



STANDARDS COMMITTEE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this Communications Strategy is to promote both within the Council and externally, the work of the Council's Standards Committee and the importance of ethical governance. It is important for the Council to send out a clear message about its stance on standards. This increases public confidence in the Council, its Members and officers whilst ensuring that those involved in Council business know what is expected of them in terms of operating within the Council's ethical framework.

The key message that the Council intends to convey via this Communications Strategy, is that there is a robust ethical governance framework in place which aims to ensure that Members and officers operate to the highest possible standards of conduct.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

Nationally, there has been increased emphasis in recent years on making changes to the ethical cultures of public bodies to promote high standards and put in place greater transparency and accountability measures. The maintenance of high standards in public life is crucial to the creation of public trust which is a pillar of public life. Public trust is concerned with people's perceptions of the honesty and integrity of those involved in the delivery of public services and people's confidence and satisfaction with the outcomes of service delivery.

The public places high expectations upon those in positions of public trust about the standards that they and their organisations should be meeting. The Committee on Standards in Public Life has found that the Seven Principles of Public Life that it drew up in 1995 (commonly referred to as the 'Nolan Principles') are largely successful in articulating what the public expects of the ethical framework within which those in public office work.

The Nolan Principles are Selflessness; Integrity; Objectivity; Accountability; Openness; Honesty; and Leadership and are a statement of values 'inherent in public service'. The Committee has also found that the public has some additional wider concerns, for example, that those in public office have attributes such as financial prudence, competence and being in touch with what the general public thinks¹.

In a local government context it is vital that the standards expected by the public are met as this contributes to increased public confidence in local democracy. An absence in trust in the relationship between the public and the providers of public services undermines the legitimacy of public office holders to act on the public's behalf. An absence of public trust and confidence also impacts on the extent to which the public engage with and use public services.

¹ Survey of public attitudes towards conduct in public life 2008, prepared for the Committee on Standards in Public Life – Executive Summary

The 2008 Survey of Public Attitudes Towards Conduct in Public Life² found that only 45% of the public would generally trust local councillors to tell the truth and 35% would generally trust senior managers in local councils to tell the truth. Local authorities together with other public bodies in the UK therefore face the constant challenge of bridging the gap between the values held by the public and their perception of official behaviour.

LOCAL CONTEXT - NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL'S POSITION

The Council is currently going through a period of positive change. Since 2004 when the Council was rated as 'Poor' in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment, significant improvements have been made across all services resulting in the Audit Commission rating the Council as 'Managing Adequately' across all areas of the assessment in 2009. Further, the Council was shortlisted for the 2009 LGC 'Most Improved Council of the Year Award'.

As part of the Council's continuing path of improvement, the Standards Committee will be influential in reinforcing the clear cultural message in relation to ethical standards that has already been established and building upon the Council's existing ethical framework. The Corporate Plan 2010-2013 states that the Council will improve its governance arrangements including improving its approach to ethical governance for Members and officers. This forms part of the Council's wider priority of being an efficient, well-managed organisation that puts customers at the heart of what it does. The Standards Committee has a responsibility to ensure that what the Council is doing to achieve these particular aims and how it is doing it, is communicated clearly to the public and Members and Officers.

A key priority of the Standards Committee is the engagement of the political and managerial leadership of the Council in its agenda. To this end, the Standards Committee had an away day in September 2009 where the Council's Chief Executive delivered the key note address supported by contributions from the political group leaders.

OBJECTIVES OF THE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

In communicating internally:

The Communications Strategy seeks to raise the profile of ethical standards within NBC by engaging key stakeholders including the political and managerial leadership of the Council which will enable the Standards Committee to effectively drive its agenda.

In communicating externally:

The Communications Strategy seeks to build trust and confidence in local democracy and enhance the reputation of the Council and its members through the engagement of key external stakeholders.

KEY AREAS FOR THE STRATEGY

² Survey of public attitudes towards conduct in public life 2008, prepared for the Committee on Standards in Public Life

- Embedding standards further within the Council through informing, reminding and explaining standards and ethical issues to members and officers.
- Increasing public trust and confidence in local democracy
- Engaging Parishes in the Standards Committee's agenda
- Ensuring that ethics and standards are at the heart of all decision making
- Raising awareness of the local assessment process

TARGET AUDIENCES

Internal

- Officers
- Members
- Co-optees

External

- Parish Councils
- The Public – Residents of Northampton Borough
- Partner Agencies
- The Media
- Other key external stakeholders eg. community groups, business groups, tenderers and potential contractors, other public authorities and communities of interest eg. students, the elderly and youths. (Please note this is not an exhaustive list).

MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

Some of the key channels of communication that will be used are:

Internal

- **Intranet and e-mail** – a means of making information available to all PC based staff or specific groups of staff at all times.
- **Induction and ongoing training** – can cover standards and ethics issues as appropriate to a member of staff's particular post
- **Notice Boards** – there are a number of notice boards in the Council's buildings that can be used as a method of communication. However, this can be expensive and information becomes quickly out of date.
- **Meetings** – information can be distributed through the usual management channels.

External

- **Website** – the Council's website is a means of communicating with all members of the public who choose to access it.
- **Local Press** – the Council issues press releases about important events or information that it wants to communicate through the press.
- **Local Radio** – local radio can provide discussion forums or interview opportunities to communicate important messages.
- **Notice Boards** – there are a number of notice boards in parts of the Council's buildings accessible by the public that can be used as a method of communication. However, this can be expensive and information becomes quickly out of date.

- **Presentations** – can be used to reach certain groups of the public directly
- **Leaflets and articles in newsletters** – can be used to reach certain groups of people who the Council does not routinely communicate with electronically or who are not internet users.
- **Social Networking** – Internet sites such as Facebook, Twitter & Linked In can be used as routes to direct internet users to the Council's website and could be used for blogging, for example. However, as these types of communications have to be monitored very regularly, it may be necessary to ensure the communications travel one way only.

SUMMARY

The Standards Committee must communicate proactively and effectively to promote high standards and public trust and confidence in local democracy. The ability of a standards committee to do this is viewed by Standards for England as a measure of high performance. The Standards Committee also has a role in communicating the Council's stance on standards issues internally to all members and officers to ensure that Council business is conducted within a robust ethical framework.

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