

East Devon District Council

Communications Strategy

Reviewed

February 2008

Policy Approval

Council in April 2008

Reasons for introducing the Strategy

Following wide consultation, East Devon District Council developed a new Corporate Strategy in 2007. The Corporate Strategy sets out a number of strategic priorities that will ensure that the Council achieves its vision of delivering 'outstanding and sustainable quality of life for everyone in East Devon'. Key to the successful delivery of these challenging, strategic priorities is a robust Communications Strategy which will support our consultation and marketing activities. It is vital that we keep our customers fully informed and engaged every step of the way in achieving our vision. This approach is reinforced by the Government's clear aspirations to ensure that positive outcomes for people and places are achieved through partnership and by engaging and empowering communities.

The Council's seven corporate priorities in the Corporate Strategy help us to prioritise our communications activities. They are:

- A thriving economy
- Affordable housing
- A safe clean and green environment
- Improved recycling
- Engaging with children and young people
- Excellent customer service
- An inspirational Council.

This Communications Strategy seeks to ensure that the Council's communications are focused and directed to ensure that key messages about our achievement of these seven areas are prioritised. Communication will also centre on the key areas of work that are shown to have the greatest impact on the Council's reputation as a service provider, as assessed by the evaluation of individual services (Systems Thinking reviews, Chartermark and ISO 9000) and the authority as a whole (Comprehensive Performance/Area Assessment and Investors in People).

These include:

- What standard of service our customers should expect from the Council
- How the public can get involved in local decision-making
- How well the Council is performing
- Whether the Council is delivering on its promises
- What the Council is doing to tackle anti-social behaviour.

In East Devon Talk magazine, we will use a system of icons to draw the reader's attention to the corporate priority about which they are reading. These icons are published alongside articles that demonstrate what the Council is doing about, say a Thriving Economy. The icons are below:



Affordable Housing



Children & Young People



Safe, Clean and Green



Thriving Economy



Inspirational Council



Recycling



Excellent Customer Service

We know that the expectations of our customers continue to rise and that customer perceptions are an important aspect of the relationship we have with the public. The Council is committed to developing excellent customer service across all areas and has embarked on a wholesale review of all its services using an approach that puts the customer at the 'heart' of all we do. In addition, the Council aims to achieve Chartermark status across the whole Council by 2011 as an external endorsement that it is achieving best practice in service delivery.

The Corporate Strategy aims to ensure that our customers experience tangible service improvement and this Communications Strategy aims to ensure that customers are informed and understand how the Council continues to meet their needs by delivering quality services and value for money.

The need for customers to understand the linkages between service delivery and service provider is set out in the Local Government Association's (LGA) Reputation Campaign, of which EDDC is a member. The campaign sets out a number of objectives and these are referred to later in this document. MORI research on behalf of the LGA has shown a clear correlation between the quantity/quality of communication and high rates of public satisfaction with services.

Managing our reputation and getting the message across means that not only must we make the most creative use of existing and untried channels for communication but also that we develop and protect the EDDC brand so that it becomes instantly recognisable and synonymous with quality services and value for money.

EDDC continues to work closely with a number of partner organisations. It is vital that our partners feel confident in the Council's ability to communicate simple and complex issues within the community. They need to be confident that they will be kept informed of important developments in a timely way. This Policy supports the principle of building close working relationships with colleagues in other public bodies and in the private sector to our mutual benefit. This also supports our corporate priority of being an Inspirational Council. This policy will seek to improve engagement with the Third Sector, with whom local government shares the same broad vision and aim of prosperous and cohesive communities.

Policy Statement

At EDDC, we recognise the need to continuously improve both external and internal communications for the benefit of our customers and staff. It is our aim to communicate 'the right information, to the right people, at the right time'.

We aim to communicate effectively with our customers and our staff. Our staff are our most valuable asset and as such are all ambassadors for the Council. They play a vital role in communication and it is therefore imperative that they are kept well informed on key issues.

We recognise the growing trend for Councils to invest more heavily than ever before in communication and marketing resources and will continue to regularly review where our resources are most needed. We must also recognise that the breadth of our communications offering will be

constrained by the size of the team and we must therefore prioritise our work on an ongoing basis. It is acknowledged that there is a clear link between communication and marketing. The Communications Team underpins its communications approach with clear marketing principles but at this time the Council does not maximise its opportunities for marketing. In 2008, the team will play a part in helping to assess the need for a Marketing Strategy and the implications of this for the Council. In the meantime, the team will continue to develop EDDC branding and use marketing techniques throughout its communication activity.

In reviewing and revising this strategy, which was first approved in 2003, we have considered the views of local people and staff as expressed in satisfaction surveys, the work of a Councillors' Task and Finish Forum, the findings of national research and the good practice of other Devon Councils. The intention is for this policy to be a working document with on-going relevance to help us to achieve genuine and long-term improvement in the ways that we communicate.

EDDC will continue to maximise opportunities to use communication and consultation to inform and engage our customers. We believe that this will lead to a closer and more productive dialogue with our customers, which will result in service improvement and an enhanced public perception of East Devon District Council.

We will continue to ensure that our internal communication is robust and timely and that there are opportunities for two-way communication, ensuring an open and honest culture which values all contributions.

Terms explained

- **Branding**

A brand is a collection of perceptions in the mind of the consumer about an organization and its services or products. The task is to ensure that the consumer's perceptions start off positive and remain that way. The brand is the ethos of the organisation, the way things are done around here – and that means everyone in the organisation needs to understand and sign up to supporting the brand. Organisations often use logos and straplines to communicate their brand to external customers and values to communicate it to staff.

- **Communications Calendar**

This is a reference to an online and organic internal document that lists key dates in the year when an activity that may warrant or attract publicity is happening. The calendar will help us to plan ahead, to prioritise our communications work, to be prepared for media interest and to avoid important activities competing with one another for publicity. The calendar will show what effect future communications activity is intended to create with the audience – for example to Aware, Inform, Engage, Promote, Consult.

The internal calendar, once established, could be adapted to create an online events calendar for external audiences.

- **Communications Champions**

This is a network of Council staff, one representing each service area, who act as the eyes and ears of the communications team, ensuring that important issues and dates are flagged up early and are included in the communications calendar (see above).

- **Local Democracy Week**

This is an annual event, usually held in October, when students from local schools are invited to consider how local government impacts on their lives, in order to promote an interest in councils from future citizens. Other initiatives include a Speed Dating event in February and visits by primary school students who hold a mock council meeting to debate a burning issue that interests them.

- **Marketing**

This has many formal definitions and means different things to different people. A good definition is: ***The identification and creation of sustainable competitive advantage.*** So far as EDDC is concerned, this means ensuring that the Council is recognised as the provider of choice for each of

the services it offers – and would be the favourite provider if there were others competing with it for customers. In other words, even if people could go somewhere else for the service, they would not want to.

- **Plain English**

This is a reference to the importance of applying a clarity test to the language used in official documents and council transactions. The aim is to avoid the use of jargon and technical language that might make it difficult for anyone outside the organisation to understand. It is the aim of the Council to use only plain English in all of its written documents. The Communications Team will promote understanding of this aim and will ensure that it practises what it preaches!

- **Public Relations**

Public Relations practice is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its public(s). This is often confused with simple activities like editorial publicity, sponsorships, and 'launch events', but it is (or should be) much more thoughtful than that. It is about using or creating opportunities to ensure that customers trust and are loyal to the brand – colloquially known as the “feel-good factor”.

- **'Reputation' campaign**

The Local Government Reputation Campaign is an initiative introduced by the Local Government Association and is aimed at ensuring that councils understand and utilise the links between good service, good communication and public satisfaction.

- **Systems thinking**

Systems thinking is an approach which puts the customer at the heart of service design and delivery.

- **Third Sector**

The Third Sector incorporates a huge diversity of non-governmental organisations. The Sector includes community groups, voluntary organisations, faith and equalities groups, charities, social enterprises, co-operatives, mutuals and housing associations all of which aim to achieve prosperous and cohesive communities.

- **Welcome Days**

This is a reference to events held several times a year designed to inform new employees about the Council, its priorities, practices and ethos. The Communications Officer plays a part in these events, presenting a short session on the importance of good internal and external communication to achieving the Council's aims.

How will we go about it?

We will:

- Be honest and open in the ways that we communicate
- Ensure that the Communications Policy and the Customer Service Strategy are central to the Council's business and service delivery
- Build organisational capacity for communication by ensuring that the Communications Champions are an informed, skilled and cohesive resource which can be called upon to ensure that opportunities for communication are maximized
- Make full use of the Communications Calendar
- Develop and support knowledgeable staff, particularly on the front line, by providing them with readily accessible, timely information
- Keep two-way lines of communication open throughout the Council so that staff and public views, ideas and suggestions are encouraged and fed back to the decision-makers

- ❑ Tell the public about the Council, its services and priorities in as many ways as possible, including via mail shots, letters, publications, media coverage and the Internet – important issues need to be communicated more than once
- ❑ Promote positive work consistently carried out by the Council and its partners
- ❑ Continue to strengthen and develop media relations and embed the use of the media pages on the intranet, which are designed to provide background information for journalists
- ❑ Improve the understanding and control of the Council's corporate image to reflect a professional, consistent and unified approach to communication
- ❑ Use plain English so that all-outgoing written communication is readily understood and jargon free
- ❑ Use a variety of internal communications, including regular bulletins for members and staff, team meetings, News and Views sessions and focus groups, which allow for two-way communication
- ❑ Ensure appropriate training is in place, including media training for officers and members
- ❑ Ensure that all staff are aware of the Freedom of Information and Data Protection legislation so that everyone is confident about what information can and should be provided
- ❑ Ensure that all staff are aware of the complaints procedure and understand how this operates
- ❑ Acknowledge where we can improve and learn from our experiences by sharing good practice.

Specific Policy Areas

Providing our customers with information about our services

East Devon District Council will continue to actively seek out and promote positive news stories from all areas of the Council. Our achievements will continue to be sent out in as many ways as possible, for example:

- through the Council Tax booklet and other publications
- on the 'front page' of the web site
- through targeted media releases
- through the use of well-worded signs/information points at parks/nature reserves and other long-term council projects
- by displaying exhibition materials at public events such as road-shows
- by producing targeted leaflets to inform the public and celebrate the Council's work
- by involving Members and Parish and Town Councils in spreading the messages.

The news stories should include:

- reports on the achievements of the Council and its partners
- follow-up of previously reported past achievements
- reports on any remedial action taken (to rectify bad press)
- information to people about ongoing work being carried out by the Council with an explanation of why it needs to be done (to pre-empt complaints)
- new initiatives being undertaken by the Council.

Many communication projects, such as recycling promotions, Local Democracy Week and the Council's performance information, are planned on an annual basis and published in our Communications Calendar. This makes sure that the information is targeted at the right people at the right time and that as wide a range of people are aware of it as possible.

We use many different communication channels and these include:

- An award-winning website with a newsy front page and special section for journalists
- An annual Council Tax booklet, produced in partnership with most Devon councils
- An annual Residents' Handbook containing an A-Z of services, published in May
- Corporate Business Plan (published on our website) and updated every June
- A colourful quarterly residents' magazine – East Devon Talk
- A December news update – East Devon Extra

- Press Releases sent to relevant media contacts and posted on our website
- A weekly internal magazine for staff, Members and the Press – The Knowledge
- Poster frames in all the Council's public toilets
- Posters on the sides of StreetScene vehicles
- Entries in local carnival parades
- Advertising on local websites
- Advertisements on the side of Seaton Tramway vehicles
- Welcome Day events for new employees
- Annual staff awareness seminars, presented by the Chief Executive
- A lively Intranet site
- A monthly team brief bulletin
- News and Views meeting for all managers
- Focus groups for staff feedback
- An annual survey co-ordinated by Best Councils in partnership with the IDeA
- A staff recognition scheme
- A staff suggestions scheme

Enhancing our reputation

We all feel more comfortable dealing with a service provider who has a good reputation rather than someone who is badly thought-of. Organisations that thrive and prosper are good at using communication to manage their reputation. Councils have traditionally been poor at promoting themselves and this is why the Local Government Association has launched the Reputation Campaign, to which EDDC is signed up.

At EDDC, we understand the importance of not only providing a good service but ensuring that this is recognised by our customers. They may need information about what services we provide, or they may need reminding that the service they are getting is of high quality.

This may be done through everyday channels such as word of mouth or letters and to this extent it is the responsibility of every employee to play their part in the process, encouraged through internal communication channels such as the Team Brief bulletin, training and management meetings, which will promote a culture of serving and informing customers. Additionally, we may need to consider more formal action and this is where the Communications Team can take special measures such as those proposed by the LGA. These core actions include:

1. Effective Media Management
2. An A-Z of council services
3. A regular council magazine or newspaper
4. Effective and consistent linkage of the council brand to community services
5. Good internal communications.

To safeguard the Council's reputation we will:

- have clear internal and external information flows
- respond swiftly
- call in outside expertise as soon as possible
- identify and brief a spokesperson
- agree the message
- tell the truth and maintain integrity
- maintain open communication channels.

Marketing our services

There are close links between the various forms of Communication, Public Relations and Marketing. EDDC currently has no formal marketing strategy, but good marketing principles already underpin the communication approach. We recognise the need to enhance our work on marketing and extend the involvement of managers and staff in marketing across the Council. A group of experienced

managers on a management development programme who are passionate about marketing will be exploring what more the Council might do on marketing and promoting the Council and its services. This may have implications for the Communications Team and our Communications Champions but the overall aim is to encourage wider corporate ownership of marketing.

It is our aim to:

- promote the Council as a service provider and partner of choice
- promote initiatives that require public participation
- promote individual council services to improve take-up and in some cases to encourage external customers to buy in our services.

The Communications Team is actively involved in a number of these initiatives and below we quote a number of examples for illustration:

- Advertisements in local publications such as the Honiton Show catalogue to promote our support for business
- Home Safeguard leaflets and display kit to promote the telephone service for elderly and vulnerable residents
- Electoral registration leaflets to encourage residents to join the electoral roll
- Posters for Political Speed Dating to encourage youth involvement in local government
- Designing an advertisement for trade publications to promote our Building Control Service
- Working with 3 partner councils on a litter campaign, with posters, bus street-liners and stickers. (This was highly successful and more so in East Devon than in the other authorities).
- Advertisements in local newspapers and magazines to encourage the public to vote for the Sustrans scheme in the December 2007 Big Lottery £50 million giveaway. This campaign, in tandem with a public relations effort, helped to ensure that the Sustrans bid was successful, capturing over 40% of the overall vote.
- Working with Countryside in 2007 to promote their Food 4 Thought sustainable farming initiative and, in February 2008 collaborating with Countryside on a street-liner advert for the sides of Seaton Tramway trams.
- Promoting the Communications and Consultation teams at a New Members' Welcome Day in 2007 with a static display and DVD.
- Working with the Finance service to promote the concessionary bus fares scheme through posters and leaflets.

Ensuring excellent media relationships

Our relations with the local press are good and this relationship will be developed further to ensure that the Council and its priorities have the best possible coverage and for us to be able to get our message across in the most appropriate way. This will help people see our strengths and those of local government in general and it is also an ideal way to provide an opportunity to develop two-way communication between the Council and the community.

Our approach is to:

- develop an ongoing relationship with key local journalists and a reputation for responsiveness
- enable the media easy access to information about the Council and our services via dedicated media pages on our website
- provide the local media with our news stories in the format and style that is most welcome to them to make it easier for our stories to be published
- ensure that our stories are relevant, positive and communicate what we are doing especially around our seven corporate priorities
- ensure that our dealings with the press are open and honest even when we are communicating hard or controversial Council decisions
- be proactive in providing response to topical issues to avoid 'bad press' developing
- use quotes from key Councillors, for example the Leader, the Portfolio holder for Communications, and other portfolio holders as appropriate, and where possible use stories which focus on our front line staff and our service to customers
- establish Communications Champions within the Council's services for our Communications Officer to work with when dealing with day-to-day press enquiries

- hold meetings with local media representatives in advance of big news stories relevant to the Council and/or district
- evaluate all communications with the media to measure effectiveness so that our future efforts can be better targeted and the value of this work can be quantified
- work with Members to encourage involvement of the Communications Team before they go to the press. This helps to portray a cohesive and co-ordinated approach.

Improving our corporate image and brand

We have processes in place to ensure that the EDDC logo is used prominently and consistently at every opportunity, whether it is on stationery, websites, buildings, signage, clothing, vehicles or street furniture.

We have branded the Council corporately so that all our media channels such as our website, vehicles, signage and identity cards have a corporate and consistent identity to ensure that:

- the Council presents itself consistently and clearly
- our customers recognise our brand as a guarantee of quality of service and value for money
- it inspires ownership and pride in the Council and its services
- the public and our staff know **what** it represents.

Driving change

In response to international and national issues such as climate change, recycling, affordable housing, economic growth and regeneration, the Council is driving change in its key service areas.

The rationale for – and methodology of – the Council's approach to these challenges must be communicated to employees, Members and our customers. Council Services that wish to embark on a communications exercise will be asked to complete a Communications Checklist. This will be the first stage in identifying several of the elements of the activity – including timescales, audience, budget and constraints. The Communications Team is a key enabler in the various growth and regeneration initiatives, including the Local Development Framework (LDF), West End growth point, Exmouth and Seaton. The aim is to use best communications practice to inform the public and so enable an open debate about these key schemes. This will back up formal consultation techniques with the result that the schemes can progress in compliance with latest Government guidelines.

Delivering best practice

To ensure that EDDC uses the most creative and cost-effective methods of communication, we will continue to benchmark ourselves against other local authorities of a similar type, facing similar challenges. To this end, we have conducted fact-finding visits to four neighbouring councils – Exeter, West Devon, South Hams and Teignbridge. Through interviewing the Communications Officer and Policy Manager equivalent in each case, we have been able to identify examples of shared practice and also areas of learning. The lessons are included in the Action Plan at the end of this Strategy.

Communicate, communicate, communicate

All members of staff and councillors are valued both for their contribution to the organisation and because they are ambassadors for the Council in East Devon. It is important that they are aware and understand the Council's priorities and why they are relevant so that they too can contribute to promoting the Council. Internal communications will continue to be a high priority at EDDC, helping to foster a culture that supports teamwork, personal development and buy-in for the Council's priorities.

We will continue to deliver excellent internal communication through:

- regular Team Briefings, Special Bulletins and team meetings
- cross organisational meetings such as News and Views and Heads Up
- staff awareness seminars

- focus groups
- staff briefings on important new changes such as those affecting their benefits
- ensuring that all our staff have access to the intranet and by building an employee portal which will give individuals information most relevant to them. This will be branded My East Devon.
- promoting the employee suggestion scheme and the staff recognition scheme
- seeking staff opinion through the Best Council Survey and taking action following the analysis
- providing staff, particularly front line staff and visiting officers with information about the Council in as many ways as possible to promote a wide understanding of Council business
- regular one to one meetings and Performance Reviews to ensure messages are communicated and understood
- providing staff with access to up-to-date contact lists, including “family tree” details and “who does what” information
- providing front line staff with contact details for services not available from the Council so that this information can be passed on to our customers
- timely welcome days for new staff
- continuing to support staff with training specific to their job and professional development
- clear management structures and management availability
- promotion of the Customer Service Strategy for customer service standards on answering/dealing with internal telephone calls and emails and using plain English (our colleagues should be given the same level of courtesy and assistance that we give to our external customers)
- encouraging cross-working between the directorates, for example work shadowing
- encouraging senior management to go “back to the floor” so that they are more aware of how services are delivered
- monitoring voicemail to ensure that it is used properly as it is understood that misuse can affect the Council’s reputation.

Outcomes

- ❑ Improved public perception of the Council’s role, priorities and capacity
- ❑ General awareness and appreciation of the Council’s achievements and reasoning behind ‘bad news’
- ❑ Smart use of all types of communication tools, including electronic
- ❑ Improved professional and corporate approach in all communications
- ❑ Assurance that any communications with the Council will be clear and concise
- ❑ Ensuring our corporate brand is used consistently and becomes associated with quality, good service provision and value for money
- ❑ Managers at all levels understand customers’ needs and act on the ‘system’ of work to better meet customer needs
- ❑ Senior management in touch with staff and their concerns
- ❑ Helping staff see the big picture
- ❑ Motivated and informed staff who accept sharing good practice as the norm
- ❑ Modernisation of service delivery through a systems thinking approach to management
- ❑ Management open and easily accessible to their staff and customers
- ❑ Better results in customer satisfaction surveys, Chartermark and other assessments.

Who is responsible for delivery?

- ❑ Everyone – the ongoing commitment of all Councillors and employees is essential to making this policy a success.
- ❑ The Communications Officer has overall responsibility and will co-ordinate delivery.

- The Strategic Management Team through the Heads of Service will be responsible for upholding policy and will maintain strong links with the Communications Officer.

Performance Monitoring

This will be ongoing and the most relevant method of gathering feedback from our customers, partners, Councillors and staff will be used, including:

- targeted public surveys
- staff surveys
- employee suggestion scheme
- staff recognition scheme
- monitoring the number of visitors to our web site and which pages are most popular
- the number of press releases and statements issued and used
- the amount of positive, neutral and negative press coverage
- sample monitoring of outgoing communication to make sure that clear English has been used
- monitoring publications to maintain consistent use of corporate identity
- continual review of busy periods to make sure that these times are adequately staffed
- ongoing review of staff use of Voicemail.

Policy Consultation

This policy has been reviewed and revised following consideration of the views of local people and staff as expressed in surveys, the work of a Councillors' Task and Finish Forum, the findings of national research and the good practice of other Devon councils. It was reviewed and revised by the Head of OD, Policy Manager and Communications Officer, with contributions from the Deputy Chief Executive, Head of ICT and Customer Service Centre Manager and the Strategic Management Team.

Policy Review

The Communications Officer will review this Communications Policy in 2011.

Related Policies and Strategies

- Customer Service Strategy
- Complaints procedure guide
- Freedom of Information Policy
- Data Protection Policy
- Consultation Strategy

Action plan

No.	Action	Lead officer	Start date	End date
1	Join the Public PR benchmarking group.	BD	May 2008	Ongoing
2	Annual meetings with neighbouring communications teams to benchmark our work and share best practice.	NS	September 2008	Ongoing
3	Consider collaborating on communications work with a neighbouring council, to maximise effectiveness of limited human resources.	BD / NS	July 2008	November 2008
4	Offer work experience to a media services student at a local college to act as an extra pair of hands to assist the communications team.	BD	March 2008	Ongoing
5	Ensure the Communications Calendar is populated with content as soon as possible, then get the Communications Champions together to keep this going.	NS / TR	March 2008	April 2008
6	Continue with daily checks on Press coverage, but extend the task to include the Advertising Value Equivalent (AVE) values. This to become part of a regular report to Members and Senior Officers and so underline the effectiveness and impact of the communications team in a more scientific way than is the case at present.	NS / JV	February 2008	Ongoing
7	Exeter City Council's communications team enters award schemes for campaigns. The kudos from winning raises the profile of the communications team and ensures Members understand how they add value. We should look into the pros and cons of this approach.	NS / BD	March 2008	Ongoing
8	In many of the neighbouring councils visited, other services manage the majority of web content and often the task is at "administrative" level, unlike EDDC which tends to use higher grade staff. ICT should consider whether simple web input could be the task of administrative staff at EDDC.	CP / JC	April 2008	July 2008
9	EDDC could consider adopting a more commercial approach, to including Marketing and Sponsorship. See 9a-9d below.	NS	February 2008	June 2008
9a	The Communications Officer, who won two Marketing Awards while employed by BT, has had preliminary discussions with a local sun-screen supplier in respect of Exmouth schemes, including children's play and beach volleyball, and these are to continue.	NS	March 2008	June 2008
9b	The Communications Officer to approach Waitrose with a view to the supermarket chain sponsoring worktop food waste caddies for our recycling upgrade.	NS	February 2008	June 2008
9c	The Communications Officer to look at options for providing Marketing and Information material on a plasma screen in Knowle reception area.	NS	March 2008	June 2008
9d	Adopting a commercial approach to filming. Hold discussions with the StreetScene officer responsible for filming permissions with a view to making a charge.	NS / JL	April 2008	June 2008

No.	Action	Lead officer	Start date	End date
10	Ensure that EDDC's brand is protected and that exposure is maximised to ensure the public fully associate services with the Council. Work with the Design and Branding Group on visual guidelines, web branding and signage at key entry points to the District.	NS / JC/ JDeL	March 2008	Ongoing
11	Maximise the benefits of the Council's participation in the LGA Reputation Campaign through production of an A-Z guide to services.	NS / CM Ltd	March 2008	June 2008