

LGcommunications publications

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# Six steps to better district council communications

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# Introduction

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**By Teresa Lane,  
Head of Communications and Marketing  
Aylesbury Vale District Council**



Districts are different – and the demands on us as communicators are unique. We often operate in small teams, so building the communications ethos across the organisation is a vital part of our role. We need to learn which tools really get our messages out to staff and residents, and make sure our valuable time and energy is spent on the right things.

Developing a place brand for the district is very much part of the place shaping agenda. Districts need to take the lead in bringing together public and private sector agencies to address local problems and challenges in a coordinated way. We can make a real difference to our residents and local businesses, but to achieve this we need to engage with our staff and show value for money. We also need to demonstrate the value communication adds to the organisation to chief executives and members.

Whether you are place marketing or communicating about your refuse service, getting the basics right is essential - maintaining efficient and proactive media relations, maximising the impact of council publications and other channels. The way in which we communicate with our audiences is crucial and can help us increase the levels of satisfaction of our residents.

I hope that district communicators will use this publication to prepare for taking the steps to great district council communications.

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## Executive summary

1. Developing a place brand for the district.  
Teresa Lane, Head of Communications and Marketing at Aylesbury Vale District Council, describes how she put Aylesbury on the map following a government decision to designate the town as a major growth area. She talks about how the council worked with its partners and the strategy behind the brand.

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2. Coherent strategy and performance indicators.  
Using research to create realistic targets is the main thrust of a talk by Westminster City Council's Head of Consultation, Neil Wholey. He discusses how analysing data well is more important than the amount spent on research and gives an example of where Westminster used research to prove a policy change to senior managers.

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3. Demonstrating the value of communications to chief executives.  
Chorley District Council has increased resident satisfaction levels by 14% in three years. Chief Executive Donna Hall explains how getting the boss on board can radically improve communications and therefore benefit the council as a whole. She explains some of the measures introduced to improve staff and resident engagement.

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4. Using publications to improve your reputation.  
Chris Taylor, Communications and Marketing Manager at North East Derbyshire District Council, discusses how good publications can radically improve the reputation of a council. He highlights the use of plain English, consistency of brand, providing value for money and getting buy-in from chief officers and members.

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5. Let's talk turkey: Gloucester City Council's approach to media relations.  
Marcus Grodentz, Communications and Marketing Service Manager, describes how saving a turkey from the Christmas dinner table provided the council with countless media hits and gave them a platform to highlight their outstanding environmental work.

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6. Engaging with staff and communicating value for money.  
By concentrating on internal communications and highlighting its value for money message, Wychavon District Council has built up a strong reputation. Fiona Narburgh, Head of Strategy and Communications, discusses her top tips for communicating value for money and innovative ways to engage with staff.

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# Chapter one

## Developing the place brand

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**By Teresa Lane**  
**Head of Communications and Marketing**  
**Aylesbury Vale District Council**



Aylesbury Vale has a population of 175,000 and is the third largest district council. It covers 350 sq miles, most of which are rural. There is low unemployment and it is relatively affluent, with a successful economy that has grown organically over the years. It's a great place to live, with the Chilterns as well as London and Oxford closeby.

Aylesbury has hit the national headlines once or twice but generally it is not exactly on the international or even national map. This changed in 2004, when John Prescott named Aylesbury Vale as a major growth area in the south east. The target he set for the district was for up to 59,000 new homes to be built and 59,000 new jobs to be created between 2004 and 2031. Getting developers to build new homes and getting people to live in them was never going to be a problem. The big challenge was how to create the huge number of jobs to build sustainable communities and avoid the district becoming a series of dormitory, commuter towns. Our first task was to develop an Economic Strategy underpinned by a marketing strategy to promote the Vale to people and businesses who already lived and worked in the Vale but also to potential new residents, workers and businesses.

From the outset we recognised that for our strategy to be successful, it had to be a joint effort with our partners, especially as there was very small budget compared to other growth areas such as Milton Keynes.

We established Marketing 2031 which included about 25 key stakeholders from across the district. Members ranged from the local college to the shopping centre managers. We used an agency with a background in place marketing to help the partnership develop the strategy and the first year action plan. Our strategy had three elements: our positioning statement, key messages and brand. The second element was about our place offer - living, working and visiting the Vale, and the third - the business offer was about starting, growing and relocating a business to the Vale.

Getting local people on board was crucial as was convincing partners who sometimes had conflicting aims. For example, whilst the health authority wanted to talk up health issues to help lobby for more money, we wanted to promote the health benefits of the area.



Our brand development was based on a lot of research and from this we were about to develop a very clear design brief. We originally used a branding agency from London but after several abortive attempts we found that by changing to a local designer who lived and worked in the Vale and, who, therefore, had a much better sense of what we were trying to achieve, we were able to agree the visual element of the brand very quickly.

Our brand is Aylesbury Vale, A Great Place To Grow. It is flexible eg A Great Place to Grow a Business and comes in eight colours so it can fit with our partners logos. We decided not to do a big launch but have slowly rolled it out as we deliver the action plan.

So what's worked for us? We have a suite of investment material which we can use time and again but the real key to our early success has been relationship building. We hold stakeholder events for about 50 to 60 key contact people at a time. You need your taxi drivers and your hairdressers on board as much as the big businesses. When a taxi driver picks up an important visitor from the station, we want them to be able to talk with pride and passion about Aylesbury Vale.

We have a dedicated website and campaigns targeted at commuters. If we can turn commuters into entrepreneurs or local employees, we will have achieved one of our economic targets.



# Chapter two

## Coherent strategy and performance indicators

**By Neil Wholey,  
Head of Consultation  
Westminster City Council**



One of the key problems with local government is target setting just for the sake of it, rather than using target setting to lead to a proper strategy. You should ask yourself the questions; what is the purpose of the target? What factors impact on the target? What are the things you are going to do in the real world to reach your target? And finally, what is a realistic target?

A bad example of target setting would be; our aim is to increase satisfaction with the council from 52%. The factors that will impact on our target are good communications and excellent services and of course we are sure that will happen because we are a very good council. So we will set a target of 55% next year and 60% the year after.

A good example would be to realise that there are many different aspects of good communications and excellent services. Therefore your communications and services need to change and corporately put resources in to reach your target. Then you can set a realistic target based on those figures. We have to understand what is reasonable and I think research evidence will lead to this strategy.

Every authority uses research differently but there are two factors which lead to success; good skills and strong leadership buy-in. An example of how ingrained research is in Westminster is that we do a residents' survey, of 3,000 interviews. It's large but that's because councillors wanted ward-based data. When we get the result I present the findings to every single department, Cabinet, the opposition group and to the overall meeting of managers and directors. This is so they understand what's going on and what they're going to have to do for next year.

When we put together our communications plan every year, we sit down with various directors and ask what their priorities are for the year. Then we look at the resources we've got and we come up with 40 campaigns, we prioritise them and then we set the overall target. Our main targets to improve ratings for core brand values – innovation, excellence and leadership - by 3-5% and to improve service ratings by 2-4%. Targets are not plucked out of the air but are a reflection of what we actually plan to do and what we know works. We go back a year later and try to understand and assess what's going on .



An example of how we used research to prove a policy change is direct mail. We do a quarterly survey with 500 interviews. There is a problem in Westminster with multiple occupancy which means publications like the Westminster Reporter get swept up and dumped in the recycling. The key challenge was to get it into people's hands. We got access to the council tax database and we direct mailed out the Reporter to named individuals in Westminster. That edition had a huge spike in the number of people who had seen it and informed levels and satisfaction with the council rose. This is a direct example of using the research to set a reasonable target, setting a strategy in place and actually freeing up resources to actually do this.

It's very easy to say it is difficult for districts to do this because they don't have access to the same amount of surveys. But there is still a lot of data out there which can be used such as the Place Survey and the BVPI survey which have questions about informed ratings and value for money scores

To conclude, a coherent strategy comes from understanding why you are doing something. It's not about expensive surveys but the amount of effort you put in to understanding what's in there. One Place Survey analysed well will give you a wealth of data and far more insight than doing an incredibly expensive survey which just sits on the shelf.



# Chapter three

## Demonstrating the value of communications to chief executives

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**By Donna Hall**  
**Chief Executive**  
**Chorley District Council**



I became chief executive of Chorley District Council in 2006. We have come a long way in the last three years.

Only five months after I started, the Conservatives won the election by a landslide ending 24 years of Labour. It was an opportunity for a radical restructure of the entire council, saving £2 million of a £20 million budget. It was bold and it made a lot of bad headlines but it made us more efficient.

One of the first things I did in communications was to ensure the team reported directly to the chief executive and sat within the leader's portfolio.

I also centralised the staff and the budgets. The directorates did not want to do it but it has led to a much more effective product. We've now got five comms people compared to two but we have made efficiencies.

We had a corporate identity but individual departments branded themselves, so we scrapped all the individual logos and created one very strong brand. We employ our own in house graphic designer, which has saved us a massive amount of money and has meant there is consistency around the brand.

We've got a very good intranet called theloop and we let staff join in discussions on the forum in work time, partly because we're split across three sites. We were voted the second best council to work for and we are most improved and best in terms of health and well being initiatives for staff.

We have a good marketing communications strategy. It does occasionally get sidetracked by issues such as the Icelandic bank situation, which meant we stopped doing other things for a couple of weeks.

We also have an officer who works on the website and theloop and we have just expanded the team to take over tourism and events.



We are a campaigning council and one of the main things that we've done is the Chorley Smile Campaign. It's a civic pride campaign and local people pledge to make Chorley a better place. In return the council also pledges to do its bit to make Chorley a better place.

We organised the Chorley Smile awards and gave £500 to individuals and organisations who had promoted civic pride. Everything we do, even the flower baskets are branded Chorley Smile and the Local Strategic Partnership has adopted it as their brand.

We've got a Chorley Smile panel, which is about 2,000 people who come in and use 'Who Wants To Be A Millionaire' style handsets to vote. So rather than having a survey which is done face to face or over the phone, we get people into the Town Hall.

If we didn't have a good communications function we would not have gone from an almost weak council to an excellent council in three years. The inspectors said the Chorley brand was everywhere. Customer satisfaction with the council is at 72% up 14%. In terms of staff morale, The Times Best Councils To Work For survey shows staff think the council is a lot better now than it was. Sickness has gone down by three days per employee, which has saved us a lot of money.

These are a few things the CPA inspectors said about us: 'Very ambitious council, positive approach to change, strong leadership, political and managerial and clear corporate image and branding.'



# Chapter four

## Using publications to improve your reputation

**By Chris Taylor**  
**Communications and Marketing Manager**  
**North East Derbyshire District Council**



In 2004, North East Derbyshire District Council received a weak rating from the CPA. Communications was identified as a key driver for improvements and this led to an increase in capacity for the in-house communications and marketing team.

In 2008, we were the first council to go straight from weak to excellent at CPA. The Audit Commission report highlighted communications and in particular our strong corporate identity as key factors driving forward the rapid improvements.

One of the ways we achieved this was with our use of publications.

A key issue for districts hoping to use their publications successfully is capacity. You need to think about the following questions.

- Are you aware of all the publications that go out from your council?
- Have you ever conducted a publications audit?
- Are you a gatekeeper or guardian?
- Do you get involved in writing and organising design and distribution of some or all publications?

Even if you are a 'one man band' you still need to keep some degree of control, for example think about consistent corporate identity, plain English guidance for authors and corporate templates for staff to use.

It is also important to be careful not to raise expectations and to consider value for money. You can keep the costs down with small print runs and having an electronic version and you can adapt and refresh it rather than redesigning.

Evaluation is needed to prove value for money and you must be upfront about the cost. It is also worth investigating whether you can share costs with a partner.

It is important to remember you can use publications to create a 'wow' factor, that small councils can still be innovative and that you must prove value for money to senior officers and members. And remember to consider the needs of your audience and exceed expectations.



Our corporate plan was a fully interactive document with an 'online' version linked to video and audio content. We kept costs down by distributing the document electronically with a limited print run.

With a bit of thought, we can achieve the wow factor on a really tight budget. For example, as part of our recent CPA inspection, we organised a tour of the district. We thought carefully about the information needs of the Audit Commission inspection team – and produced a simple tour guide, with a map of the route, photos of staff and councillors on the tour coach and background to the stops en-route. It gave a great impression of the council on the first day of inspection week.

Don't forget a picture speaks a thousand words. Investment in a quality corporate photo database is money well spent. We spend around £1,500 a year refreshing our database with photos supporting communication of our five corporate ambitions.

Ensuring a consistent 'look and feel' to publications is a key way to link your services to your council brand. It sends out a message of 'one council, one team' to staff and members as well as externally and gives confidence in the council.

Support from chief officers and members is crucial to provide communications teams with the back-up they need to effectively 'police' corporate identity. We have set ourselves up as gatekeepers and all printed communications to the public (with the exception of letters) comes through us.

No matter how big or small your team, you should have a communications input into content of certain key publications such as the annual report and corporate plan.

Seeking feedback is also important. We use a mix of the following methods: feedback forms included with publications, Citizens Panel feedback and reader panels.



# Chapter five

## Let's talk turkey: Gloucester City Council's approach to media relations

**By Marcus Grodentz**  
**Communications and Marketing Service Manager**  
**Gloucester City Council**



There is no doubt that for the vast majority of people local government is intrinsically boring. This provides a challenge for those of us in communications – particularly when it comes to securing media coverage.

I don't want to resurrect the debate about whether being an ex-journalist is essential to working in a local government press office. But I believe journalistic training does help provide an 'eye' for a good story – and often the ability to keep that story 'running'.

Roger the turkey was a case in point. She – let's not go into how she got her name but it involved a competition – was rescued from the Christmas dinner table by one of our local radio stations. Gloucester City Council runs a rare breed centre with endangered cattle, goats, sheep and wildfowl. We were asked if they would provide a home for Roger.

For more than 12 months we 'milked' Roger for all she was worth. Angles included settling into her new home, being lonely, chasing the geese off their nests so she could sit on their eggs, the hunt for a mate and her blind date with a recently bereaved turkey called Fred. Roger and Fred set up home together and love was in the air. It all gave us great coverage across all mediums.

A year later the 'love couple' had their very own Christmas page and guestbook on our website. People all over the country and indeed the world signed it and sent them seasonal greetings. Who says turkeys don't like Christmas?

Sadly, before we could get to the patter of tiny feet, both turkeys succumbed to marauding foxes. But their demise meant more coverage.

It gave us loads of opportunities to talk about the outstanding environmental work done by our

countryside unit which runs the rare breed centre.

The fact they are internationally recognised, get invited to lecture abroad and get visited by groups from overseas. Their work is also a major contributory factor to Gloucester winning Gold in the Britain in Bloom national competition.

It's doubtful whether half of those messages could have been conveyed so effectively without the help of a turkey called Roger. And what's more – we had great fun with it. There's nothing in the rule-book that says you can't enjoy your work.

It goes without saying you need a good working relationship with your local media. Professional trust needs to be worked on and developed.

When our foreign suppliers told us they would be unable to deliver our Christmas lights in time for our planned switching on ceremony it was obviously not good news.

We were drafting a press release when our local daily paper called – they'd got wind of the problem. It would have been the easiest thing to have issued the press release as a 'spoiler' but we appreciated they had a 'scoop.' We let them have it – and issued our release the next day after they had run with a front-page lead. It bought us bags of goodwill from the news desk – and a willingness to run a series of positive stories over the coming weeks that made it clear the council had been badly let down.

All of the local and regional media wanted to know about our Christmas lights and we were honest and open with them all – and were literally providing daily updates. Coverage of our response to that challenge and the switch-on ceremony when it happened were overwhelmingly positive. As one local businessman told us – 'you've snatched triumph from the jaws of a disaster.'

We know, from the reams of research, that the majority of what people know about their local council is from the media. That's why we meet regularly with local editors, give it such a high priority and continue to work hard at it.

# Chapter six

## Engaging with staff and communicating value for money

**By Fiona Narburgh**  
**Head of Strategy and Communications**  
**Wychavon District Council**



I manage the corporate centre at Wychavon which includes everything from emergency planning to community safety, community wardens, performance management, policy, strategy, graphics, design web and of course communications. And it is all carried out by just 13 staff.

My passions are reputation management, being a really strong brand ambassador for Wychavon and keeping auditors at bay.

How do we measure up? We have got one of the best overall satisfaction rates in the country. We have the 8th lowest council tax in the country and we are ranked 6th nationally for residents saying we give value for money. We are a Conservative-controlled council, with low staffing figures and services that are mostly outsourced. In 2008 we won The Times' Best Council To Work For survey which was based on staff feedback.

A new journalist started recently and we gave him a tour of the area. I asked him to describe the council in three words. He said well managed, efficient and green. I was pleased with that.

We also have a strong corporate branding. Soon after becoming a policy officer for the council I added the strapline underneath the council name. It states: good services, good value. It is understated but it is what residents identify with us and what we can always deliver on.

My three top tips on value for money are as follows. Firstly, make friends with your accountants. Work with them to communicate finances to residents. Secondly, find out from your partners, staff and residents how you should spend the money. Finally, make sure people know it's you by branding your services. We've just introduced wheelie bins with our logo on the front.

Like Westminster City Council, we turn our key messages into campaigns, and we have a plan for how we deliver value for money.

We've had some positive media on this theme, including WDC to save £1m in three years and Wychavon best in the region for quality of life'. Despite having invested in Icelandic banks the story in the Telegraph mentioned some of the more unusual ways we have used our resources including building a hospital using our own money. At the time the auditors questioned whether this was legal but now it is seen as innovative and a great use of well being powers.

We work hard on our corporate branding because you have to compete to be read in local government and although I think we've got it about right with our creative approaches, we always need to check that we don't get too dull and boring. I would rather people don't like it but at least they have looked at it.

Internally, we've come up with the campaign Get Better, Not Busier. One of the most important things to understand is that people need to know what is expected of them in their job. Managers need to buy into this, they have got to recognise people's needs and be flexible. We work very hard on having brilliant customer service because we are only as good as our last phone call. We hold staff briefings and we try to look after our staff health by doing things like the Global Corporate Challenge where staff go and speak to people rather than sending emails. We have half price membership to leisure centres and run a crèche. We've also launched the WOSCAs, which is the Wychavon Outstanding Service in the Community Awards. These are the things that keep our staff working well for us and that level of engagement means we keep delivering well for residents.

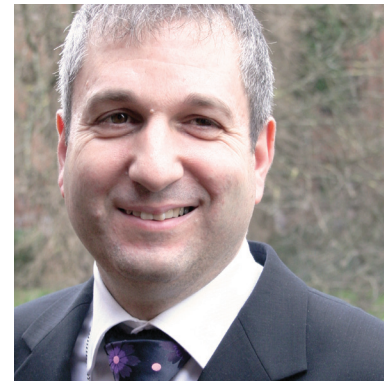
So is there a link between value for money and staff engagement? Well I think there is, it's not about the money, it's always about what councils do with that money. And what could be more motivating than doing a great job for the people we are our here for.

# Conclusion

## Improving district communications

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**By David Holdstock**  
**Chair of LGcommunications**  
**Head of Communications**  
**London Borough of Hillingdon**



This collection of short essays shows there is much going on amongst the districts to improve communications and raise the profile and image of local government.

There are many examples of district councils which place communications at the very heart of their organisation. We have seen several examples of this including a chief executive who has intrinsically linked her council's resurgence with good communications and resident and staff engagement.

We also have numerous examples of councils playing to their strengths whether that is having a strong value for money story to tell or a great media story as in the tale of Roger the Turkey.

But it is important not to forget that all of this should be underpinned by evaluation and research and there is a good discussion and debate about the importance of setting targets that actually mean something and using the findings in order to continue to prove that communications really can make a difference.





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