

Shetland Islands Council



Communications strategy 2011



House style: 'Council' is always capitalised, where referring to Shetland Islands Council. However 'councillors' is not, neither is 'elected members'.

Numbers up to and including nine are spelt out in full when used in sentences. Departments are capitalised when confusion may arise if they are not ('Legal Services'). Proper titles ('Chief Executive'; 'Convener') are capitalised. Essentially, capitalisation should be avoided but where confusion can occur (there are other chief executives and other councils) it can be used effectively.

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a The importance of communicating

Communicating is vital to the way we all work in the Council, and to the way we work as an organisation. Staff and councillors need to talk to each other and to the public.

We're all in the communications business – if we don't communicate effectively, we won't get anything done.

So this strategy is about making ourselves understood, being clear and frank, and making sure that our words have the intended effect. It's not about 'spin'. It's about clarity, action and being clear on our roles and responsibilities.

The way people view us affects the way Shetland is seen by the community and by the wider world. So our reputation is at stake every time we communicate with others.

b Why we need a communications strategy

At the end of June 2010 the Accounts Commission for Scotland held a two-day public hearing to look at how we were being run. The commission made a number of recommendations, including the following.

“The Council should improve the way it develops clear, coherent messages to communicate with the local community, and take steps to improve the way it conducts its relationship with the media and recognises the media’s legitimate interest in Council matters.”

After looking at the way we communicate, in November 2010 we agreed an improvement plan as the official response to the findings. This plan committed us to:

- set up a communications office within the Chief Executive's office, in order to support our councillors, our corporate message and Shetland's reputation; and
- refresh our communications strategy.

The risks associated with poor communications, and the benefits of doing things properly, were highlighted during the hearing. The hearing stressed that good communications are:

- a vital part of providing effective services;
- essential to our relations with communities, service users, and businesses; and

- crucial to staff morale.

This is the first communications strategy since 2003, so putting it into practice is a priority.

c The aims of this strategy

We must do better, and this strategy sets out our commitments as an organisation and as individuals. We want our communications to be professional and well-organised.

Significantly changing the way we work takes time. However, an essential starting point is for staff and councillors to understand and accept the objectives in the strategy. We need to make this work.

“It’s all very well agreeing a communications strategy, but we must make sure that it changes the way we work. Otherwise it will just be another document that sits and gathers dust.”
Councillor Betty Fullerton (Nov 2010)

Every manager or supervisor has the opportunity to apply good practice relating to communications in their own team. The more people do this, the more change happens. Communicating well has to be central to the way we do business.

Finally, an important aim of this strategy is to fix the problems that we’ve been told need to be fixed.

Over the past six months we’ve consulted staff, management, councillors, the general public, organisations we work with, community councils, trade unions and the local media. We’ve had almost 500 responses, giving us a huge variety of comments. These are the foundations we have built this strategy and action plan on.

The issues that were raised most often during our consultation are set out below, with a few examples of what we were told.

We should tell staff about things before we tell the media.

“Quite often the first I hear of a Council project or decision is via the local media. It would be better as an employee to hear news first if possible.”
Comment from a member of staff

Communication with the public is poor – people see the Council’s website as confused and confusing.

“The Council’s Website actually contains a fair bit of information but generally comes across as faceless and is in need of a radical overhaul in terms of navigation, layout, language, style and presentation.”

Comment from a member of the public

There’s a lack of clarity in the language used in Council documents.

Staff and councillors should get support and training in working with the media.

The Council shouldn’t rely just on electronic communications.

“Don’t miss the people who don’t have access to email and technology.”

Comment from Council management

The Council should be more open and honest in its communications.

“Shetland is a small place and you hear an awful lot of gossip. You also tend to hear about things in a roundabout way. The Council needs to make sure they are open and honest about what they are doing and make sure things don’t leak out.”

Comment from a member of staff

Council services must share information and work together better.

Regular updates for staff on what’s going on in the Council will help reduce confusion and speculation.

Good work and good news stories should be highlighted more often.

“We should share best practice internally, have a formal cascade system in place and be better at celebrating success stories.”

Comment from Council management

2 Roles and responsibilities

a Councillors

Communications role

The 'Protocol for Councillor/Officer Relations' sets out very clearly the roles that councillors and staff are expected to fulfil. Councillors are elected to decide policy, not to manage services. Staff manage the organisation which provides the services. A similar distinction can be made for communications.

Councillors will be at the forefront of our communications and will make all comments on political policies. The principal purpose of councillors' statements is to explain or comment on our policies and decisions.

However, any councillor can issue their own statement to the media or respond to the media when they are approached by them. In these circumstances, the councillor concerned will be speaking on his or her own behalf and will be personally responsible for what they say.

Communications responsibilities

As reflected in their job descriptions, councillors are expected to represent the Council in an appropriate way and project a good image of the Council and Shetland.

Councillors must respect confidentiality when necessary.

Councillors must not undermine staff in public or through the media. This damages our reputation and undermines our commitment to trust, co-operation and partnership.

b Staff

Communications role

Staff must not publicly express personal opinions on Council policy. That is the role of councillors. Staff are there to provide accurate information to councillors and to manage services.

Staff can comment on the running of services and provide information, as long as they follow the procedures set out in the appendices to this strategy.

Communications responsibilities

Staff need to work with the media more effectively, helping to improve fair and accurate reporting by representing the Council fairly and accurately. The Code of Conduct for Employees makes it clear that staff must conduct themselves in a way that will not damage the Council's reputation. That includes statements to

the media. Staff are expected to always follow that code when communicating with press and public.

To improve the public's perception of the Council, more information needs to be made available more easily. However, staff must actively get that information and make themselves better informed. Staff should be doing all they can to correct misinformation, inaccurate rumours or speculation. Everyone should be well-informed enough to set the record straight, when necessary, but should also respect confidentiality when necessary.

3 Commitment to change

a We need to make the following commitments as individuals working for the Council and collectively as an organisation.

We will do the following.

- Tell staff and councillors about issues affecting them before they are released to the general public and the media.
- Improve our website and intranet site.
- Write and speak in language people will understand.
- Provide training to make sure that anyone expected to deal with the media has the skills and confidence they need to do so.
- Provide regular information about the Council to staff who do not have access to emails.
- Write and speak honestly, and communicate the facts, good and bad, in a clear and unbiased way.
- Listen to staff and councillors and give them feedback.
- Deal with requests for information quickly, properly, and openly. There is no excuse for not giving a response.
- Make sure that the need to keep staff, organisations we work with, MPs and MSPs, trade unions, the press and the general public informed is built into all council projects.
- Work with the local media, building positive working relationships.

4 Communicating within the Council

a Guiding principles

It would be easy to rely just on electronic communications (email, intranet and internet) to keep staff informed. However, with two-thirds of our staff not having access to a computer, it's clear that emails are not going to reach everyone.

Email and the internet cannot replace face-to-face communication. Research suggests (and feedback confirms) that the spoken word is the most powerful and meaningful way of keeping staff informed.

We need to avoid information overload, but it is clear that the majority of staff (83.1%) want to hear news about the Council directly from the Council. That way, they feel:

- that the information is unbiased;
- valued by the Council making the effort to inform them directly; and
- in a much better position to pass this information on to other staff.

We can't guarantee to meet the specific needs and interests of each individual staff member, or that everyone will hear news from the Council before hearing it through the local media. This strategy aims to find a balance between making information more easily accessible to staff, managers and the general public.

b Internal communication

Staff

"I don't think my manager knows what happens at Corporate Management Team so can't cascade that to me and I can't tell my staff. There are a lot of rumour, myths and stories about redesign and no transparency in processes."

Comment from a member of staff

Information from the corporate management team

After every corporate management team meeting, a summary, showing decisions taken, will be provided to heads of service, service managers and head teachers. This will provide information that can be used in staff briefings and team meetings. It will also appear on the communications page of our intranet site.

The Chief Executive's blog will be produced every week. This will provide staff with a short description of what he has been doing during the week, as well as comments on topical issues.

A staff newsletter will be produced and circulated by email and on notice boards every six weeks.

If there is an event that is felt to be of general interest to staff, bulletins will be issued to all staff and councillors.

“Although my husband and I both work for the SIC, albeit in very different areas and at different grades, the information I receive is very different from his experience. As a manager of a large staff group, I spend a great deal of time and effort conveying information to my staff. His managers do not appear to place the same importance to this area in his workplace. As a result, he feels undervalued and of little worth.”

Comment from a member of staff

Information from managers

All heads of service and service managers will organise regular team meetings and staff-briefing sessions – at least one every six weeks. Through these meetings, information on what’s going on in the Council will be shared, along with things like training events and meetings, and video conferences with partner organisations or professional bodies.

Team managers and supervisors will need to pass this information on to their staff.

Information from staff to managers

Staff want to share their ideas, suggestions and views with their managers. We need to make sure we allow this to happen. This can be informally through their line managers, but we also want to let staff make suggestions and give feedback direct to management.

A staff suggestions site will be set up on the Communications page of our intranet site.

A central contact email address (communications@shetland.gov.uk) is available. It will give staff a place where they can help improve how we communicate. It’s important to point out that it won’t be a dump for complaints and random questions about Council services.

Councillors

It’s important that we meet councillors’ information needs and improve communications between councillors and staff. It’s also important that information that councillors do not need to make a decision on is channelled to

them in the most effective way. Two areas where improvements can be made are as follows.

Councillor information bulletins

If a councillor at a committee meeting has asked for information, or staff want to inform members but don't need a formal decision, a short bulletin will be produced.

Bulletins will be written in a set format, keeping the information short and to the point. Services will be responsible for producing the bulletins, although the communications unit and member support service will help. A separate set of guidance notes is available to explain this in detail.

Councillor internet page

A dedicated page will be set up for councillor information bulletins, to give the public access to the information.

5 Communicating with the outside world

a Electronic methods

Feedback tells us we need to revamp our internet site and establish this as the main way of getting information to the outside world. So, we will do that. This project will tackle the many internet-related issues that have emerged through our consultation – including appearance, search functions, use of social media, service disruption alerts and so on.

One immediate improvement will be the redesign of the homepage. This can become a hub for all Council news. The aim will be to attract the public to that site to get their news about what's going on in the Council.

The way we are perceived affects how Shetland is perceived. We will aim to improve our image through our communications – getting better coverage for positive news stories through our website. However, we will be honest at all times, explaining poor performance and difficult decisions as well. Over time, we hope to build a reputation for being an organisation that is open, honest and efficient, and that provides value for money.

“The challenge is to get the info out there rapidly before it gets misrepresented by either word of mouth or even our local media.”
Comment from a member of staff

b Non-electronic methods

The idea of a Council newspaper has been put forward in the past. However, feedback confirmed that this would not be popular.

We will provide a yearly update report on our performance, using paid-for space in the local media. This will help to explain any major decisions and changes, as well as give councillors an opportunity to explain any major policy decisions.

We will also continue to produce our annual public performance calendar. This has proved to be a very popular and cost-effective way of keeping the public informed of how we are doing.

“The media is a tool of analysis, a response to actions by others. SIC should communicate itself with people in Shetland, via its staff, a better website, social networking, and so on. It should not allow itself to be distorted through the prisms of other organisations, which have a propensity to negativity on certain issues and individuals. It should be better at communicating, and develop new means to communicate its many actions, its political decisions and its goals and ambitions.”
Comment from a member of staff

6 Keeping an eye on progress

a Performance management

Good communication is just one step towards a better Council. Some elements of this strategy (such as the appendices) should have an immediate effect on the way we all work. But we need to think long term and keep our efforts going. For that reason, the corporate management team will review this strategy every six months, and our executive committee will review it every year.

We will also ask staff for regular feedback through our intranet and have regular feedback sessions with members of the local media.

A set of performance indicators will be developed and monitored each month. This will help to show how successfully we are achieving the aims set out in this strategy.

b Formal review

We will also review this strategy in two years' time to see whether the changes made have had the desired effect. If some things aren't working, we will look for ways to deal with them.

7 Contact details

The Communications Unit office is based upstairs in the Town Hall, Hillhead, Lerwick, ZE1 0HB.

Communications Project Manager

Peter Peterson (temporary till end September 2011)

Phone: 01595 74 4538

Email: peter.peterson@shetland.gov.uk

Part-time Communications Adviser

Tom Morton (nine hours a week – temporary till end September 2011)

Phone: 01595 74 4258

Email: tom.morton@shetland.gov.uk

Communications Officer

Elaine McGregor (temporary till end September 2011)

Phone: 01595 74 4535

Email: elaine.mcgregor@shetland.gov.uk

These details will be updated once a permanent unit has been set up.

General enquiries about communications can be sent to communications@shetland.gov.uk. Every member of the Communications Unit has access to this email address, and it is monitored every day.

Appendices

Feedback from staff showed that there is a high demand for guidance on speaking to the media and issuing press releases. So these appendices will become Council policy, immediately replacing all other guidance.

A. Action plan

This action plan aims to meet the commitments in this strategy. We will update it regularly. This action plan goes hand in hand with the more detailed operational plan which guides the work of the Communications Unit on a day-to-day basis.

We will tell staff and councillors about issues affecting them before they are released to the general public and the media.

What we'll do to make this happen	Who'll do it	By when	Cost	Progress
Redesign our website's home page to make it a 'Council news' page. It will be updated regularly with what's going on in the Council. It will give staff an option to receive regular updates every time the page is updated.	Communications Unit	Mid-May	None	Done.
Create a 'Staff changes' section on our intranet site to help staff keep up to date with changes in staff.	Communications Unit and Human Resources	September	None	On hold until new management structures are in place.
Develop an information board for the intranet site – to hold useful information on what's going on for team briefings – including the outcome of corporate management	Communications Unit	August	None	Currently underway.

team meetings.				
Develop an information bulletin page for councillors as a public store for all reports that do not need a council decision.	Communications Unit	June	None	Done.

We will improve our website and intranet site.				
What we'll do to make this happen	Who'll do it	By when	Cost	Progress
Hire a specialist to help redesign our website.	Internet Project Team	September	Not yet known	Currently underway. A Project Team and Board are taking this forward.
Redesign the Council's intranet site.	Intranet Project Team	September	None	Plan to go live with a new site in early July.

We will write and speak in language people will understand.				
What we'll do to make this happen	Who'll do it	By when	Cost	Progress
Provide plain-English training for heads of service and service managers – creating 'champions' across the organisation to actively tackle jargon when they see it.	Communications Unit staff, Human Resources and Train Shetland	1 and 2 June	Available on request	Done – training was delivered on 1 and 2 June.

Make plain-English training available to all staff as part of the corporate training programme (at least two courses a year).	Train Shetland	2012 onwards	Not yet known	Done. Date set for next year.
Get Plain English Campaign's Crystal Mark for the Council website and key policy documents.	Communications Unit	From now on	Available on request	Currently underway. This Communications Strategy is the first to carry the Crystal Mark.

We will provide training to make sure that anyone expected to deal with the media has the skills and confidence they need to do so.				
What we'll do to make this happen	Who'll do it	By when	Cost	Progress
Provide communications training for councillors and staff who are regularly expected to speak to the media.	Communications Unit and Train Shetland	30 June and 1 July. Other courses to be arranged.	Not yet known	Currently underway. Councillor training is booked for 30 June and 1 July.
Add communication-skills training to the annual corporate training programme for staff.	Communications Unit, Human Resources and Train Shetland	January 2012	Not yet known	Currently underway.
Provide training for councillors and staff in how to communicate during an emergency.	Communications Unit, Emergency Planning and Resilience, and Train Shetland	December	Not yet known	This is yet to be agreed. A procedure for communicating in an emergency has been drafted.

We will provide regular information about the Council to staff who do not have access to emails.				
What we'll do to make this happen	Who'll do it	By when	Cost	Progress
Identify where all staff noticeboards are across the Council, adding new ones where necessary.	Communications Unit	July	Not yet known	Currently underway.
Identify staff who can update staff noticeboards on a regular basis.	Communications Unit	July	None	Currently underway.
Work with managers and supervisors to design and introduce a formal system to 'cascade' information around team briefings.	Communications Unit, Human Resources and managers	July	None	Currently underway. The system will be introduced along with the new management structure.

We will write and speak honestly, and communicate the facts, good and bad, in a clear and unbiased way.				
What we'll do to make this happen	Who'll do it	By when	Cost	Progress
Produce the annual public performance calendar, reporting performance in a balanced way.	Communications Unit	December	Not yet known	
Produce a 'How we're doing' booklet for the general public to show progress on the improvement programme.	Communications Unit	August	Not yet known	An insert in the Shetland Times is booked for 26 August.
Improve the performance section of our website, making it easier for	Communications Unit and	September	None	

staff, the public and organisations we work with to find out how we are doing, linking to the planning and performance management framework.	services			
Put more effort into explaining why decisions have been taken. Explaining more clearly why we can't comment in some situations – for example, due to commercial sensitivity and personnel reasons.	Communications Unit, Councillors and managers	From now on	None	A centre-page spread in the Shetland Times is booked for 8 July. The theme of the spread is 'Council finances'.

We will listen to staff and councillors and give them feedback.				
What we'll do to make this happen	Who'll do it	By when	Cost	Progress
Set up a staff suggestion scheme and discussion forum for staff on our intranet.	Communications Unit and ICT	July	None	Currently underway. Plan to introduce in early July.
Set up a central communications email address, monitored daily, for staff to make suggestions directly. If staff feel they are not receiving information, they can use this email address to alert management.	Communications Unit and ICT	May	None	Done.

We will deal with requests for information quickly, properly and openly. There is no excuse for not giving a response				
What we'll do to make this happen	Who'll do it	By when	Cost	Progress
Update and re-release the 'Corporate styles and standards booklet' to make staff aware of the necessary standards for things like replying to letters.	Communications Unit	September	None	

We will make sure that the need to keep staff, organisations we work with, MPs, and MSPs, trade unions, the press and the general public informed is built into all Council projects.				
What we'll do to make this happen	Who'll do it	By when	Cost	Progress
Make sure staff from the Communications Unit attend all agenda-setting meetings to help identify communication issues at an early stage.	Communications Unit and Agenda Management	From now on	None	Agreed.
Give pre-agendas to staff in the Communications Unit so they can identify stories that could be communicated.	Committee Services	From now on	None	Done.
Involve the Communications Unit in project planning so that communications issues can be considered at an early stage.	Communications Unit and managers across the Council	From now on	None	

We will work with the media, building positive working relationships.				
What we'll do to make this happen	Who'll do it	By when	Cost	Progress
Make sure that we maintain regular contact with the local media.	Communications Unit	From now on	None	Already in regular phone contact with the Shetland Times, Shetland News and Radio Shetland.
Tell editors when inaccurate reporting has taken place – in a spirit of openness and honesty and recognising that trust is a two-way process.	Communications Unit and managers	From now on	None	Done a few times so far.
Produce a 'Guide to the Shetland media' for councillors and staff to improve understanding	Communications Unit	July	None	A draft is in place.
Work positively with the national media to make sure that positive Council news stories feature in the national media. This would be part of supporting the Shetland marketing strategy.	Communications Unit, Promote Shetland and Economic Development Unit	From now on	None	

Staff time is not costed in this plan, as that has already been budgeted for.

B Contact with the media

Context

There is confusion over who in the Council can speak to the local media. It's important that this problem is solved, so that staff and councillors can deal with media contacts professionally and efficiently. This appendix also contains some useful guidelines on how to prepare for and take part in media interviews.

The media's perspective

Reporters believe they have the right to speak to anyone they like when looking for a story. They are likely to see restrictions on who can and cannot respond to a press enquiry as overly controlling. And they will undoubtedly have personal contacts with staff, which will sometimes result in inappropriate 'off the record' or anonymous interviews. They will be keen to get to the person they see as being able to provide them with the necessary details for their story.

We must try to help reporters get things right.

Our perspective

In formal interviews, staff or councillors have to be trusted to do things properly, but they must be accountable for what they say. Anyone speaking to the local media must understand that they are representing the Council and that involves serious responsibilities.

The local media in Shetland constantly monitors our actions and performance. The press have the right to enquire honestly, and we must respect this, but we should not flirt with the press or regard them with fear, or view the media with contempt.

Approach to be adopted

Staff, managers and councillors should agree who is the best person to represent us in a media interview.

Some of the best communicators on radio are not necessarily management. So to have a rule that only managers above a certain level can speak to the media (as has been the case in the past) is too clumsy and would not serve the purposes of this strategy.

Our objective when giving an interview to the media is to make sure accurate information is reported. With that in mind, staff and councillors should apply these basic principles when preparing for, and during an interview.

Handling contact with the media

- 1 The Communications Unit must be told about all interviews the media asks for. If you are a councillor and want to put forward your own personal views, you have to take personal responsibility for what you say. Although all requests for interviews are not made through the Communications Unit, staff in the unit are in the best position to say whether it is a good idea to give an interview. And it may be useful to get some briefing to prepare for the interview.
- 2 The Communications Unit must be told about any requests the media make for information, so they can give advice on the response to provide. However, standard queries looking for clarification of facts or figures do not need to be passed to the Communications Unit.
- 3 You must consider what a proposed interview is going to be about and agree with your line manager who would be the most appropriate person to be interviewed. Can the person answer detailed questions on the subject?
Has the person been trained?
Does the person feel able to carry out the interview?
- 4 If you are a councillor and are being asked for an interview (this could be immediately after a committee meeting), consider whether it would be useful to have a staff member there during the interview to help provide details.
- 5 In line with the 'Protocol for Councillor / Officer Relations', any councillor can give an interview on their own views. In those circumstances, the councillor will be speaking on their own behalf, not on behalf of the Council, and is personally responsible for anything they say.
- 6 Plan the messages that you would like to get across in the interview. Have points in your head that you want to make.
- 7 If a reporter calls and you cannot respond there and then, agree to call them back when you have had time to prepare. It's vital that if you say you'll call them back, you do so. It is also vital that you are available to the reporter. That can mean giving out a mobile or home number and being there to take the call when it comes. This is about something that is basic in building a good relationship with the media – making a promise and keeping it.
- 8 For a printed press interview, it can be useful to ask for questions to be emailed, and for you to send your responses back by email. This is valuable as it gives you time to think and means there is a record of exactly what your replies were. If you do this you read your responses out loud to check that they sound like what you'd say. This is because you will be quoted as if you had been speaking, so be aware of the need for your language to be natural.
- 9 Be aware that all Council emails are stored, and that under the Freedom of Information Act, they may have to be released to any reporter who asks for them. So anything you email could be quoted in a newspaper.

Giving a radio or TV interview

Reading a prepared response or referring to prepared answers will not do in this situation (though briefing notes can be helpful in radio interviews). A natural, fluent response in an ordinary accent is what's needed. For TV, do not look at the camera, unless you are involved in a 'live two-way' with a national TV station, where the questions will be heard through an earphone and you must gaze directly into the camera. This is notoriously difficult and we will provide training for this to people most likely to face this kind of interview.

In radio and TV, being calm and sincere is vital. You are involved in a conversation, so speak clearly but don't be tempted to shout or gabble. Before you start, a couple of big, deep breaths, exhaled very slowly, will slow your heartbeat and calm your nerves. Do not mumble. Be clear, short, simple and straightforward. Don't give the interview in an embarrassing location. We hope that there will be a standard location for interviews in the Town Hall.

- Anger and irritation do not portray you in a good light. A calm response always pays dividends.
- Do not laugh as if you don't believe what someone is saying.
- Do not patronise your interviewer, even when they're clearly wrong.
- Do not use jargon, even jargon you're very familiar with.
- Do not have any alcohol before the interview, and beware of caffeine.
- Make sure you are never caught smoking on camera, even when you think it is not recording.
- Dress appropriately for the location, your position, the weather and the occasion.

When faced with a microphone, always assume it is recording. Idle chit-chat which you think is not being recorded can end up a lead news item, as many politicians have found to their cost.

Make sure the Council's messages and images are consistent. This is absolutely essential. We are all representing the same Council. It is the Communications Unit's job to give advice on the Council 'line', and consulting a communications officer should mean that everyone is singing from the same hymn sheet.

Avoid being evasive or hesitant. If you're not sure or don't know, say so. Do not try to avoid the question. Sometimes a simple answer is best, but remember that giving a curt 'yes' or 'no' in an interview comes across as dismissive and sometimes bitter or angry. Show respect for the interviewer. If you don't, you're disrespecting the public. And if you don't, the reporter will have his or her revenge as they have the last word. Be aware that unfair editing is a possibility. Being quoted 'out of context' is a common excuse, but remember – if you said it, you said it.

Do not offer too much information. Wait for the questions. Answer them truthfully and in a straightforward way. Keep a clear conscience.

Communications Unit staff are always available to provide advice and guidance. That is, 24-hours a day, seven days a week.

C Preparing and issuing press releases

All press releases will be prepared and issued by the Communications Unit. This will make sure that the Council uses a consistent style and works more efficiently. Again, this new approach reflects the feedback we received from staff and councillors, where 84.5% of respondents said that they would support the Communications Unit writing and issuing all press releases.

However, this approach relies on getting the unit involved early on so that they can plan the best way to get the message out.

The new process in action

- 1 A press release is to be prepared.
- 2 Details of the story are discussed with a communications officer and an approach is agreed to get the information out.
- 3 A communications officer drafts the press release and sends it to the appropriate councillor or staff member for their agreement. (Note: all quotes will be agreed with the person they are attributed before publishing.)
- 4 Once the press release is agreed, the Communications Unit will post the story on the Council news homepage of our website and in an email to all staff, if appropriate.
- 5 The Communications Unit sends the press release to media contacts.
- 6 Councillors' spokespeople and staff will be contacted for follow-up interview by the media, as necessary. The Communications Unit will be kept up to date on requests for interviews.

The Communications Unit will aim to make sure that any press release dealing with an item of business at a committee meeting is issued within one hour of that meeting ending. The unit's performance in achieving that target will be monitored as part of this strategy and the Council's performance-management arrangements.

Press releases, publications, booklets, or other documents issued by or on behalf of the Council may contain quotes from the political leader or the relevant chairperson, in line with Council policy.

If a policy has yet to be decided, a publication will not carry a quotation that gives a councillor's personal opinion.

All press releases will be issued as plain text in an email, rather than in the traditional template format. The media have told us that this will help reduce the time it takes to handle them.

D Responding to inaccurate reports in the media

During the consultation process we received a number of comments about the Council's ability to respond to inaccurate reports or published letters. Information that is inaccurate and is not corrected can damage the Council's reputation.

We have developed the following procedure on the basis that, if inaccurate information is given, the Council should quickly put it right or provide more information to help people understand the issues.

Of course, this approach relies very heavily on a good relationship with the media, which we are committed to developing.

Inaccuracy in the media

Responding to inaccurate reports in the media is different from reacting to unfair editing, offensive opinions or views which people within the Council disagree with.

We have a responsibility to make sure that incorrect or misleading information is identified and corrected. However, you should not become involved in talking to the media, either in public or in private, which are to do with opinion, perceived bias or personal grievance.

Many corrections can be achieved easily, simply and informally. It is part of the Communications Unit's role to maintain open channels of communication with all local journalists, and especially with senior editors. Often a single phone call is enough to sort things out.

If a report contains an inaccuracy that you think is significant or legally damaging, do not contact the organisation concerned yourself. You should get in touch with the Communications Unit immediately.

In consultation with the staff concerned, and the Council's Legal Services department (if necessary), the Communications Unit will give advice on the level of response needed.

This may be a simple on-air or printed correction by the editor, a letter for the editor to publish, or a full-blown apology (which may make up a major part of a newspaper page in extreme cases) dictated and approved by us.

This is usually the result of legal activity or is part of an agreed settlement in order to avoid court action, and should be seen as a last resort.

Always bear in mind that we will have to maintain a relationship with the media outlet concerned after any dispute. At all times, our response to inaccuracies should be thoughtful, calm and carefully reasoned. Dashing off an emotional email in the heat of the moment is completely unacceptable.

However, there may be times when we need to take swift and committed legal action to protect our reputation and the reputation of anyone else involved.

Councillors

Councillors are responsible for representing the public in many issues, some of them controversial, and may want to do so in radio or TV, or in print.

If a councillor is facing what they consider to be inaccurate reporting, they may want to respond personally. However, if they are acting in the name of the Council or a committee in which they have a leadership role, they should consult the Communications Unit first for advice and guidance.

Information gathered illegally

In rare circumstances, a media outlet may get documents or information illegally. There is also the possibility of confidential information that could damage us, residents or organisation we work with, financially or in terms of reputation, being published. If this is suspected, the Communications Unit and Legal Services should be contacted immediately. Being threatening or aggressive towards the reporters concerned is unacceptable.