES

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