



4.11.19

Communications Strategy Paper

Introduction

Hambleton District Council is a well-run and financially stable local authority. It provides high-quality services for local people, businesses and visitors. In common with other district councils, these include many essential day-to-day services as well as those contributing to a good quality of life for residents and a pleasant environment. The council has over 540 staff and its main office is in Northallerton.

In January 2019, the council participated in a LGA peer review of communications. The review team found “many positive examples of communications.” Several areas for improvement were recommended – see LGA Peer Review Feedback, 16-18 January 2019: section 7.

One key recommendation was that Hambleton should deploy some senior level communications resource to review further the current arrangements and make recommendations for a future, fit for purpose solution with a strategy and communications plan developed as part of this work.

As the appointed consultants, Promodo Ltd has been on-site since May 2019 and this strategy paper has been developed as an output from this work.

This strategy paper articulates a new approach to communications.

Present communications arrangements

Communications is delivered at present by:

A Senior Communications & Media Officer (0.5 FTE) who reports to the Director of Economy & Planning.

A Communications Officer (0.68 FTE); 2 x Graphic Designers (1.92 FTE) and 2 x Technical Communications Officers (2.0 FTE) who report to the Customer Services & Communications Manager.

Additional communications, marketing and promotional activity is undertaken by a number of service-based officers, including in leisure and business support.

From a series of 1-1 conversations and group discussions, the outputs from the LGA peer review, and additional onsite research, the following SWOT analysis has been completed.

<p>STRENGTHS</p> <p>Communications is generally viewed positively in the council.</p> <p>There is a range of skills in the communications team.</p> <p>Some of the communications team have been with the council for many years and have a good corporate knowledge.</p> <p>There are additional skills in rest of organisation (for example, leisure, business support, consultation).</p> <p>There is good ICT in place and a clear ICT strategy to support future communications service.</p> <p>The Leader & cabinet are fully engaged in this work.</p> <p>The CX, senior managers and service managers are interested in what a refreshed communications service would offer.</p>	<p>WEAKNESSES</p> <p>There isn't a full communications team as such; the existing arrangements offer only a partial coverage of communications.</p> <p>There isn't an overarching communications strategy & plan; work is largely self-determined and reactive.</p> <p>There isn't any "professional" communications leadership at present so the potential to develop the team and prioritise work is limited.</p> <p>The current communications work is mainly press/media.</p> <p>There is no semi-formal/structured process for determining work/agreeing communications priorities.</p> <p>Communications is viewed largely as tactical not strategic.</p> <p>The organisation has limited experience of having a corporate strategic communications resource available and what the benefits of this would be.</p> <p>Productivity: some work seems multi-handled within the comms team.</p> <p>Lack of measuring of impact of work: presently activity is the most common measure.</p> <p>There isn't a corporate style guide with clear brand guidelines and imagery.</p>
<p>OPPORTUNITIES</p> <p>Better use of insight and intelligence supporting policy and services.</p> <p>Greater audience understanding to shape council communications.</p>	<p>THREATS</p> <p>Residents and businesses have increasingly higher expectations of councils generally.</p> <p>Communications is constantly evolving so effective comms teams need to have a broader skill set.</p>

<p>More targeted external communications.</p> <p>Improved recognition and support for council projects.</p> <p>Support for new council programmes for example, commercialisation; refreshed planning service.</p> <p>Opportunities for place branding and place shaping.</p> <p>Strengthened understanding of what the council does.</p> <p>Demonstrable community engagement in local priority setting.</p> <p>Extends contact into ‘harder to reach’ communities.</p> <p>A clearer employer brand to support recruitment.</p>	<p>There is a diminution of public trust in all levels of government.</p> <p>More complex local and regional arrangements can reduce public understanding of what the council does and reduce recognition for action.</p> <p>Changes in regulatory/statutory requirements (for example DDA).</p> <p>Financial pressures- need to be more productive and demonstrate good value for money.</p>
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Existing insight & intelligence

Effective communications is based on evidence and insight. The council works well in terms of conducting research and information gathering for specific projects and individual pieces of work. Projects feature highly in the council’s approach to delivering its corporate objectives and resource is invested in the projects from the beginning. To support this, the council has a dedicated in-house consultation resource.

In addition, the ICT strategy supports greater insight and intelligence gathering and use and the customer services team is a rich source of insight and has a very good ‘sense’ of the Hambleton population.

The LGA peer review noted that audience research was possibly ‘ lacking’, however as outlined above, audience research exists and is used effectively, but this tends to be on a project by project basis.

In general terms, the council doesn’t have an up to date overview of residents and their views and priorities. The last residents survey was The Place survey- ten years ago. A new residents’ satisfaction survey is being developed; with field work starting in autumn 2019 and results being available in early 2020.

This survey will follow the recommended LGA format for a district council and will provide a baseline to measure future progress against. The plan is then to repeat this survey in a 4-yearly cycle; to fit in with the political/elections term.

Social media

Social media was also noted in the LGA peer review as being an area of opportunity for the council. Social media has been developed significantly over the past 18 months and this investment by the council has shown a measurable increase in both the range and quality of the content online and the activity and traffic to the different council social media channels.

A light-touch comparison with other council websites and social media, shows that Hambleton has an active and engaging social media offer. The challenge now for the council is to take this work to the next level and demonstrate the benefit in terms of outcomes and added value from social media- rather than it being mainly about activity alone.

Critical success factors

To ensure the successful delivery of the strategy, there needs to be:

- A commitment by the leadership to a single unified approach to communications.
- Recognition that an effective communications team for the next 5 - 10 years will look very different to that of the past.
- Buy-in to the added-value that a unified approach to communications will bring.
- A willingness to engage with the corporate communications team at an early stage, in terms of service priorities and to see communications as a strategic enabler - something that will enhance and add value to existing and future work.
- Recognition that high-performing communications teams are both strategic and operational in their work.
- A willingness to **start** doing new things; **stop** doing some things and **change** how some things are done.

These critical success factors are largely about cultural change and effective internal communications will be essential in making this happen.

Design principles

The refreshed approach to communications will:

- Be more corporate.
- Be more targeted.

- Adopt a unified approach.
- Be more collaborative.
- Be more productive.
- Offer a broader communications skill set.
- Reflect up to date communications trends including:
 - ❖ Offline and online integration.
 - ❖ Storytelling and layered messaging.
 - ❖ Relevance (real time / right time).
 - ❖ Shareable content.
 - ❖ Use of digital influencers (internally and externally).
 - ❖ Consistent brand and corporate identity.

Overarching objectives

A refreshed approach to communications for Hambleton that:

- Meets the council's needs.
- Fits the council's way of working.
- Is aligned with the Hambleton values.
- Enhances and adds value to the existing communications offer.
- Builds on the recommendations from the LGA peer review.
- Is ambitious, high-quality and outcome-focused.

At present communications delivers a service that officers and members are generally happy with. In terms of new arrangements, there is a balance to be struck. The council has ambitious plans. It is well regarded locally and within the region delivering an ambitious portfolio of projects, on time and to budget. It has well-run local services. The refreshed approach to communications will add to what is delivered currently and will:

- Introduce a strategic and unified approach to internal & external communications.
- Build confidence in communications as a strategic service.
- Be evidence and insight based.
- Provide high quality information, at the right time and in the right place.
- Increase awareness of what the council is doing and ensure the council receives recognition for action.
- Influence attitudes & opinion.
- Influence behaviour.

Strategic approach

The Council priorities are:

- Driving Economic Vitality.
- Enhancing Health and Wellbeing.
- Caring for the Environment.
- Providing a Special Place to Live.

These priorities give the direction to the strategic communications plan. The council priorities have clear outcomes and the communications plan will support the achievement of these aims.

The proposed approach will ensure Hambleton has a communications team that can offer a full range of strategic and tactical communications. This will broaden the current service and introduce a new way of working with an emphasis on the internal, client side and more integrated external communications.

There will be a greater focus on outcomes and impact and being able to measure and evaluate communications work. The approach builds on the existing arrangements but will require a step-change in how communications is planned and delivered.

The existing communications resource will need to increase but it will also need to be deployed differently. The existing communications skill-set will need to broaden and be more flexible to reflect the new approach.

There will be four main areas of communications.

1. Corporate Communications

- Strategic brand
- External communications
- Reputation & influencing
- Stakeholder communications
- Crisis communications
- Marketing - Corporate
- Marketing - Service led (Leisure, Business & Economy)

2. Internal communications

- Employee engagement
- Employer/recruitment brand
- Change communications

3. News

- Media Relations
 - ❖ Local, regional, national media
 - ❖ Issues management
 - ❖ Media training
- Digital & Social
 - ❖ Integrated digital strategy
 - ❖ Social media
 - ❖ Video content development

4. Creative Services

- Corporate identity
- Brand development
- Graphic design
- Copywriting

These four areas (and the sub-disciplines within each), will offer a much-enhanced communications service to the council.

The corporate communications team will need to have and/or develop skills and knowledge in these different areas.

The communications service will be appropriate to the type and size of authority Hambleton District Council is. Some of these areas will be much less used than others, but it's about ensuring the council has a fit for purpose and high-quality service that is agile and adaptable.

Corporate Communications

Why is it important?

- Corporate communications ensures the council's messages are consistent, clear and relevant.
- Corporate communications provides a consistency to the council's brand and identity.
- Corporate communications helps nurture and sustain good relationships with key stakeholders.
- Corporate communications helps build reputation and influence.
- Corporate communications helps target specific media and niche audiences.
- Corporate communications supports a continuous flow of information across the organisation.
- Corporate communications produces reliable information.
- Corporate communications provides crisis communications.

Internal Communications

Why is it important?

- Internal communications keeps everyone informed- people like to know what's going on.
- Internal communications increases understanding of the council's strategy and priorities.
- Internal communications helps promote a whole council approach with everyone feeling they are contributing to the 'bigger picture'.
- Internal communications helps build a corporate culture and engages people in what's going on.
- Internal communications builds trust and confidence in senior leadership.
- Internal communications promotes learning and encourages feedback.
- Internal communications helps develop engaging recruitment materials and builds a strong employer brand.

News

Why is it important?

- A good news team ensures information is shared in a timely and appropriate way.
- Creative lively engaging content- leads to a good take up of new and views.
- It increases engagement and builds trust.

- It meets the needs of multiple audiences.
- It is efficient – and avoids duplication of effort: stories are written once then shared across different channels.
- It improves corporate style and helps build a strong and authentic brand.

Creative Services

Why is it important?

- Creative services promotes a consistent brand image.
- Creative services refreshes the brand and ensure it remains current.
- Creative services ensures the corporate look and feel is used across all communications, ensuring the council achieves recognition for action.
- Creative services offers copywriting and ensure a strong and compelling corporate narrative is used.

Structure and approach

Corporate communications team

The recommendation is to create a corporate communications team to cover the four areas of communications - as detailed above. These roles would work in an agile and flexible way, and cover a wider range of communications activities than at present.

It is recommended that these posts report into a Corporate Communications Manager who would in turn report into the Director of Economy and Planning.

This would provide the team with professional communications experience and skills and provide the council with knowledge and ability to deliver the new strategy; new arrangements; new plans and new ways of working.

The Corporate Communications Manager would be responsible for the delivery of the communications strategy; the development and the delivery of the annual communications plan. They would line manage the six (5.1 fte) corporate communications team members and have oversight of all communications activities across the council.

New communications work would be planned and allocated reflecting business need and team capacity. It is not proposed to make this an overly bureaucratic process but given the numbers of corporate projects and the range of communications activities supported, having a coordinated approach will ensure communications can be tracked, monitored and evaluated. This will ensure sufficient resources are freed up to work on new areas of work and improve levels of productivity across the team.

This new structure and way of working reflects both the current and future priorities of the council and the way in which communications as a discipline is changing and evolving. It is proposed that the existing cohort of communications officers has the skills and experience to fulfil these new corporate communications officer roles.

As well as the new corporate communications team, a strategic communications group will be established.

This will comprise the corporate communications team plus officers (located and managed within directorate/service areas) who have a communications/marketing element to their role.

The strategic communications group will contribute to the development and delivery of the overall annual communications plan.

Review mechanisms to cover the monitoring and evaluation of the annual communications plan would be established.