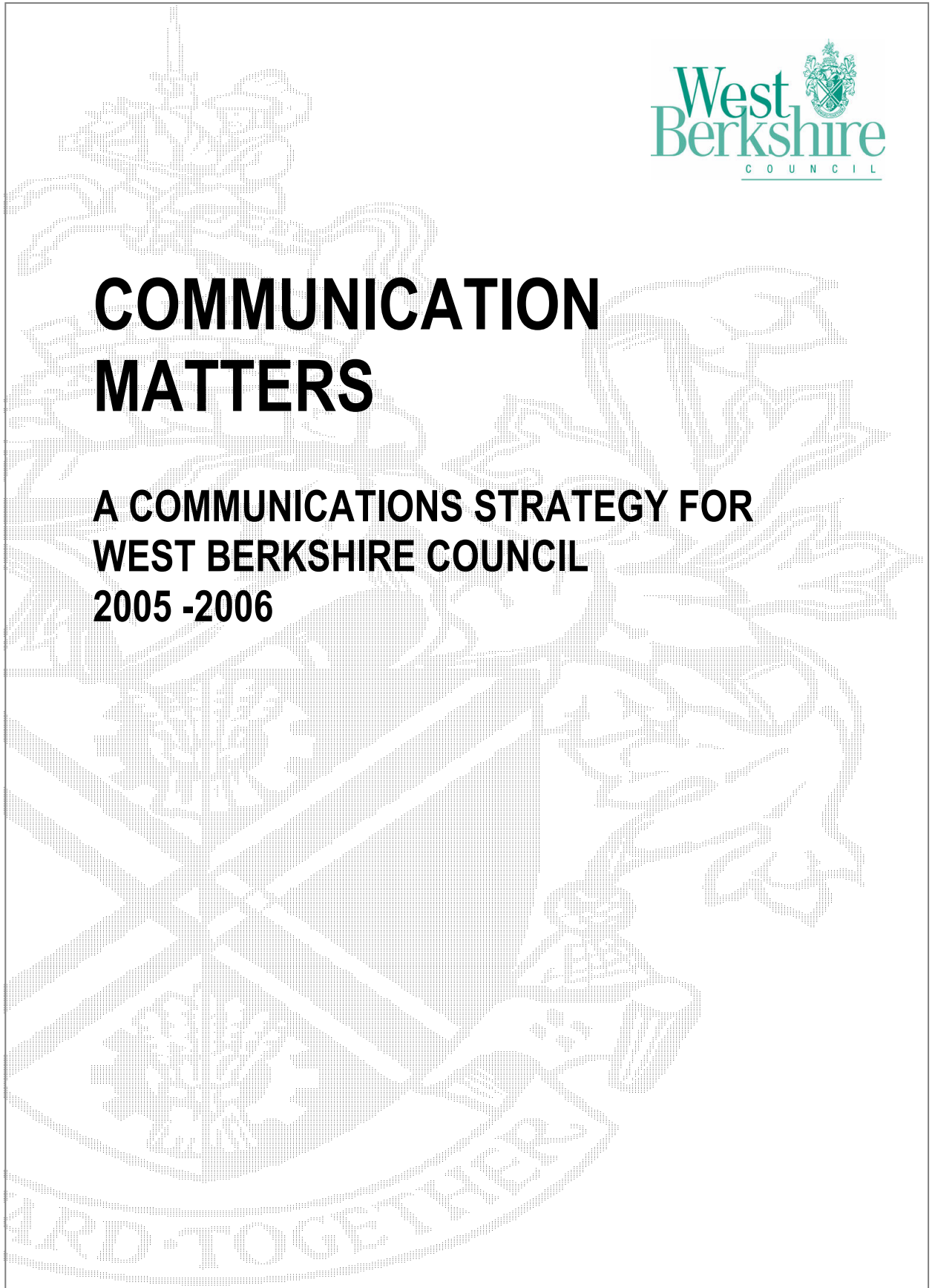


# COMMUNICATION MATTERS

A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY FOR  
WEST BERKSHIRE COUNCIL  
2005 -2006



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## 1 Introduction

Effective communications are essential to the success of any organisation. This strategy sets out the Council's approach to communications and provides a framework for improving our performance.

This review takes a look at the communications approach and performance two years since the conception of Information and Communication as a service unit, to lead the charge on communications activity.

To achieve its goal of effective Community Leadership, the Council must be able to communicate and influence a wide range of organisations, individuals and partners in a cohesive and co-ordinated way. Ensuring that the Council co-ordinates communication activity is therefore important in getting our message across, providing good value for money and providing the people of West Berkshire with good quality services.

### Building on success

West Berkshire has a successful track record of communications activity - both internal and external. Examples include: West Berkshire News, now into its second year of publication, development of a Council-wide communications forward plan – by the corporate communications group and extensive communications activity around key projects, including the Newbury vision.

The new communications forward plan, enables us to monitor communications activities across the Council for the first time. All parties in the corporate communications group have provided their annual project plans and delivery targets, against which we can monitor delivery and project success.

## 2 The purpose of the Communications Strategy

Improved communications can nurture a better understanding and acceptance among our internal and external audiences of the Council's actions and the reasons for them

The improved understanding will:-

- increase public appreciation of the Council;
- help facilitate the effective delivery of services;
- help maximise the use of available resources;
- raise staff morale.

The Communications Strategy is a crucial document for the Council, setting out principles and approach and also defining responsibilities. The Communications Strategy is a focus for action for the Council and will:

- endorse communication as a priority issue for West Berkshire Council;
- support the aims and objectives of the Council's Corporate Plan;
- recognise the importance of two-way communication to assess audience needs, and the requirement to explain how customer views have been taken into account;
- be reflected in service plans throughout the Authority;

- establish that good communication is everyone's responsibility from Councillors and the Chief Executive, to front-line and support staff;
- identify key responsibilities for communication in West Berkshire Council;
- demonstrate our communications commitment to the people of West Berkshire and our partners in the community;
- encourage good communications practice internally and externally;
- provide an action plan for improvement.

### **3 The case for a Communications Strategy**

Research published by the Improvement and Development Agency shows that people know little about Councils or what they do. It has also established that the less people know about an organisation, the less favourably disposed they are towards it.

The research shows the majority of local residents see councils as 'bureaucratic' rather than 'hard working'; as 'closed' rather than 'open and honest'; and as poor information providers compared with other public and private sector organisations.

It also shows that good performance delivery isn't always matched by good satisfaction ratings, and therefore highlights the importance of quality of communication in shaping opinions of the Council. A clear message is that:

**Effective communication leads to improved customer satisfaction.**

<b>The I&amp;DeA national research says that the public ...</b>	
<b>Want:</b>	<b>Are less interested in:</b>
Information about services provided and how to get access to them	Over-arching promises about service delivery
Reasons decisions are made and how local views were taken into account	How well the Council is performing, for example in Audit Commission terms or against long and complex plans.
Information about how the Council spends its money ('my council tax')	Details of Council personalities rather than facts about services
Planned activity ('what are you going to do about ...')	
News of local events	
How to get in touch, and how to complain	

## 4 The audiences we need to reach

Accurately identifying the audience is essential for good communications. Our audiences are many and varied and messages need to be tailored to be effective. Getting the message across may take different forms depending on the audience but the key to success here is to place yourself in the position of the audience, and ask how would they understand and react to the information presented.

<b>Some of our key audiences are:</b>
The public as service user and taxpayer to create an informed and positive impression of the Council including all “hard to reach” groups to promote equality and inclusion.
Our own Councillors to facilitate their roles as key decision-makers, representatives of their wards, and guardians of the Council’s corporate reputation
Council staff to nurture trust and loyalty, so they become ambassadors for our organisation
Our partners and stakeholders in the business community, public sector, and voluntary sector to create effective working partnerships to the benefit of the community as a whole
Other local authorities and their forums, to share the principles of best practice and help ensure best value in our service delivery
Central government and its departments to ensure their full understanding of our achievements and status, and to generate their support for our organisation

## 5 The key themes we need to convey

In providing information to our audiences, we should have regard to our corporate priorities that commit us to:-

<b>The Council’s Strategic Priorities 2003 - 2008</b>
Providing strong community leadership
Tackling all forms of social exclusion across the District
Promoting independence for older people and those with disabilities
Maintaining high standards of educational achievement across all our schools
Ensuring that the street environment is clean, well maintained and safe
Increasing the provision of homes that are affordable to those on low incomes
Improving life for looked after children and other young people at risk
Improving transportation
Improving environmental resource management
Creating attractive and vibrant town centres

Working through the West Berkshire Partnership, we should also support the four leading priorities:-

<b>West Berkshire Community plan 2003 –2008: Four leading priorities</b>
Ensuring that everyone has access to adequate affordable housing whether owned or rented
Developing transport solutions matched to people’s needs across the District
Reducing social exclusion in rural areas by providing equal access to rural services
Developing learning opportunities for people of all ages to support social and economic well being

## **6 The Council’s strategic principles of communications**

The image we project as a Council is important because it helps the public and our partners to understand the work we do. It should also accurately reflect our corporate values and the efforts we are continually making to uphold these.

To reflect clearly the sort of organisation we aspire to be we should articulate these strategic principles which are based on our corporate values in all our communications activity.

<b>Strategic Principles - reflecting our values.</b>
A provider of quality public services that represent good value for money
An open, honest and democratic organisation that adheres to required standards of public service
Responsive to the needs, wishes, and opinions of local residents and other customers
Working with our many partners to co-ordinate service provision
Ensuring equality for all in the services and information we provide
Aiming to continually improve in every aspect of our work

It is also essential that we are seen as a single organisation, as presented in our established corporate identity for the Council. All published material should adhere to our accepted corporate style (which includes use of logos), and be easily and instantly identifiable as originating from West Berkshire Council.

Service areas should hold a copy of the corporate identity manual, but the graphics and public relations teams hold copies for reference.

## **7 Responsibility for communications**

### **7.1 Everybody**

A key message from the strategy is that everyone in the organisation has a personal responsibility for making communications work both internally and externally. Structures, frameworks and identifying key communications responsibilities supports good communication, but all staff and Members need to be ambassadors for getting the messages across and in listening to our partners, stakeholders and customers.

## **7.2 Corporate Board**

The Chief Executive and Directors will be responsible for driving the communications strategy by actively and demonstrably applying its principles to all aspects of their work.

They will communicate decisions and strategic thinking behind them to Heads of Services in order that appropriate cascade of information can be timely and accurate and that all audiences hear the news and have the opportunity to feedback to the Council.

## **7.3 Heads of Service**

All Heads of Service will take responsibility for ensuring the successful implementation of the Communications strategy in their areas of responsibility. They will:

- ensure that all staff are fully aware of the Communications Strategy, and acting upon it;
- provide regular feedback to the Head of Information and Communication, both informally and through the Corporate Communications Group; where each service area has an invited representative,
- establish channels of communication for staff to express their views and opinions on internal procedures, policies and practices;
- provide regular feedback to their own Director through Management Team meetings, thus informing an upward flow of information as well as the more usual top downwards procedure;
- provide information to, and liaise with, elected Members within the guidelines of the established protocol;
- advise and recommend on future planning for Communications issues;
- where relevant, make Communications ability a key result area in staff appraisals

## **7.4 Members**

Elected Members are a critical link in the chain of communication with the public, with partners and with staff. Their role is critical because they both represent the views of the public to the council “outside – in” and the views and values of the Council to the public “inside – out”.

Roles for Members in communicating and influencing on behalf of the Council are important in fulfilling the Council’s Community Leadership roles. Member development programme helps to support Members as they learn and practice new communications techniques. Support from Officers to Members with timely and accurate information is important and guidelines and protocols are to be put in place to ensure smooth communication.

# **8 Communication Functions**

The Communication Strategy can be broken down into a number of functions that support and are informed by the strategic principles. The action plan is sub-divided using these as headings.



<b>Communication Functions</b>		
<b>Function</b>	<b>Aim</b>	<b>Principles</b>
Public relations	To look after the reputation of West Berkshire Council. To promote better understanding of the Council and its work .	Inform and educate the public Target key issues for the Council and for local people
Internal communications	To sustain two way flow of information in the Council and the Amey West Berkshire Partnership to encourage confidence, trust and loyalty.	Inform staff and Members of issues that affect them and the Council Consult staff formally and informally about issues that affect them and the Council
Consultation	To open channels and links with the public, partners and staff and inform and direct the way we do business and provide services.	We will consult internally and externally Consultation will be linked to the provision of information to support informed comments We will feedback to consultees and show how their views were listened to.
Corporate identity	To ensure that services and information are consistently represented in a recognisable corporate style.	Information in all formats will always be clearly branded. We will follow the Corporate style guidelines.
Information Management	To use up to date channels both internally and externally to get the message across. To promote self access to communication and information sites supporting “intelligent customers”. Meet statutory requirements for Freedom of Information and Data Protection Act.	Encourage e-communication by training and raising awareness of advantages. Build on the success of the website to make it a key channel for communication – especially when new website is delivered this summer. Use the Intranet (and for schools extranet) and e-mail to communicate with our staff and Members Council is open, honest and accountable.

## 9 Communication Priorities

Outputs	Actions	Timescale	Accountability and Relevant Plans	Targets and indicators
<b>Section 1 : Themes across all functions</b>				
Ensure established corporate communications group delivers its forward plan.	To co-ordinate all Council communications functions through a cohesive programme of activity. I.e. The Communications Forward Plan.	On-going	Head of Information and Communication Corporate Communications Group	<i>Activities delivered</i>
All literature produced in line with new 'how to' guide.	Widest distribution of guide to all staff involved in producing literature and regular updates of information to reflect changes in brand or corporate ID.	September 2005 and ongoing	Members of Corporate Communications Group Heads of Service and delegates	60% of all known literature meeting standards in 2005, 80% in 2006
Copy of all Council external publications lodged in central 'library'	All service areas to be notified of need to lodge copies. Information and Communication to establish central library for general as well as Freedom of Information Act requirements.	May 2005 and ongoing	All Heads of Service Corporate Communications Group	All known publications lodged in central library
<b>Section 2 :Communications functions</b>				
<b>Public Relations</b>				
Increase in positive coverage generated by WBC.	Measure favourability and volume of press coverage.	Report every 6 months	S&C Service Plan Communications Action Plan Corporate Board and Management Board	15% increase in positive coverage.
Publish 4 issues yearly of West Berkshire News.	Published according to schedule.	April 2006	Information and Communication Unit LSP Editorial Board	Published.
Publish Official Guide to West Berkshire.	New edition to be focused on business benefits of West Berkshire.	November 2005	Information and Communication	Guide published at zero cost to the Council.
Media briefing sessions by Executive Members of the Council	Run pilot briefings	December 2005	Head of Information and Communication	Pilot briefings run. Assessment of effectiveness carried out

<b>Outputs</b>	<b>Actions</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Accountability and Relevant Plans</b>	<b>Targets and indicators</b>
<b>Internal and Member Communications</b>				
Information Bulletin for Members to be improved	Encourage other literature to be delivered as electronic media.	September 2005	Policy and Performance Information and Communication	Take up of electronic media.
Deliver staff electronic newsletter monthly.	Publish electronically (hard copies to those not on email).	Monthly	Information and Communication	Publication achieved
Support Members in their role as communicators on behalf of the Council	Continue to provide focused media training for Members.	Ongoing	Information and Communication	Executive Members trained.
<b>Consultation</b>				
Co-ordination of public consultations	All proposed consultations identified, and system for co-ordination established	Ongoing	Policy and Performance	All proposed consultations co-ordinated
Integration of Consultation into service planning	Consultation Strategy is in place and is being updated  Meet statutory requirements for Best value	March 2006	Heads of Service Policy and Performance	Implement Consultation Strategy
<b>Corporate Identity</b>				
Abridged guide to Corporate Identity	Write and design guide	October 2005	Public Relations team	Guide published and circulated
<b>Information Management</b>				
Adherence to corporate identity maintained	On-going assessment of all publications lodged in the central 'library'	Ongoing	All Heads of Service Information Management Team	All lodged publications adhering to corporate identity
All Council external publications available on website	All service areas to action placing of publications on the website	April 2004	All service areas. Information and Communication Unit to monitor	% of publications on website
Review and upgrade West Berkshire Website	Source provider. Train users.	Autumn 2005	Information Management Team All Heads of Service Corporate Communications	Website delivered

Outputs	Actions	Timescale	Accountability and Relevant Plans	Targets and indicators
Meet statutory Data Protection and Freedom of Information requirements	Adhere to responses in agreed timescales. Publish on-line publication scheme. Disclosure log.	Ongoing	Group Information Management Team All Heads of Service	All statutory Data Protection and Freedom of Information requirements met.

## 10 The channels and tools available

Our communications opportunities rely on the toolkit available to us. The following illustrates the main channels and potential results that could accrue from each.

<b>Communications channel</b>	<b>Target audiences</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Potential achievements</b>
Ward councillors	Local residents, business and other communities	Two-way liaison / consultation	Better informed audiences, gleaning of local issues
Executive councillors	The media, govt and other bodies	Voicing of strategic and other issues	Demonstrated community leadership,
Staff	Work colleagues local residents	Word of mouth from 1,600 potential ambassadors	Spread of accurate, positive information
Management briefings	Staff	Cascade of information and decisions, feedback of ideas / concerns	Better informed and motivated workforce, gleaning of information
Monthly staff newsletter	Staff	Distribution electronically of information to all staff	Better informed and motivated workforce
Councillors' information bulletin	Councillors	Briefing on business management, news, planning applications	Well informed elected membership of Council
Website	All	Delivery of up to the minute information, interactive consultation / applications	Better informed audiences. Efficient information exchange
Intranet	Staff	Comprehensive data source, interactive messaging	Better and more efficiently informed workforce
The media	Local residents, businesses and other bodies	Promotion of news and information through our own press releases	Better informed audiences
Our own public leaflets, brochures, posters	Members of the public and their sub-groups	Delivery of information, interactive consultation	Better informed audiences, assisted service delivery.
West Berkshire News	Local residents	Delivery of information, presented in a quality journalistic way	Better informed residents, assisted service delivery and enhanced reputation for the WBP
Consultation processes	Local residents, businesses, and other bodies	Paper, electronic or voice canvassing	Collection of data and opinion to aid service delivery. Imparting of information
Public meetings	Local residents, parishes and other bodies	Collective information exchange, debate and recommendations	Information briefing, gleaning of local opinion, informed recommendations
Council, Executive, other committee meetings and their reports	Members, officers, parishes, other organisations, the public, the media	Written and verbal briefings on key decisions to be made. Verbal debate.	Audiences informed of key decisions and associated rationale
Reception areas / public access points	Visiting public, businesses and other organisations	Front-line interaction with visitors	Creation of professional image. Information exchange