

# **Shetland Islands Council Communications Strategy**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Shetland Islands Council believe that effective communications are essential if the Council as an organisation is to operate as efficiently as possible.
- 1.2 Research carried out in early 1998 in connection with a Best Value consultation on the Council's Values and Aims suggested that both the Council's internal and external communications were deficient in some areas. Subsequently, an audit of the existing communications was carried out, and the report produced in March 2000, which establishes the strengths and weaknesses of existing communications and a benchmark against which to measure future improvements, forms the basis of this strategy.
- 1.3 The Council must be clear and focused about communications at corporate and service level. This strategy:
- outlines what must be done in terms of improving communications;
  - proposes methods of communication; and
  - outlines how the Council should monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of new initiatives.
- 1.4 Improved communication must start here. Every Councillor and member of staff must be made aware of what the communications strategy is and what they should be doing to support its development.
- 1.5 For the purposes of this paper, Communications has been divided into the following three broad areas:
- Internal Communications
  - External Communications
  - Media Communications

## 2 VALUES, AIMS & VISION

### 2.1 *Good communication is fundamental to ensuring the Council achieves its vision, aims and values:*

- puts service users first and is constantly working towards improved standards of service provision;
- values the consultation process and external input and opinion is encouraged;
- encourages the input of staff in the decision making process;
- aims to increase public participation in all areas of its work.

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- ensures that members and staff are well informed and their ambassadorial role in helping increase awareness and understanding of the council is encouraged;

**2.2 *Improving communications across the board is a key step towards achieving our vision of providing the best services we can.***

Our vision is to create an environment where members and staff feel that they belong to the Council as a unified organisation and where staff, service users, partners, the community and voluntary organisations are involved in influencing decisions and in improving the quality of service delivery.

**2.3 *Good communication is fundamental to the Council achieving its aims effectively and efficiently.***

- This strategy aims to address the weaknesses identified in the Audit of Communications and provide a framework for improvement and development in this area.
- The Council will strive to improve its communications with members and staff to provide them with a better understanding of what the Council stands for and the role each of them can play in improving the standard of service provision.
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- The Council will strive to identify the needs and wants of its customers by using various communications channels. Consultation and customer feedback are crucial in order to gain a clear understanding of *who* our customers are and *what* is important to them. Only then can we provide the most appropriate levels of service to our customers.
- The Council will strive to become more proactive in its relations with the media. Research by MORI shows that the more people know about their local authority, the more satisfied they tended to be with it, so it is vital that the media, as one of the sources of public information on the Council, receives effective and efficient information on Council matters.

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- The Council will strive to improve its communication with other public agencies, voluntary organisations and associated bodies.

## **2.4 Internal Communications**

**The improvement of internal communications aims to ensure:**

- Members and staff are always well informed and involved in matters that concern them;
- Staff feel that they are part of the Council as a wider organisation rather than feeling that they are part of a department or specific service unit;
- Members and staff are aware of the Council's Values and the aims that they are working towards, what is necessary and why, and how they are contributing to achieving them;
- Staff have the opportunity to voice their ideas and opinions on Council policies, procedures, services and decisions;
- Staff are aware of Council decisions before they are more widely circulated; and
- The standard of internal communications provides a solid foundation for more effective and efficient external communications.
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## **2.5 External Communications**

**The improvement of external communications aims to ensure:**

- The community, other organisations and the media receive the information they require about Council policies, procedures, services and decisions;
- The community are aware of how to comment, complain or make suggestions on any of the above and have the opportunity to contribute to the development of policies, practices and procedures in order to improve the quality of services;
- The Council is perceived as a unitary organisation and by its own values; and
- Shetland and the Council are presented to the outside world in ways that best support the development of the islands' economy, society and environment.
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## **2.6 Media Communications**

**The improvement of media communications aims to ensure:**

- Council decisions and changes to policy are explained and reported to the public in comprehensible terms;

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- The Council responds effectively to mistakes that have been reported in the press, using the media as a tool for admitting mistakes, accepting responsibility, apologising and explaining how things are going to be put right; and
- The media is used to its full potential as a vehicle for informing the public about Council services.
- All members and senior officials are trained in how to deal with the media effectively;
- The Council is more proactive in its approach to the media reporting on positive issues.

### **3 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

Good communication needs everyone to play their part but there must also be a clear understanding of particular roles and responsibilities. Better communications skills are needed across the organisation and this must be given sufficient time, effort and priority by members and staff to be delivered.

Some responsibilities of groups are set out below;

- Members have the key role in setting the overall goals for the Council and leading the communication and consultation internally, externally and through the media regarding these goals.
- Managers and Managers have to engage with the public, listen to their views and comments, propose and explain ideas, explain decisions and the reasons why those decisions have been made.
- Staff have to engage with the public to listen to enquiries, help decide how needs can best be met, explain about options or limits to services, refer to partners or other agencies. Staff also have to communicate with each other as colleagues, managers, team members, customers and suppliers.
- Everyone has to promote the Council and Shetland to the wider world to support the creation of a positive image at regional, national and international level.

Poor communications makes all these roles and responsibilities harder, more time consuming, more prone to error and ultimately reduces the level of customer service. Good clear communications tangibly improves customer service by getting the right thing done quicker first time more often but also improve customer and staff satisfaction with the process.

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To provide the catalyst for this step change in improving communications it will be necessary to focus on the improvements required and assist members, managers and staff to enhance their skills, establish better channels and get everyone using them effectively.

### **3.1 *Communications and Consultation Co-ordinator***

The Council may choose to appoint a Communications and Consultation Co-ordinator. This individual would work with members, managers and all services to improve all aspects of the Councils Communications performance.

The duties of the position would include:

- advising on all aspects of communications and consultation;
- determining member and staff training and development requirements and organising appropriate training;
- advising on press releases and organising media activities;
- assisting Executive Directors in identifying items of Council news that would be of interest to staff, the public and securing appropriate media coverage of them;
- advising on and organising consultation exercises and public opinion research exercises;
- managing the Council's website ensuring it is regularly updated, user-friendly and attractive;
- co-ordinating the placing of material on the website by all Council departments; and
- managing the production of corporate information including staff briefings, public information leaflets, website.

## **4 INTERNAL COMMUNICATION**

Good internal communications will ensure that all Council members and staff are aware of what goals they are working towards, what needs to be done and why it needs to be done. This will help staff to feel valued and committed to achieving these aims and will give them the opportunity to put forward their own suggestions for improvement in a constructive manner.

### **4.1 *Staff Newsletter***

Regular staff briefings will be produced and posted on the Intranet and distributed on paper.

Executive Directors and Heads of Service will produce periodic briefings to keep staff informed of the business of the Council. The briefings will:

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- include a summary of Executive Decisions;
- include information on new policies and policy changes, including the impact they will have on services and staff;
- ensure that all staff are kept informed of Council matters;
- assist in unifying the Council by providing Council-wide information to all staff, reducing the focus on individual departments; and
- encourage feedback and staff participation.

#### **4.2 Information Cascading System**

A formal information cascading system will be set up.

This will ensure:

- corporate messages flow from Executive Management Team to the workforce through the regular team meetings outlined below;
- non-confidential Council minutes are made available to all staff;
- there is openness in the availability of information and staff feel valued and well informed; and
- a two-way flow of information.

#### **4.3 There will be regular briefing sessions at all levels of the Organisation.**

These briefing sessions will:

- ensure that all staff are aware of Council-wide issues;
- promote staff identification with the Council as a whole rather than with specific department by increasing awareness of issues affecting other departments;
- provide an opportunity for staff to raise concerns with their department Head;
- begin the cascading of information from line managers to their staff; and
- encourage to redirection of information from staff to line managers.

Regular briefing sessions are already held in some departments and indicate good communications. Good practice must be consistently applied across the Council and therefore the practice of holding team meetings must be adopted Council-wide.

#### **4.4 Electronic Communications Use**

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An information pack and guidelines on using the Intranet and Electronic mail effectively will be provided to all staff.

This will:

- ensure that all members and staff are aware of the Intranet, what it is for, and how to use it;
- promote the use of the Intranet as a central store of Council information, including Council minutes, press releases, staff bulletins, jobs/vacancies, Council policies, advertisements, an internal phone directory and a link to the Council's website;
- ensure that all members and staff are aware of how to use e-mail and what tools are available to them to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of e-mail communication; and
- provide standards to which all electronic communication must adhere.

**4.5 *The Council's Intranet will be developed, promoted and updated regularly.***

This will ensure that:

- the Intranet is serving its purpose as a central store of Council information;
- the Intranet is well designed, easily accessible and easy to navigate; and
- all staff are aware of the existence of the Intranet and the services it provides.

**4.6 *Induction Training***

Departmental induction checklists will be issued to all new staff and will be completed by new staff and their line managers.

These checklists will familiarise new staff with the structure of their department and will ensure that they are aware of certain key issues such as:

- health and safety reporting procedures, fire procedures, and first aid information;
- conditions of employment;
- expected communications standards; and
- policies and training available.

Induction Training Sessions will be held regularly to familiarise new members and staff with the Council, its aims and values and its policies.

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These sessions will be Council-wide and will be held approximately once a month depending on intake. A comprehensive induction scheme will ensure:

- all are aware of what the Council does and how it operates;
- all are aware of which departments are responsible for which services and where they fit into the organisation's structure;
- new staff meet other new staff and gain contacts in other departments that they are encouraged to keep; and
- all receive the full training required for their position and are made aware of further training opportunities available to them.

An on-line induction training programme will be developed and will form an integral part of the induction training scheme.

#### **4.7 Members and Staff Awareness**

All members and staff will be provided with comprehensive information on Council Departments and their functions.

A comprehensive list of council members and staff, their specific duties and responsibilities and their contact details will be regularly checked and updated using a central database. This will be incorporated into the existing Internal and E-mail Directories. Each Head of Service will be contacted monthly for information on staffing changes to ensure that the list is kept up-to-date and accurate. This will ensure:

- all members and staff know where to direct their queries and how to reach the correct department or individual directly;
- members and staff obtain their required information quickly and avoid the situation of being kept on hold or passed around from extension to extension; and
- members and staff who are dealing with a misdirected external query will be able to pass the customer on to the correct department or individual immediately.

Awareness will be raised on all Council policies and they will be readily available to all staff.

This will address the current lack of awareness of which policies exist and where they can be obtained. To ensure that all members and staff are aware of and have access to current policy, all policies must:

- be available on the Intranet in word format;
- be downloadable so that manual workers have access to paper copies; and

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- be updated as soon as changes have been made to them.

Staff will be made aware of any policy changes as soon as they occur through the regular staff briefings to avoid instances of staff inadvertently working according to a policy that is no longer active.

Awareness will be raised on the Council's Values and Aims and how members and staff are expected to work towards them.

This will address the current lack of awareness of the Council's Values and Aims. It is impossible for us to be striving to achieve our aims and promote our values if we do not know what they are. These are currently available on the Intranet as part of the Corporate Plan. To ensure that all members and staff are aware of them, the Council's values and aims must have a separate link on the Intranet so they are easily located.

#### **4.8 Staff Consultation**

Staff will be consulted regularly on any proposed changes taking place across the Council.

This will ensure:

- staff are kept informed of Council issues and proposed changes;
- staff feel valued and that their comments and suggestions are taken on board; and
- staff are given the chance to contribute to changes in policy and across the Council as a whole (*an alarming 96% of respondents to the staff survey feel that they are not given the chance to comment on or contribute to changes across the Council as a whole*).

Staff will be given explanations of reasons behind decisions and changes.

This will ensure:

- staff know *why* as well as *what*, and therefore have a better understanding of Council decisions; and
- staff are better informed and therefore better equipped to make comments and suggestions for improvement in the future.

#### **4.9 Customer Care**

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The Council will endorse the *Customer Care Guidelines* for good written communication and will adhere to the Council's *Corporate Styles and Standards*.

This will:

- ensure the existing good standard of internal written communication is maintained;
- increase consistency throughout the Council and encourage staff to identify with the Council as a whole rather than with their service section or department. *(94.4% of respondents to the staff survey identified with their section or department rather than with the Council as a unitary organisation).*

(Remember: Our customers are anyone to whom we provide a service. Therefore colleagues in other departments are our customers and should be treated to the same standards of Customer Care set for members of the public and outside organisations.)

## **5 EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION**

- Good external communication will enable all Council members and staff to obtain accurate information on their customers' wants and needs to ensure that decisions are well informed.
- Members and staff will operate in a manner that demonstrates commitment to the Council.
- Members and staff will make the public aware of the key issues facing their community, encourage them to participate in debating the issues and empower them through the provision of information.

### **5.1 Customer Care**

The Council will develop and implement a Customer Care Policy.

Customer care is basically treating customers in the same way that you would wish to be treated. It is not just the responsibility of senior staff or staff on the frontline. To our customers, each and every member of Council and staff is a representative for Shetland Islands Council and therefore we all have a responsibility to treat customers properly. The policy will include:

- Guidelines for efficient, effective and welcoming reception areas;
- Guidelines on written communication;
- Guidelines on telephone communication;
- Guidelines on face-to-face communication;

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- Guidelines on consultation;
- Guidelines on dealing with the media;
- A Managers' Handbook; and
- The dos and don'ts of excellent service.

**5.2 A Corporate Training Programme will be developed to ensure the Customer Care Guidelines are implemented successfully and uniformly.**

Council reception areas will be of a high quality and reception staff will be adequately trained in Customer Care.

As reception staff are often the first point of contact our customers have with the Council it is essential that they are giving out the right first impression. All reception areas will adhere to the guidelines for efficient, effective and welcoming reception areas and all reception staff will be equipped to deal with the public and outside organisations efficiently and sensitively.

The Council will keep customers informed of service developments.

The majority of the respondents to the public survey feel that they do not have enough information on the Council's services. Through the various communication channels outlined in the following paragraphs, the Council will provide its customers with information on:

- the services provided by the Council;
- the expected standards of these services;
- who the services are for;
- how to access these services;
- how to complain if things go wrong;
- how the services are performing;
- the cost of running these services; and
- who can be contacted for further information on them.

**5.3 The Council will publish periodic Council information leaflets.**

The information leaflets will be included as supplements with *The Shetland Times* and/or distributed in other ways. They will:

- advertise Council Services;
- inform the public on where to get advice or help on specific issues;
- update the public regularly on what is happening in their Council and their Community;
- explain newly-adopted policies and procedures;

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- provide the public with feedback forms and information on how to make comments, suggestions, complaints and queries to the Council;
- include significant input from members;
- include updated contact for members and for each service;
- adhere to the Council's Guidelines on written communication; and
- be approved by an editorial group before publication.

#### **5.4 Public Awareness**

The Council will encourage and promote use of an updated public suggestion and complaints schemes.

Public suggestions and complaints are vital to ensuring we provide the best possible services. They provide us with invaluable feedback about what the public want from us and how our services are experienced and perceived by the public. Awareness will be raised on these schemes by:

- distributing leaflets and feedback forms to all households;
- periodically enclosing feedback forms in *The Shetland Times*;
- displaying leaflets, feedback forms and posters advertising the schemes in Council reception areas, schools' reception areas, local shops, post offices, leisure centres, community facilities and Doctors' surgeries, and
- advertising the schemes in the local media.

#### **5.5 The Council will produce an annual Performance Report.**

The report will be distributed to all households each year. The Performance Report will:

- outline corporate aims and what is being done to achieve them;
- provide a summary of how much was spent on each service and where the money came from;
- explain how the Council is performing against its own targets or in comparison with other comparable service providers and what is being done to achieve targets that have not been met;
- explain the purpose of Best Value clearly; and
- provide information on which Service Reviews are currently being undertaken.

#### **5.6 Consultation**

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The Council will consult regularly with the public on proposed changes in service provision.

Regular and carefully planned consultation will ensure Council decisions are better informed and take into account the opinions and views of interested parties. There will be regular consultation exercises throughout the islands. The Council will:

- adhere to the Council's Guidelines for Consultation;
- publicise consultation exercises to ensure as wide a response as possible;
- use a variety of consultation methods depending on the consultation requirements;
- be sensitive to the needs of all its customers including the elderly, those with a disability and those in remote communities and ensure every customer has the same opportunity to consult;
- report back to the public on what has been done as a result of the consultation; and
- evaluate the benefits of the consultation exercises.

**5.7 *Regular Members' Surgeries will be held in all constituencies.***

This will expand on existing good practice in some constituencies.

The Members' Surgeries will:

- continue to develop relationships between the public and their Councillors;
- promote Councillors as approachable sources of information on Council matters and
- offer constituents an opportunity to raise issues or concerns.

**5.8 *The Council will research public opinion annually or as required.***

This research will take a variety of forms but all seeking to establish a representative set of views of the general public. As outlined in the Audit of Communications, public opinion research will:

- provide a solid basis for the planning or adjustment of services;
- offer clear indications of whether or not the Council's performance is improving or deteriorating in particular respects;
- offer access to the opinions of people who might not attend public meetings or who otherwise feel inhibited from expressing views; and

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- allow more accurate shading of opinion than is possible by other methods.

### **5.9 Electronic Communication**

The Council's website will be redesigned and used as a fundamental resource and holding point for all publicly available Council information.

The new website will be more visually appealing and better organised with useful links to other websites. It will promote the Shetland Islands as well as the Council. The content of the website will include:

- an A-Z of Council Services and contacts;
- all corporate publications;
- all Council policies;
- agreed Service Standards
- how to access Services
- how the Council is performing
- electronic feedback forms for public suggestion and complaints;
- all non-confidential Council and Committee minutes;
- recruitment advertisements, post information and electronic application forms;

The redesigned website will be easier to understand and navigate than the existing one and will continue to be developed in line with new technologies and opportunities.

### **5.10 General Enquiry**

The Council will develop, improve and publicise General Enquiry facilities.

It is necessary to publicise the current location of the General Enquiry Office and improve signposting and investigate the provision of General Enquiry facilities at other sites. General Enquiry facilities will receive complaints, queries and suggestions by telephone, e-mail, letter and by the public dropping in. General Enquiry facilities will be developed over time to include;

- up-to-date information on Council proposals, including plans and models where appropriate;
- comprehensive advice and information on Council services;
- advice on how to make suggestions or complaints;
- feedback forms and a suggestion box;
- information and application forms for Council vacancies;
- available copies of all Council forms;

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- dedicated computer terminals so customers without home access to the website can have easy and free access to it;
- courtesy telephones so customers can make enquiries directly to the appropriate member of staff; and
- general assistance on how to use the electronic equipment available.

## **6 MEDIA COMMUNICATION**

Good media communication will improve the public's understanding of the services provided by the Council and keep the public and outside agencies updated on what the current issues facing the Council are. It will also ensure that the Council is recognised for its achievements and quality of services, which will encourage the recruitment and retention of the best quality staff.

### **6.1 Media Relations**

The Council will be proactive in its relations with the media.

Local media, such as *The Shetland Times* and *SIBC*, was identified as a good source of information about the Council by the Audit of Communications. The Council will become more proactive in its media relations by:

- regularly publicising Council Services in local newspapers and on local radio;
- publicising the Council's public suggestion and complaints schemes in the local media;
- promoting the Council's achievements and successes;
- reacting to 'bad press' by being open, honest and accountable at all times, admitting to mistakes and explaining why decisions are made

All Members and Staff regularly in contact with the media will be trained in media relations.

The local media appreciate the access they currently have to members for information on political decisions and this will continue. Specific training will be provided to those in regular contact with the media and guidelines on how to deal with the media will be provided to all staff as part of the Council's Customer Care policy.

Informal meetings between the Council, EMT and the media will be considered when appropriate.

These meetings will:

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- encourage the open exchange of comments and suggestions;
- promote better mutual understanding; and
- allow informal discussion of issues; and

## **6.2 Press Releases**

Press Releases will follow a corporate style and will have to be approved by the nominated officer before being released.

They will be assessed on whether or not they are easy to follow and understand, are concise and not full of jargon, and they will adhere to a word limit to ensure that they are not too lengthy.

## **6.3 Council Advertisements**

All Council advertisements will follow a corporate style and will promote the Council and Shetland as a whole.

Inconsistency in advertising styles is a symptom of the Council operating as separate departments rather than a unitary organisation. A corporate style and standard will:

- ensure that all Council advertisements are recognisable and identifiable as such;
- increase the public perception of the Council as a unitary organisation; and
- promote Shetland and the Council.

Consideration will be given to the possibility of developing a logo/brand image for Council advertisements. (or carrying the Shetland Brand currently being worked on by Development)

The Council's recruitment advertising will be accurately targeted, will promote the Council as an employer and will attract the best quality of applicants.

The Council will identify the most cost-effective methods of recruitment advertising to ensure that the intended target audience is being reached and to reduce the need for re-advertisements.

The Council's recruitment advertisements, where relevant, will:

- have a standard layout as with contracts advertising;
- include a standard 'Shetland Paragraph' which promotes the islands;
- include a brief 'Council Paragraph' which promotes the Council;

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- include a brief 'Departmental Paragraph' which outlines the duties of the employing department; and
- be more eye-catching, possibly including scenic or cultural photographs or illustrations connected to Shetland life.

## **7 CONCLUSION**

The successful implementation of this communications strategy will ensure:

- the Council practices open government;
- communication and consultation with the staff and the wider community will be regular, clear and honest;
- the Council's communications aims will be achieved and Council members and staff will be committed to achieving the Council's corporate aims;
- the Council will be better informed and better equipped to deliver the highest possible quality of services to the residents of Shetland.