



**DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT (DOE) COMMUNICATIONS  
STRATEGY FOR THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM PROGRAMME**

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## **1. Introduction**

This strategy summarises the Department of the Environment (DOE) approach to communications supporting the Local Government Reform Programme in Northern Ireland as identified in the Review of Public Administration (RPA). Effective communication is critical to a successful change management strategy. This requires an organised flow of adaptable, collaborative, and strategic communication to internal and external audiences and key stakeholders.

An effective communications strategy and action plan must drive and support activity. This will involve the management of the reactive communications as dictated by the nature of the changes balanced by an ongoing proactive campaign. This is designed to build public confidence and trust in the changes identified in the Review of Public Administration and increase public understanding of what the new local government structure will mean.

## **2. Aim of the Communications Strategy**

The overall aim of the strategy is to support the Local Government Reform Programme through timely and interactive internal and external communication; to communicate the ultimate benefits of the reform programme; and to be recognised as a trusted and reliable source of information providing support to those impacted by change and working in partnership with stakeholders.

### **3. General Communications Objectives**

The following objectives have been established for communications for the Local Government Reform Programme:

- Provide clear, consistent, accurate and regular information to increase understanding and support internally and externally.
- Utilise existing communications mechanisms and investigate new and innovative channels targeted in accordance with audience needs and preferences. All communications should be efficient and effective with an emphasis placed on best value through integration of campaigns where possible to ensure maximum impact and overall effectiveness.
- An engaging, inclusive, honest, transparent and systematic communications effort to involve employees and stakeholders and encourage “buy in” to the process so they are more likely to offer support and cooperation as opposed to resistance through increased understanding and confidence in the reform and modernisation objectives.
- Provide a core infrastructure with sufficient capacity and resources that will support the programme from inception to completion through the initiation, planning, design and implementation phases.
- Ensure that information is disseminated in a timely and efficient manner in synergy with the timescales of the programme to promote awareness of key milestones.
- Incorporate communications best practice and learning from other organisations that have been through a major change process; particularly any learning points gained from the experience of DHSSPS.
- Adaptable and flexible communications – employment of robust evaluation processes and incorporation of 360 degrees feedback to ensure that all communications are regularly evaluated, assessed and future improvements made.
- A “one stop communications shop” – a single point of contact for all communications to ensure an integrated, coordinated and consistent approach.

- Ensure all communications are accessible and of a high quality therefore supporting that communications are from a credible and reliable source.

#### **4. Positioning the Local Government Reform Programme**

The Local Government Reform Programme will become an increasingly significant media, public and internal issue and communications must ensure that the rationale for these changes is understood amongst all key audiences and stakeholders. Communications should concentrate on shifting the focus to the advantages of local government reform and the improvements it will deliver.

Core key messages should be developed to underpin all communication. This persistent drip feeding of key messages should increase awareness and consistency. Close liaison with key audiences and stakeholders will boost impact and enhance the reliability of the message. This will involve proactive engagement with all target audiences.

#### **5. Target Audiences**

The Local Government Reform Programme's target audiences can be split into three broad categories:

- (i) Internal
- (ii) External
- (iii) Stakeholder

In developing areas of activity, it needs to be clear what messages are to be communicated and the most relevant communication approach applied. The following sets out distinct principles for each group to facilitate targeted communication.

These audience groups are not in isolation from each other and there will be situations where a particular group falls into more than one category and communications should be tailored accordingly.

## **5 (i) Internal Audiences**

- **Local government employees**
- **Central government employees including transferring function departments**

Internal communications should abide by the general objectives (point 3) with additional communications principles as below:

- Communication recognises and acknowledges the key role that employees play in the overall programme – communications are integrated and “owned” by employees.
- Communication is delivered with sensitivity and understanding demonstrating management support and commitment by clearly indicating the sources of information and the context in which they are provided. Relevant officials and managers are properly equipped to develop, deliver and provide advice on key messages to be communicated.
- Simple, explicit and easily understood communications take account of what employees want to hear and how they want to hear it. Communication should answer the question “how does this affect / benefit me?”
- Communication is in consultation with communicators from the councils who are responsible for information dissemination in their areas. Council communicators feed into the content and communication is provided by the DOE in a suitable format for council communicators to circulate appropriately.
- Communication is kept to a reasonable frequency and level of detail in order to minimise saturation levels while keeping all interested parties informed.
- Employees are aware of the principles of the Public Service Commission (PSC) and that there are processes in place to safeguard their interests which are being adhered to.

- Communications are subject to Trade Union consultation where applicable and the Local Government Staff Commission (LGSC), Public Sector People Managers Association (PPMA) and the Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee (NILGOSC) as appropriate.
- Communication methods will follow Public Service Commission (PSC) advice that a variety of communication channels are used. These will include emails, websites and intranet sites; prudent use of regular newsletters; and direct contact through seminars, conferences and staff meetings.

## 5. (ii) External Audiences

- **General public**
- **Opinion formers**
- **Community representatives**
- **Business representatives**
- **Trade unions**
- **Media**

External communications should abide by the general objectives (point 3) with additional communications principles as below:

- In liaison with the DOE press office, all proactive activity will consider the timing of the release of stories in terms of the overall media context and wider news and political environment.
- Communication will be fully integrated to ensure that all relevant audiences and stakeholders receive information in a timely manner.
- Ongoing media relations (proactive and reactive) will be used as a vehicle to position the Local Government Reform Programme and communicate with the wider public.
- All requests from the media will be responded to succinctly and to deadline. Queries will be clarified with advice and guidance provided on key issues. Requests for interview will be facilitated, often at short notice, and news releases and statements will be issued.

- A range of proactive tools will also be utilised in planning for events that will draw media interest – please see Appendix A.

#### **5. (iii) Stakeholders**

- **Assembly**
- **Change Managers**
- **Community and business sector**
- **Council CEXs**
- **DOE Local Government Policy Division**
- **DOE Press Office**
- **Environment Committee**
- **Executive**
- **Local Government Reform Communications Group**
- **Local government staff**
- **Local Government Staff Commission (LGSC)**
- **Media**
- **Minister**
- **NILGA and other local government umbrella groups – NILGA will disseminate to members, including Councillors, as necessary**
- **Political representatives**
- **Public Sector People Managers Association (PPMA)**
- **Representatives from all transferring Departments**
- **Regional Transition Coordinating Group (RTCG) members**
- **Strategic Leadership Board (SLB) members**
- **Trade Union Representatives Central Joint Forum, Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) and the Northern Ireland Committee, Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NIC / ICTU)**

The stakeholder communication strategy should abide by the general objectives (point 3) with additional communications principles as below:

- Key stakeholders are engaged in shaping communications from the programme, resulting in all impacted stakeholders at all appropriate levels receiving visible and direct communications regarding the objectives.
- Communication meets the needs of all stakeholders and a collaborative approach facilitates the continued development of trusted relationships.
- Communication recognises that various organisations know the best way to communicate with their audiences, but give direction to the overarching message and provide support and cohesion for the overall communications programme. All communications therefore should be aligned through effective partnership working.

## **6. Communications Structure**

The Regional Transition Coordinating Group (RTCG) will be the Communications Steering Group. It will provide the oversight to ensure communications are taken forward in accordance with the policy directions established by the Strategic Leadership Board (SLB). The SLB will be kept apprised of appropriate communications before they issue.

A Local Government Reform Programme Communications Group has been established to drive communications activity. This will be facilitated by the Joint Secretariat (DOE and NILGA) that reports to RTCG. The RTCG reports back to the SLB.

The Local Government Reform Programme Communications Group includes representatives from each of the 11 council clusters; government departments that have functions transferring; Trade Union representation; and the Local Government Staff Commission (LGSC). Representatives have responsibility for ensuring that actions are taken and messages cascaded.

## **7. Monitoring and Feedback**

All communication activity will be evaluated, reviewed and monitored on an ongoing basis. An external organisation will be selected to carry out an initial communications auditing exercise to ascertain the level of knowledge in key target audiences in order to baseline and monitor communication activity going forward.

Regular reports on communication impact amongst key audiences and stakeholders will provide continuous performance indicators. This will mean communication can focus on the most relevant issues and will assist in continuously improving performance.

## **8. Communications Plan**

A programme of action to advance the objectives contained in this strategy has been developed. This includes specific activities with clear timescales – the timings of individual activities will naturally depend on progress in other work areas. Specific plans will be developed in further detail for each of the major milestones.

## **Appendix A**

### **Proactive Toolkit for Media Relations**

#### **1. Develop Trusted Relationships with the Media**

Provide timely information and further media understanding of the Local Government Reform Programme.

- Develop a central group of advised correspondents and strategically select key opportunities for the media to meet with the Minister and officials for formal and informal briefings on the main issues.
- Where appropriate, attend meetings with local media, together with the relevant council communications managers to explain the reform changes in particular areas. These meetings should be arranged on the 11 council basis in order for the media to become more familiar with the new structures.
- Utilise to best effect the council communicators' local media knowledge.

#### **2. Milestone-Led Strategic News Releases on Key Issues**

These should include:

- Key outcomes flowing from meetings when something significant has been decided.
- Agreed media features and profiles to target specific audiences or to relay a particular message.
- Media interviews.
- Milestone stories with specific media campaigns.
- Media visits, where appropriate.
- Photography to increase coverage.
- Keynote speaking events maximised and exploited.
- Events / seminars / exhibitions and road shows to publicly demonstrate direct interaction with key audiences.

### **3. Develop Online Communications**

The website should provide:

- Simple, direct and accessible communication.
- Up-to-date information with the latest news.
- Visually stimulating information to maximise traffic and impact.
- Other online communication methods such as e-zines, viral marketing and new media methods should also be explored.

### **4. Advertising**

- Strategic, cost-effective advertising targeted to raise awareness of elements of the Local Government Reform Programme.

### **5. Publications**

- Produced to meet the needs of identified audiences.
- Accessible and available to those not fluent in English.

### **6. Community Engagement / Consultation / Outreach**

- Listen to the needs of all key stakeholders and engage them whenever practicable and appropriate.
- Maximise public relations opportunities when key issues are being consulted upon.

### **7. Public / Political Profiling**

- Meetings and briefings with political influencers and opinion formers locally to promote inclusion – public relations opportunity maximised if appropriate.

### **8. Corporate Identity**

- Ensure that all internal and external communications adhere to agreed style guides to ensure professionalism and consistency of output.