
GETTING YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS

A communications toolkit for local councils

FOREWORD



Many local (parish and town) councils appreciate that in order to be effective they must communicate well and engage effectively with the communities they serve.

Research affirms that the reputation and effectiveness of local councils depends upon public awareness. There are many excellent examples of where this is already being achieved through the hard work and commitment of local representatives. Both the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) recognise that one of the chief drivers in developing and sustaining a good relationship with communities lies in the range of ways councils communicate to their audiences.

The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme (QPS) asks councils to demonstrate that they communicate, consult and actively involve their electorate, local organisations and members of the public. Good communications and community involvement is critical to earning and maintaining the goodwill of the communities that councils serve.

This communications toolkit, supported and funded in a partnership between NALC and the CRC, provides resources to help councils improve their communications with residents, staff and other stakeholders.

If local councils ensure that people are well informed about their council services and what they stand for, they are far more likely to build trust and a strong reputation for their work. In return, communities will have confidence in the decisions of their local councils and take pride in their achievements. These are the building blocks of sustainable communities.

The toolkit covers a range of communication tools and contains many helpful tips. Drawing upon existing good practice, it presents guidance relating to publications, media relations, digital communications and effective leadership.

When the CRC and NALC joined forces to create this product, it was due to our shared belief in the value of local councils and the knowledge that what you contribute to your communities is more important now than ever. We hope and believe that this product will provide support and add value to your work.

Cllr Michael Chater,
Chairman,
National Association of Local Councils

Dr Stuart Burgess,
Chairman,
Commission for Rural Communities

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PART ONE



EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY LEADERS

What is community leadership?

How to engage more effectively

Case study

INTRODUCTION



Local councils have an overarching role to play in their area which no other body can provide. In performing a community leadership role, councils can articulate and represent the views and needs of the local community more effectively.

This will involve listening to the local community and communicating what it is doing through a variety of mediums (some of which are detailed in this toolkit). If the community knows and understands what the council is doing for them, research has proved that its reputation will be higher.

The role local councils play as community leaders places them at the heart of communications in their locality and the effective use of the tools at their disposal will ensure the messages are strong, clear and well understood.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP?

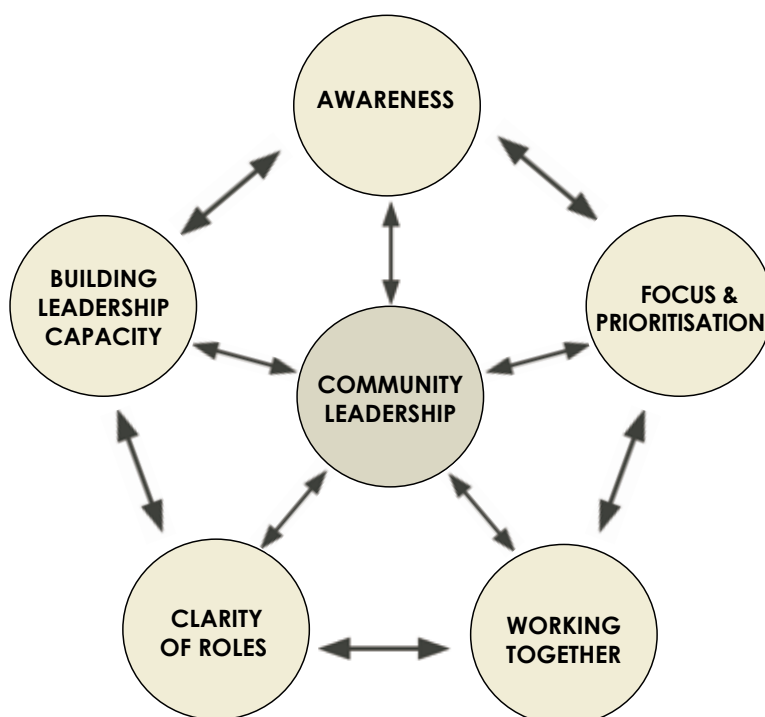
Local councils have an overarching role to play in their area which no other body can provide. In performing a community leadership role, councils can articulate and represent the views and needs of the local community more effectively. This will involve listening to the local community and communicating what it is doing through a variety of mediums (some of which are detailed in this toolkit). If the community knows and understands what the council is doing for them, research has proved that its reputation will be higher.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP?

- Community leadership is being widely used to describe the key and unique value that councils can bring to their localities.
- As the only overarching locally elected body, councils have a uniquely democratic role within the locality.
- In this capacity they are increasingly being asked to perform a visible community leadership role, focusing on bringing partners together, joining up local services, exercising influence in developing a shared local agenda and high-quality local services, engaging with citizens and creating a vision for their localities.

Essentially, it is not traditional, top-down leadership, but involves the council placing itself at the heart of the community and its activities. It encourages councillors and officers to use all the tools at their disposal to engage communities in making a difference.

A useful model to see how community leadership is viewed as central to a council's strategy can be seen below; it places the council at the centre of engagement, decision-making mechanisms and partnership working.



WHAT ABOUT REPUTATION

"Reputation is the opinion (more technically, a social evaluation) of the public toward a person, a group of people, or an organisation. It is an important factor in many fields, such as education, business, online communities or social status", or "Reputation is 'the result of what you do, what you say and what other people say about you'".

DOES REPUTATION MATTER?

- There are around 9,500 local (parish and town) councils in England spending over £600m of public money.
 - There are around 80,000 councillors, some elected but many co-opted, which represent around 16 million people in England, about one-third of the population.
 - The local council sector is diverse; the smallest represent under 100 people, the largest over 80,000.
 - Over 200 new local councils have been created in the last ten years, mostly in suburban/urban areas and towns.
 - Local councils have a legal structure, with powers (and duties) to represent the local community, delivering services to meet local needs and improve quality of life.
- So yes reputation does matter!

WHAT DO PEOPLE THINK OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

Consider these statistics from recent polls.

- 80% of the population is satisfied with its local area as a place to live.
- 59% felt that they belong to their immediate neighbourhood.
- In contrast, only 33% agreed or strongly agreed that their local authority provided value for money, with 45% of people satisfied with the way their local council runs things.
- 29% of local people felt they could influence decisions in their local area, a figure noticeably higher in London at just over 35%.
- 14% of the population had been involved in decision-making as either the member of a committee or as part of groups relating to local services, education or standing as a councillor. However, only 27% of people would like to be more involved in local decision-making.

These statistics have been taken from principal authority polls but are intended to be illustrative of the perceptions around local government as a whole.

Here are just a few things people are saying when asked about government and their own local authority in particular: www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIQWptjIQfk&feature=player_embedded

WHAT CREATES THE BEST IMAGE TO THE COMMUNITY?

Perceived value for money has the strongest correlation with overall satisfaction.

The strongest driver of perceived 'value for money' and the primary driver of resident satisfaction with councils is effective information about council services – what a council does.

Councils whose residents feel well informed about services are the most popular and vice versa.

Councils that prioritise communications, and tell local people about the benefits and services they provide, are likely to reap the benefits of higher overall satisfaction ratings.

Effective communications can help to challenge inaccurate stereotypes of local councils, as well as improving residents' familiarity and engagement with local councils.

CAN EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT HELP?

Community engagement means connecting with the core of a community and using our understanding of a community as a tool to develop relationships.

Community engagement is the process of working with, and through, a variety of groups of people to address issues affecting their well-being.

- When effectively applied it can be a very powerful tool.
- It is, in essence, an art form, not a science.
- All the theory in the world will be useless unless it is applied with understanding, skill, and sensitivity.

A good basis for starting to get it right is to 'start where the people are'. If councillors and others do not start with what is close to people's hearts and instead seek to impose their own notions of what the community wants, then it is unlikely to be a happy or productive experience.

Here is an example of how one local council in the US is consulting its community on how it sees its own vision: www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOgg_HjcSxg

WHAT MIGHT YOU EXPECT FROM YOUR PRINCIPAL AUTHORITY

Principal councils have, under the 2009 Local Democracy Bill, a legal obligation to consult (a simple form of involvement) on a range of plans and strategies. These might include, depending on the type of council involved:

- Community Plans;
- The Local Transport Plan;
- The Structure Plan;
- Local Economic Development Strategy;
- changes to highways;
- school re-organisations.

In addition, many councils choose to involve their communities, or parts of them, in a huge variety of other activities and issues. For example:

- Area Committees (Community Investment Prospectuses Groups);
- Older People's Forum;
- Youth Councils;
- School Governors Forum.

Local councils should perhaps be seeking ways of getting their communities' voices heard in these consultations. Alternatively, tapping into the results of such consultation exercises will give you useful feedback on how many views have been expressed by your residents and what their concerns are. You may find that among those who take the trouble to respond to consultation exercises are people who might be prepared to help with community activities.

HOW TO ENGAGE MORE EFFECTIVELY

As community leaders, what tools can you employ to engage more effectively and communicate what you do better?

- Manage the media more effectively to promote and defend the council.
- Provide an A–Z guide to what a council does.
- Publish a regular council magazine or newsletter.
- Ensure the council brand is consistently linked to services.
- Good internal communications – make sure staff and members are informed and give the community consistent messages and representation on behalf of the community.

Councils can also:

- liaise with other parishes;
- recognise the county/district/city council;
- understand regional and sub-regional dynamics;
- link thinking to other community strategies;
- emphasise the significance of neighbourhood planning;
- link community planning to spatial planning; and
- think about areas, places, buildings AND people.

Importantly, local councils need to work with community groups and other partners to do the following.

- Understand the viability of local assets and service provision.
- Enhance and sustain facilities and services (step-change from traditional to new forms).
- Organise the precept to maximise community finance.
- Represent the collective need and opportunities in dealing with statutory bodies.
- Create more sustainable community-led plans and act as guardians of them.
- Create greater confidence in using such powers as the Power of Well-Being.
- Continue to develop and protect the reputation of local councils.
- Use the precept to meet community needs and support the community leadership role.

To achieve many of these aims, partnership working will become more and more important. Having a good image and reputation will unlock doors and create more effective working between organisations and sustained relationships over time.

BETTER COMMUNICATION AND PARTNERSHIP WORKING

Effective communication is a major factor in the success of a partnership. Sharing ideas and developing a shared perspective (and hopefully a shared de-jargonised language) is a good way to secure joint ownership. The language issue is important. People not involved in local government can get frustrated by continual references to numbered or dated 'Acts' and to acronyms. The same applies to other public and private sector partners and voluntary groups – all have their own language and their own style. Using a common language is important in developing common understanding.

Finding effective ways of encouraging the community to feed ideas or criticisms into the partnership is as vital as finding effective ways of getting ideas out to the community.

CASE STUDY

Name of council: Whiteley Parish Council

Location of council: Hampshire

Size of population: 8,000

COMMENT: Whiteley is a reasonably small council that is undergoing a massive transformation. It has engaged its residents at every step of the way, ensuring that they understand what is taking place and consulting them on their views. This is an excellent example of community leadership in practice.

WHITELEY PARISH COUNCIL SAYS...

Whiteley is a relatively new community located between the cities of Portsmouth and Southampton in Hampshire. The development of around 4,000 homes straddles the boundary between two council districts: the borough of Fareham to the south and west, and Winchester to the north and east.

The parish council has a corporate strategy and a business plan, which are reviewed annually and based on a parish plan, which is conducted to determine residents' views on a broad range of issues.

The parish council's vision is "to improve the quality of life for the residents of Whiteley by working closely with the community and appropriate service provider's. The council will work in an open and accountable manner for the benefit of residents". In the autumn of 2007, the council was awarded Quality Parish Council status.

WHITELEY TODAY

Apart from the residential areas, Whiteley also contains:

- the sizeable Solent Business Park, which consists of a number of large offices;
- a shopping centre, which consists of a number of discount stores and designer fashions.

Development at the business park continues and now includes:

- a 5* Solent Hotel and Spa;
- a modern and sizeable medical centre, including a doctors' practice and pharmacy;
- a private medical establishment incorporating NHS dentists and a physiotherapy clinic;
- a local store, food take-away stores, a hairdresser and three pre-schools/nurseries;
- a community centre and a leisure centre;
- a sizeable recreation ground with sports provision, numerous children's play parks, a retail outlet that includes a supermarket, and a petrol station;
- restaurants and cafes, a skate park, a primary school and maintained wooded areas.

THE FUTURE OF WHITELEY

The area north of Whiteley is included in the South East Plan as a possible urban extension and if the community were to be expanded northwards it would include:

- further residential developments, including a high percentage of affordable housing of up to 3,000 houses and;
- associated infrastructure, including transport, educational and community facilities.

In September 2007, plans were announced by the co-owners, British Land and USS, to redevelop Whiteley Village to provide more appropriate shopping facilities for existing and future residents at an estimated cost of £150m.

THE COUNCIL'S VISION, SHARED

What the council had learnt from a previous experience was that good communication and community involvement was critical to learning and maintaining the goodwill of residents. Community engagement is about giving local people a voice and involving them and their community. It is about the development of relationships and clear communication to deliver better services and projects. This builds trust with the principal authority and leads to better co-operative working with all concerned.



Whiteley with the proposed area for redevelopment to the south in grey

From the outset, the parish council adopted a clear strategy for taking this project forward and established an excellent working relationship with the developer and principal authority.

1. The first step in the process of engaging the local community involved the preparation of a detailed questionnaire, which covered a wide range of issues.

2. This was followed by a series of exhibitions where residents could fully converse with the developer and parish council officials.
3. The questionnaire, which was sent to all residents, generated an excellent response and this feedback was instrumental in determining the appropriate level of services needed as part of the redevelopment.
4. Furthermore, as part of the consultation process, the parish council was able to secure the majority of the developer's contribution (Schedule 106 monies) to provide much-needed community facilities, which would be built as part of Phase 1 of the proposed development.
5. A planning application for the redevelopment was submitted in the summer of 2009.

THE STORY SO FAR

The application was unanimously approved in late autumn of the same year. The scheme has also been seen and approved by the Government of South East (GOSE). Work is expected to start in late 2010 or early 2011.

Website address: www.whiteleypc.info, email: clerk@whiteley@parish.hants.gov.uk

PART TWO



HOW TO IMPROVE MEDIA RELATIONS

How to engage positively with the media

How to use media tools successfully

Case study

INTRODUCTION



Local government tends to get poor media coverage nationally, regionally and locally, and we know residents' perceptions of their local council are strongly shaped by the media. So, it is crucial to try and build a positive relationship with journalists to achieve more informed, positive reporting about your council. It may also help you have more influence over the way bad news stories are reported.

There is plenty of evidence for the role of the media in shaping views. Research by Communities and Local Government in 2006 revealed that, in general, people were most positive about their council in areas where the council had a good relationship with the local press.

Residents' surveys consistently show that the majority of people get most of their information about their council through the media, particularly the local press. So this section of the communications toolkit establishes some ground rules for getting media relations for your council.

HOW TO ENGAGE POSITIVELY WITH THE MEDIA

The effectiveness of the first tier of local government can often be highly dependent on its public image. Image depends primarily on policies and programmes, but can be greatly affected by relationships with the media. But how can this relationship be made more positive and the media be managed to enhance the image – thus the impact – of the local council or association?

PRESS AND BROADCASTING

First, it is important to understand each type of media and how they operate. They have a nature, which spreads news from local/provincial to regional to national media.

Specialist press (in the first tier sector), such as *Local Government Chronicle*, *Municipal Journal* and *Local Government News*, have a positive influence and are widely respected. They often provide the initial starting point in the information trails for the national media; therefore they cannot be ignored. Equally important is the local press, which has a tremendous influence over the local electorate and communities.

THE MOTIVES OF A JOURNALIST

- It is essential that you understand the motivation of journalists so that you can improve the quality of the relationship.
- It is vital to understand the psychology of a journalist before trying to enter into a 'devil's pact' with him or her.
- They need a certain proximity to information and facts.
- They are in the business of getting stories and this simple fact should never be forgotten.
- If involved as an officer or elected member your end of the pact must be to bring stories to them. There is no other business to be had with them.

THE FIRST TIER'S APPROACH TO THE MEDIA

The first tier must communicate effectively in a credible, persuasive way to influence public opinion and win consent to maintain its reputation.

Why communicate via the media?

- To show that parish or town councils are at the heart of local community democracy.
- To explain the work undertaken by local councils on behalf of the electorate.
- To promote and raise the profile of your local parish or town council.
- To defend the interests of your local council.

DEVISING A MEDIA STRATEGY

When considering a media strategy, there are two questions you should ask yourself:

1. what is the purpose of the media strategy?
2. where is the best place to convey the message?

HOW TO USE MEDIA TOOLS SUCCESSFULLY

PRESS RELEASES

1. How to write a press release

- The press release can be the cornerstone to getting any media coverage.
- The press release should be no longer than two sides of A4.
- The most important aspects of the release should come first, then with it descending in importance.
- Your contact details should be at the end of the release.

All press releases should answer the following questions:

- what happened?
- where has it happened?
- why has it happened?
- when has it happened?
- how has it happened?

Presentation and distribution

The press release must be presented in an easy-to-read format. Remember that the people working in the media are very busy and working towards tight deadlines. Set up a database of key journalists and editorial staff in your locality that might be interested in the stories that come from your organisation. (See page 16 and 17 for a sample media release.)

2. Writing opinion pieces or feeding information for news and feature stories

In the first instance, it is worthwhile to set up meetings with journalists just to get to know them and vice versa.

You should call the relevant editors, news editors or feature editors at your local or regional newspapers to find out how to submit an opinion piece or provide information for news and feature stories.

Ideally, you should prepare and rehearse a 15-second statement of the contents of your opinion piece or information you want to get across so that you can quickly convey your idea to the journalist. Also be aware of, and respect, the paper's deadline.

Send the opinion piece to the appropriate local or regional paper first. If it is rejected, try another paper. Do not be discouraged if it takes several tries to secure a placement.

Make the relevant member or officer available for interviews by the media.

SAMPLE MEDIA RELEASE

[Insert your logo here should you have one]

[XXXX Campaign Group Media Release]

[date, month] 201[X]

[XXX Campaign group wants local council for XXX]

XXX Campaign Group is currently seeking support from local residents for a new local council for [name your local area] to provide improved services, local representation and better support for local voluntary and community organisations.

[John Smith], Chairman of XXX, said: "This is about us controlling our future, rather than relying on others..."

So, just what is a local council? Local Councils are the tier of government closest to the people and usually work in partnership with district or county councils.

Across England there are already around 9,000 local councils representing around 15 million people in areas as diverse as urban city communities, market towns and rural villages. Their aim is simple – to improve community well-being, provide better services at a local level and provide local people with a stronger voice.

A local council could give the local community a greater influence over the issues that affect us all. Local councils across the country are already doing a great deal towards improving community well-being and providing better services at a local level.

Local councils might provide, maintain or contribute to the following services: community centres; leisure facilities; local youth projects; crime reduction measures; street lighting; street cleaning; community transport schemes; environmental issues and allotments, to name just a few.

XXXX Campaign Group is petitioning the borough/district council to create a new local council for XXX.

[Jean Jones], Press Officer of XXX Campaign Group, explained: "If we can secure enough signatures YYY council will be required to undertake a community governance review and they will have to consult local residents on the proposal. A community governance review must be completed within 12 months and unless very good reasons exist XXX will have their own local council formed."

**Continued.../
.../Follows on**

A new local council would provide the community with a focus for tackling the issues that affect us, provide us with a louder voice and enable us to more easily tackle the issues that we face.

Ends

Notes for Editors

1. [XXXX] Campaign Group are an independent group made up of local residents who are campaigning for a new local council in [area]
2. Advice and guidance about local councils can be found at the website of the National Association of Local Councils at www.nalc.gov.uk
3. For more information, contact [key contact name, telephone number or email address]

GETTING ON AIR

In considering radio or television as a medium for your message, it is important to keep your material current. A good test is whether you can work the days today, yesterday, or tomorrow into your material.

The following avenues offer an opportunity for on-air coverage.

- Current affairs programmes.
- Public service announcements.
- News programmes featuring local news.
- Editorials.
- Call-in or open line shows.

Remember...

- Resources and priorities vary among stations, so it is a good idea to make direct contact with the programme director to determine the most appropriate outlets for your story.
- Planning, combined with courtesy and professional behaviour, will go a long way towards ensuring that your issues are publicised.
- To make the relevant member or officer available for interviews by the media.
- To make sure you know what messages you want to get across in an interview – list your 'must says' and 'like to says' before you go in.
- Do not become a 'rent-a-quote' figure. Too many media appearances on side issues will devalue the occasions when you have something important to say.
- To make your story suitable to the medium. If the story is to be on television, make your story visual. Likewise, if the story is on the radio, then it needs to be audio friendly.
- No jargon – council/local government speak does not help people understand your message.
- Live interviews are the best, as it means that your contribution cannot be edited.

HOW TO HANDLE A CRISIS

What should you do when things go wrong and the press is beating a path to your door?

- It is important in the first instance to agree the message that you want to get across to the media.
- Agree ground rules with any other agencies or authorities that might be involved.
- Provide background information – or the media will find their own, which might be skewed to your disadvantage.
- Be authoritative.
- Keep talking – feed the media.
- If it is appropriate, say your sorry – you can voice regret without accepting liability. If you have done something wrong and you know that from the start, apologise and say what you are doing to put it right. People are more likely to believe you when you say "we did this right", and that moves the story on.
- This attitude extends to a ban on the phrase 'no comment' and resisting the temptation to dump on other agencies and authorities. The former suggests shiftiness and the media will simply go elsewhere – to the 'opposition' for example. The latter can cause real long-term damage to relationships within the local community.
- Tell the truth.
- Monitor the media – refute errors before they become accepted fact.

CASE STUDY

Name of council: Ashton Hayes Parish Council

Location of council: Cheshire

Size of population: 1,000

COMMENT: Ashton Hayes Parish Council has worked tirelessly with the University of Chester and, just as importantly, the local, regional and national media, to highlight and raise awareness of the fact that the village was the first carbon neutral one in the UK.

It produces regular media releases, makes itself available for interviews and keeps giving briefings and background for information. The media is a beast that needs constant feeding.

For more information: www.ashtonhayespc.co.uk/ and www.goingcarbonneutral.co.uk/

PART THREE



HOW TO PRODUCE EFFECTIVE PUBLICATIONS

General publication advice

How to write a newsletter

How to layout a newsletter

Case study

How to write a magazine

How to layout a magazine

Case study

How to write and layout leaflets and posters

Case study

INTRODUCTION



Local councils have long been producing their own community publications. This enables them to provide news, features and the ability to respond to events more effectively, as well as being able to shift the focus towards how the council is working with the community and its partners and the impact this activity is having.

For some local councils, producing dynamic publications have seen them become their residents' main or preferred source of information about their council. So how did they get to this position? This section provides some of the answers by giving you some tips for producing a good publication. This section also includes a case study for a council publication.

GENERAL PUBLICATION ADVICE

While every publication is unique, there are guidelines that can help make your publication look more professional. You may only have access to certain IT facilities, or you may be inexperienced at producing publications, but you can still produce a relevant, informative and positive publication, whether it is a newsletter or magazine, for your community. Here are a few guidelines for you to bear in mind.

OBJECTIVE

Your objective is to use a combination of text, design and format that will get your message across to your chosen audience cost-effectively.

INITIAL PLANNING

At the start of the project make sure you know:

- what the purpose of your magazine is;
- who your target audience is;
- what message your publication has to communicate;
- if a newsletter, poster, leaflet, brochure or programme will reach your audience best;
- whether there is a wider campaign to which your message must relate;
- your budget;
- the timetable you have to work to.

BUDGET

When preparing a budget for your publication, keep in mind staff time for writing, design, and project management, as well as hard costs such as photography, printing and mailing.

There are ways of bringing in income for publications or reducing expenditure such as advertising revenue. Try attracting local businesses and key stakeholders to pay for the advertising in your publication. If possible, find ways of producing the publication in collaboration with other key stakeholder groups such as principal authorities, religious organisations, local Mothers' Union's groups, local Women's Institute groups, the Citizen Advice Bureau, local community police, local sports clubs and also neighbouring parishes.

CHOOSING YOUR SUPPLIERS

You may have a list of approved suppliers that your council has already commissioned work from. Choose your supplier(s) carefully – creativity, reliability and specialist knowledge might be factors, as well as cost.

BRIEFING YOUR SUPPLIERS

Inform potential suppliers what you need them to do in terms of text, design, printing delivery date and distribution requirements. Suppliers will base the timetable and costs of producing your publication on this briefing. You should supply a written brief and a spoken one. That way, you have a record of exactly what you asked for, which you can refer to when it comes to discussing costs and making payment. Always issue formal contracts for suppliers.

DEALING WITH PRINTERS

Always get quotes from at least three different printers. Printers tend to take more time than they said they would. Get a clear idea in your head of what you want before you get an estimate (paper type, colour, whether folding is included and so on). Expect good service and do not be embarrassed to ask them to describe the terms and conditions they use.

Ask if there is a cheaper way to do it, for example if you get a full colour proof it is more expensive than getting a black and white proof faxed to you. However, with a full colour proof you will be able to see exactly how the colours will look. Ask yourself if you need a proof? If the printer is typesetting your work then you definitely need a proof, but if you have provided camera-ready copy (i.e. you have sent out the artwork and they only need to print the work) then you are only checking for colour and print quality.

PROJECT STAGES

Once you have chosen the right suppliers for your publication, they will still need your input at various points in the production schedule to make sure the finished product is on time and that you receive a product that meets your needs. Key stages are:

- tendering;
- briefing;
- approving designs;
- approving/amending draft texts;
- approving black and white laser proofs of laid-out text at an agreed number of stages and checking and approving your printer's colour proof (if necessary) of the full publication and 'signing off' the job for all copies to be printed and delivered.

SCHEDULING

Working backwards from your target distribution date is the best way to create a timeline. Ask your printer and mailing house about normal turnaround times for their services. Take into consideration your council's approval process and responsiveness of management. Be sure to allot enough time for these factors and each stage of production including editorial writing, design, pre-press and distribution.

DELIVERY

If you are using volunteers to deliver the publication, here are some suggestions.

Ensure that you give distributors plenty of time to deliver the publications.

Do not put a date on the publication as volunteers may sometimes be slower to deliver the publication than you had planned, for example, it is better to put 'Winter' on a newsletter or magazine than to put 'December'.

Be aware of the true workloads involved in delivering items. The number of households is not necessarily an accurate guide as you must also account for the geography of the area, so, for example, it is quicker to deliver to 100 terraced houses than 100 large houses with long drives.

Have some sort of check-up mechanism in place so that you know when your publication is delivered. Ask distributors to let you have any spares, ensuring that they do have spares.

Let your distributors know that they are important to you. How about a prize for distributor of the month or an annual party?

HOW TO WRITE A NEWSLETTER

A newsletter is a regularly distributed publication generally about one main topic that is of interest to its subscribers. Newsletters are published to provide information of interest to their members, customers or employees. They can be produced weekly, monthly or quarterly. The modes of production can be printed or electronic. Newsletters delivered electronically via email (e-Newsletters) have gained rapid acceptance especially as the public become more aware of saving paper and costs. Newsletters can be A4 or A5.

General attributes of newsletters include news and upcoming events of the related organisation, as well as contact information for general inquiries. The news stories should be short and punchy. Images relevant to the news stories can add colour.

TOP TIPS

- Decide the frequency of your newsletter and the size to set it up.
- Generate the content which should report on relevant news stories to your audience. This could be a local event or an industry event.
- Prepare your mailing list. Who will the newsletter go to? Is it being printed and posted or emailed as an e-newsletter?
- A professional looking newsletter can easily be created in MS Word or Publisher, or by using desktop publishing software such as Adobe's InDesign.
- Look at other community newsletters in your area to get ideas about content and format, paying special attention to communities that are similar to your own.

HOW TO LAYOUT A NEWSLETTER

Keep your newsletter design clean and simple. You can use colour and images to bring your content to life. Newsletters can be A4, A5 or even in an electronic (PDF) format.

STEP ONE

Decide the size of your newsletter.

STEP TWO

Add your content using columns and grids.

STEP THREE

Add some images to relevant stories. Make sure they are high resolution. Never use a poor quality, pixilated image.

TOP TIPS

- Keep your newsletter relevant to your audience.
- Use the design of your newsletter to present your organisation in a professional manner.

CASE STUDY

Name of council: Loughton Town Council

Location of council: Essex

Size of population: 30,340

Name of newsletter: *Think Loughton*

COMMENT: *Think Loughton* is a community newsletter – 13,000 copies are distributed quarterly to every home and business in Loughton. Part of the cost of producing the newsletter is covered by advertising revenue. The town council pays the remainder plus the cost of distribution by the Royal Mail.

The newsletter is intended as a channel between the citizen, the community and the town council. It is a way of letting them know what the council is doing and hope to do in the future, but it is mainly intended as a way for citizens to tell the people of Loughton and the town council what they do or what local issues concern them.

LOUGHTON TOWN COUNCIL SAYS...

We consider *Think Loughton* to be one of our most important lines of communication with local residents. Published quarterly, it complements the service provided by the council's website.

We endeavour to produce an engaging and informative quality publication with a wide-ranging appeal so that its first stop after delivery is not the recycling bin.

The key aims of this newsletter are to:

- promote the work of the town council;
- engage with local electors;
- support the work of local voluntary groups and charities;
- provide information, including that from other tiers of local government and the police.

Recent editions have promoted several new community ventures arranged by the council. Invitations to an inaugural tea dance at our community hall and to assist in the formation of a local film society have resulted in successful outcomes.

One of our priority projects is the registration of village greens to protect them from future development. Through the newsletter we have asked residents to provide the necessary evidence of the historical use of the land for leisure activities and keep them updated.

Residents are often unclear as to where the responsibility lies for service delivery. Through *Think Loughton* we publicise the work of the town council by providing information throughout the year on recently completed projects and future plans. The summer editions have, as an insert, a copy of that year's Annual Report providing more detailed information on how and where their money has been spent.

The most heartening words we hear are: "I read about that in *Think Loughton*."

Website address: www.loughton-tc.gov.uk



Think Loughton
News from Loughton Town Council Spring 2010 No 48

Mayor's charity launch

THIS YEAR the town council is holding what we hope will become an annual event to raise funds for a local 'Mayor's Charity'. This is something many other larger councils already do but, starting from scratch, we had to decide on the charity and, more importantly, what event to organise. Fitting in with the healthy lifestyles agenda now being followed by councils across the country, a fun run seemed appropriate as this could appeal to all ages (as long as it was for fun and not competitive) and at the same time give us all a chance to raise money for a worthy cause. This year we have chosen The Dream Factory, a locally based charity that raises money to provide treats and outings for terminally ill or seriously handicapped children.

The event, part of the Loughton Festival, will take place on the Farring Valley Recreation Ground, starting near the South Loughton Cricket Pavilion between 10.30am and 12 noon on Sunday 18 April. It is also supported by local clubs including the Loughton Athletic Club, Buckhurst Hill AFC and the South Loughton Cricket Club. It will be no longer than 6am so well within the capabilities of young and old as long as they go at their own pace, and all participants will receive a medal!

Details are still being finalised but the cricket club hopes to put on a parallel event for non-runners and we are inviting a celebrity to lead some warm-up exercises beforehand on the tennis courts. Come and join us for a fun morning, give yourself a health boost and raise some money for a good cause at the same time! A booking form is available directly from the council's website, www.loughton-tc.gov.uk or from the council office. Details of other events in this year's Loughton Festival can be found on page 6.

Bench for a hero

Marine Georgie Sparks remembered on page 3

Photo: © Chelsea Park High School

Loughton's Property Professionals since 1988

ROFFEYS	ROFFEYS	ROFFEYS
LETTINGS 020 8502 3500	SALES 020 8508 0101	PREMIER HOMES 020 8502 5800

Whether you are selling, buying, renting, or letting... ...there really is only ONE CALL to make

Relevant title and issue date

Easy to read three column layout

Good quality news image

Advertising

HOW TO WRITE A MAGAZINE

Research shows that you only have a few seconds to grab your readers' attention. All of that money and effort put into writing, typing and printing your publication will be wasted if they do not read it. Therefore, you must make it readable.

INITIAL STEPS

- The first questions you must ask yourself are what is the purpose of the publication and who do you want to read it? This will help you decide whether a magazine is the best method to use or whether a newsletter or leaflet would be more suitable.
- When writing a magazine, always match it to your readership. Although you can never please everyone, you must try and avoid making publications too simple or too difficult. Always avoid patronising descriptions, clichés, acronyms, local government-specific terms and in-jokes in your publications.
- Try to write in a style that is easy for the reader to follow (remember, they will not spend long reading it). Below are some suggestions.
- Do not use overly long or complex words when shorter words will do.
- However, don't use many words if one word will do.
- Try and vary the length of your sentences, while always avoiding sentences that are overly long.
- Use specific words rather than abstract words, for example, "the potholes in the main road are to be filled during March" rather than "highway improvements will be undertaken during March".
- Maintain the credibility of your publication and organisation by avoiding the use of exaggeration or over-emotional language.
- Do not write too much on one subject. Readers like to be able to see that they will not have to plough through pages and pages of copy.
- Headlines should be attention grabbing.
- Make sure that your news stories answer the five questions – Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? – and that the main point of the story is right at the top.
- Do not embellish news stories with unnecessary words such as adverbs and adjectives. Keep it simple and to the point.
- The opposite is true when writing features. Features allow writers the space to develop a story and to add a bit more 'decoration' in their writing. This could be, for example, elaborate and creative descriptions of places and people.

- Be sure to spell the names of people and places correctly. Do not be afraid to ask people with unusually spelt names to give you the correct spelling.
- Devise a style guide. This will ensure that everyone who writes for your magazine knows its style. This will, in turn, lead to the magazine being consistent all the way through.
- Get someone to proofread your copy to ensure that it is error-free and do a final spelling and grammar check of everything just before the publication goes to print.
- Invest in a good dictionary, thesaurus and punctuation book.
- Read other magazines and newspapers to see which are easy to read and easiest on the eye.

HOW TO LAYOUT A MAGAZINE

A magazine can be used as an income generator and be sold or given out free to your audience.

STEP ONE

First define your audience and the purpose of your magazine. Every magazine has its specialist area.

STEP TWO

Then do a mock up of the magazine. Think of the amount of pages, the size of the pages, the paper to be used.

STEP THREE

Cost your budget. Plan your printing and so on, accordingly.

STEP FOUR

Plan your content. This can include pages such as introduction, features, regulars, competitions, readers' letters, directories and so on.

STEP FIVE

If you have advertising, lay these out yourself.

STEP SIX

For the style of your magazine, choose a font, leading (the spaces between each line) and point size. This should be the same throughout the magazine. Your headings can be different and more creative but your body text should be the same throughout.

STEP SEVEN

Your layout should have at least two columns. Your point size should not be too big or too small.

STEP EIGHT

Think about captions and making a feature of them.

STEP NINE

Think about your publication's timescale. Will it come out monthly, quarterly or bi-annually?

TOP TIPS

- Plan well.
- Use relevant, focused and engaging content.
- Generate good advertising revenue.

CASE STUDY

Name of council: Leicester Forest East Parish Council

Location of council: Leicestershire

Size of population: 6,500

Name of magazine: *Life*

COMMENT: The magazine is clearly laid out, and you get a sense of what is going on in the community. It is eye-catching, and makes good use of local advertisers to generate revenue. It is a reader-friendly size with a hard news lead, which attracts the attention of the local people.

LEICESTER FOREST EAST TOWN COUNCIL SAYS...

Leicester Forest East is a large parish of about 2,500 households, on the western boundary of Leicester. Bisected by the M1 (north/south), and the A47 (east/west), it makes the creation of an identity as a village rather than a commuter suburb difficult. But the parish council is dedicated to fostering a sense of belonging in the community, and considers communications to be at the core of this, with the parish magazine, as the kingpin.

From humble beginnings in 2001 as a parish guide, *Life* eventually became a quarterly publication, and in its present format comprises 24 pages with a full-colour cover, and two colours inside.

Adhering to a regular schedule is important for readers and advertisers. For readers it provides continuity, enabling them to be kept up to date with events in the neighbourhood, and for advertisers an awareness of when a publication is due, for any promotional activity.

The editorial process is voluntary – a small committee meets twice per issue to discuss content and so on. Once copy is agreed, it is edited and paginated. The parish office collates the 'raw' copy, and emails it to the editor. Particular responsibility in translating the copy into a presentable format is done by the editor. Editing is a serious business, entailing correcting grammar and spelling, and reducing the amount of text. Many contributors write as they speak so a good grasp of English and the ability to précis is invaluable!

The copy then goes to a professional studio for print preparation, then to a professional print company for production. The latter two stages cost money, but are essential if a presentable result is to be achieved. (A presentable result is one which has clarity, is attractive and easy to read, including as many pictures as possible.)

The parish council allocates funds from its precept for these professional services. This is money well spent, as it enables the circulation of parish matters and other items of local interest that would be impossible to do otherwise. Distribution is to every household in the parish by all parish council members, each having a 'round'.

Website address: <http://leicesterforesteast.leicestershireparishcouncils.org/>

LIFE MAGAZINE

Clearly visible title and issue date

A short strapline summarises what the magazine covers

Some headlines indicating what is covered in the issue

High resolution image relevant to news story



LIFE
Winter 2010

Leicester Forest East Parish Magazine

In this issue...

Artwork gift

Stop the 450c Houses Now
This Countryside Needs You

RAG poster campaign

LFE Spinney, off King's Walk Park

New Library - where and when?

Proposed site for new library

Existing library

It was in July 2004 that a new library for LFE was first mooted. At the start there were problems in deciding where the best site could be - a problem which has not really gone away. There is no one place (which is available) which would suit everyone. Consideration was given to re-development of the current site, or adjacent to Stanford Lays School, or to St Andrews Church, or Forest Park Inn, or the Parish Hall. Re-development on the current site included the demolition of the newsgents, to provide for a bigger area to include car parking. As anyone using the library or the post office (or who lives on Holmfield Avenue West) knows, parking is a problem in this area. For various reasons, most of these options proved unviable, with the only two with any chance of progressing being the existing site or the Parish Hall.

[Continued on page 2]

HOW TO WRITE AND LAYOUT LEAFLETS AND POSTERS

Posters and leaflets are popular marketing tools used to put across a certain message. Posters are used to inform a large group of people about something and are usually put up for public display. Leaflets are given out to individuals to read.

STEP ONE

AUDIENCE

Before you begin designing, ask yourself – what is the purpose of this poster/leaflet and for whom am I designing it? Am I selling something? Am I educating people? Am I promoting something? Who is my audience and what do I want them to get out of this? It may seem trivial, but taking the time to write a simple sentence defining why you are printing a poster/leaflet and who you are making it for, can give your design direction and purpose.

STEP TWO

MORE IMAGE, LESS TEXT

A poster/leaflet is all about grabbing someone's attention. Do not get bogged down trying to tell a story with text. Instead, rely on graphics. If you need to use text, do so sparingly and be sure to integrate it into the graphic itself. Separating your text forces your viewer to split his/her attention, meaning you are less likely to hold it.

STEP THREE

LESS IS MORE

You want your poster/leaflet design to have one single feature item, that is, one thing that stands out and grabs the viewer's attention. If your design is dragged down by over crowding with too many colours, textures or text that is not going to happen. Instead, look at your design and ask yourself, what is the focus here? Is it clear? Does it stand out?

STEP FOUR

QUALITY GRAPHICS, IMAGES AND TEXT

Posters are big, which means your design has to be big and so does the quality of your pictures' resolution. Taking a small graphic file of your logo and blowing it up to ten times that size just does not work. It will be blurry. Instead, start with large images, work on your design and always review your proofs to make sure everything looks poster-perfect before you send it to be printed.

STEP FIVE

DISSEMINATION

What size is the final outcome? Where is it going? For example, is it going to hang on a wall, and so on?

TOP TIPS

- Plan your marketing message.
- What is the best mode of communication? A poster or a leaflet?

SAMPLE POSTER DESIGN

Your headline should be short and to the point

**BUILDING BLOCKS
FOR THE FUTURE**

The image should be strong and high resolution



PUNCHY ● EFFECTIVE ● SUCCINCT

Information about the product should be succinct, punchy and attention grabbing. If it is too long it detracts from the quality of the message. Keep your fonts clean and modern. The stronger the message the more memorable and effective it is.

Your contact details should be visible

For more information:
www.website.co.uk
or call 020 7889 9800

LCR

PART FOUR



HOW TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY ONLINE

How to use digital media tools

How to use social media

Case studies

How to design a website

Case study

INTRODUCTION



Digital communications are a must for any council, and are more than about simply having a website. Growing numbers of people of all ages are using new forms of digital communications and expect the organisations they are in contact with to do the same.

Used as one element of the communications mix and always with objectives in mind, digital communications are a vital tool for:

- targeting hard-to-reach groups;
- engaging people in your campaigns; and
- getting important messages out quickly and cheaply to a large number of people.

Digital communications touch on many areas of local government activity. The focus of this section is the use of digital communications tools to carry out communications and engagement activity.

Why are digital communications crucial for local councils? In stark terms, 45 million British people regular use digital (and we mean online) communications. That is a lot of people. They are understandably becoming less patient with bodies or organisations that do not have a digital presence of any kind out there in cyberspace.

And to go into more detail, 41% of people who use the internet, engage with social media and 38% of people who use the internet, hold social media accounts.

It really is like a new industrial age and that is why you can justifiably call it a 'digital revolution'. The interesting thing about this digital revolution is not the technology but the implications of it.

HOW TO USE DIGITAL MEDIA TOOLS

WEBSITES

How should a website be considered by a local council? It is essential for the success of any website that it is recognised as an integral part of the council. It is a global, potentially low-cost communication and an increasingly transactional medium by which information and services can be made available at any time of day or night.

As such, councils need to consider how best the internet can be used to provide access to information and to aid in the delivery of goods and services to customers.

There are three main categories of website.

- Information orientated – these cover publications, publicity, recruitment, news, statutory information, promotional material, providing advice, requesting responses and feedback.
 - Operational – these are transactional websites geared towards e-business.
 - Campaign – these websites will support a specific publicity campaign.
- Many websites may incorporate aspects of each of the above.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES INCLUDE:

- identification of your website's place in the council's overall communications strategy;
- identification of the audiences for your website, where possible on the basis of market research or dialogue with residents;
- understanding and responding to citizen's satisfaction with the website;
- provision of resources, especially staff with the necessary skills;
- integration of the website with business processes, which might include electronic dealings with the public, publication of information, recruitment and consultation;
- integration of web services with other systems where practicable;
- monitoring the development of the website and its success.

To ensure that the aims and objectives of the website are achieved, they must be applied to key roles in your council: updating your community; providing a call to action; opening up consultation; and interactivity.

FUNDAMENTALS OF SETTING UP A WEBSITE

In establishing a website, councils must ensure that:

- users can find your website;
- users are clear about who owns the website and what it is designed to achieve;
- goods and services being offered by the council are effectively focused on the target audiences in terms of relevance and ease of accessibility;
- adequate security is in place when dealing with online purchases and service, and that the client nor the provider is compromised;
- contact points (whether email, forms-based or telephone) must be staffed and enquiries answered within reasonable timescales;
- the information published is up to date, accurate and relevant to the website;
- links are up to date so users can rely on the website being available and is fast enough.

HOW TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA

WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

- Social media is a collective term for the ways to create and publish stuff on the internet.
- People generally use the term to describe how organisations and individuals share content and create conversations on the web.
- It is transforming the way companies do business and individuals interact with each other.
- It is providing a voice for those who were not well heard before.
- Social media will change the way that local government and its elected representatives interact with local people.
- Social media is usually fairly open – meaning a wide variety of people can see, comment on or collaborate on materials. The tools are usually free or low-cost and often easy to use requiring no more skill than adding an attachment to an email or creating a Word document. This means there are low barriers to entry for sharing opinions with a potentially wide audience.
- You may also see the term Web 2.0. This is shorthand to describe how social media has changed the content of the internet from being dominated by one-way publishing or e-commerce to a greater emphasis on words, pictures, music and videos being published, shared and commented on by ordinary people.

Government 2.0 is sometimes used to describe how social media is changing the relationship between government institutions and citizens. Citizens and service users are increasingly expecting a greater say in how things happen in the place where they live and are probably already discussing local issues online. Government 2.0 refers to the uses of social media tools to engage in those conversations, shape policy, support local democracy and improve services.

HOW TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA

Councillors, councils and their partners are using social media for a range of purposes. It is being used as a way to spark innovation and engage in conversations with local people.

Some councils are using social media to:

- provide and exchange information about services;
- support local democracy;
- gather citizen insight and manage citizen relationships;
- promote cultural events or tourism for their area;
- support community cohesion, neighbourliness and resilience; and
- create internal communications and learning and development.

Councillors may find it is easier to set up their own blogs as there are plenty of free sites and this neatly circumvents the issue of whether official council blog sites need to be shut down during elections.

But councillors also need to ensure that councils are making the most of the potential these tools are offering. Councillors should ask if there is a council policy for social media use, particularly for council officers.

BLOGS

Blogs are easy to update web journals, usually published by an individual or a small group. They are almost always commentable – meaning readers can share their opinions about what the author has written. Councillors can share their views on public policy, share information about council services or issues of local interest and canvas opinion using blogs. Even very ‘business-oriented’ local government blogs have a personal feel with bloggers sharing some detail of their daily lives, for example sharing how changes in local services have affected them, how much they enjoyed taking their kids to the village fete or sharing pictures of tasty local produce.

You can create a blog from a number of different methods including:

- make it a part of a website;
- setting up a blog in www.blogspot.com; or
- setting up a blog in Live Journal in www.livejournal.com

BLOGGING TOP TIPS

- Your name is your brand so do not hide behind a clever title.
- Do not forget to include your contact details.
- Never write anything that you could not say in a public meeting. A blog feels like an intimate space but it is not, so think twice about what you write, especially if you are angry or upset.
- However, do not sound as though you are at a public meeting. A chatty style is best.
- Do not think of blogging as an alternative to delivering political leaflets – it supplements and extends your printed literature, but it does not replace it.
- Use photos. But always ask permission and explain that you are taking photos for your blog. You must check that there is parental permission before you use photos of children.
- You will mainly be writing about local issues, but also try to find the local angle to national stories.
- Make sure that the local press know about your blog. From time to time, drop an email to local reporters with a link to something that might interest them on your blog.
- Encourage comments on the site, but use the option to pre-moderate them. Although this restricts the immediacy of responses, it gives you some control so that you can protect yourself, and those leaving comments, from abuse and defamatory remarks. From time to time explain the criteria you are using when moderating comments.
- Respond to comments, but do not forget that you are still in a public space. Beware of the knee-jerk reaction to a political challenge and continue to present yourself as reasonable and thoughtful, which you undoubtedly are.
- Set appropriate privacy settings for your blog or networking site – especially if you have a private, non-political blog.
- Be aware that the higher your profile as a councillor, the more likely it is you will be seen

as acting in your official capacity when you blog or network.

- Ensure you use council facilities appropriately. If you use a council-provided blog site or social networking area, any posts you make will be viewed as made in your official capacity. Do not use council facilities for personal or political blogs.
- Be aware that by publishing information that you could not have accessed without your position as a councillor you will be seen as acting in your official capacity.
- Make political points, but be careful about being too specific or personal if referring to individuals. An attack on individuals may be seen as disrespectful, whereas general comments about another party or genuine political expression is less likely to be viewed as disrespect. Do not post comments that you would not be prepared to make in writing or face to face.
- Do not blog in haste.

MICRO-BLOGGING

Twitter, www.twitter.com, was the social media phenomenon of 2009 and is still growing. It is a way of sharing short snippets of information, links to interesting resources, what you are doing or requests for help. Limited to 140 characters, it is ideal for sending and receiving information through text on the go. It can be used as a one-way publishing tool, pushing out short bursts of information and many councils use it this way through corporate accounts. It is more powerful as a conversational tool with councillors and local people sharing information.

Many councillors are already using Twitter. You can see a growing list at www.tweetyhall.com or www.cllrtweeps.com, two sites that collect a growing list of councillors using Twitter.

SOCIAL NETWORKING

Social networking is using online tools to build communities of individuals who are interested in sharing information and support. Social networking sites, such as Facebook (www.facebook.com), Bebo or MySpace, can be used to facilitate connections between people who already know each other, usually in a social context or can be used by organisations and businesses to share information about products, services or events with a range of interested individuals. Other social networking tools such as LinkedIn are built around professional identities. Some social networks are built around particular issues, for example MumsNet for parenting or around a geographic area.

Facebook is by far the most popular social networking site with 23 million users in the UK alone. Compare that with the circulation figures of newspapers.

Using social networking sites as a councillor requires a different approach to using it as an ordinary citizen. Many councillors use Facebook as anyone else would – to share personal news and information with people they already know. Other councillors use their Facebook pages more openly, 'friending' beyond people they know. Facebook now allows politicians to create pages where they can share information with supporters without disclosing their personal networks.

SOCIAL NETWORKING: THE RISKS

When it comes to reaching certain groups quickly, cheaply and maintaining control over your message, many councillors find online methods hard to beat. However, there are some key points to remember to stay safe.

If you use blogs to help you to carry out your political work rather than in your private capacity, your obligation to meet certain standards of conduct still applies. You can still be involved in robust political debate and state your opinions strongly – the Code of Conduct does not exist to gag you or fellow councillors or stop you expressing political views. It does, however, prohibit treating others with disrespect, bullying and bringing one's office or authority into disrepute.

It is important if you are blogging or tweeting personally, and not in your role as a councillor, that you do not act, claim to act, or give the impression that you are acting as a representative of your authority. It is worth noting that web links to official council websites may give or reinforce the impression that you are representing the council.

You may use a blog to draw attention to a particular local issue and call the council to account, as you would in a public meeting. However, blog entries ridiculing or attacking particular officers, or making serious accusations about their personal competence or integrity, could amount to disrespect, even bullying, in some circumstances.

It is worth considering that while the immediacy of social media can be a great benefit, it also has a downside. For example, it is possible for you to Tweet on a matter seconds after leaving the council chamber – long before your opponents have issued press statements. This can result in broadcasting spontaneous remarks that may quickly seem unwise. By the time you have reconsidered and deleted them they may have been seen by thousands, Facebook-shared, re-Tweeted, linked to, and committed to local headlines. That is fine, if you have got the message across just how you wanted to, less so if your post was an outburst in the heat of the moment. Such remarks are easily withdrawn, apologised for and forgotten when made in person, but posting them on the internet means that they have been published, and in a way that cannot be contained.

It is important to note that good ethical standards are not limited to the code. While you may not be investigated for using online media, your conduct can still attract adverse publicity, even where the code does not apply. For example, a regional newspaper recently called a councillor's blog post against a rival party a "toilet-mouthed tirade" saying: "A [code] breach it may not have been; childish, crude and demeaning to all who vote or follow politics it certainly was."

It is clear that social networking sites can enhance political debate and add positively to local politics when used correctly.

CASE STUDY

Name of council: Chalfont St Peter
Location of council: Buckinghamshire
Size of population: 13,000

COMMENT: Quite often the most effective social networking is around issues, campaigns and events rather than organisations. An example of this is a Facebook campaign, which Chalfont St Peter Parish Council is involved with, which is to stop the over-development of Chalfont St Peter Buckinghamshire, particularly at Holy Cross/The Grange and Newlands Park sites.

Sense for Chalfont St Peter is opposed to all inappropriate development in the village. It is not opposed to all development.

See the campaign, and sign the petition, on the Sense website www.sense4csp.org.uk and visit www.chalfontstpeter-pc.gov.uk for more information.

Name of council: Formby Parish Council
Location of council: Merseyside
Size of population: 24,000

COMMENT: Formby First is a web blog from the independent Formby parish councillor, Sean Brady. He uses this blog to report on his activity as a local parish councillor and his interests in Formby as a place and a community.

Blog address: <http://formbyfirst.typepad.com>

HOW TO DESIGN A WEBSITE

An effective website is one that meets the needs of your visitors. This means displaying your products or services in such a way as to make it easy to buy or get in contact. It is not about the layout, the colours, images or clever effects, it is all about your content, navigation and calls to action.

STEP ONE

Plan your website and follow a controlled design process.

STEP TWO

Check your content for accessibility, spelling and grammar.

STEP THREE

Ensure you have your keywords in all the right places.

STEP FOUR

Check that every page has the key components in place.

STEP FIVE

Make sure that the navigation is logical and hierarchical.

STEP SIX

Make sure the site works in all the major browsers.

STEP SEVEN

Keep it simple.

TOP TIPS

- An effective website is one that meets your visitors' needs. It does not matter how clever the layout is, how well your internet ranking or good your branding, if the site does not meet their expectations they will not visit it again.
- Make sure you give yourself enough time to create your website; effective website design involves a lot of planning and research.
- Get as much help as possible from the professionals.

CASE STUDY

Name of council: Misterton Parish Council

Location of council: Nottinghamshire

Size of population: 2,000

COMMENT: This website has a good layout and design, clear navigation and excellent usability. Access to local information was never more than a couple of clicks away.

MISTERTON PARISH COUNCIL SAYS...

We decided to develop a website in 2003 when we embarked on our bid to become a Quality Council. We were aware of the ICT expertise available at Bassetlaw Community & Voluntary Service (BCVS), and were fortunate to secure its (free) services in designing it. We did not want anything fancy – something easy to navigate – giving local information we knew that people were interested.

Our first website, a dot org domain, was essentially a community-based facility, with parish council information being provided as just one of the menu items.

The type of information we provided included:

- information about the parish council, including diary of meetings;
- agendas, minutes, and so on;
- local news and diary dates;
- local weather;
- links to other councils, voluntary organisations, and so on;
- our contact details.

We later added much more information, including:

- our Parish Plan;
- local photographs;
- a message board;
- a facility for shops, businesses – anyone in fact – to advertise for free;
- a street map.

At first we managed the website ourselves, but it quickly became apparent that it would be better for someone skilled at the job to do it, and so we were delighted when BCVS offered to manage it for a small monthly fee.

Having secured Quality accreditation in May, 2006, it occurred to us that to reflect our new-found status, we really ought to have a dot gov domain, and so we began the process of converting. However, it quickly became apparent that much of the community-based information on our existing website was not really suitable for a dot gov website, and so we made the significant decision to run two websites. There would be a new website for official parish council business, www.misterton-notts-pc.gov.uk, and the existing site, www.mistertonvillage.org.uk, would continue to provide community information.

We may well be unique in operating two different websites, but this approach allows us to provide a wide range of useful information.

The official parish council site now includes comprehensive information about the council, including agendas, minutes, annual reports, newsletters and details of a considerable number of published documents, such as our Freedom of Information Publication Scheme, complaints procedure, and so on. It also provides contact details of all members and officers.

We know from local feedback that our agendas and minutes, in particular, are widely read by local residents and some people not so local. We have always tried to make our minutes reasonably comprehensive and readable.

When we have an important village consultation exercise we use both websites to advertise it. A good recent example was a public meeting called to discuss the future of a redundant village hall. We posted a public notice on the homepages of both websites.

We also find that, through our contact facility on both websites, we get a considerable number of emails from the general public giving us their views on local affairs, or reporting matters that need attention, or telling us what they think we are doing well or not so well.

To conclude, our websites are a great success and much appreciated by our users.

Website address: www.misterton-notts-pc.gov.uk/index.html



Miserton Parish Council website

SOURCES



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Joseph Rowntree Foundation	Page 1
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Local Government Association – Best Value Performance Indicator	3
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PART TWO

<i>Connected Councillors: a guide to using social media to support local leadership</i> by IDeA in association with the National Association of Local Councils, the Leadership Centre for Local Government and Standards for England	36–40
<i>Social networking: an effective medium of communication but not without risk</i> by Standards for England. www.standardsforengland.gov.uk/News/Newsletters/TheBulletin/Issue47/ See item on Social Networking	40–41

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) is the nationally recognised membership body representing the interests of around 9,000 local councils and their 80,000 local councillors in England. Local councils serve electorates ranging from small rural communities to major cities. These councillors are all independently elected and raise a precept from the local community. Together, they can be identified as among the nation's most influential grouping of grass roots opinion-formers. Over 15 million people live in communities served by local councils, around 35% of the population. Over 200 new local councils have been created in the last ten years.

COMMISSION FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES

The Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) was established in April 2005 and became an independent body on 1 October 2006, following the enactment of the NERC Act www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2006/ukpga_20060016_en_1. Its role is to provide well-informed, independent advice to the government and ensure that policies reflect the real needs of people living and working in rural England, with a particular focus on tackling disadvantage. It has three key functions.

Rural advocate: the voice for rural people, businesses and communities.

Expert adviser: giving evidence-based, objective advice to government and others.

Independent watchdog: monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

Published by:

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Commission for
Rural Communities
Tackling rural disadvantage