



Communications Strategy

2018

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Introduction

Communication is an essential part of good management and the effective delivery of Council services. We communicate to:

- Build support and advocacy,
- Engage the community and target audiences,
- Harness resources to create change, and
- Be authentic in demonstrating our core values.

Generally speaking, the “why” can be defined by five broad desired responses:

1. To raise awareness,
2. To build understanding,
3. To create a belief,
4. To create behaviour change, and
5. To generate advocacy.

Table 1: Why are we engaging with the community?

Awareness	Understanding	Belief	Behaviour Change	Advocacy
“Never heard of it/ them.”	“I get it – I can see this as important/ relevant to me.”	“I can relate to this – I want to get involved.”	“I will do something about this – and I know what to do.”	“Everyone needs to understand this and get involved.”
Build knowledge and consciousness	Education, engagement/ involvement	What’s the proposition for me? How is this relevant to me?	What’s the call to action? What do you want me to do about it?	Support and systems to facilitate systemic change

(Davies, 2011)

One flows from the other. You can’t drive behaviour change until you have awareness, understanding or belief.

Deliberate, planned and sustained communication effort from Council is critical to establish and maintain mutual understanding between Council and its community as well as its other stakeholders. It is also a key aspect of Council meeting its legislative requirements. The Local Government Act 2002 requires local authorities to assist and promote opportunities for public participation in local decision making. A Communications Strategy and an appropriately resourced function is an essential tool for meeting Council’s strategic objectives and statutory responsibilities.

This Communications Strategy aims to be a “broad statement of strategic direction” for Waitomo District Council’s approach to communications in both levels of service and function.

This strategy:

- Provides a guide to Council’s day-to-day communications activities;
- Sets Council’s expectations for media; and

- Allows Council to better engage with its community in a genuine way.

The Strategy has three key areas

1. Objectives
2. Principles
3. Processes

This strategy describes what Council wants to achieve, who it will engage with, through what channel and how we plan to evaluate the usefulness and effectiveness of Council communications.

Communications Objectives

Objectives are the specific results that we aim to achieve through communication. They are the backbone of the strategy and influence all aspects, including outcomes and actions. The Communication Objectives have been established taking into account Council's overall Vision for the District and strategic direction. They also take into account the broader local government environment.

Council's Vision is ***"Creating a better future with vibrant communities and thriving business."*** One of the focus areas in Council's 2015-25 LTP is placing a greater emphasis on community and economic development. The objectives align to this.

In May 2015, Local Government New Zealand research (Local Government New Zealand, 2015) found that general public understanding of what Councils do is extremely low and, while seen as important to society, Councils generally had a poor reputation.

While it can be debated that a majority of those negative perceptions are in fact due to the quality of or issues with service delivery itself, some of the solution lies in effectively promoting what Councils are doing well and communicating in a transparent and up-front manner when things go wrong.

With this in mind, Waitomo District Council is focused on developing those relationships and creating an environment where its stakeholders want to communicate with Council.

Council communication policies must also take account of statutory obligations to consult with the community. *"The prime purpose of consultation is to enable the effective participation of individuals and communities in the decision-making of Councils. This will enable elected representatives to make better-informed decisions on behalf of those they represent."* (Department of Internal Affairs)

In accordance with the Local Government Act 2002 the following six principles apply when a Council undertakes consultation:

- Councils must provide anyone who will or may be affected by the decision, or anyone who has an interest in the decision, with reasonable access to relevant information;
- These people should also be encouraged to express their views to Council;
- People who are invited to present their views to Council should be given clear information about the purpose of the consultation and the scope of the decisions being made;
- People who wish to present their views must be given reasonable opportunity to present them;
- Councils should receive these views with an open mind and give them due consideration when making a decision; and

- Council should provide people presenting their views with information relevant to decisions and the reasons for them.

Based on the needs and requirements above Council has set out the following Objectives:

1. Promote the value of Council's role in the community,
2. Encourage involvement in local decision-making,
3. Ensure communities are well informed on Council's activities/ operations,
4. Support Council's reputation in the District,
5. Support Council's reputation within the Local Government (LG) sector,
6. Attract people to live or work in and visit the Waitomo District, and
7. Promote a sense of community and pride of place.

Although all of the above objectives are important, in line with its vision, Council has determined that Objective 6, to attract people to live or work in and visit the Waitomo District, is the most important communication objective. Objective 5 - Support Council's reputation with the LG sector was also identified as a key objective.

Prioritising objectives assists with resource allocation during implementation of the strategy.

Communication Principles

The communication principles have been established to guide the form and content of messaging. The principles have been set out to move Council's target audiences from their current thinking or understanding to the preferred position.

These are:

- **Proactive communications** on projects, milestones, activities to pre-empt issues;
- Drive **consistent and repeated messaging** through an integrated communications approach to build credibility and legitimacy;
- **Link messaging to WDC's strategic direction** - social, economic and cultural interests of people and communities. Maintain and enhance quality of the environment, and reasonably foresee needs for future generations.
- **Messaging language** to be such that it comes across as accessible, hands-on, specialists in our field and as having a firm grasp of the issues and avoid the risk of being perceived as a nameless, faceless, authoritarian organisation.
- Establish **strong brand recognition** of Council by ensuring all Council communications bear Council's clear and consistent brand - both in terms of messaging style, logo and collateral. This will promote the breadth of our work;
- Seek to **understand our community** and its target audiences by proactively establishing relationships with key stakeholders to enable two-way communication. This is **particularly important with Māori**, both in respect to obligations under the Local Government Act and the Resource Management Act and as critical participants in our economy and communities;
- **Tailor messaging** to key audiences to ensure that our messaging resonates and also that we are using our limited resources efficiently;

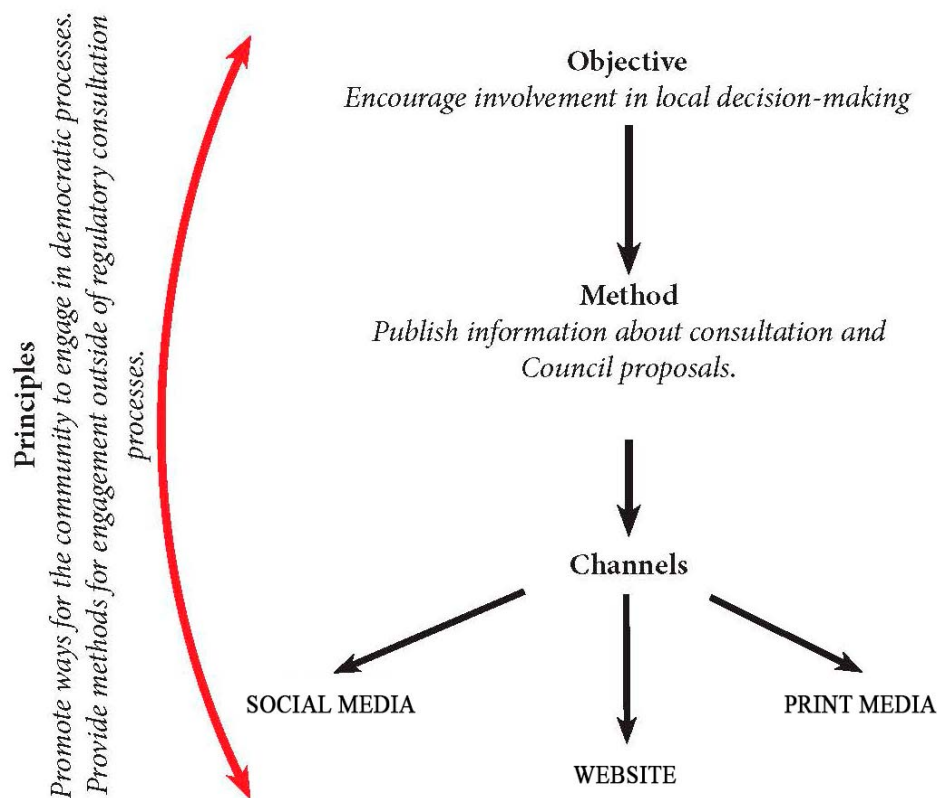
- Ensure internal stakeholders **understand our communications objectives** so we have a consistent message;
- Ensure our communications **clearly reflect Council’s collective position** and is 100% reliable to build trust and confidence;
- Ensure all communications are in **plain English, concise and balanced**;
- Ensure any **misinformation, biased or unfair information is addressed as soon as possible**;
- **Promote ways for the community to engage** in democratic processes. Provide methods for engagement outside of regulatory consultation processes.

Communication Methods

Methods are where the “rubber hits the road” for Council’s communications function. These are tasks, channels or campaigns that will bring into effect the objectives outlined previously. The principles will guide the messaging.

There may be a number of methods to achieve each objective. Subsequently, each method may be fed through a number of channels at Council’s disposal, both internal and external.

An example of how this may flow from objectives to principles, through to method is set out below.



Key Audiences

In order to maximise the penetration of communication resources, key audiences need to be identified.

Identifying leaders within those groups is essential to mobilising or soliciting feedback for various Council processes or projects. Likewise, understanding the motivations of those groups, the demographic of people that make up those groups and how they prefer to engage will inform tailored communications for each group.

The key audiences Council will engage are:

- District community in general,
- Businesses and business associations,
- Community Groups such as Ratepayers Group, Youth Council, Grey Power, Schools,
- Māori organisations,
- Media - local and regional,
- Central government and agencies, and
- Other Councils in the Waikato Region or Councils WDC shares a boundary with.

Council's stakeholder database aims to identify stakeholders and maximise the effectiveness of this resource.

The different channels that are used to communicate with the community are:

- Website
- Print media
- Social Media
- Radio
- Council publications; Rates newsletter, flyers, brochures/guides and posters.

Communicating online is a key element of communication in today's world. An effective website has become an essential means of communication for all organisations.

WDC's Customer Service Strategy includes a key action focused on providing technology solutions: *'Ongoing review of WDC website to provide online communications and transaction processing – i.e. 24/7 customer access'*.

WDC's website is an integral part of the way we deliver services to the community offering access to Council information 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It will be promoted as a key means of communicating and doing business with Council.

Processes

Processes outline a series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve the objectives. To ensure Council's messages are consistent, authentic, and accurate and in line with Council's collective position, it is important that there are robust processes for who can say what, when and to whom.

Forms and processes ensure that the objective of 'ensuring communities are well informed on Council activities/operations' is achieved.

The communications team lead the development of communications processes to ensure key messages are outlined early in the communication planning process, that spokespeople and project ambassadors are identified and contingencies for risks and challenges identified prior to the commencement of a project.

It is critical that all Council officers recognise, value, practice and take accountability for quality communication in their daily activities. In particular, when a new project or area of focus arises, staff will liaise with the communications team to prepare a plan for communication of the project.

Communications will be deployed prior to and following completion of public consultation.

Typically, Councils rationalise decisions on who will publically represent an issue in the media. WDC's Media Policy outlines who may speak to the media.

Communication involves not only keeping people informed about what Council is doing, but also providing people with the opportunity to provide feedback on Council's planning and decision making and how it is performing in its' service delivery.

Council will continue to actively seek feedback from the community with the support of the Communications team.

To assess performance, Council currently carries out annual Resident Satisfaction Surveys (RSS) as a means of gauging the satisfaction of residents with the activities it carries out and the services delivered. The RSS is a good means of gauging the satisfaction of residents.

The Customer Service Strategy provides for a range of targeted customer satisfaction surveys. These are implemented upon completion of the delivery of a specific Council service, such as building consents and provision of Elderly Persons Housing.

Council also communicates with it's communities on planning and decision making on matters such as:

- Long Term Plan and Annual Plans,
- Annual Report,
- Policies and Bylaws,
- Some Strategies and Plans,
- District Plan, and
- Certain Resource Management decisions.

Communications in the form of educational information is required from time to time, to support an improved level of community awareness.

Examples of the activities in which Council communications serve an education purpose are:

- Waste Minimisation,

- Responsible Dog Ownership, and
- Water Conservation.

Implementation of the Communications Strategy

Examples of how Council will implement its communication objectives are set out in the following table.

Objective	Example
Promote the value of Council's role in the community	<p>Regular sharing of service and project information via website, social media and print media.</p> <p>Ensure that the WDC logo and sponsorship is highlighted in communications.</p> <p>Publication of funding and grants information on the website.</p>
Encourage involvement in local decision-making	<p>Extensive promotion of opportunities to engage i.e. using various methods – website, social media, radio and print media.</p> <p>Provide advice on how to make a submission to Council.</p> <p>Communicate any opportunities to engage with Elected Members.</p> <p>Increase use of Mayor's Facebook page in consultation communications campaigns.</p> <p>Share snippets of consultation material on social media and radio in a way that is easy to understand and consider.</p>
Ensure communities are well informed on Council's activities/operations	<p>Proactively communicate significant operational activities and projects in a timely manner.</p> <p>Council operations/work that has the potential to significantly impact on the day-to-day service delivery will be publicly notified.</p>
Support Council's reputation in the District	<p>Promptly respond to Council issues with planned media release.</p> <p>Publish and share information about Council's performance and achievements.</p>
Support Council's reputation within the LG sector	Contribute and showcase a particular success to 'Local Wins' under the LGNZ

	<p>website.</p> <p>Share LGNZ news on Social media.</p>
Attract people to live or work in and visit the Waitomo District	Promote District on social media.
Promote a sense of community and pride of place.	<p>Encourage and promote compliance with Council's regulations, bylaws, policies and vision in Council communications.</p> <p>Communicate negative effects of vandalism/graffiti on community environment and image.</p> <p>Communicate successful collaboration and partnerships that result in positive outcomes for community groups and organisations.</p> <p>Promote Council services that support positive outcomes for community using various communication methods.</p>

Evaluation

Evaluation of the effectiveness of Council communications is increasingly important.

It is important that resources are used efficiently and demonstrating what works and what doesn't will help refine future communications strategies.

A six-monthly progress report to Council will provide an update on the actions and campaigns undertaken to meet the objectives set out in this strategy.