

Building Trust: Action Plan Executive Summary

Introduction

The Building Trust project aims to help local authorities work more effectively with local people, their own staff and the wide range of groups and organisations that make up our local communities. It has been developed jointly between the Local Government Association (LGA), the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) and LGcommunications, the professional body that represents local government communications teams.

This is the first time that a corporate communication project has been undertaken jointly by the bodies that represent elected members, chief officers and communication professionals and we believe that ultimately this will be its greatest strength. This unified approach goes to the heart of the building trust philosophy which says that communication is everyone's job and what is needed if we are to succeed in providing effective leadership is absolute unity of purpose among elected members, senior managers, staff and partners.

The action plan report examines how local government has used communication in the pursuit of its goals and analyses what has worked. It also makes a set of strategic recommendations that will form the basis for effective and efficient communication practice as all of us in the sector continue to navigate our way through uncharted waters.

Its intention is to support council leaders, chief executives and communicators to identify challenges in their area and build trust with their communities, partners and staff during a period of unprecedented change for local public services. This goes beyond communications to understanding how local government itself needs to change as the LGA's Rewiring Public Services campaign has set out the challenges for local public services and a series of propositions.

Recent years have seen a decline in trust in both public and private sector organisations. We question the quality of the food we eat, the validity of MP's expenses, the journalistic standards of the newspapers we read or the behaviour of the banks we invest our money with. Local government has suffered its own reputational issues over the years. However, it has worked hard over the last decade to act in such a way as to deserve a good reputation and trust in local councils has increased from 52% to 65% between 2001 and 2012.¹ If local government fails to recognise this and does not manage its reputation through building trust with the public there is a risk that this good work could be undone. In particular there may be increased opposition to reform and a loss of confidence in the competency of local government. The action plan we have produced is designed to complement this work and help to reconnect people with the local democratic process.

For the purpose of the Building Trust project, communication is defined in its broadest sense: this is probably best captured by returning to the Latin root '*communicare*', meaning to share. There should, therefore, be no false differentiation between communication, consultation, engagement or even research: all fall under the umbrella of communication in its broadest and truest sense.

Developing Building Trust

Those councils which adopted the LGA / LGcommunications Reputation Campaigns of 2005 and 2010 have told us that there is now a need for the next step as the landscape has significantly changed. For those councils which adopted the key actions of the reputation campaign, it can be shown that they have made a significant contribution to improving how councils communicated, and with that the overall reputation of local government.

Reputation I was launched in 2005, driving a period that saw government funding for councils increase above inflation each year (between 2000 and 2009). Its core premise, backed by a significant body of evidence, was that to increase satisfaction the task was simply to ensure that local people were kept informed and that universal services in particular were strongly linked to the council that was responsible for delivering them. It was a tool kit with 12 core

¹ Citizenship Survey (2001-2011) c.10,000 GB adults 18+ each year. Community Life Survey (2012) c.2,500 GB adults 18+

actions: if these were carried out effectively, both satisfaction and reputation were predicted to rise. This still holds true and these core actions remain at the heart of effective communications activity.

Reputation II was launched in 2010 in the shadow of the looming cuts. It sought a more strategic approach, setting out for the first time what the underlying factors that determine good council communications. It began to move the concept of council communication from a tactically based task-led approach to one that could and should be more strategically driven.

Building Trust was launched in 2013 to review and develop the work of these two campaigns. Much of what has been set out in the two previous campaigns is still valid and useful and should not be discarded. However, what is required now is a more nuanced approach to ensure there is no loss of confidence in our capabilities to manage our local areas through inevitable significant change. As the resources available to local government reduce, it will be increasingly important for people to work with us if we are to deliver the outcomes we want for our areas. Trust will be the oxygen of this increased co-operation.

This approach must recognise that as expectations change, and local government's capacity for delivery reduces, communication needs to be less about simply broadcasting and informing and more about conversing and winning people's trust and confidence. For local areas to survive and thrive we need to change the relationship between local government and the public. This will require councils to develop a better understanding of what builds trust between them and the residents and businesses they serve, the behaviours they need to improve or change, new customer service expectations and what destroys trust and the resulting consequences. The best communications teams, who are the conscience of their organisation, are capable of insight into the audiences they serve which will help drive this change.

We know that there are those who are civically engaged and those who are not. There are some people who put local authorities at the centre of their lives and others who have very little contact with the council. Both groups will need to be engaged and an increased level of trust will be crucial to this. The challenge is focused around the role of local leaders to use communications to help them deliver real results. Trust will help to deliver mutually beneficial actions especially in times of austerity.

The new approach also suggests that communication is increasingly the job of everyone and not just the few. The job of our professional communicators (who, like staff in all departments, will be fewer in number) will become less about communicating for the organisation and more about supporting and advising the organisation on how it communicates. This is a subtle but crucial difference that goes to the heart of building trust. Martin Reeves, president of SOLACE, captures the new communication challenge well when he talks of devolved leadership in our organisations and the need to recruit armies of narrators and chief narrators to tell our stories.

The following are just some of the outcomes that you should look to achieve through the Building Trust project:

1. Improve the lives of residents
2. Boost the morale of staff and elected members
3. Better join up of local public services
4. Change in the way services are delivered
5. Manage demand for services
6. Manage expectations of the people and organisations that you serve
7. Deliver behaviour change
8. Access capacity within the community to deliver services
9. Reduce unnecessary contact with the council
10. Increase engagement with the democratic process
11. Improve community cohesion and local places themselves
12. Improve access to and use of services

The Trust Test

A high performing council communication team will have been following best practice for at least a decade. However, just because something worked in the past does not mean that it will continue to do so. *The Trust Test (part 1)* can be measured as a series of self-assessment qualitative questions. These can be used as the basis of discussions with elected members, chief officers, communication professionals and members of the public:

1. **Are people too familiar with your communications?** We encourage all councils to assess whether the style and content of their communications is fresh and dynamic. The original activity of the Reputation Campaign worked because it was different to the unstructured communications that preceded it.
2. **Have local people changed their relationship with communication channels?** Attitudes towards and use of broadcast, print, social and digital media are changing rapidly. Your communication needs to deliver a targeted approach based on the interests of the public.
3. **Has your council changed what it is communicating about?** This may require different tools and approaches than the ones that have been successful in the past.
4. **Do local people feel they have less influence?** People need to be informed about the services and benefits the council provides, but also about issues affecting their local area and how to get involved in local decision-making.

The Trust Test (part 2) establishes that the impact of addressing these issues can be measured in a quantitative way through public opinion surveys. Some of these have been set out by the LGA in their regular polling of public opinion, and as part of their LGINform series of questions they recommend local authorities ask the public. We will develop this further as the Building Trust project progresses:

1. **How much do you trust your local council(s)?**
 - Current level: **61%** of Britons say great deal/fair amount²
2. **To what extent do you think your local council(s) acts on the concerns of local residents?**
 - Current level: **63%** of Britons say great deal/fair amount
3. **Overall, how well informed do you think your local council(s) keeps residents about the services and benefits it provides?**
 - Current level: **66%** of Britons say very/fairly well informed

Using the Action Plan

The Building Trust Action Plan, available from our websites, sets out a clear strategic basis for how effective communication needs to be conceived and executed so that it drives the agendas of our organisations and areas. This consists of three core elements: brand, leadership and strategy. It aims to achieve absolute unity of purpose and clarity of method between elected members, chief officers and the professional communicators they employ to deliver effective and efficient communication for their organisations.

To help with this we have set out:

- our evidence for why the concept of building trust is important;
- how to evaluate success;
- a framework for professional development;
- a framework for a strategic plan.

We are confident that these ideas will be of use to you. We welcome feedback relating to the Action Plan principles and how these have been implemented locally. This is not a definite answer: it is a work in progress which we want the local government sector to own and develop.

² LGA polling on resident satisfaction with councils, July 2013, 1,002 British adults 18+ interviewed by telephone

Work so far

A number of formal and informal workshops and sessions were held with senior elected members, senior officers and communications professionals to explore what they required from this piece of work. This included two sessions with the LGA's cross-party Innovation and Improvement Board. A broad proposition was developed, and was tested with key politicians and officers before it was launched.

The original Building Trust consultation document and online survey were launched at the LGcommunications Academy in May 2013. Following the responses, we reviewed progress at the LGA Conference in July 2013. The key themes were explored with the 45 Chief Executives and senior managers in workshop sessions. This is an ongoing process: we are launching this Action Plan at the SOLACE Summit in October 2013 but are looking to continue the discussions and development of the Building Trust project over at least the next couple of years.

Throughout the development of the Building Trust project we have tried to open up the discussion beyond just communication professionals. We have engaged with elected councillors, senior decision-makers and the public themselves. We have incorporated evidence from publically available research into the Action Plan.

What continuing support are the LGA, LGcommunications and SOLACE providing?

LGA

- Focusing outward communications on the **Brand** of the sector and how local government is "getting the basics right"; driving innovation but also listening and engaging
- Encouraging changes across local public services to build trust
- Setting up peer reviews using the Building Trust framework
- Continuing to monitor the impact of the project through public opinion polling

LGcommunications

- Developing online and regional discussions on the principles of the Building Trust project, expanding the research base and showcasing case studies
- Supporting a professional development programme
- Relaunching the LGcommunications Reputation Awards
- Working with the LGA to develop new metrics and analysis as part of the Trust Test at a national and local level
- Work with the LGA and SOLACE to develop and agree a communications **Strategy** framework document for local government

SOLACE

- Working with Skills for Justice and the LGA to establish a learning framework for **Leadership** skills among senior managers that embeds the concept of trust in their professional development
- To also include trust within a framework of ethics and values that will be developed as part of the next SOLACE business plan

Further details

For the full report please visit

LGA www.local.gov.uk

SOLACE www.solace.org.uk

LGcommunications www.lgcomms.org.uk