

You heard it here first

– A communications strategy for The Vale of White Horse District Council

“There is no greater impediment to the advancement of knowledge than the ambiguity of words” Thomas Reid, Scottish philosopher

1. Why do we need a communications strategy?

As a public sector organisation what we do, why we do it and how we do it are all subject to scrutiny. Not just in the formal committee or inspection sense, but also informally by the public, the press, our staff and the partner organisations we work with.

People find out what we are doing in a variety of ways, but the most popular and trusted source is information from the Council itself. This puts us in an enviable position because it means we have a clear channel of communication with the people we work for.

The reason we need a communications strategy, which sums up where we are now, where we want to be and how we are going to get there, is to ensure we value and protect this asset while at the same time working with other communication channels like the media to ensure consistency. We need to be sure we are saying the right things at the right time to the right people in the right way and to ensure the service is complementary to business objectives and helps to deliver those objectives.

2. Doing it in style – how we communicate

Putting out information is not enough, we need to do it with style. Communicating with our staff, the public and our other stakeholders is not something that should be done grudgingly or with suspicion and it should certainly not be done as a last resort because our hand is forced. Every opportunity to get our message across should be embraced and welcomed. In order to safeguard our reputation and credibility when we communicate we should do so with the following values and aspirations uppermost in our minds:

Open and honest – tell it like it is

Timely – at the right time and on time

Accurate – get it right

Clear – no jargon

Proactive – get there first

Involving – get it out there or get them in here

Innovative – do it differently

3. What we say – key messages

These should reflect what the Vale wants to be famous for, the issues and concerns that the Vale believes are a priority. These are shaped by the Vale's vision and corporate aims.

Valuing the Vale by:

- a) Working together to provide an affordable home for all
- b) Keeping the Vale clean, green and safe by tackling offenders and protecting our towns and countryside.
 - Protecting the environment by reducing waste and saving energy
 - Helping communities stay healthy by providing leisure facilities and sports coaching
 - Working in partnership to promote and enhance neighbourhood safety
- c) Helping our residents get in touch with us in a way that is quick and convenient
- d) Delivering the best deal for the Vale residents
- e) Being open and honest about the Council's work, providing accurate information at the right time and in the right way.

4. Where are we now?

- a) We now have a communications team in place comprising a Head of Communications, Communications Officer, Assistant Communications Officer and Web Developer. The Web Developer was transferred from ICT and the communications roles were created from existing resources. The corporate admin team also sits with Communications.
- b) Staff publications "The Horse's Mouth" and "Team Brief" have been transferred to the communications team and have been improved.
- c) The residents' newsletter "Vale Views" has improved content and layout and is produced and distributed house-to-house to 55,000 homes three times a year.
- d) The website has increased accessibility and is undergoing further transformation.
- e) The Local Government Association "Reputations" programme has been adopted and now needs to be implemented
- f) Media coverage has increased by 187 per cent from 2005-06 and neutral/positive coverage has increased by 214 per cent. Negative coverage has dropped from 17.5 per cent to 11.5 per cent.

- g) The Vale is currently dealing with a number of “hot issues” including the proposed reservoir, the sale of the Old Gaol and improvements to Bury Street.
- h) Publications including the Council Tax leaflet, EMBRACE newsletter and community safety newsletter are produced
- i) Printing and advertising budgets have been centralised under the communications budget.
- j) Partnership working through EMBRACE (working with ethnic minority businesses), Oxweb (Oxfordshire public sector web managers), Oxfordshire PR Group, Oxfordshire Consultation Group and Oxfordshire Waste Partnership Project Group.
- k) The communications team played a key part in the Council’s response to the summer floods including keeping residents informed, organising a Ministerial visit, supporting the grant process and dealing with both local, national and international media queries.

Best Value Residents Survey

The three-yearly Best Value Performance Indicator General Satisfaction survey was completed last financial year (06/07) and includes a wealth of information about perceptions of the Vale. Specifically related to communications:

- Only 50 per cent believed the council keeps them informed (similar to Oxfordshire Consortium average and polling expert Ipsos MORI’s district average).
- The most common source of information was the Council itself (44 per cent). 23 per cent from the local media and 12 per cent from the website.
- It is worth noting that residents who thought the Council’s performance had got worse were also more likely to favour the local media as a source of information (33 per cent).
- Of those who made contact with the Council 71 per cent were satisfied with the outcome.
- The most common reason was to ask for advice or information (43 per cent).

Staff Survey

This was conducted in June last year.

- 33 per cent of staff were prepared to act as advocates of Council services but advocacy of the Council as an employer was only 15 per cent
- 78 per cent of staff disagreed that morale was good
- Staff did not feel they were working for a successful organisation (-19 per cent net agreement) or could develop a career (-27 per cent)
- Only two in five said they understood the Council’s corporate plan
- Work life balance was positive – 57 per cent successfully balanced commitments

- Trust and confidence in directors and senior management was low even though they had good knowledge and access to them
- Staff did not feel the SMT had a clear vision of the future and were not being kept up to date
- Staff did not feel they were recognised for good performance (-47 per cent)
- Preferred sources of information were email (71 per cent), line manager (58 per cent) and team meetings (54 per cent)
- 55 per cent did not feel informed, particularly with regard to corporate and strategic decisions, and did not feel information was credible
- 61 per cent did not feel there was enough opportunity to let management know how they felt
- Change management was also an issue

A staff action planning group was set up after the survey and continues to make recommendations to improve issues raised in the survey.

5. Where do we want to be – what are we aiming for?

To safeguard and continuously improve:

- Customer Satisfaction
- Involvement, engagement and information flow with staff and the community
- The Vale's reputation
- The Vale's website

6. How are we going to get there? – Objectives and milestones

A. We want our staff to feel well informed and that they are getting information at the right time, so in turn they become advocates for the Vale, not just their service area

Actions:

- I. Develop an internal communications framework with minimum standards so managers and their staff understand how they can expect to be kept informed. To be completed by December 2007
- II. Develop quality internal publications which include relevant information at the right time. Ongoing
- III. Promote the work of the Senior Management Team and Senior Management Group so staff understand the role of the strategic groups. Ongoing.
- IV. Develop the staff intranet so it includes all relevant information to enable staff to do their jobs and understand others. To be completed by August 2008.

Measurement: Staff Survey.

B. We want the website to be the first point of contact for people with internet access seeking information about the Council

Review and rewrite web content and structure from a customer perspective and encourage public engagement with the website

Actions:

- I. Identify the most common queries and concerns from the public to shape content and structure. To be completed by December 2008 but then continuously reviewed.
- II. Write a new A to Z for the website. To be completed by April 2008.
- III. Compile a frequently asked questions searchable database. To be completed by April 2008.
- IV. Develop a public relations campaign promoting the website. Promotion campaign to start in January 2008.

Measurement: Website monitoring reports.

C. We want to implement the Reputations programme in full, as agreed by the Executive. This should be achieved by September 2008.

Actions:

Cleaner, Safer, Greener:

- I. Branded cleaning operation: ensure a visible cleaning presence with a strong link to the Council
- II. No gaps in cleaning and maintenance contracts: Integrate services and simplify boundaries eg to avoid grounds maintenance teams walking past litter because street cleaning will deal with it.
- III. One number for public contact: ensure a single number contact to avoid people being passed around.
- IV. Deal with "grot spots": Know where they are and why in order to take preventative action. Areas which attract fly-tipping, abandoned vehicles, graffiti etc.
- V. Abandoned cars/fly-tipping: Set a target for their removal within 24 hours of being reported/sighted and make it easy for people to report it.
- VI. Green flag award: Aim to have one for at least one park, indicating it is clean, safe and green.
- VII. Educate and enforce: Make it clear to the public that littering, dog fouling and fly-tipping are crimes that will be prosecuted and that offenders will be named and shamed.

Communications:

- I. Manage the media: Develop a positive relationship with the media through a pro-active approach, honest evaluation and leadership from senior officers and members in order to better inform residents of the Council's actions and decisions.
- II. Provide an A-Z guide: A good quality guide which explains the council's services in a simple, jargon-free way to help people understand the breadth of services offered.
- III. Publish a regular newspaper: A good quality product which demonstrates an understanding of the readership and contains useful, compelling and entertaining content.
- IV. Council branding: Effective and consistent linkage of the council brand to community services.
- V. Internal communications: Based on honest and open dialogue to help staff deliver better services, understand the council's goals and understand their customers' needs.

Measurement: Achieving sign off from LGA.

D. We want to maintain our high profile press coverage while minimising negative stories

Develop a media protocol so that media queries will be dealt with according to the relevant principles of the communications style ie Open and honest; accurate; clear and timely.

Actions:

- I. Conduct a media survey to identify perceptions of the service and areas for development. Complete by March 2008.
- II. Write the media protocol. Complete by September 2008.
- III. Circulate to the media and include it on a communications section of the website. Complete by September 2008.
- IV. Include information about the protocol in staff and Member training. Ongoing.

Identify media opportunities throughout service areas to ensure a consistent flow of positive stories to the media

Actions:

- I. Collate a media plan and calendar to secure at least four proactive releases a month. Ongoing.
- II. Identify opportunities through quarterly DD meetings. Ongoing.

Keep staff informed of media activity

Actions:

- I. Regular updates in Horse's Mouth on media activity for the month. Ongoing.
- II. Reactive media queries log on the intranet. To be achieved by August 2008.
- III. Circulate cuttings to DDs for wider circulation among their team. Service to start by January 2008.
- IV. Have cuttings on display on at least one board per floor. In place by January 2008.

Increase awareness of media role and requirements through a training programme

Actions:

- Training programme for all staff. To be developed for 2008/09.
- Specific media interview training for Exec/Shadow Exec and key officers. To be developed for 2008/09.
- Compose and circulate media guidelines for all officers and Members. By September 2008.

Measurement: media coverage and annual media surveys.

E. We want to increase Vale Views to four editions a year (by incorporating the Council Tax leaflet as a way of minimising costs) and include advertising

Actions:

- I. Use the Vale Voice Citizen's Panel to review Vale Views specifically in terms of value for money, frequency, content, design and advertising. Complete by October 2007.

- II. Seek permission to convert the Council Tax leaflet to a special fourth edition of Vale Views and review the schedule for the remaining three editions. Complete by December 2007.
- III. Write a detailed specification for agencies to include design, print and advertising, incorporating the views of the Panel. Complete by December 2007.

Measurement: Increased customer satisfaction.

F. We want to get people more involved in the Vale through consultation and participation

Actions:

- I. Develop a separate consultation and engagement strategy incorporating the Community Call For Action recommendations from the Government White Paper. To be presented to the December Executive.
- II. Develop a Value your Vale campaign to encourage citizenship and participation through actions. For 2008/09.

Measurement: Customer satisfaction survey.

G. We want people (including our staff) to understand what the Vale stands for and want properly resourced and planned campaigns to help achieve this

Actions:

- I. Continually refine and develop the Council's vision.
- II. Continually review the Council's corporate priorities and action plans.
- III. Develop the Vale logo and corporate style guide. To be complete by March 2008.
- IV. Develop annual campaigns which incorporate corporate priorities and objectives across all service area activities. For 2008/09.
- V. Manage the printing and advertising for the Vale. Ongoing.
- VI. Monitor letters and correspondence to the public. Ongoing.

Measurement: Staff and customer satisfaction surveys.