

building better communications

Southwark Council Communications Strategy

2003/2006

November 2003

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1. Communicating well

Communications Objectives

- 1.1 The MORI surveys have confirmed the importance of keeping the people who live, work and visit Southwark well informed about the borough and the services the council provides.
- 1.2 This strategy is designed to further improve our *external communications with stakeholders locally, regionally and nationally and enhance the council's 'public face'.
- 1.3 The council's communications objectives are therefore as follows:
 - To inform all the council's stakeholders of our services, and our work to make Southwark a better place, to live, to work, to learn and to have fun.
 - To influence perceptions of Southwark, locally, regionally and nationally.
 - To engage our partners, government, business and other stakeholders and encourage them to invest in Southwark.

Communications Goals

- 1.4 In delivering these objectives, we will achieve the following goals:
 - a unified brand across all council services to stand as a hallmark of quality, customer service and innovation;
 - deliver well-executed, well-planned communications that reach all parts of the community;
 - actively demonstrate the council's leadership role by engaging with and responding to local residents, encouraging citizenship and protecting the interests of local people;
 - improve the council's reputation and influence with all stakeholder groups.

Communications Vision

- 1.5 In three years time, once the communications strategy is fully implemented, we will see:
 - A greater understanding of what the council is doing to improve the borough, their neighbourhood and local services so that residents feel **well informed**.
 - A better sense of the council's **community leadership** role so that residents feel confident and able to have a say in decisions that impact on them.
 - An enhanced **reputation** and position of **influence** for Southwark Council locally, regionally and on a range of national platforms.
- 1.6 Achieving this will support the council's drive to become a 'good' CPA assessed authority by 2005. We should also expect to see further improvements in the 2004 and 2006 MORI surveys in how well residents feel informed by the council, continuing the positive upward trend we have seen since the mid 1990's.
- 1.7 Outlined in this strategy are the means of achieving this. Section 2 reviews where we are now, section 3 looks forward in more detail to where we want to be and section 4 considers the changes to people and culture, strategy and process, financial planning and the communications methods we need to adopt to get there. The appendix attached sets out a plan for improving how we manage communications across the council and the actions we must take to achieve our communications vision.

- 1.8 The strategy is designed to be an organic document. Operational communications plans to deliver within the framework set by the strategy will be drawn up annually as part of the business and budget planning process.

**External communications: the strategy is designed to cover all aspects of external communications; including media and public relations, campaigns, marketing and publications and new media. Once completed, the reputation work will also be incorporated into the strategy. This strategy does not cover internal communications, although the effectiveness of our internal communications will have a direct impact on the content, proactivity and quality of our external communications.*

2. Where are we now?

“More people in Southwark say they feel well informed by the council than at any other time since MORI started conducting residents’ surveys for the council (1979).”

- *In the 2002 survey, 51% of residents say they feel well informed by the council about the services and benefits it provides.*
- *This shows a net increase of 17 percentage points since 2000.*
- *Southwark now outperforms Brent, Enfield and Islington.*
- *Three in five people were satisfied with the way the council is running the borough.*
- *Southwark is just above Brent, Enfield, Camden and Islington on satisfaction.*

MORI Residents survey 2002

External reviews

MORI

- 2.1 This increase in the degree to which residents feel well-informed is important. Research by MORI and other similar organisations shows a strong correlation between the degree to which people feel well-informed, and their level of overall satisfaction with the local council. We should aim to see a further increase in this figure in the 2004 MORI survey.
- 2.2 What these MORI surveys do not show us is what kind of information people deem to be important in order to consider themselves well informed. And whilst we have a very clear picture of their concerns, we don’t know to what degree they are aware of the actions we are taking to address them. Awareness of five priorities and the work the council and its partners are undertaking to tackle them will be measured in the 2004 MORI survey.
- 2.3 Whilst the MORI evidence clearly demonstrates consistent improvement in some aspects of our communications over the last four or five years the Best Value review of External Communications and the subsequent CPA assessment nevertheless each recognised the need for even further improvement across all aspects of our communications work.

BEST VALUE AND OTHER REVIEWS

- 2.4 Various reviews and audits were commissioned as part of the Best Value process and these reached broadly the same conclusions:
 - the need to become more proactive and strategic in planning and executing our communications activities;
 - the need to achieve a change in organisational culture and ethos to achieve this;
 - the need to place communications high on all Southwark agendas and consider it at an early stage in the cycle of policy and decision making.

REPUTATION

- 2.5 The Best Value review of External Communications and the CPA assessment each singled out the issue of reputation as an area of weakness. The 2002 MORI survey gives us a baseline from which to measure residents’ perceptions of our reputation.
- 2.6 We also need to build a picture of our reputation amongst other stakeholders and opinion formers within and outside of Southwark to understand how they perceive us now, and the steps we must take to build and enhance our reputation with these people. MORI has been commissioned to carry out an independent reputation audit.

The findings will contribute to the development of our future communications programme.

Improvements already implemented

- 2.7 A number of changes have already been put into place since the Best Value review and CPA assessment to start to drive through improvement to our corporate communications capacity and forward planning:
- **Communications Managers**
Five new communications managers with a departmental brief have been appointed to strengthen the corporate team and provide professional communications management capacity within the departments.
 - **Communications Planning**
With the communications managers in post, we have reviewed our communications planning to encourage a more proactive approach and more effective co-ordination across all council services and partnerships. Each communications manager is undertaking a baseline audit in their department to identify the full scope of communications activity.
 - **Media evaluation**
Media evaluation is undertaken each week to analyse media coverage for the preceding week and identify priorities for the coming week.
- 2.8 These changes are important building blocks to support the transformation of external communications in Southwark.

3. Where do we want to be

- 3.1 As Best Value and other reviews have identified, to achieve our communications objectives of informing, influencing and engaging our stakeholders and the wider world outside Southwark we have to work differently and more professionally. Chief officers, executive members and communications staff must take joint responsibility for setting a clear proactive communications agenda and driving it through the organisation. The following sets out the detail for achieving this.

Strategic and proactive communications

- 3.2 Communications *must* be seen in a strategic context. It matters to everything the council does. The council's messages must be few, clear, consistent and continually reinforced and all external communications materials must look and feel professional, timely, focused and be totally accessible to the audiences they are meant for.
- 3.3 Forward planning, consistency and quality are key to achieving this. Officers and members must consider strategic communications implications when framing service delivery and enacting policy decisions. To take full advantage of the benefits that communications can bring, they must seek out and consider professional advice right from the outset.
- 3.4 This will require a significant shift in culture within the organisation. We have a long term view of how we want the council to be seen - as a...

"modern authority, recognised as best in class, that excels in customer care...through being a learning organisation, focused on quality, that enables and empowers our people to deliver."

- 3.5 But to achieve this communications must become an integral part of policy and service planning, and we must adopt a clear framework for providing professional communications advice and guidance whenever it is needed.

Overarching vision and communications framework

- 3.6 The overarching vision and five policy priorities agreed by the council and the Southwark Alliance will form the strategic communications framework for the council.

"We want to make Southwark a better place to live, to work, to learn and to have fun."

We will do this by:

- *Tackling poverty*
- *Making Southwark cleaner and greener*
- *Raising education standards*
- *Tackling crime and the fear of crime*
- *Improving the health of the borough.*

- 3.7 The council's communications activities will be assessed to ensure that they reflect and promote these five policy priorities wherever possible. Spending on new developments and improvements will be assessed in the same way to ensure that capital expenditure is directly linked to one or more of the five priorities.

Integrating communications into annual budget and business planning processes

- 3.8 To develop a proactive and properly resourced annual forward communications plan, Communications priorities must be set annually by chief officers and executive members so that resource allocation and delivery are considered as an integral part of the business planning and budget-setting process.

- 3.9 Once headline priorities are set, the council-wide communications team will produce an annual communications plan for each policy priority with clear timeframes and dedicated budgets.

How will the council's communications look

- 3.10 A clear communications framework, better planning and extra capacity within the council-wide communications team will result in significant improvements in our external communications.
- 3.11 Public awareness and understanding of the council's services and actions to improve quality of life for local people will be enhanced, and we will see tangible results of this in the 2004 and 2006 MORI residents surveys. Residents will feel increasingly well-informed about council services and be constantly reminded as they go about their everyday lives of the council's commitment to tackling their top concerns. Our reputation will be enhanced amongst all of our target stakeholder groups, including those outside of Southwark. The money we spend on communications will be worked much harder to give maximum benefit.
- 3.12 This will be achieved through a combination of:
- Driving forward a consistent corporate branding style, following a branding audit across all services.
 - Clear, focused information about council services that meet the particular needs of the target audience for whom they are intended
 - Highly creative and properly funded proactive marketing campaigns.
 - Proactive media strategy.
 - Public affairs campaigns to influence government policy outcomes on issues impacting on the borough and the people who live here.
 - Well-designed, accessible, interactive and comprehensive new-media channels, including web portal and kiosks (that support both communications and customer access strategies).
 - An evaluation framework to monitor the effectiveness of our communications efforts.

4. How will we get there – culture and people

Communications leadership

- 4.1 Clear messages are already emerging from the reputation audit – stakeholders and opinion formers outside the borough believe that Southwark is a highly complex borough with an equally complex agenda. Equally, they think that the council is backwards in coming forward about Southwark’s innovation and achievements.
- 4.2 If this perception is to be reversed and we are to establish a stronger reputation for achieving and innovating *despite* the challenges we face, we need to adopt a more strategic and forward-thinking approach to promoting the council's work.
- 4.3 The leader and chief executive are in a unique position to maintain a strategic perspective and overview of policy and service developments, and the communications opportunities arising from them.
- 4.4 To channel this knowledge the chief executive, the leader and the head of communications will meet every two weeks. This kind of arrangement is common practice in boroughs such as Westminster and elsewhere in London and other parts of the country. It will signal to the rest of the council that communications is being raised up the agenda to become a corporate and Executive priority.

Council-wide buy-in

- 4.5 Communicating with the public has been placed much higher up the agenda by the council’s administration, and as a result of the CPA assessment last year. But the council culture and structures have yet to catch up. Policy development and implementation are not yet an integral part of communications and vice versa. Whilst the council’s approach to communications planning has improved, it is still not as strong as it should be and does not reflect a whole council focus on events that are important PR opportunities.
- 4.6 To drive forward a much more proactive and well-planned communications agenda, communications must become a standing item on management and team meetings. This will provide the additional benefit of encouraging staff to think about communications (and their services) in the context of success, achievement and innovation.

Corporate Communications Team

- 4.7 In common with other core services, responsibility for service-based communications has traditionally been devolved to business managers. However this has resulted in ad hoc and, often, poor quality communications and it is important that this arrangement is now reversed. The appointment of department-based Communications Managers marks the beginning of this process.
- 4.8 Ultimate responsibility for all communications activity within service areas – including improvements in quality and assessment of need, value for money and effectiveness - will rest with the communications managers who will work closely with, and draw support from, colleagues in other parts of the council including the central communications team. The new council-wide communications team will work in a much more integrated and supportive fashion, for the good of Southwark Council as a whole rather than individual departments. Working across service and organisational boundaries will become increasingly common as we adopt a matrix approach to communications, based on the five council priorities..
- 4.9 All communications managers will report jointly to a senior manager within their department and the head of communications, who will be closely involved in the performance management, work planning and professional development of all communications staff.

- 4.10 All media relations activity will continue to be channelled through the press office to ensure close consistency of message and response, especially important if the communications framework outlined in this strategy is to work effectively.

Protocols

- 4.11 This enhancement in communications activity – and capacity – provides an even stronger case for clear protocols to clarify roles and responsibilities of communications staff, chief officers and executive members:

EXECUTIVE MEMBERS

- Ownership of five priorities, as well as Executive portfolios.
- Ultimate ownership of proactive communications and reputation agenda for the council as a whole.
- External lead as spokespeople for all council (and some partnership) issues.

COT

- Ultimate ownership of all departmental communications activities with a focus on proactive news and reputation management, and sound forward planning.
- Responsible for strategic development and delivery of annual communications plans (and budget to support them).
- Regular consideration of communications as a standing item on COT and SMT agendas.

HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS

- Professional lead for communications across the council; professional ownership of external communications the associated reputation work and operational delivery.
- Shared line- and performance-management of all council communications staff.

CENTRAL COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

- Central contact point for all reactive and proactive media relations and PR activities.
- ‘Buddy’ partnership with nominated communications manager.
- Co-ordinating point for all cross-departmental / multi-agency media relations and PR activities.
- Multi-disciplinary professional support (media relations, marketing and publications, new media) for communications managers.

COMMUNICATIONS MANAGERS

- Management of all departmental communications activities (other than media contact), including strategic web editing and content development role for the department..
- Quality assurance role for all external communications activities emanating from department.
- ‘Buddy’ partnership with nominated press officer.
- Day-to-day management of service input into corporate communications planner.

5. How will we get there – budget and planning

Management of communications resources

5.1 The Best Value review identified the need for a review and rationalisation of communications resources. Money for communications has traditionally been held within business unit budgets, and under a variety of codes. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. As an immediate first step, all future spend on communications should be contained within the following definitions:

- *Publications* - magazines, newsletters.
- *Campaigns* - themed marketing activity over a fixed period using a range of media, eg leaflets, advertising, billboards, posters, buses, supermarket till receipts, events.
- *Information* - annual reports, leaflets, brochures – eg Corporate Annual Report, Council Tax leaflet, leaflets to promote / inform about particular services or activities.
- *Advertising* - press advertisements, public notices (NB. recruitment advertising may be coded elsewhere).

5.2 This will be refined over time to give greater detail on communications spend across the council. The ultimate aim should be to allocate budget at the beginning of each year to follow the communications priorities agreed by chief officers and executive members.

Communications planning

5.3 To reach a clear communications operational plan ready for the start of each new financial year the Corporate Communication team will oversee:

- Annual prioritisation of communications effort and spend agreed by Executive Members / COT. This will include four or five key marketing campaigns, reputation targets and so on. All of these should reflect some or all of the five priorities.
- Departmental communications plans produced as part of business planning process aligned to each priority
- Budget allocation and project plan for delivery produced by communications managers.

Where the communications strategy fits into the council's work

5.4 To be effective, the communications strategy must be a living document that relates to the world around it, contributing to the community plan as well as the council's Best Value Performance Plan, and other council-wide programmes such as the [Forward@Southwark](#) programme, the customer service centre and our face-to-face contact with the public.

6. How will we get there – branding and style

Looking from the outside in

- 6.1 As outlined earlier, the central goals of the Council's communications strategy should be to provide timely, reliable and relevant information about council services and policies, in a way that is accessible to all the people who need them.
- 6.2 This will require a reversal of the council's current approach. We should aim to communicate with all stakeholders at a time and through a medium of their choosing. That means taking information out to people in a thoughtful and proactive way, rather than expecting them to seek it out from us.
- 6.3 The Government's *Connecting with Communities* project shows that people want to receive the following communications from local councils:
- Information about the provision of services.
 - News about local activities.
 - Reasons why decisions are made.
 - Tangible improvements to services.
 - Information about how council tax is spent
 - How to contact the council.

Corporate branding and style

- 6.4 Irrespective of structure or service delivery arrangements, the council is just one entity in the eyes of the public. That's why the organisation must look and act as one.
- 6.5 Branding is key to achieving this. Steps have already been taken to strengthen Southwark's brand. New corporate identity guidelines are available on the website to guide internal staff, partners and other external bodies delivering services or producing material on behalf of the council.
- 6.6 The rules are clear. The *Southwark Council* brand is used at all times, and must be reflected on all branded materials, from stationery, forms, leaflets and newsletters to uniforms, vehicles and signs. Use of individual service, departmental, initiative or development brands is not acceptable, and the communications team will carry out regular random audits to ensure that the correct branding is being used.

Branding and partnerships / external service providers

- 6.7 External contractors delivering services *on* behalf of the Council must also be required to use the Southwark brand. Southwark residents must be aware of the full extent of the services they receive to make an informed judgement about whether they're getting good value for money. The council's branding and style requirements should be clearly stated in all service specifications and monitored as part of the contract.
- 6.8 Branding issues for partnerships such as the LSP (Local Strategic Partnership) and SSP (Safer Southwark Partnership) will be considered on an individual basis and guidelines drawn together for branding each one.

Clear and accessible communications

- 6.9 Plain language and consistency of style are basic tools of good communications. Yet much of our information is produced using passive verbs, long sentences, council jargon and stylised designs that fly in the face of normal standards of grammar and

capitalisation. Over six million adults in the UK have difficulty reading everyday information such as newspapers and claim forms. Many rely on translations, and translating overly complex, jargon-filled or grammatically incorrect information into another language increases the potential for confusion even further. So, we must review our use of language and style. Sometimes our approach will differ, depending on the audience but the underlying principle shouldn't change. Our use of language should be modified to meet the profile of our target group.

7. How will we get there – our communications approach

Positive media relations & public affairs

7.1 If our ambition is to raise the council's profile further we must become much more opportunistic in the way we manage our media relations and public affairs.

7.2 Our ultimate goal is to:

- Make Southwark the first port of call for journalists looking for a local angle on a national news story, or a tangible example of a government policy in action on the ground.
- Achieve a reputation as one of the best communications functions in local government for delivering a speedy, creative and professional media relations service.
- Use existing and emerging technologies to provide sound and print materials across the web.
- Introduce more effective mechanisms to meet the needs of 24 hour broadcast organisations but...
- Sustain our relationship with more traditional local media.

To achieve this, we need to make a much greater investment of time and in planning. Executive members, chief officers and communications staff need to think ahead and ensure that the planning and execution of our proactive media relations programme is high on everyone's agenda, and closely aligned to the council's policy and service development, right from the outset. At the same time, the media relations team and communications managers need to keep a watching brief on national policy developments and announcements that have a strong relevance for Southwark.

High visibility marketing campaigns

7.6 Whilst a strong focus on media relations is important, and inevitable, a combination of communications channels is often more powerful in raising public awareness. By combining highly creative design, an innovative variety of print, direct marketing, web and PR, and a user-focused approach to targeting our campaigns we can achieve a powerful impact on awareness and perception.

7.7 To achieve such an impact, budget is key. Forward planning is equally crucial. It is better to run a small number of high impact campaigns over the course of a year than to stretch resources over a greater number, and seriously dilute the impact as a result. The programme of campaigns for the forthcoming year should be considered as part of the annual communications plan for each of the five priorities with clear timeframes and dedicated budgets (see 3.4)

7.8 A corporate framework for managing campaigns is also required to ensure that all campaigns are planned, executed and evaluated in the same way. A framework will be agreed by the corporate communications team and subsequently reviewed at regular communications forums once campaigns are underway.

Southwark Life

- 7.9 Published every two months, Southwark Life remains one of the most popular sources of information. Regular reviews of cost and distribution are undertaken to ensure maximum value for money and quality. The editorial policy is currently being re-written to better reflect the five council priorities.

Direct mail

- 7.10 Leaflets through the door are still the main way that people prefer to find out about the council. Nationally, 46% of people state this as their preferred method. In Southwark, the figure rises to 51%. If we are to maximise the impact of this kind of direct mail however we must manage the volume and regularity of the flow of information through people's doors.

Leaflets, posters, policy and strategy documents and other printed materials

- 7.11 A council-wide branding audit is currently underway to flush out the full range of materials currently available as a precursor to monitoring all production of marketing and promotional materials via the new council-wide communications team.

New media

- 7.12 Past MORI surveys identified a growing number of internet users in Southwark. Our new media offering will continue to grow and evolve with new enhancements to meet the rising expectations of new media users, through the web portal, kiosks and other means.

Exhibitions and conferences

- 7.13 These can be highly effective in reaching and influencing professional and political peers, national politicians and other target opinion formers and influencers..

Recruitment materials & advertising

- 7.14 Recruitment is a powerful means of enhancing our reputation and profile with others. Irrespective of the seniority of the appointment, each new recruitment process is a communications opportunity and a means of enhancing the council's reputation.

Action plan – communications framework

- 7.15 Overleaf is a sample action plan to identify the major programmes for the current year, using all or many of the communications methods outlined here. This demonstrates the scope of the communications activities with which the council is engaged.

ACTION PLAN – COMMUNICATIONS FRAMEWORK

| Activity | Year one 2003/04 | Year two 2004/05 | Year three 05/06 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Campaigns – following the framework agreed | Community Wardens 'Safer' SSP public awareness campaign Recycling campaign | To be agreed by Executive and COT | To be agreed by Executive and COT |
| Marketing & publicity initiatives following 'six to fix' & other council imperatives | Council Tax 'pay up' campaign Council tax direct debit campaign Xmas rent campaign Housing information & publicity campaign for new neighbourhood arrangements Mayor's community sports programme | To be agreed by Executive and COT | To be agreed by Executive and COT |
| Major building / investment programmes | Warwick Park City Academy City of London Academy | To be agreed by Executive and COT | To be agreed by Executive and COT |
| Significant proactive media / public affairs opportunities (these will be identified in detail in the Communications Planner) | Outcome of OPM future education options review Completion of Millwall walkway | To be agreed by Executive and COT with input from communications & corporate strategy teams | To be agreed by Executive and COT with input from communications & corporate strategy teams |
| Key statutory publications | Council tax leaflet Annual report BV performance Plan | Council tax leaflet Annual report BV performance Plan | Council tax leaflet Annual report BV performance Plan |
| New media | Installation of kiosks | Enhancement | Enhancement |

8. Measuring our performance – media and campaign evaluation

Media and campaign evaluation now

8.1 There is an on-going debate among local government communications professionals about the most effective method of measuring performance. In the absence of BVPIs, most have opted for basic measures that focus on press releases issued and corresponding hit rates, number and response times for press releases and a basic analysis of good, bad and neutral coverage.

8.2 In Southwark a series of locally based performance indicators were agreed with chief officers last year and these are currently as follows:

Media relations:

- One piece of proactive national coverage and three pieces of local coverage per department per month.
- Four hour response time for all media enquiries.

Marketing and publications:

- Produce 6 issues of Southwark Life to schedule and on budget.
- At least 6 integrated marketing campaigns each year.

New media:

- Four new content developments a month.

Media coverage is evaluated weekly to monitor responsive and proactive media coverage, as well as on-going campaigns, enquiries and longer term 'work in hand' (such as national and regional broadcast documentaries).

Media and campaign evaluation in the future

8.3 Newsflash, the software programme used to log and monitor all media relations activities, is subject to regular upgrades. As the software grows in sophistication, our ability to monitor will become increasingly sophisticated. As a result of the most recent upgrade for example, we are able to monitor:

- by category;
- by month;
- by media;
- by category and tone;
- by category and prominence;
- by category and response;
- by issue and media and
- by key messages:

8.4 Evaluation of marketing campaigns is less easy. Wherever possible, questions will be added to existing consultation programmes to measure public awareness of the council's five priorities and actions to address them. The bi-annual MORI residents survey will continue to be used as a means of monitoring how well local residents feel informed and, specifically, views on Southwark Life.