Gloucestershire County Council Communications Strategy

2013 to 2015
Introduction

This strategy sets a framework for council communications. It gives direction to all media, online, internal, marketing, publications and public relations communications activity undertaken on behalf of Gloucestershire County Council.

We will use the most appropriate channels of communications to reach our wide variety of customers and stakeholders including residents, employees, businesses, community partners and all levels of government.

We will seek to provide communications services on the most cost-effective basis, for example by centralised print buying.

Communication only works when messages are clear and easy to understand, and when it is a two-way process. It’s not enough to talk – we also have to be able to listen.

This is no easy task for an organisation which has 597,000 customers, 3,900 staff, responsibility for a huge range of services, and relationships with government, regions, the European Commission, partner organisations and other local authorities.

The question is - how can the county council communicate clearly and simply, when it operates in such a complex and constantly changing environment?

This is the challenge for corporate communications, and this strategy seeks to address it.

Research shows that communication with residents is a key driver to overall satisfaction with council performance.

It is also at the heart of good customer service and effective, meaningful consultation – and critical to delivery of the council’s community leadership role.

This strategy sets out the framework within which we can respond to this challenge.

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¹ 2011 Census of Gloucestershire population
Aims, Vision and Values

Aims
The ultimate aim of our communications is that all staff, residents, partners and everyone who deals with the council will have a clear understanding and a positive perception of our vision, aims, values, services and achievements, leading to higher levels of satisfaction and engagement.

Vision and Values...
What are we trying to do?
To make its vision come alive, the council must be able to communicate with and influence a wide range of organisations, individuals and partners in a cohesive and co-ordinated way.

We therefore need to …

• make the council easy to understand and talk to
• co-ordinate and direct communications so that all parts of the council are working towards shared objectives, in support of council strategy
• ensure that everyone understands what we’re working towards, and what the outcomes will be – showing people what success looks like
• ensure staff and partners understand their contribution through clear objectives, milestones and deadlines
• make sure people know the outcome of the changes the council makes
• make people feel better informed, proud to live in Gloucestershire, proud to work for the council, and proud to work with it.

Another way of saying this is that we need to build the county council as a brand.

The visual element of this brand – our corporate identity – is generally understood by staff and customers.

However, the less tangible aspect of the brand is harder to define and influence.

It is made up of these components…

• Our overall purpose – what are we here for?
• Our values – what drives us to do the things we do?
• Our key messages – what are we saying about what we offer?
• Our service delivery – what do we provide, compared with what we promise?
• **Our behaviour** – how do we treat our customers and our staff?

We won’t be able to build relationships with staff, partners or customers unless we can be clear about our answers to these questions, and be clear in the way we communicate those answers.

It is important that we bring these elements together in a unified approach across all communications channels, so that we are consistent in tone, look and feel. People need to understand who we are and what we stand for.

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**Preparing for the future**

The council vision is to use the resources available to us to improve the quality of life for Gloucestershire people.

Our plans are built on three clear values that will help to steer us through the years ahead. Applying these values will mean that the council is not only smaller, but also more flexible and more responsive to local people’s needs and expectations.

These values are:

- **Living within our means**

  We believe that it’s wrong to spend more than we can afford or to pass financial problems on to the next generation. This means we have to make difficult decisions now and focus on our priorities, manage our budgets and reduce our borrowing.

  We will do that by:

  - Being as efficient as possible and saving money by joining up with our partners
  - Making tough but necessary choices about the services we provide and taking responsibility for those choices
  - Implementing cuts in government grants locally - where government has had to cut funding streams for specific services, we will not be able to afford to subsidise those services locally
  - Reducing our debt and the burden it places on our finances.

- **Providing the basics**

  In the coming years, we will have less money and will have to make sure we spend it where the need is greatest. Our role is to make sure local people get good outcomes from their services and we understand that it is the quality of the service that matters to local people, not who provides it.

  Our focus should be on:

  - Improving outcomes for the most vulnerable children, young people and adults
• Providing the infrastructure and services that keep the county moving and working
• Making decisions that promote long-term sustainability
• Finding the best, most efficient way of delivering services which satisfy customers. If someone else can do a better job or make the money go further, then we should make use of their skill and expertise.

Helping communities help themselves

The council is at its most effective when it is helping people to live successful lives as independently as possible and helping communities to help themselves. We believe that if power is in the hands of local people, you get better results and achieve better value.

Our approach will be to:

• Give individuals more say about the services they receive and the support they receive
• Empower communities to do more themselves and give them the tools they need for community action
• Recognise that some areas need more help than others and that, with a little support, they can get their ideas off the ground
• Support the transfer of buildings and other assets to community ownership so that they can become a hub for local activity – flexible and responsive to local needs.
Evidence and analysis

Where are we now?
What do our customers and stakeholders say?

The council has developed its brand.
It has set out its overall purpose, values and key messages.
Both last year and this year we have asked customers and stakeholders to help us set some key priorities that would support our values. The research has told us that these are customer and stakeholder priorities:

**Council Strategy – Our priorities**

1. **Getting our own house in order**
   
   We should focus on getting our own house in order. We should do everything we can to be as efficient as possible, reducing our running costs, streamlining management and getting the best value out of our assets.

2. **Protecting vulnerable people**
   
   We should focus on protecting vulnerable people. We should focus our resources on the most vulnerable children, young people and adults.

3. **Supporting active communities**
   
   We should focus on supporting active communities. We should help communities to do more themselves and give control over to local services.

4. **Building a sustainable county**
   
   We should focus on building a sustainable county. We should prioritise those services that keep the county up and running, that make Gloucestershire an attractive place to do business, that stimulate economic growth and create jobs in Gloucestershire, and that directly protect the public from harm.

Where do we want to be?

Everyone who works for us, everyone who works with us, and the people we serve, all understand what we are working towards and our priorities.

Everyone understands the contribution they can make and how others are playing their part.

The aim of our communications is that all staff, residents, partners and everyone who deals with the council will have a clear understanding and a positive perception of our aims, values, services and achievements.
Our communications objectives are:

- To secure and strengthen the reputation of the council as a community leader and an effective and efficient provider of high quality outcomes that are focused on our values and priorities
- To build and maintain a professional corporate identity for consistent and co-ordinated use throughout the organisation
- To promote the image of the council as an effective, efficient and listening organisation focused on the public and their needs
- To ensure that communications are consistent and co-ordinated across all channels to give maximum support to the council’s strategic priorities
- To ensure all staff understand the priorities of the council and feel valued and able to contribute to major changes affecting services they provide
- To ensure that our communications activities reflect the full diversity of the community and help ensure equality of access to all our services.

This strategy is underpinned by a recent (2012) restructure of the communications function and will be delivered through a variety of communications programmes and techniques.

Meanwhile, it is important that the council increases its efforts to understand what local communities are saying.

This strategy will dovetail with the council’s consultation and customer insights initiatives in sharing information gained through consultation programmes such as budget consultation, improved use of the council’s CRM system, the revitalisation of the citizens’ panel, and increasing use of new technology devices to generate instant feedback on topical issues.

In addition, working with public sector partners on joint communications is important to us, for example, through the Local Resilience Forum (jointly with the police and district councils, planning for and responding to emergency situations) as well as on a day to day basis with Gloucestershire Care Services (NHS), NHS Gloucestershire and Gloucestershire Police.

We are also in constant contact with our counterparts within the six district councils, health and police to share good practice and explore joint working opportunities.

Delivering our objectives

The council’s reputation is based on perceptions – how people see us.

Managing our reputation means first of all understanding what those perceptions are, deciding how we want to be seen, and planning how to get there.
We will tackle this by focusing internal capacity on the council’s key messages and, through the 2012 communications restructure, ensuring that the most appropriate level of resource is available for our key priorities and activities.

**Media and PR**

We will seek to maintain and further improve positive media coverage and develop our media relations service to promote and defend the council, recognising the proven link between the public’s sense of feeling informed and feeling satisfied.

**Campaigns**

We will maintain and develop our programme of media and integrated campaigns that underpin the Council’s values and priorities. These include:

- *Grow Gloucestershire*, which focuses on homes, skills and jobs
- Protecting vulnerable people
- Supporting active communities
- Building a sustainable county
- Keeping our own house in order.

**Social media**

We are embracing new technology and social media platforms as an integral part of our communications channels. We recognise the opportunities that social media can deliver in terms of reputation enhancement, engaging with the public using their medium of choice, greater two-way dialogue and the insights that social media can provide, and as an opportunity to reduce cost versus other communications channels.

Similarly, we recognise the risks of social media and we are investigating monitoring software that can monitor our own social media activity and also gain a better understanding of the conversations about us in which we are not currently participating.

In parallel with the development of our 2013–2015 Communications Strategy, we are also developing a social media strategy and we are updating our social media policy and staff guidelines.

**Websites**

We recognise the value of websites as a source of information, as a point for customer transactions and as a low cost alternative to face-to-face and telephone contact.

In 2012, we rebuilt and launched a new, streamlined fully-transactional website to serve the public and businesses of Gloucestershire. The new website is designed to make it easy to find the information you need, to report
faults and incidents, to ask questions and to conduct many different types of transactions, all in a 24/7 environment.

Not only is this usually faster than alternative methods of contact, it means you can conduct your business with the council when and where you like, while doing so at a lower cost to the taxpayer.

We are applying the same principles to our new intranet site for staff (Staffnet, launching spring 2013) and our new extranet site for schools (Schoolsnet, also launching spring 2013).

**Internal communications**

Internal communications play a key role in ensuring that staff know the council’s plans and priorities, and what is coming on the horizon.

Employees need to understand how their actions contribute to the overall achievement of priorities and how their behaviour affects the way the organisation is perceived internally and externally.

We have streamlined our internal communications to provide:

- Regular briefings and updates to staff through our *One Update* bulletin
- Briefings to councillors through our *Members Matter* bulletin
- All the information staff need on policies, processes and performance through our intranet site, Staffnet
- Support for senior management leadership forums
- Support for our focus on improving customer experience and customer service while reducing cost through our *Think Customer* programme and our *Challenge Den* initiatives.

We are working with Human Resources and devising new ways to receive staff feedback and to understand levels of staff engagement.

We are also piloting Yammer, a corporate media tool which brings the power of social networking to our organisation, and is designed for organisational collaboration, file sharing, knowledge exchange and team efficiency.

**Design and print**

We have a centralised design and print team which ensures we achieve best value, through centralised buying power, and consistency of design look and feel to reinforce our brand and our values.

We have recently set in place a supplier framework procurement arrangement, which gives us resource capacity and scalability, without incurring unwanted overheads.

We have also recently entered into a supplier arrangement with Gloucester City Council to deliver their design and print requirements. If successful, we will consider seeking similar arrangements with other local partners so that we can secure even greater value for money through bulk buying leverage.
Consultation

Finally, and most importantly, we have a small central consultation resource whose role is to help us find out what the people of Gloucestershire need and want, together with their priorities.

We conduct a number of corporate consultations regularly, for example the annual budget consultation and the health and wellbeing survey.

In addition, we provide consultation expert guidance to other parts of the organisation as they reshape or design new services for customers, so that they can do so based on a clear understanding of customer needs and preferences.

To support this, we have developed our consultation protocol and strategy for 2013. We also plan to re-introduce our Citizens’ Panel as an additional consultation resource and to support the organisation’s customer insights activities in shaping service design and delivery for the future.

We have also developed a consultation supplier framework procurement arrangement, to give us the same resource capacity and scalability as we have in design and print, again without incurring unwanted overheads.

All of this is to help us understand what the public truly want, to deliver on the council’s values and priorities and to provide the best possible value for money.