NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

21 September 2009

Review of Communications Strategy

1.0   PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1   To present to Members a report on progress on the review of the Standards Committee Communications Strategy and related matters.

2.0   BACKGROUND

2.1   At the last meeting of the Committee Members received a report relating to the Committee's Communications Strategy and asked for a further and more detailed report to be presented with a view to the revision and updating of the Strategy.

2.2   The Monitoring Officer has undertaken an initial review of the Strategy in draft and a revised draft for Members' consideration is attached at Appendix 1 to this report. The main part of the Strategy as originally agreed is still relevant as it contains the essential elements, but it did need updating and refreshing with further action points. Revised action points are accordingly attached at Appendix 2. Members are referred to the action points and requested to consider any additional actions that they consider appropriate.

3.0   THE COUNCIL'S COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

3.1   Members at the last meeting discussed the incorporation of the Committee's Communications Strategy in the County Council's Corporate Communications Strategy. The Monitoring Officer has discussed this matter with the Head of Communications. She has advised that the Council's Corporate Communications Strategy, covering 2009-2011(see Appendix 3) has been developed to provide an outline in approach for the Council in all of its activities. It provides a framework for policies and initiatives that will aid communications. It has been reviewed by the Council's Communications Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as well as by Directorate communications groups.

3.2   To ensure that the Corporate Strategy remains relevant, a flexible approach has been taken which means that it supports the Council's many other strategies (either service based, initiatives or Committees), rather than specifically listing how this will link into all of the Council's activities.

3.3   Of particular note are the key principles for all communications activities, which include ensuring that communications are clear, understandable, relevant and consistent, equal and accessible.

3.4   The Strategy covers internal and external communications and a series of broad aims. It is supported by service plans for the Communications Unit, which enables the delivery of the Strategy. Each directorate and service will be using the corporate Strategy to develop their own specific Communications Strategy for each of their areas, linking back to the main aims and developing an action plan to deliver it. The Standards Committee's Communications Strategy will be part of this wider framework, aligned with the key principles and supported by an action plan.

4.0   COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY PRINCIPLES

4.1   Members suggested that the principles which are set out at paragraph 2.6 of the Committee's Strategy should be highlighted in County Council publications to promote openness. The Monitoring Officer has considered how the principles are being incorporated in the Council's processes and policies. The principles in general aim to promote openness and transparency in the Council's operations. Many of the Council's activities and policies reflect these principles and they are being actively embraced.

(a)   The principles reflect the need to ensure that a clear line is drawn between the Council and party group communications. The Council has adopted a protocol in relation to media communications which makes it clear that information produced by the Council will be for the purpose of increasing public awareness of the Council's services and functions, awareness of the Council's policies and priorities and to improve local accountability. It is clearly stated that the County Council is prohibited from using its resources to promote a particular political point of view. The general protocol supported by specific guidance on communications during the election period. It is also an integral and well understood part of the Code of Conduct that Council resources are not used for the promotion of party political objectives.

(b)   The principles promote openness and transparency. The Council has a clear freedom of information policy which embraces the ethos of the Freedom of Information legislation and the Council actively complies with the principles behind that legislation. The Council seeks wherever it is appropriate to inform the public proactively about issues that are topical and of public interest and concern and actively uses the NY Times and other media communications for that purpose. In advice from the Communications Unit on any communications, these principles are always considered i.e. the need to be clear, to explain what is happening and why, as well as apologising when the Council has made mistakes and what it is going to do to improve.

(c)   The principles advocate that the Council should be open and confident about pitfalls in policies they are pursuing and communications need to acknowledge difficulties and competing pressures. The development of policies by the Council is undertaken openly, with appropriate public consultation and scrutiny, and with clearer evaluation of benefits and issues at Executive, and where appropriate Council level.

(4)   The principles state the importance of a Council acknowledging when mistakes are made, or matters are not handled in the best way. Quarterly monitoring of complaints about the Council is undertaken and reported and as part of that process an analysis of action taken to redress the problems is set out.

5.0   NY TIMES ARTICLE

5.1   Members further suggested that an article be placed in the NY Times with a view to responding to public concerns about Members expenses following the recent issue relating to MP expenses. The Council has in fact taken the opportunity to respond to public interest about expenses in a response to a recent leading article in the local press. So far as further information in the NY Times is concerned, in discussion with the Communications Unit it is suggested that in terms of timing, the opportunity to put further information into the NY Times should best be taken when then there are further developments in the ethical regime to report. This might occur for example once the changes to the Code of Conduct, particularly in relation to the effect of Members conduct in their private lives, are implemented.

6.0 OFFICER AND PUBLIC AWARENESS

6.1 Members expressed the view that levels of officer and public awareness of the ethical framework remain at a low level. Ensuring appropriate levels of awareness will involve the provision of information repeatedly on an ongoing basis. Members may consider that the following measures, contained in the proposed action plan, will continue to assist the process:

(a) Information about the ethical framework is included in officer and member induction processes. This has been the subject of consideration by the Committee previously, and has been incorporated, but needs to be reviewed from time to time.

(b) The training of officers. Because of the size of the Council, training to date has tended to be delivered to senior officers with a view to their cascading the main principles to those for whom they have responsibility. There will be an opportunity with eventual introduction of the model Officer Code of Conduct to reinforce the information about the ethical framework, but that may, as yet, be some time in the future. Other suggestions are:

- To circulate the Standards Bulletin in with Key Messages, and also to publish it on the Intranet with an alert to the fact that it is being published.

- Continued periodic training to officers.

- Undertake a brief ethical survey, following on from the Ethical Audit undertaken in 2006 to check whether awareness levels have changed.

- To assist public awareness, a further article could be published the NY Times, as stated above, when the Code of Conduct changes.

- Information about the Officer Register of Interests and the Code of Conduct to accessible on the Intranet.

- To update information on the Intranet and website about the Standards Committee and Standards Committee Members. Members referred to the fact that photographs and profiles have not yet been incorporated. Revised information, subject to the inclusion of photographs of Independent Members (to be taken on the date of the Committee) is attached at Appendix 4.

6.2 Members are requested to consider whether any further measures could be adopted.

7.0 RECOMMENDATION

7.1 Members are recommended:

(1) To agree the revised Communications Strategy subject to any amendments that Members wish to suggest.

(2) That Members agree the action points in Appendix 2.

CAROLE DUNN
Assistant Chief Executive (Legal and Democratic Services) and Monitoring Officer

County Hall
NORTHALLERTON

15 September 2009

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Standards Committee Communications Strategy

1.   INTRODUCTION

1.1   Purpose of the Strategy

The purpose of the Communications Strategy is to promote the work of the Standards Committee in order to gain public confidence in North Yorkshire County Council, its Members and Officers.

1.2   Key Message of the strategy

North Yorkshire County Council works to ensure high standards of conduct from its Members and Officers.

2.   NATIONAL CONTEXT

2.1   Public trust is a pillar of public life. It is concerned with perceptions of honesty but is also about confidence and satisfaction with the outcomes of service delivery. Bridging the gap between values held by the public and their perception of official behaviour is a major challenge facing public bodies in the UK.

2.2   Difficulties for public authorities in engaging public trust are recognised. Evidence from national surveys over a number of years has shown low levels of trust in public officials including those operating in local government.

2.3   The Government set a number of national objectives for the ethical regime:

a)   to maintain high standards of conduct for local authority Members and employees,

b)   to define effectively what standards of conduct are expected of Members and Officers, and for such rules to be fair and clear,

c)   for an effective means of taking action when breaches of the rules occur, and for such means to be fair, clear, proportionate, rigorous and thorough, and

d)   to ensure measures are in place to guarantee public confidence in the appropriateness of the ethical regime.

2.4   There is increasing emphasis on the importance of trust in the relationship between the public and public services. Absence of trust critically undermines the legitimacy of public office-holders to act on the public's behalf. At a time when community engagement and enabling the public to influence the services they receive is considered to be a priority, levels of trust impact on the extent to which members of the public will engage with and use public services.

2.5 The relationship between ethical organisational culture, public trust and excellent service delivery is a strong and mutually reinforcing one. A strong ethical organisational culture is a driver of both increased public trust and improved performance and service delivery. A healthy culture is more likely to produce individual and organisational behaviours that increase public trust in the organisation. This in turn makes it more likely that the public will engage with the organisation and utilise its services. Excellent service delivery will then itself increase public trust in the organisation.

2.6 The Standards Committee has a responsibility to ensure that its own communications adhere to clear principles which encourage public trust, and the Committee also has a role in seeking to influence the wider Communication Strategy for the Council so that it adheres to the following principles:

a) A clear line is drawn between the Council and party group Communications.

b) Communications which are misleading or contrary to the long term credibility of the Council should be challenged

c) In line with the FOI Act there should be a presumption in favour of disclosure and a culture of proactive publication and disclosure with a view to challenging the public's perception of a closed and secretive world.

d) The Council should be open and confident about potential pitfalls in policies they are pursuing. Communications need to acknowledge difficulties and competing pressures.

e) When things do go wrong, both the Committee and the wider Council needs to develop the skill of admitting mistakes and, critically, explaining how we are going to learn from them in the future.

3. THE COUNCIL'S POSITION

3.1 The Council has been working to establish a clear cultural message in relation to ethical standards. It is essential to present to the public an unequivocal statement of the Council's position that is owned by the Authority's leaders. A defined role for the Leader and Chief Executive Officer in setting high ethical standards has therefore been developed. A clear statement of intent for all staff and Members assists the Committee in its internal and external communication.

4. PUBLIC AWARENESS

4.1 Research conducted by the Council in relation to levels of public awareness in 2003 shows that the public continue to struggle to understand which core services the Council provides. In relation to the ethical agenda, in 2007 after some initial work by the Standards Committee on communications about the ethical agenda, the Council conducted a survey through the Citizen's Panel of public awareness in that area. The following are the main findings in relation to awareness. It shows overall that some impact has been made, but that more can be done to improve awareness

- 97% of respondents believe high ethical standards and good systems of governance are important.

- 64% believe that generally standards of behaviour from Members and officers are high, whereas one in ten feel they are not very, or not at all, high and over a quarter are unsure.

- 45% were unaware of the statutory principles. Over half of the respondents were aware, to varying degrees.

- Almost half (48%) were aware that there was a Code of Conduct for Members. Of those respondents, most knew some detail of the Code (only 17% were not aware of any specific requirements) but only 60% (30% of the total sample) were aware that penalties can be imposed.

- Knowledge of the Standards Committee is low: only a quarter of all respondents were aware of the Standards Committee (with 30% of them being unaware of any of the Committee's responsibilities) and only 22% of all respondents were aware of the Standards Board.

- 83% of respondents felt that Members and officers should be judged broadly by the same standards, with 9% thinking that employees should have higher standards and 4% thinking they should have lower standards.

- Only 13% of respondents felt the Council promotes standards issues well.

5.   **SWOT ANALYSIS**

Strengths	Opportunities
• Focus on the part of the Committee in improving awareness as part of an agreed work programme • Standards Committee has clear objectives • Support from experienced staff • Awareness on the part of most members of the ethical framework	• To use the Council's publications and external media to raise awareness • To work efficiently on the ethical agenda with other authorities and partner organisations • To use training opportunities
Weaknesses	**Threats**
• Officer awareness of ethical issues is less prevalent • Public awareness of the ethical framework is also low	• Lack of awareness can result in incidents of breaches of the Codes • Lack of confidence on the part of the public • Media interest in malpractice particularly also in the light of negative publicity arising from concerns about conduct in other areas of public office

6.   **OBJECTIVES OF THE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY**

6.1   The aim of the Standards Committee Communications Strategy is:

6.2 In communicating externally:

a) to raise awareness amongst the public of the Council's stance in relation to standards of conduct
b) to raise public awareness of the work of the Committee
c) to engage with the public
d) to gain public trust in the authority

6.3 In communicating internally:

a) to raise awareness of the work of the Committee
b) to communicate the role of Council's Leader and Chief Executive Officer in the ethical agenda
c) raise awareness amongst the staff and councillors of the standards expected of them
d) to gain commitment to those standards from all those representing the Council

7. KEY AREAS FOR THE STRATEGY

7.1 Key areas to be addressed by the Communications Strategy are as follows

a) engaging with the Public
b) promoting the work of the Committee in order to enhance public confidence in North Yorkshire County Council, its Members and Officers.
c) raising awareness amongst the public of the Council's stance in relation to standards of conduct and of the work of the Committee.
d) raising awareness of the work of the Committee within North Yorkshire County Council.
e) communicating the role of the Council's Leader and Chief Executive Officer in the ethical agenda.
f) raising awareness amongst the staff and Members of the standards expected of them.
g) gaining commitment to the standards from all those representing the Council.

7.2 The Strategy will also contribute to providing information on the following issues, together with information on the overall role of the Standards Committee :-

- Members' Register of Interests.
- Officers' Register of Interests.
- Defined roles of Leader and Chief Executive Officer in ethical agenda.
- Members' Code of Conduct.
- Officers' Code of Conduct.
- publication of Members' Interests on the Council's website.
- ethical training.
- development of clear guidance on ethical issues.
- review of induction processes for County Council.
- the monitoring of performance indicators.
- the ethical framework of the County Council.
- performance of the Standards Committee
- the Standards Committee Annual Report
- update on cases determined by the Standards Board for England

8.   TARGET AUDIENCES

8.1   It is important to be clear in setting the strategy as to who the target audiences will be.

8.2   External audiences:

- Residents
- Partner Agencies
- Local Strategic Partnerships
- Those involved with the Local Area Agreement
- The Business Community
- Voluntary Sector and Community Groups
- Tenderers and potential contractors
- Planning Applicants and Objectors
- Inspectorates
- Other authorities
- Central Government
- The Media
- The Audit Commission

8.3   Internal audiences will include:

- Employees
- Trade Unions
- Council Members
- Co-optees
- Contractors

9.   MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

9.1   Options to be considered for **external communications** include the following:

a)   NY Times**:** the Council's own newspaper which is directly distributed to all residents of   North Yorkshire through their letter boxes.

b)   The Local Press: the Council issues press releases about important events or information that it wants to communicate through the press. It is up to the editors of the paper how they use those press releases.

c)   Television and Radio**:** the Council has limited access to local television, other than in response to questions when a particular news story attracts press interest. The Radio has a more general approach allowing some discussion forums and interview programs.

d)   Press Notices: these are information boxes in the local papers paid for by the Council. The cost of these notices is relatively high and this method is usually restricted to statutory notices and other notices required by law.

e)   Website: the Council's website is a means of communicating with all members of the public who chose to access it. The information is always available, but to be effective must be kept up to date. It is a very economic means of communication, although it has yet to reach a wide audience for all areas.

f) Area Committees**:** the Council's seven Area Committees potentially provide a forum accessible to the public to present information in relation to the activities of the Committee and standards issues generally.

g) Council offices: council offices themselves provide an ideal opportunity for promotion of the ethical agenda and publication of standards documentation and the Standards Committee's work.

h) County Libraries: again, libraries in the area potentially provide a publicly accessible forum through which the activities of the Committee and standards issues generally could be promoted.

9.2 Evaluation of the most effective means of external communication with the public has shown that the Council's own communications through its newspaper, newsletters and leaflets is most effective, although information gleaned from local newspapers is also significant.

9.3 Options to be considered for **internal communications** include the following:

a) Key Messages: Key Messages distributed by email every Friday from the Chief Executive's Office. These brief statements update all staff who have access to email, on key services available, how staff can assist and key changes proposed to take place within the organisation.

b) County Talk: the Council's internal newsletter is distributed monthly with pay slips and has proved to be an effective means of communicating with staff in the internal communications surveys that have been conducted.

c) Induction: the Council is developing an e-induction and training service which will be made available to all staff, even those who do not have access to a PC. The induction will be restricted to a need to know basis so that staff will be given information to enable them to carry out their roles. The e-induction is in the process of being prepared.

d) Email: to get a message to all staff or a group of staff about an issue it is possible to use the Council email system which is a very effective method of providing direct access to all staff who have access to a PC. A large number of staff providing direct services do not have ready access to a PC.

e) Intranet: a means of making information available to staff at all times. It has the same difficulties in reaching staff as other PC based information.

f) Posters/Notice Boards: there are a number of notice boards and poster information around County Hall and other establishments. It is a more expensive method of communication and is quickly out of date.

g) Face to Face Meetings: information can be distributed through the usual management channels but this is not appropriate for wider communication as a complex message is very difficult to communicate in this way.

h) Standards Bulletin: A bulletin periodically produced by the Council relating to standards issues.

10. INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS BY THE COMMITTEE

10.1 Internally the Committee produces a regular Bulletin for Members and Senior Officers. The information on the County Council Website and Standards Committee Reports are available to all staff.

10.2   The Committee has involvement in the induction for new Members but information about the work of the Committee and ethical issues needs also to be included in staff induction. There also is scope to expand information on the Intranet to include details about the role of the Monitoring Officer and the Committee. There have been presentations to senior managers and Management Board, and some training has been provided on Fraud and Corruption.

11.   THE SELF ASSESSMENT SURVEY

11.1   A self assessment survey was undertaken in 2006. The survey showed 94.3 % of Members knew that they are required to observe the requirements of the Member Code. On the other hand only 65% of staff knew that they had agreed to abide by the Code of Conduct for Officers.

11.2   Over 97% of Members were aware of the Standards Committee, but 21.8% of officers at PO6 or above did not know that the authority has a Standards Committee. 66% of officers did not know that the Committee had a forward work programme (compared with 28.6% of Members).   The vast majority of Members considered that the Committee added value, but a significant proportion of Officers were less clear. Given that the survey was conducted at the end of an election year and approximately one third of Members were new to the authority the difference is striking.

11.3   The self assessment survey highlighted key areas where greater awareness is required. Since then work has been on going with Members and Officers to promote understanding of the importance of the ethical framework. This will continue to be a significant part of the Committee's work programme.

11.4   There is a limit to the extent that *all staff* in the organisation need to understand the framework in detail, although there should at least be some awareness of the Whistleblowing Policy, the role of the Monitoring Officer and some of the policies and procedures which are relevant to particular areas of work.

12.   SUMMARY

12.1   The role of the Committee in relation to Communications is two fold. Firstly, it has a role in influencing the internal and external communications of the Authority as a whole to build trust between the leadership of the organisation and other officers and members in the organisation. It also contributes to building trust between the public and the organisation in relation to both its elected Members and its senior managers.

12.2   Secondly, the Committee has a role in communicating the work it does to the staff and Members of the organisation so that they understand the Council's stance. The Committee needs to continue and to continuously review communications to the public and to publicise information about the ethical health of the organisation to raise awareness and to further help build public trust.

Deleted: The Committee needs to further develop internal communications particularly in relation to staff.

Deleted: has

Deleted:

Deleted: need to form

Deleted: forthcoming

Deleted: The Ethical Audit last year has gone some way towards raising awareness of the senior staff within the authority about the role of the committee.

Deleted: that role

Formatted: Font: Italic

Deleted: to extend those

Review of Action Plan 2007-9

Objective	Action	Time scale	Responsible	Outcomes	Evaluation
1. To raise awareness amongst the public of the Council's stance in relation to standards of conduct and thereby to gain public trust in the authority	1. Statement of the Council's stance to be agreed. – **DONE.** 2. The statement to be posted on the Council's web site - **DONE.** 3. Publish article in North Yorkshire Times on the Council's ethical framework – **DONE. Ad hoc articles subsequently published.** 4. The Register of Members' interests be included on the Council's web site – **DONE.**	January 2007 March 2007 June 2007 March 2007	Standards Committee Monitoring Officer (MO) MO and Council's Communications Unit MO	The public will have a clearer understanding of the Council's ethical standards, and trust will be increased	Measured by means of responses from the Citizen's Panel.
2. Promoting awareness among the public of the work of the Committee	1. Details of the role of the Committee and key players to be included on the Council's web site including information as to how to make a complaint or raise an issue. – **DONE.** 2. Details of the work of the Committee to be included in the article at 3. above - **DONE.** 3. To provide key partners with a statement to ensure their awareness of the Council's ethical standards – **DONE.** 4. Work with other authorities in the promotion of ethical standards **– DONE and ongoing. Other authorities invited to and attended training and vice versa.** 7. The Communications strategy be incorporated as an integral part of the County Council Communications Strategy. **– TO CHECK WITH COMMUNICATIONS UNIT.**	End March 2007 End June 2007 December 2007 On going September 2007	MO MO and Council's Communications Unit MO MO MO and Communications Unit	The public and partners will have greater understanding of the role of the Committee in relation to the ethical framework.	As above

Objective	Action	Time Scale	Responsible	Outcome	Evaluation
	3. Review Details of the Committee included on the intranet. **–DONE (link to 'Councillor Conduct' section on website included on 'Conduct and Disciplinary' intranet page.)**	March 2007	MO		
		On going	MO		
	4. Communications to include profiles and photographs to assist in engaging the public interest. **START MADE eg Standards Committee webpage.**	June 2007	MO and Standards Committee		
	5. An item be included in the staff newsletter annually in relation to the work of the committee. **ONGOING. To be included at the time of the Annual Report.**				
4. To communicate the role of Council's Leader and Chief Executive in the ethical agenda	1. Role of Leader and Chief Executive to be agreed – **DONE.**	November 2006	Standards Committee and Council	Staff and members will have an understanding of the role of the Leader and Chief Executive in relation to the ethical framework	Further self assessment survey
	2. Role description to be included on web site and intranet	End March 2007	MO		
5. To raise awareness amongst the staff and councillors of the standards expected of them	1.Requirements in relation to officer register of interests to be rolled out to officers in Directorates **– DONE. Process of maintaining the Register is ongoing.**	End December 2007	MO	Register of interests complete	Further self assessment survey
	2. Specific training on the amendments to the Member Code of Conduct be delivered to officers and members following implementation – **DONE. Refresher training for Members and Officers subsequently undertaken.**	June 2007	MO team and members of Standards Committee	Members and officers aware of the provisions of the revised Code	
		On going	Standards Committee and MO		
	3. Standards Bulletin to be agreed and published periodically to members and staff. **DONE and ongoing.**				
6. To gain commitment to those	1. Review member induction to	On going	MO	Member induction will provide	

| standards from all those representing the Council | ensure all new members receive training and information about their obligations under the ethical Code. **DONE.** | | | clear advice to new members about the ethical framework | |
| | 2. Ensuring members receive appropriate reminders to update the register of interests. **DONE (reminder in each Standards Bulletin)** | On going | MO | Register complete and members aware of obligations in relation to interests Continued low levels of complaint for alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct | |

Action Plan 2009-11

Objective	Action	Time Scale	Responsible	Outcome	Evaluation
1. To raise awareness amongst the public of the Council's stance in relation to standards of conduct and thereby to gain public trust in the authority	1. Publish article in North Yorkshire Times on the Council's ethical framework 2. Revisit Citizen's Panel Survey	1. End December 2009or following revision to Member Code of Conduct if later. 2. Within three months of 1. above			
2. Promoting awareness among the public of the work of the Committee	1. Continually update and annually review details of the role of the Committee and key players included on the Council's web site including information as to how to make a complaint or raise an issue. 2. Details of the work of the Committee to be included in the article in the NY Times. 3. To provide key partners with a statement to ensure their awareness of the Council's ethical standards. 4.Identify further opportunities to work with other authorities in the promotion of ethical standards.	1. On going 2. End December 2009 or as 1. 1. above 3. On going 4. On going			
3. To communicate the role of Council's Leader and Chief Executive in the ethical agenda	1. Secure the attendance of the Council's Leader and Chief Executive, and of other group Leaders at the Standards Committee.	1. December 2009			

Objective	Action	Time Scale	Responsible	Outcome	Evaluation
4. To raise awareness amongst the staff and Members of the standards expected of them	1. Requirements in relation to officer and Member register of interests to be reiterated to officers in Directorates and to Members and to be posted on the intranet.	1. End March 2010			
	2. Opportunities be identified to facilitate the self completion and amendment of Officer interests electronically.	2. End December 2010			
	3. Training on developments to the Member Code of Conduct, and ethical framework be delivered to officers and members.	3. On going			
	4. Training on the development of the Officer Code of Conduct, be delivered to officers and members once the Model Officer Code is forthcoming.	4. To be delivered when model code of conduct is issued			
	5. Standards Bulletin to be agreed and published periodically to members and staff, and a link be included in Key Messages and on the intranet.	5. On Going			
	6. Undertake Ethical Survey.	6. March 2010			
5. To gain commitment to those standards from all those representing the Council	1. Continually review member and officer induction to ensure all new members and officers receive training and information about their obligations under the ethical framework	1. On going			

Communications Strategy
2009 - 2011

1.0 Introduction
This communications strategy outlines North Yorkshire County Council's approach to communications and its future aspirations for communications. It is a framework, over two years, for policies and initiatives that will aid communications and enhance the council's capability to deliver its objectives. The strategy will balance the need to adapt and be flexible in line with the longer term aims of the council.

This strategy will address a number of key areas;
- Key drivers and influences – what will affect how the council communicates;
- Supporting the council's strategies – outlining how communications should support other council activity;
- Current communications activity in the council;
- Key principles for communications;
- Challenges and aims – for communicating with residents, with colleagues and with the media;
- Evaluation – outlining how this strategy will be measured.

The strategy is broadly split into two interlinked areas – external and internal communications – and sets out the principles and aims for communication. The strategy will be supported by annual service plans from the communications unit, which will translate the strategy into action.

2.0 Key drivers and influences
North Yorkshire County Council has a duty, as a local authority, to engage effectively with residents, partners, employees and other stakeholders. Effective communications is essential to this.

Communications over the past few years in local government has increasingly focused on reputation. The Local Government Association's reputation campaign, launched in 2005, set out 12 actions that, delivered well, it believed would have a positive impact on council reputation. The campaign has advocated focused campaigns, which showed demonstrable action, which satisfies the public, specifically value for money and customer service.

With the focus on efficiency and value for money, communications will need to play its role in supporting, as well as delivering, services more efficiently and effectively, particularly in a climate of budgetary constraints. The council needs to effectively use its communications resource.

A study published by the Department for Communities and Local Government, 'Perceptions of Local Government' (2006), provided strong evidence to suggest that clearer written, honest and transparent communications helps build trust amongst residents. It also showed that residents would trust their council more if they felt that their views were being taken on board.

Work has continued on monitoring communications and its impact. Ipsos MORI has observed the disparity between the average service satisfaction rating (in local authority best value surveys) and overall council satisfaction, which is often much lower. They believe that more engagement, more research and a better understanding of what's driving customer perceptions, as well as an assessment of how well promoting key council messages are all essential to successful communications and ultimately improved reputation.

With the introduction of the Government's Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) of each council, the place survey is being used to test how effectively local authorities are communicating a sense of place. Therefore, the likelihood is that focus will need to move away from individual services and instead communicate a community's 'sense of place'. Campaigns will, therefore, need to be assessed according to their impact on the community, not what officers think of the design. The focus needs to move towards campaign communications and agreeing a common public service approach with partners. This will result in the need to develop public sector 'hubs' for communications.

3.0 Communications – supporting the council's objectives and strategies

Under the modernising local government agenda, local authorities are expected to act as community leaders and deliver a high standard of services. To fulfill these roles effectively, good communication is essential. Good communications will help the county council realise its corporate objectives of continuously improving the services it delivers

and contributing to improvements in the quality of life for residents within the county.

The communications strategy links closely with the council plan and social inclusion strategy and supports a range of partnerships. It is also closely linked with the corporate consultation strategy and the people strategy and workforce plan. In particular communications will contribute towards the development of staff engagement and support workforce development under the CAA 'key lines of enquiry' in this area. It supports the council's overall vision, 'North Yorkshire is a place of equal opportunity where all can develop their full potential, participate in a flourishing economy, live and thrive in secure communities, see their high-quality environment and cultural assets maintained and enhanced, and receive effective support when they need it'.

The strategy contributes to all of the corporate objectives and specifically to the councils values;
- Treat everyone fairly and value diversity
- By honest and open in all that we do
- Strengthen effective local democracy
- Inform, listen and involve
- Respond to local needs and circumstances
- Work in partnership and provide leadership where required
- Value and develop our staff

This strategy also contributes specifically to the Sustainable Community Strategy (and therefore the North Yorkshire Strategic Partnership). It particularly focuses on access to services and on community cohesion (making sure that all sections of the community live and work together well), and supports the Local Area Agreement, working with partners, specifically improving communication with and involvement of, local communities and customers.

Under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act, (2007), from 1 April 2009, all local authorities have a duty to involve their residents in decision making and service provision, by providing information and involving and consulting local people. Whilst the corporate consultation and engagement strategy will by key to delivering this requirement, the communications strategy will contribute to meeting that duty.

Communications will also support the council's equalities policy and its achievement of the new equalities framework, e-government strategy and risk management strategy.

Communications will support the staff charter by helping staff to express ideas and concerns and have them heard, as well as support continuous improvement in how services are delivered. As the council continues with change and improvement, internal communication will support staff and managers through effective communications channels.

4.0 Communications in North Yorkshire County Council

Good communications is essential to the success of the council and its services. Communications professionals across the council work to deliver effective communications, providing support and guidance on a range of communications activities;

- Communications campaigns, planning and strategy
- Publications
- Internal communications
- Marketing campaigns and strategy
- E-communications and websites
- Design, print and distribution
- Branding and identity
- Press and media management
- Photography
- Plain English

Everyone in the council has a responsibility for communicating well, but good communications has to be developed and supported and is a priority which should become an integral part of the organisations day to day business. The council's new behaviour and skills framework includes a number of core competencies which require staff to develop their communication skills.

The council's audiences are wide and varied and, externally, will typically include;

- Residents
- 'Hard to reach' groups, including residents with English as a second language
- the media
- Service users, including those with learning and physical disabilities
- Voluntary groups and organizations
- The business community

- Opinion formers (including MPs, MEPs, civil servants, central government, district councillors, parish councilors and regional government agencies)
- District, town and parish councils
- Other public sector organizations (police, health, fire)
- Partner agencies (including staff in voluntary and commercial organizations working in partnership with the authority in delivering services)
- Visitors and those who work in the county

Internally, audiences include
- Employees, including school staff
- Councillors
- Staff in organizations contracted to carry out county council functions
- Trade Unions

The means of communication with these groups may be different, but an effective communication strategy must have the ability to reach each one.

5.0 Key principles for communications
These principles are the basis for all communications in the council;
- All communications are clear, understandable, relevant and consistent
- All communications are accessible and use appropriate channels
- The council has a strong and consistent brand and identity
- The council actively encourages all staff to be good communicators
- All communications are targeted, timely and effective, tailoring the messages and methods to meet the demands of the audience
- All communications are equal and accessible.

The council will ensure that all communication activity takes into account the differing accessibility needs of all, regardless of culture or ethnic origin, nationality, religion or belief, gender, disability, age, sexuality, geographical location or any other status.

The council's approach will be sensitive to the needs, values, language and cultural differences that exist within its communities and will make communication materials available in other formats where reasonable and appropriate.

These principles should ensure that communications across the council are well co-ordinated, effectively managed and responsive to the diverse needs of the public and staff.

6.0 Communication aims
Some of the challenges that the council and communications activities face have already been outlined. These specifically affect how communications should develop in the future.

6.1 Communicating externally
<u>Communication with residents</u>
Research has already identified that there is a direct link between how well informed the public is about council services and how satisfied they are with them. Those who feel they are well informed are more positive about the authority and more likely to feel that it offers local people value for money and provides a good quality of service. With an increasing focus on a sense of 'place', communities become more important and local factors need consideration when deciding how to best communicate, rather than adopting a 'one size' fits all approach.

   1. *Aim*
Raise the public's awareness of the role of the county council as a provider of services and community leader.
   2. *Aim*
Communications will be developed and around communities and neighbourhoods, taking a range of channels of communications and matching them to the needs of the community. This will target communications to audience needs.
   3. *Aim*
Develop our relationship with residents through a <u>range of media</u>, including <u>social media</u>, using a range of channels.
   4. *Aim*
The council's key <u>publications</u> will develop to better align themselves with communities and their needs, providing a range of information on the council's activities and services, as well as providing a cost-efficient channel of communication.
   5. *Aim*
The council will ensure that all communication activity takes into account the differing accessibility needs of all.

Linking popular services to the council through branding and identity will be crucial for the reputation of the council to be raised.
   6. *Aim*

<u>Brand</u> our communications consistently and with clear identity, ensuring the council has a single brand identity.

   7. *<u>Aim</u>*
Ensure there is a consistent quality in the council's communications, through the effective use of <u>plain English</u>, professional <u>photography</u> and clear <u>brand and identity</u>.

The council's consultation strategy sets out how the council will approach this activity and there are close links with communication.
   8. *<u>Aim</u>*
The council communications activity will support the council's consultation and engagement activity, particularly the development of the council's duty to involve.

E-communications
   9. *<u>Aim</u>*
Develop online communications for all the council's customers, residents, visitors and businesses, and support the efficient delivery of services.

<u>Communicating with partners</u>
Partnership working will be increasingly significant and become key to the success of the council's activities, as well of those of its partners, particularly under the CAA. The council needs to have a strategic role in partnership communications and will specifically by supporting the North Yorkshire Local Resilience Forum (NYLRF) on communicating, warning and informing, as well as the six county-wide thematic partnerships under the North Yorkshire Strategic Partnership. Communications support for other partnership work will involve work with district councils, as well as a range of public sector bodies, (including waste and road safety).
   10.   *<u>Aim</u>*
<u>Work in partnership</u> with others, from public, private and voluntary sector, to support priorities, linking up communications to ensure improved better communication for residents and users.

<u>Communicating with the media</u>
Residents' surveys consistently show that a key source of information about the council is through the media – and in particular the local press. When asked how they would prefer to receive information about the council, residents say they favour information sent by the council direct to their doors – either in the form of a council magazine

or leaflets. But even here, the local media still make it into the top two or three methods for how local people would prefer to receive information from the council.

Research by MORI has found residents often cite the local media as a key influence for why they hold particular perceptions of their council – more often negative. There has been little, if any, robust research to measure exactly how people's perception of their local council is influences by local press articles. However, a direct link between journalists' relationships with an organisation's communications team and the impact on their news agenda has been found. Generally, the better relationship, the more accurate and positive the news stories.

With a county as geographically diverse as North Yorkshire, communicating with the media is a challenging job. With the variety and breadth of the media organisations, it is essential to understand the influence they have in particular communities and the role they play.

    11.   Aim
Develop and promote the council's reputation through the media, by providing an efficient proactive and reactive media service.

For external communications, there are key strands of work which will enable the delivery of the communication aims. These are;
- Ensuring the council's brand identity is protected
- Raising the public's awareness of the role of the council as a provider of local services and as a community leader and place shaper
- Delivering a range of cost-effective communication channels to increase the numbers of residents, service users and partners who feel well-informed about the council's activities and services
- Ensuring that access to effective communication in an appropriate format is available to all sections of the community. All relevant groups in the community need to be considered when using each communication channel to engage with the appropriate audience
- Securing the confidence of key opinion formers.

6.2 Communicating internally
Internal communications is a crucial component of an effective communication strategy and an understanding of, and commitment to, the council's objectives is fundamental to its successful delivery. With a workforce of approximately 23,000 people, many of whom are also

residents within the county, they are an important element of a successful communications strategy. If employees are not signed up to, are unclear, or even unaware of, what the council stands for and what it sets out to achieve, the authority is unlikely to be successful.

This strategy recognizes that staff awareness, training and access to best practice are all important. Staff engagement is key. The significant challenge faced by the council in terms of internal communications must ensure that methods, message and frequency are carefully considered and that two-way communication is used. The strategy will also support the council in its work under Investors in People programme.

This strategy also recognizes the focus of the key lines of enquiry and four themes under the CAA, addressing the question of 'does the organization plan, organize and develop its workforce effectively to support the achievement of its strategic priorities?' Communications will play an important role in ensuring staff understand the council's priorities and objectives, and in engaging staff in introducing changes and new ways of working.

1. *Aim*

Communicate efficiently and effectively with our staff, in a number of different ways, in a timely and appropriate way, to encourage two-way communication.

2. *Aim*

Internal communications will be delivered through a framework of channels and mechanisms, which complement each other.

3. *Aim*

The recruitment and induction of new staff will ensure understanding of the council's values and culture.

4. *Aim*

Communications will be developed and supported as a key skill and competency for all staff, but particularly for managers and senior officers.

5. *Aim*

Improve employee understanding or, and commitment to, corporate objectives and priority areas, with the development of an employee engagement strategy.

6. *Aim*

Provide employees with the information they need to feel well informed and knowledgeable in order that they can perform their roles to the best of their abilities, act as ambassadors for the council and provide informed feedback.

7. *Aim*

Improve staff morale and motivation, through providing opportunities to listen to and understand their concerns, as well as providing the opportunities for staff to identify improvements and efficiencies.

With 72 elected councilors, representing residents across the county, they have an important role to play in communication for the council. With meetings and events and a programme of briefings and seminars, members are able to provide information in a unique way to residents in the county.

8. *Aim*

Councillors will be provided with a range of communications tools and have communications support to help them fulfill their role within their communities.

9. *Aim*

Enhance and support members' communication and community leadership activities, through a range of different communication channels.

7.0 Evaluation

The benefits of communications to council performance are often intangible, partly because of the challenge of isolating communications contributions from other factors, partly due to the measures being used being too large (like changes in overall satisfaction) and sometimes due to poor or non-existent evaluation and monitoring.

Measures need to move aware from outputs (such as the number of press release) to key council messages or campaign recognition, or wider council outcomes. Setting such measures is challenging.
The communications strategy will have a number of methods of evaluation. Communications needs to become effective at evaluating its contribution to the council and demonstrating its worth to managers and services.

Service performance plans will translate this strategy and aims into the day to day service delivery requirements of the communications unit and other communications officers across the council. The plans will detail how, when and where services will be provided.

With the introduction of National Indicators as the method of assessment for local authorities, evaluation of communications activities are closely aligned to evaluation of partnership working and the wider impact of communications.

The national indicators, in which communications has a key role to play, focus on how people feel, whether influencing decisions or belonging to their neighbourhoods. 'Overall or general satisfaction with the local area' will be significantly influenced by communications.

There are many other indicators measuring participation in, and use of, services and facilities, and communications and campaigns will have a key role to play in improving these indicators. Specifically, the provision of information electronically and its impact on customer services will be another measure of communications success. Others look at education and awareness, where communications will need to be part of the plan to improve these indicators.

An overview of evaluation measures is attached in the appendix.

Appendix

Evaluation

Performance Indicators / measurements	Description	2008/ 09 outturn	2009/ 10 target	Comments
Key Performance Indicator, CEx	Number of visits on the website	1,434,646	1,316,000	The target of 1,300,000 for 2008/9 was exceeded. 2007/8 result was 1,285,947
NI 14	Reducing avoidable contact	Baseline information		The website and information on it will form a key part of reducing avoidable contact.
NI 1	% of people who believe people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area	80.6%	81.9%	Previous BVPI indicator. Communications issues around community cohesion.
NI 2	% of people who feel that they belong to their neighbourhood	67.1%		Communications issues around community cohesion.
NI 3	Civic participation in the local area	16%	17%	Role of councilors and communications
NI 4	% of people who feel that they can influence decision s in their locality	32.8%	29.7%	
NI 5	Overall / general satisfaction with local area	87.1%		Wider public sector communications, involving partners
	Production of NYTimes	11 editions		Reader feedback and survey
	Internal communications events / updates / use of channels			Ad hoc feedback
	Media monitoring			Analysis of story and position in the newspaper; key message analysis and equivalent advertising spend
CAA, Key lines of enquiry, 3.3	Organisation's workforce			Role of communications in achieving 'performs well'
Equality framework	Equality impact assessments and wider communication on the framework			Contributions towards the overall council approach

In addition to these indicators, the council's communications activity will have an influence on the achievement of other indicators – the number of which is significant. This influence can be through features or articles in NYTimes, or through media activity, promotion through the website or internal communications, or through campaigns.

The main indicators are listed below:

- NI 6 Participation in regular volunteering
- NI 8 Adult participation in sport and active recreation
- NI 9 Use of public libraries
- NI 17 Perceptions of anti-social behaviour
- NI 22 Perceptions of parents taking responsibility for the behaviour of their children in the area
- NI 23 Perceptions that people in the area treat one another with respect and consideration
- NI 41 Perceptions of drunk or rowdy behaviour as a problem
- NI 42 Perceptions of drug use or drug dealing as a problem
- NI 47 People killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents
- NI 48 Children killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents
- NI 52 Take up of school lunches
- NI 57 Children and young people's participation in high-quality PE and sport
- NI 90 take up of 14-19 learning diplomas
- NI 110 (L70, LAA) Young people's participation in positive activities
- NI 138 Satisfaction of people over 65 with both home and neighbourhood
- NI 185 CO2 reduction from local authority operations
- NI 191 Residual household waste per household
- NI 192 Percentage of household waste sent for reuse, recycling and composting

THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE

North Yorkshire County Council has a Standards Committee which promotes high standards of conduct in the Council.

The Committee:

- assists and advises Members and the Council on ethical issues;

- monitors the operation of the Council's Code of Conduct for Members (which is based on the national model); and

- receives, assesses, investigates and determines complaints that Members have breached the Code.

All elected Members and certain co-opted Members must follow the Code and if they break it then they can face sanctions from the Standards Committee ranging from, for example, censure to suspension for up to six months. The Adjudication Panel for England generally determines the more serious cases and has power to order disqualification as a Member for up to five years.

Complaints of breach of Code

The responsibility for receiving and considering complaints that a Member may have breached the Members' Code of Conduct lies with the **standards committees** of local and other relevant public authorities.

What this means is that if you want to complain about the conduct of a Member of North Yorkshire County Council, you must submit your complaint, in writing, to:

The Standards Committee
c/o The Monitoring Officer
North Yorkshire Legal and Democratic Services
North Yorkshire County Council
County Hall
NORTHALLERTON
North Yorkshire
DL7 8AD

The Standards Committee can only deal with complaints about the behaviour of a Member and cannot deal with complaints about things that are not covered by the Members' Code of Conduct. If you make a complaint to the Committee, it must be about why you think a Member has **not followed the Code**.

The Standards for England (a national body) is a key regulator of the ethical framework, providing advice and guidance to authorities on the framework. Standards for England may still investigate certain, more serious, complaints in particular, limited circumstances.

Please visit the Standards for England website at www.standardsforengland.gov.uk for further information on their role and the standards regime generally.

Who are we?

The Council's Standards Committee has four independent Members (people who are not Councillors) and six elected Council Members. They are:

County Councillors

Philip Barrett

David Jeffels

John Marshall

Peter Popple

Peter Sowray

Geoff Webber

Independent Members

Henry Cronin
James Daglish (Chairman)
Gillian Fleming
Dr Janet Holt

Our Independent Members

Henry Cronin is a retired Executive Director of Nursing, Psychology and Allied Health Professionals, and, latterly, was Acting Chief Executive of an NHS Foundation Trust

James Daglish, Chairman, is a retired business Chief Executive and Member of the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Committee for North Yorkshire.

Gillian Fleming, Vice-Chairman, formerly worked for the Ombudsman's office but now undertakes dispute resolution assignments, including mediation, conciliation and professional regulation. She is also a Member of Employment Tribunals.

Dr Janet Holt is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Healthcare at the University of Leeds and is also the Healthcare Ethics & Law subject co-ordinator.

The independent Members can be contacted through the [Monitoring Officer](#).

What do we do?

The Standards Committee has the following terms of reference:

- promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct by Members;

- assisting Members to observe the Members' Code of Conduct;

- advising the Council on the adoption or revision of the Members' Code of Conduct;

- monitoring the operation and effectiveness of the Code;

- providing/arranging training on standards matters;

- granting dispensations to Members, where appropriate;

- receiving and assessing complaints that Members may have breached the Code of Conduct;

- reviewing Standards Committee decisions to take no action on a complaint that the Code has been breached, where such review is requested by the complainant;

- determining complaints (other than those being determined by Standards for England/Adjudication Panel) that Members may have breached the Code of Conduct for Members;

- dealing with any reports from a case tribunal, any reports to the Committee by an Ethical Standards Officer and any report from the Monitoring Officer on any matter which is referred by an Ethical Standards Officer;

- maintaining a general overview of ethical issues in relation to the Council;

- advising the Council on any amendments to its Constitution concerning standards issues;

- dealing with any other complaints about Councillors' conduct, unrelated to the Code of Conduct, referred by the Chief Executive Officer;

- granting exemptions to officers in politically restricted posts to allow them to engage in political activities;

- exercising all functions in respect of the publication of Standards Committee independent Member vacancies;

- assisting in the recruitment of independent Members to the Standards Committee (but not approving individual appointments).

Sub-Committees

The Standards Committee has established three Sub-Committees to deal with the separate roles involved in dealing with complaints about Member conduct:

- **Complaint Assessment Sub-Committee**: this Sub-Committee undertakes all functions of the Standards Committee in relation to the initial assessment of complaints that Members have breached the Authority's Code of Conduct for Members (including the referral or otherwise of complaints for investigation or other action);

- **Complaint Review Sub-Committee**: this Sub-Committee undertakes all functions of the Standards Committee in relation to the review of assessment decisions to take no action in respect of complaints that Members have breached the Authority's Code of Conduct for Members; and

- **Complaint Determination Sub-Committee**: this Sub-Committee undertakes all functions of the Standards Committee in relation to the consideration of complaint investigation reports, the holding of complaint determination hearings, the making of findings and the imposition of sanctions (if appropriate) in respect of complaints that Members have breached the Authority's Code of Conduct for Members.

Each Sub-Committee is comprised of three Members of the Standards Committee, including at least one Councillor and one independent Member, and each is chaired by an independent Member.

The Standards Committee has developed local assessment criteria against which the Complaint Assessment Sub-Committee assesses new complaints and decides what action, if any, to take. The criteria also set out how complaints received anonymously will be dealt with. The Assessment Criteria can be accessed by following this link.

The procedure that the Complaint Assessment Sub-Committee and Complaint Review Sub-Committee will follow in discharging their functions in respect of complaints can be accessed here.

Monitoring Officer

The Standards Committee is supported in its work to uphold high ethical standards by the Council's Monitoring Officer, who has a key role in relation to the ethical agenda.

Further information about the Monitoring Officer can be found by following this link.

Meetings

- The **Standards Committee Agenda, Reports and Minutes** are available on this website.

- If you have any queries regarding a meeting, please contact:

  Democratic Services,
  North Yorkshire County Council,
  County Hall,
  Racecourse Lane,
  Northallerton,
  North Yorkshire,
  DL7 8AD

  Telephone: 0845 034 9494