Allerdale Borough Council’s internal communications strategy and action plan

1. Introduction

Research shows the importance of good internal communications with “Councils that spend time keeping their staff well informed are rewarded with more motivated staff and it appears, better CPA scores” (Connecting with communities: the business case for communications).

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.

A direct link has also been identified between levels of staff satisfaction and advocacy. The more dissatisfied staff feel about their organisation, the more likely they are to speak critically about the organisation. The more satisfied they are, the more they are likely to be good ambassadors for the Council.

The IDeA identified the benefits of good internal communication, including:
- 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
- Improved perceptions of council reputation and image.

The staff survey in May 2002 raised concerns about internal communications:
- 37% of respondents did not feel that the Council provided them with enough information to enable them to do their job well.
- Only 45% were confident of receiving feedback on suggestions and 57.4% agreed that there were opportunities to raise issues.
- A huge 79.4% found out what was happening at the Council through the grapevine, whilst only 53.7% gathered information from team meetings.
- Consequently only 54.4% of employees that responded to the survey felt that Allerdale Borough Council was a good place to work.

As part of the best value review of internal communications in 2003 a working group tackled the issues and the Internal Communications Strategy was developed. The strategy focused on:
- Monthly team meetings
- All staff were to have an annual appraisal where performance is reviewed, objectives agreed and the individual’s contribution to delivery of the Council’s Vision could be identified
The intranet was developed to keep staff quickly informed about corporate information, news, success and achievements and to respond quickly to developments and information that may be heard on the grapevine.

The staff survey in May/June 2004 showed a huge improvement in internal communications.

- The number of staff that found out what was happening at the Council through the grapevine had decreased by 10%.
- The new official methods of communication, team meetings and the intranet, increased by 26% and 10% respectively.
- 90% of respondents now attended team meetings and 97% felt encouraged to ask questions.
- 89% said that information gained from team meetings was useful in delivering their service (20% increase on 2002).
- 79% said that information from team meetings was useful in knowing what is going on at the Council (22% increase).

Whereas in 2002 only 54.4% of employees felt that the Council was a good place to work, 81% of staff now agreed - a staggering increase of 27%!

Improved internal communications contributed towards the Council gaining Investors in People status. Their report noted:

"Strong consistent communications are achieved through regular team meetings and the use of email and the intranet. The intranet was generally well received and thought to be a useful communications tool."

The Strategy was viewed as best practice in communications circles, winning a Gold Award at the North West Chartered Institute of Public Relations in 2005 and the council’s use of these internal communications channels for key corporate issues, such as the first Corporate Improvement Plan, earned it national communications award in 2006 and 2007.

However there are increasing signs that the impact of these new approaches are wearing off. This is typical of any form of communication campaign – the effectiveness of communication wears out as people become increasingly familiar with it; staff’s expectations of the level of communication and how we communicate have increased. In times of change, particularly, thirst for communication grows but perception of its delivery worsens. Trust in, and credibility of, information falls.

The strategy also lacked reference to other internal communications channels that are used, such as webcasts and global emails, and did not make reference to methods of communication with members. In 2008-9 a review of the internal communications strategy was undertaken.

2. Objectives

The internal communications strategy must be aligned to the overall strategy for Allerdale Borough Council. Internal communications will give staff and councillors a clearer insight into how their individual roles link to the Council’s strategic priorities.
and vision, increasing understanding of the Council’s business and improving morale, motivation and performance.

Information must be communicated to staff and councillors that is relevant to them doing their job and providing the best service they can. In addition, transparent, equitable and consistent access to information about wider council business will increase knowledge about key issues and developments and enable staff to become more involved in policy and service planning.

Strategic aim:

To increase staff understanding of the aims and objectives of the Council by maintaining a strong two-way flow of information that supports and encourages teamwork, trust and pride in what we do.

3. Position statement

The Council currently utilises the following internal communications channels:

For staff

- Intranet
- Website
- Team meetings – timetable on intranet
- Corporate messages – decided by Corporate Management Team and Heads of Service
- Staff briefings – as and when required on key issues
- Webcasts – so those who cannot make briefings get to see first-hand what is being said
- Global emails for major corporate messages
- Posters on Council noticeboards
- Leaflets attached to payslips
- Chief Executive’s bulletin
- Inductions for new starters – module on communications and customer service, information in induction packs
- One-off events – eg for CIP launch

For members:

- Intranet
- Website
- Emails to all councillors
- Members’ bulletin
- Briefings/upDATES on specific service issues by service managers/lead officers
- Executive members meet with managers/attend directorate meetings
- Briefings/presentations at council meetings
- One-off events
The most recent staff survey in 2007 showed:

- 83.1% agreed or strongly agreed that they had a clear understanding of the goals and objectives of the authority as a whole
- 95.4% said they had regular team meetings
- 90.3% said questions were encouraged at team meetings
- 95.4% receive communication about Allerdale Borough Council through the intranet, 78.5% from team meetings, 73.8% through the Chief Executive’s bulletin, 60.5% from their line manager, 56.9% from the local press and 55.4% from the grapevine

As part of the internal communications review three workshops have been held to ascertain how useful team meetings were to the organisation and what structure they should take in the future; one for team leaders/managers and two for members of staff below manager level. Over 100 employees were invited to attend one of the sessions. In total, approximately 30 managers and staff attended the sessions to express their views. They workshops showed that the majority of those who attended felt that there was a need for some kind of team meeting system. Issues raised included:

- the definition of a team (whether it includes administration support staff)
- too much prescription regarding how often meetings are held and what had to be on the agenda
- corporate matters taking too long/not user-friendly/interpreted or biased by the manager/not passed on
- the submission of minutes containing confidential team matters
- the practicalities of keeping services running when staff were all meant to be in a team meeting.

It was noted at the workshops that although staff make time for team meetings to ‘communicate’ they don’t consider that they could/should make time to access other communication channels such as the intranet, bulletins, agenda papers and minutes.

The Council has in 2008-9 experimented with webcasts as an internal communications channel to support staff briefing sessions. The first webcast for the launch of the Corporate Improvement Plan in September 2008 had 154 viewings. The webcasts on the shared management briefings in November 2008 and January 2009 had 141 and 123 viewings respectively.

A survey to allow staff have their say about internal communications in January 2009 received a response rate of just 34%. The survey showed strong use of the current internal communication channels, but suggest that staff are not fully utilising all the channels available to them:

99% - Intranet news (including operation news and featured news)
98% - Intranet press releases
96% - Intranet document store
96% - Briefing papers put on the intranet (eg on job evaluation, shared IT service)
77% - Agendas/minutes of council and committee meetings on the intranet
93% - The Council’s website
85% - Team meetings (team is defined as a service area or part of a service area)
44% - Directorate meetings for service managers
80% - Corporate messages in team meetings
89% - Staff briefings (shared services, CIP launch)
58% - Webcasts of staff briefings
93% - Global email to all staff from the Leader or Chief Executive
62% - Posters on notice boards
83% - Leaflets attached to payslips
91% - Chief Executive’s bulletin on the intranet
49% - Information received in induction packs
78% - One-off events/publications (eg for the launch of the Corporate Improvement Plan)

In February and March 2009 Corporate Scrutiny were invited to input their observations and suggestions on the issue of communication with members. Members agreed that the number of communication channels available was sufficient but it was acknowledged that members had personal communication preferences, with some members preferring electronic communication to paper communication and vice versa. Members felt strongly about being kept updated by officers, particularly on ward matters. They suggested a staff-member communications charter be agreed so that both staff and members understood what could be expected (appendix 1).

4. Delivery

Key principles:

- We will develop communications channels to provide honest, accurate, understandable and timely information to all staff and councillors that is relevant to them doing their jobs effectively and increasing their understanding of council business
- We will listen as well as inform ensuring that sufficient channels of communication, including feedback mechanisms are in place, so information moves up, down and across the organisation
- We will ensure staff are aware of and involved in decision making and activities
- We will monitor and assess the effectiveness of internal communications and continue to develop our practices to meet changing needs
- All staff will take responsibility for ensuring they keep up-to-date by accessing the information that is available to them.

Intranet

Staff and councillors have access to the Council’s intranet. All are encouraged to make use of these facilities within the terms of the Council’s internet and e-mail policy. The intranet should be the primary means for communicating operational news within the organisation.

Staff are encouraged to use the intranet to both provide and receive information about the Council and its services. Staff are also encouraged to access the agendas
and minutes of Council and committee meetings to learn about the work of the Council, particularly outside their own service area.

Staff using features on the intranet, such as the discussion forum, must abide by their conditions of use in that they will not post any material which is knowingly inaccurate, defamatory, abusive, malicious, offensive, or invades any person's privacy.

Managers will be responsible for relaying all relevant information, by any other appropriate means, to their staff who cannot easily access the intranet.

**Team meetings**

As part of our commitment to improving communication within the Council, it is necessary for all staff to attend a team meeting preferably every month and at least once every two months. If any manager or member of staff feels there is a need for a team meeting above this minimum requirement then they may arrange one.

Where this is not practical, such as when teams are dispersed across the borough, staff must be briefed regularly and consistently so they are enabled to provide the best service they can.

The team meeting structure will be a transparent process that will ensure the exchange of information up, down and across the organisation. The framework will encourage staff to share current best practice within the organisation.

Managers must arrange team meeting dates for the year and put the dates in an electronic diary on the intranet. This gives the team plenty of notice for them to manage their own diaries, allows a planning tool for Corporate Management Team, Heads of Service or portfolio holders to attend team meetings should they wish to, and allows a ‘spot check’ by Communications/HR to ensure team meetings are happening for the purposes of Investors in People.

Staff can expect that an agenda should be published in advance. Agendas for team meetings can take whatever format the team requires, but must include corporate messages (decided by the Corporate Management Team and Heads of Service and issued by the Communications and Marketing team - see below), an opportunity for feedback on training and development and an opportunity for health and safety issues to be raised. All staff will have the opportunity, and are encouraged, to add items to the agenda for discussion.

The size of team meetings should be sufficient to enable a constructive discussion. Managers must ensure that team members who are not present at team meetings are given feedback from the meeting and given the opportunity to ask questions.

**Corporate messages**

Corporate Management Team and Heads of Service decide corporate messages for use in team meetings. The messages are distributed through the Communications and Marketing team to service managers.
So that messages are consistently conveyed they should be used by the service manager/chair of the team meeting as provided.

**Staff briefings**

If the Council wishes to convey information on a specific subject staff briefings will be held as and when required on key issues. At least two briefings will be held, staggered at appropriate times to enable as many staff as possible to attend. All staff are encouraged to attend such briefings.

**Webcasts**

Webcasts (videos over the intranet) may be used to supplement staff briefings or other communications as required so that those in area offices who cannot attend the briefings get to hear first-hand what is being said.

**Global emails**

Emails to all members of staff are only for important corporate messages and can only be sent by a member of the Corporate Management Team or the Leader. To prevent technical difficulties, the message should be within the body of the email and not be sent as an attachment. This will be co-ordinated by the IT team.

Managers will be responsible for relaying all relevant information, by any other appropriate means, to their staff who cannot easily access e-mail.

**Posters**

The Council's offices have several notice boards for staff information. Please ensure that notices are relevant and timely. Out of date information should be removed immediately. To promote the professional image of the Council to visitors, posters should only be put on notice boards or specified notice areas and not stuck on corridor walls/doors.

**Leaflets attached to payslips**

Staff actively look for their payslip so attaching information to payslips can be an effective means of ensuring everyone in the authority receives the information. Please contact the Payroll team in Finance for further information and timescales.

**Chief Executive’s bulletin**

The Chief Executive will issue a regular bulletin to advise staff of any issues that he/she may want staff to be informed about. The bulletin will be posted on the intranet.

**Inductions**
Once a month a corporate induction is held for all new starters which includes a module to educate new employees about how communications and customer service is undertaken at the Council and what is expected from them. The module is supported by information in induction packs.

One-off events

To raise awareness of issues for one-off occasions the Council may organise special events for staff, such as for the launch of the Corporate Improvement Plan.

Other communication methods

All staff and councillors are encouraged to develop a wide range of other communication methods, traditional and innovative, to promote continuous improvement in keeping everyone informed.

Walking the job

The roles of key communicators are strengthened by this strategy:

Role of Chief Executive
- Must ensure that key issues relating to council business are communicated to all staff through the team meeting framework and other appropriate means
- Must ensure that opportunities for feedback are provided and monitored for their effectiveness.

Corporate Management Team
- Must ensure that key issues relating to council business are communicated to all staff within their own areas of responsibility through the team meeting framework and other appropriate means
- Must ensure that there is equal access to further information for staff about key areas of the council’s business.

Communications and Marketing team
- Must ensure that the internal communications strategy is implemented consistently throughout the council and its effectiveness monitored
- Must ensure that feedback received from staff / councillors is incorporated into the strategy on a regular basis to improve its effectiveness
- Must ensure that press releases are published on the intranet
- Must ensure that corporate messages are sent to service managers for inclusion in team meetings.

Other managers
- Must ensure that the team meeting framework and other means of sharing information are implemented throughout their areas of responsibility
- Must provide opportunities for staff to access information both within and outside their normal areas of work to promote cross-cutting working and personal development.
5. Monitoring and evaluation

How will we judge our success?

- By conducting regular research with staff
- By evaluating internal communication activities
- By monitoring the communications ability of staff in annual appraisals and facilitating relevant training.

To monitor team meetings and to enable members of the Corporate Management Team, Heads of Service and portfolio holders to attend team meetings when they require, all services must put the details of their team meetings into the team meetings calendar on the intranet.

The team’s performance indicators should help ensure that the Communications and Marketing team is delivering in line with the strategy. There is one local performance indicators, relating to internal communications activities – the percentage of staff who have team meetings.

Feedback from staff about how the strategy is being implemented, including what is working well / best practice and where problems are being encountered, is welcome at all times and should be directed to the Communications and Marketing team.
# Internal communications strategy action plan

All actions within existing human/financial resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key actions</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Deadline</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>IC1</strong> Continue to encourage staff to access the information available to them on the website</td>
<td>Communications and Marketing Manager</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IC2</strong> Monitor team meetings quarterly through the team meeting calendar to ensure teams are meeting regularly</td>
<td>Communications and Marketing Manager</td>
<td>Quarterly</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>IC3</strong> On instruction from Corporate Management Team/Heads of Service, write and distribute corporate messages for team meetings</td>
<td>Communications and Marketing Manager</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IC4</strong> Investigate opportunities for use, and evaluate take-up, of webcasts and other new media for internal communications</td>
<td>Media Relations Officer</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IC5</strong> Carry out an induction programme on communications for all new staff</td>
<td>Communications and Marketing Manager</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IC6</strong> Review recruitment adverts/information packs to reduce costs, enhance employer branding and improve attractiveness of the Council as an employer for potential staff</td>
<td>Communications and Marketing Manager</td>
<td>May 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IC7</strong> Target trade/specialist media with positive news releases about the work of service areas for staff/potential staff</td>
<td>Media Relations Officer</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IC8</strong> Develop internal communications practices to meet changing needs and the issues around change management</td>
<td>Communications and Marketing Manager</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IC9</strong> Continue to support service areas in communication to staff of their projects/activities/issues, ensuring internal communication is considered for all communications action plans</td>
<td>Communications and Marketing Manager</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IC10</strong> Produce paper version of useful telephone numbers/email addresses for service managers for councillors to contact with queries</td>
<td>Communications and Marketing Manager</td>
<td>Quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IC11</strong> Undertake review on the intranet in conjunction with stakeholders, including a separate home page specifically to meet the needs of members</td>
<td>E-government Project Manager</td>
<td>2009-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IC12</strong> Continue to produce a members’ bulletin to keep councillors informed of developments within the Council.</td>
<td>Customer Services directorate</td>
<td>Fortnightly</td>
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Appendix 1

Staff-member communications charter

This guide summarises the protocols that staff and members endeavour to adhere to when communicating internally with each other.

Effective communication is not a task for communications specialists alone; everyone involved in, and connected with, the Council has a role to play - through what they say or do and how they say or do it. Good communication requires a commitment from members, chief officers and staff and is a two-way process; communication is about listening as well as informing.

Both councillors and officers are servants of the public and they are indispensable to one another. But their responsibilities are distinct. Councillors are responsible to the electorate and serve as long as their term of office lasts. Officers are responsible to the Council. Their job is to give advice to councillors and the Council and to carry out the Council’s work under the direction and control of the Council, their committees and sub-committees. Mutual respect and communication between councillors and officers is essential to good local government.

Consultation

Members play an important role in ensuring that the council listens effectively, providing residents with a way of raising issues and giving their input into debates and decisions. Members will pass comments raised by residents to officers to increase officers’ awareness of issues in the community.

Ward members must be appraised of local issues within their ward by the lead officer on a project/issue and involved in any public meeting or consultation exercise. They must be notified, at the outset, of any consultation on a local issue in their ward.

Members’ requests for information

Committees and Executive members may require briefings from officers to assist them in responding to questions. In responding, officers must seek to ensure that the information provided is factually correct and complete. Officers must be mindful in providing support to executive members that such support does not undermine the integrity of the member or their own impartiality as an officer.

A request should be made to the service manager in the first instance. Members should not approach members of staff below service manager level as this can be intimidating to staff. It is for the appropriate officer to determine what information ought reasonably to be provided in response to the request. A response should be provided within five working days, but if this proves impossible, the delay must be explained and a clear indication should be given when a substantive response will be provided.
Officers will provide relevant information, access to documents, advice and explanation that members may reasonably request, provided the detail and amount of information requested would not involve taking up a significant amount of time and resources, and is necessary for them to fulfil their responsibilities as a member of Allerdale Borough Council.

Where members have requested information on projects/issues that are ‘in progress’, officers will continue to update the member on the project/issue as milestones are achieved/decisions made.

Members may use any information provided only for the purposes of properly performing their duties as councillors. Members will necessarily acquire much information that has not yet been made public and is still confidential. Members should never disclose or use confidential information for personal advantage or of anyone known to them, or to the disadvantage or the discredit of the council or anyone else; this would be a breach of the councillors’ code of conduct.

Members acknowledge that officers within a department are accountable to their senior officer. Officers should always be prepared to assist members, but they cannot go beyond the bounds of the authority given to them by their senior officer and they should not be asked to do so by members.