

Communications within the Council

A strategy for improvement

Introduction

People are the most valuable asset for the Council. It is through its people that Woking Borough Council delivers services and develops a relationship with its customers.

We all have individual roles to play in providing services or access to services either working alone or with colleagues from our own section or from other work areas. We also share one role in common - to be ambassadors for the Council, to help everyone to understand what the Council does and why it does it and why it can't do some things and to carry back messages which might influence the actions of the Council in the future.

Effective communication at all levels, within teams, between teams, and between staff and senior management is crucial in making this happen.

Building on the results of the audit of internal communications which took place in 2001 and on feedback from the Improvement and Development Agency peer group review in November 2001, this strategy provides a framework for developing on areas where internal communication is already working well and also on improving it

- **For individuals**
- **Within and between teams**
- **At the organisation level**

It also complements key objectives outlined in the Corporate Plan namely to involve all those who have a stake in the performance of the Council, to treat everyone with fairness and dignity and to recognise the value of our staff and enable them to shine.

The responses to the communications survey indicated significant variances between work areas and we must understand the reasons for this and remedy any weaknesses. The organisation must work to provide a way forward so that we can improve communication throughout the Council and make relevant, planned communication a real part of every day working life. However, it is down to managers to ensure that their staff, as well as they themselves, are taking practical steps to improve communication.

Key themes are:
(G1)

- **Good communication is a full time job** – and it's everybody's job – it will help us to do things better!
- **We must show our commitment to communication by creating the correct climate** – and that includes everybody, both staff and managers alike. Managers may want to put communication on the back shelf due to other pressures, but investment in good communication will help to alleviate these pressures. Ensure that information, including that personal to staff, is in place on time and kept up to date.

- **Two way communication is crucial.** All of us have a responsibility to share and exchange information to support decision making – if you don't know ask, if you do know tell. Your manager is responsible for ensuring that you have the information to do your job. But you also have a responsibility to find out about things, ask questions and do your own research.
- **We need to listen, not just hear and give constructive feedback** – staff to managers and managers to staff
- **One organisation, no barriers** – together we are greater than the sum of our parts and can all benefit from a networking approach to working. Special consideration should be given to how to overcome potential barriers to good communication including distance and accessibility.
- **Who is your audience** – messages should be tailored to suit our audience, in language that they understand so that they are clear about what it means for them. We need to think about the best way of reaching them and consider if the message is relevant.
- **Electronic communications – an aid, not a solution**– the intranet, the world wide web and email present a great opportunity for sharing information and receiving feedback but need to be used wisely and with care to avoid information overload. **Face to face is best** wherever possible
- **Communication is about co-operation** – working together wherever possible to share information and get the job done better.

The coded numbers in this document refer to key actions in the associated action plan which has been developed out of the strategy with the participation of staff from across the Council.

1. Information to do your job

- **91% of staff agree that they are clear about the objectives they have to achieve their job and 75% say they get the information they need to do their job well. Over 80% know what their department's objectives are. This is a positive result but one that we mustn't be complacent about.**

To do the job and to do it well we all rely on information, in the following areas:

- **contractual terms and conditions of employment** - these are set out in everyone's contract of employment, in the staff handbook and are explained during induction **(TA2)**
- **the job and its performance** - job descriptions set out the duties and responsibilities of the jobholder which should fit into the wider picture i.e. the workplan for teams and service areas, setting out tasks, projects, plans, priorities and resources, normally as an annual programme. What is expected of us will be clarified by our managers on joining **(TA2)** and in the appraisal process **(G6)**.
- **the learning that is needed** – managers have an important role as mentors and coaches for their staff and will guide them on how to keep pace with change and the training and development opportunities that are available **(TR1)**.
- **practical information** on operating and technical instructions, health and safety, general information about the workplace and about who is who, where they are and what they do **(TR1; TO1; TO5)**.
- **the organisation's performance, progress and plans for change** – this is available for all staff to read in the Corporate Plan and the Best Value Performance Plan both updated once a year. Committee reports giving details of Council decisions and other information about projects being undertaken corporately and by individual service areas will be available on Ewok, the Council's intranet site **(TA1; TO3; TO5)**.

To obtain this information staff can ask their managers. However, they will also be expected to be inquisitive, to ask questions and to do their own research making contact with team colleagues and employees in other areas, particularly those that work closely with their team **(TA6)** and making full use of available office accommodation. For example hot desk areas, training rooms and meeting areas – formal and informal.

2. Communicating with one another

“ Skills and tools

- **95% of us say that we believe we have the communication skills we need to do our job well. 56% say that the person they report to has good communication skills and only 42% think the Council provides clear guidance to staff on how to communicate effectively.**

There are many communication tools available. We need to think about which is the most effective for the situation and the message we have to convey and for the person/people we are trying to communicate with. We also need to think about the language and tone when we communicate (**G5**) – these help messages get across more effectively if they are right. Minimum written standards for communications will be established (**G1; G4**) and training to reinforce these points will be readily available for both managers and staff (**TR3**). Staff should be able to ask their manager and one another for guidance and support.

- **Face to face** communication is direct and swift and is usually the most effective form of communication between team members and people working closely together. It enables discussion, questioning and feedback. Other face to face situations are team meetings or interdepartmental (**TA1; TA6**) or project meetings. This is the preferred method of communication wherever practical.
- **Telephone** may be better if a colleague is at a distance and needs to be reached quickly. Team members and colleagues working nearby should be prepared to help one another and external customers by taking messages (**G3; G4; TO7**).
- **Email/Electronic Communication** is now part of our lives but needs to be used properly. It is fast and convenient for communicating one message to many people, or for reaching a colleague at a distance if they are away from their desk. It is also good for sending copies of documents, booking meetings etc (**G4; TO6**).
- **The intranet (Ewok)** is available to all staff with access to a pc (**TO3**). It provides the opportunity for staff and managers to share news on their work (**TO5; TA1**), to ask questions of other colleagues and to provide feedback/make suggestions (**TA5**). It also explains who does what in the organisation (**TO1**) and provides contacts. Viewing e-wok should be at least a daily occurrence.
- **The staff newsletter (OK!) (TO4)** is published for all staff five times a year and editorial contributions on a work related theme are welcome. The effectiveness of the newsletter as a communication method for staff will be evaluated each year through an annual readership survey.
- **Language and tone.** Successful two way communication relies on plain language which people understand, expressed positively and sympathetically with the needs of the audience in mind. We need to work to avoid using jargon, gobbledegook and language which is too blunt or critical. There are tools to help – training courses in letter writing and report writing (**TR1; TR3**) and a plain language writing guide (**G5**) to be made available on the intranet and in published form. We can also all tackle the issue in our normal day to day work and in our

teams by looking critically at letters, reports etc and asking, do I understand this and by making positive suggestions for improvement.

Information sharing

- **51% of respondents are happy with inter-departmental communication. 54% of us know what our internal customers require from us. However the survey results suggests that for some areas in particular there are concerns about quality and effectiveness of communication between teams and there is confusion about what internal customers require.**

We are all part of one organisation which pulls together to deliver services to the public who pay our wages. We have external customers but we also have internal ones and we should expect to treat and be treated with respect by all colleagues regardless of where we work and what job we do **(G3; TR2)**.

Colleagues in all sections and work areas need timely, relevant and useful information in order to better perform their own jobs and we can all share the responsibility for achieving this.

We need to explore information sharing methods within teams and between sections which regularly work together on issues and more widely across the organisation. This promotes understanding, networking and opportunities for smarter working. This can include:

- Fostering working relationships between opposite numbers and actively progressing clear and strong links between staff involved in the same projects **(TA6)**.
- Regular publication of headline details by each Service Area on the intranet which can be linked to the appropriate committee reports on ISYS **(TO2; TO3; TO5)**. The intranet offers the chance to invite feedback from both within and outside Service Areas and share ideas between sections **(TA5)**. The information needs to be regularly updated by named, trained publishers in each Service Area to ensure consistency in levels of information available via Ewok across the organisation.

Team meetings

- **Nearly 60% of staff agree that they are invited to attend meetings which keep them up to date with what's happening in their area but only 40% believe that these meetings give them information about what is going on in the Council in general.**

Team meetings **(TA1)** are an essential part of finding out about things which might affect our own work and about how our work could affect others in the team. Effective team meetings will cover team work and also get messages down through the organisation about strategic objectives and key decisions taken by the Council. They will also provide the opportunity for employees to be really involved, to feed back views, concerns and suggestions. There should be scope for managers to adopt the principle of team meetings to suit their own style and the needs of the team but staff

are entitled to expect that they will have the opportunity to receive and give information to their manager regularly and inclusively **(TA1)**.

“ Feedback

- **44% of staff agree that they get regular feedback on how they are doing in their job.**

Feedback is a vital part of effective two way communication. We need to continue to move away from old hierarchical structures with a command and control approach to an environment where feedback is given regularly and constructively by managers to staff about their work, by staff to managers and between colleagues working together on projects **(TA1; TA6)**. Regular appraisals **(G6)** are one way of doing this, but there are other more informal ways and colleagues need to work together to agree on mechanisms that work for them. Examples include a regular suggestions slot in team meetings **(TA1)** and feedback opportunities on a project by project basis.

“ Geographical distance

- **Location, particularly remoteness from the Civic Offices seems to be a key dimension in how positive respondents feel about internal communication.**

Distance represents a potential barrier to effective internal communication and we must work hard all the time to overcome this.

- Regular visits by managers with responsibility for staff in locations outside the Civic Offices will help to keep them briefed on issues affecting their jobs and the Council in general and provide good opportunities for feedback **(TA1)**.
- Another option might be for staff to spend a short period of time working in another location, either in the same Service Area or in a different one **(TA6)**. This might be interesting and enjoyable and could provide the opportunity for fact finding and to develop a better understanding of that working environment. This could be carried out on a reciprocal basis. All such exchanges must be undertaken with due attention to workloads and resources and should be reviewed through the appraisal process.

“ Knowing who to contact

- **Currently 40% of staff agree it is easy to find out who does what at the Council.**

Because we are all part of one organisation we must expect to work together on certain issues regardless of the section we work in. It is therefore vital that we know who does what and how we can contact each other whether by phone, email or in person. The electronic database of staff names and contact details is available to

staff on Ewok **(TO1)**. There are plans to provide further information on roles and responsibilities. Staff have ownership of their own information so that they are responsible for updating it – although new staff and leavers will have their records updated centrally. This database is searchable on names, email addresses, phone numbers and by job title.

3. Communication up and down the organisation

“ Involvement in decision making

- **Although 66% of respondents say their managers communicate well and 62% say their managers encourage teamworking, only 37% believe senior management works hard to stay in touch and only 43% of respondents feel their contribution is valued by the Council.**

We need to promote the regular exchange of information and to provide opportunities for all staff to make suggestions that are recognised and considered for action.

Through:

- Regular informal visits by senior manager/Management Team to sections would assist in getting news ‘on the ground’ **(TA1)**
- Taking forward the managing our business briefing programme which allows for smaller group workshop style participation **(TA1)**
- Developing a regularly updated intranet slot for Management Team to give news and views on issues of importance for all staff and to receive feedback on these from staff **(TO3; TA1)**
- Establishing roles within service areas for key communicators (information intermediaries) who can support their managers to share and receive information from across the organisation in a networking role **(TA1)**.

All suggestions from staff need to be listened to, considered, acted upon if appropriate and feedback given whether they are adopted or not **(TA1; TA5)**. We need to make sure that we celebrate our successes too **(TA3)**.

“ Communicating the vision

- **Two-thirds of staff say they rely on the grapevine to find out what’s going on. Only just over a third of staff think a clear vision for the direction of the Council’s work has been communicated and 52% say that they are not familiar with the Council’s plans for the next year or so. Although only 35% of staff believe that the Council manages change well, they understand why it might be needed and the vast majority of staff support efforts to change.**

The environment in which the Council works is constantly changing, and an understanding of the Council’s vision for the future is essential if we are to keep pace with the rate of change. We need to understand how our work can contribute to the Council’s strategic aims and we must communicate clearly with each other if we are to work effectively as individuals or in teams to help in delivering the Council’s aims.

We need to build on the generally high level of support given to the Chief Executive’s briefings to ensure the Council’s vision is understood by all staff:

- Encourage an environment where staff feel able to communicate freely and can contribute to shaping the Council's vision (**G2; TA4**).
- Explore new ways of presenting this information more regularly, including better contact with staff located outside the Civic Offices. This could include the introduction of structured briefing sessions building on the Chief Executive's staff briefings followed through with briefings by Service Heads to identify how strategic aims are to be met through the day-to-day work of the Council - attended by a representative from Management Team (**TA1**).
- Provide regular feedback on how we are progressing towards the Council's vision (**TA1**).
- Clearly demonstrate the links between the Council's Vision, service plans and individual/team responsibilities and targets (**TA1**).
- Encourage feedback to enable staff to feel their contribution towards the strategic aims is recognised and where difficulties arise, these are addressed positively, not critically (**TA4; TA5**).

4. Making things happen

A significant amount of effort has been invested in developing this strategy by many individuals and groups of staff. We need to ensure that something positive will come of it and that we can measure these improvements over time.

We need to:

- Work with staff focus groups to develop an **action plan** with clear responsibilities, targets and timescales for delivery of **co-ordinated** and **planned communications** which will support personal development plans, service and corporate planning
- **Brand and launch the strategy and action plan** to all staff so that everyone is aware of it
- Provide **awareness raising sessions** about the strategy and action plan to help achieve buy in by staff including new starters and **link individual performance in communications in to the appraisal scheme (G6)** to measure personal effectiveness in this area
- **Regularly monitor and evaluate** the success of the strategy and evaluate target achievements of the action plan by undertaking a **yearly review** after implementation (first scheduled review would be April 2003) based on the first internal communications survey and **setting up a staff panel (TA4)** (like the citizens' panel) to receive both quantitative and qualitative feedback and further suggestions for improvement. The Improvement and Development Agency's (I&DeA) future reviews of our progress will also give a broad indication of how we are doing.
- **to learn from one another and identify and embrace best practice**
- Work to **foster a culture and climate** for the organisation in which people feel readily able to contribute and communicate wherever they work and whatever job they do through an **organised schedule of training events for communicators** and an **annual programme of communication events (TA1; TR3)**
- **Celebrate our successes! (TA3)**

This strategy is about the role we each have in improving communications - please try to understand your part in making it a success - let people know what you think.

For any assistance you need with the strategy please contact Alison Burt, Marketing Communications Manager or Martin Evans, Personnel Manager, or your manager.