

Office accommodation strategy – Communications plan

Introduction

The ability of the Council to successfully restructure its service provision depends, in part, on the stakeholders who will be affected and how they react. High-quality communication will help your Council effectively manage those relationships, maintain their trust and contribute towards the organisation achieving its objective.

The communications strategy

Good communication of the strategic intentions to internal and external stakeholders should avoid misunderstandings that could obstruct the implementation of the overall office accommodation strategy.

The Executive and senior management team need to be consistent in their communications to ensure that key messages are clearly understood and that people do not receive confused messages. However, if communications become too predictable, people stop listening.

They also need to demonstrate sensitivity to the needs and views of others. Early communication can act as a warning system if stakeholders are unhappy and the Council can then factor this in to the project development, from conception to operation. This does not necessarily mean that the Council will change its vision but may highlight the need for greater clarity, explanation or amend the details of the delivery.

Whoever is leading the communications is your advocate and 'eyes and ears' and it is highly recommended that they are involved in the decision making process. This may be a communications professional, ward councillors, lead member or senior officer.

Senior involvement from both the Executive and the senior management team is important to demonstrate commitment to the project. However, pick the best people for the briefing based on their individual strengths and not just direct responsibility. For example, a large group briefing of 50 staff needs to be led by someone who can speak confidently in public and handle any initial criticism without getting defensive.

Stakeholder management

When deciding on the strategy, consider the implications of the changes on each of your stakeholders, how they may view the change and the impact on the Council's relationship with them. The nature of local authorities means that the Council is likely to already have a regular dialogue with all of these groups, which you can utilise.

Local authorities' stakeholders can typically be broken down into the following categories:

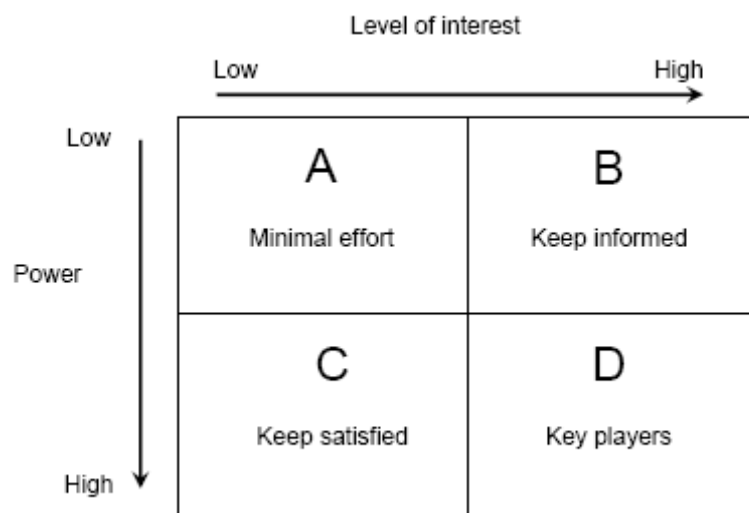
- **Political** - Councillors, Committees, MPs and other elected representatives;
- **Internal** – Managers, Employees, Unions;
- **Users of the service** – Typically residents and maybe other councils;

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- **Local community** – Other residents, local groups and businesses based near to the offices;
- **Suppliers** – Those people who provide materials or services to the function;
- **The media** - The media are primarily a way of communicating with other stakeholders but should also be considered separately.

Each group will have different expectations which may conflict and will need to be addressed through your communications with them. For example, councillors might want to move an office function to an area creating jobs and revenue to support regeneration against a local community not wanting more traffic and parking in their area.

Depending on whether each stakeholder is directly affected by the change or crucial to the organisation, the Council may vary how you communicate. One tool to guide this is the Johnson & Scholes (2001) mapping technique below:



Internal communication

Changes to the office accommodation strategy are likely to have the greatest impact on your internal stakeholders. It is important that they are happy with the change to maintain staff morale which is likely to result in delivering a better service - and more satisfied residents if they provide a service which has direct contact with them.

Therefore, getting the internal communications strategy right is crucial. Two factors that will influence this strategy are the Council's structure and culture, which may be different in each local authority.

Structure

How you communicate will depend on the structure of your council. Most are based around a functional structure based on the main activities with each reporting to a director and specialists at senior and middle management levels.

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The communications strategy will need to ensure that everyone across the organisation is informed but will focus on the relevant business units depending on how they are affected by the change.

It could be useful to appoint a number of 'change champions' who are responsible for part of the process or act as advocates in each team.

Culture

Culture affects how your council may react to the change. Culture is something that is formed collectively by people across the organisation over time. It rests in the shared experiences, routines, stories and values.

These are some examples which may affect how people feel emotionally about the change:

- **Shared experiences** – Has the Council been through a similar change before, what impact did it have and will it affect how your staff feel?
- **Routines** - Will it mean that staff no longer share common facilities which break a link with other teams?
- **Personal culture** - Will there be any significant staff changes as individuals often contribute to the culture themselves?
- **Values** - Will it change the way you expect staff to think and behave?

Councils tend to promote a participative culture where employees are encouraged to come forwards with ideas. Involvement means they are more likely to be motivated to contribute towards the Council's success but for this to work you must be prepared to modify aspects of the move.

Tools

The Council should use a mix of the following tools to communicate with internal audiences:

- **Two-way communication** – Allows an opportunity for the Council to listen to staff views and receive feedback. This could include face-to-face meetings, group briefings, focus groups, surveys, online forums;
- **One way communication** – Providing information. This tends to be geared more towards mass communication. Typical methods include mail, email, staff newsletters and the intranet.

External audiences

Be realistic about whether moving your office accommodation will impact on your external stakeholders. For example, will you need to change phone numbers or could there be an interruption in service? Even where this is not the case, there is a good chance the local press and residents will find out about the move. Whatever the reason for changing the office accommodation, your political opponents will wish to spin it as

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cutting services. It is, therefore, equally important to carefully manage your communications with your external stakeholders to minimise any potential criticism.

Tools

Although it is useful to provide written information to suppliers, the focus here is on the local community and users of the service. Communications should still contain a mix of one and two-way communication tools, such as:

- **Two way communication** – Allows an opportunity for the Council to listen to local views and receive feedback. This could include meetings with residents associations and community groups, public meetings, focus groups, public consultation and surveys;
- **One way communication** – Providing information. This tends to be geared more towards mass communication. Consider what existing mailings you are doing where you can include the information e.g. annual council tax bills, residents' council newsletters, ward leaflets and on the website. Depending on the scale of the change you may wish to produce fliers specifically on this issue. Ask for the information to be included in school newsletters, in doctor's surgeries and other public places. Brief the local media.

Communications checklist

Project conception and planning

- Map stakeholders, consider the implications of the changes on each group and assess existing communications channels.

Strategy

- Convey vision through one-to-one briefings with key players and group briefings to those likely to be most affected;
- Listen to initial views and concerns.

Feasibility

- Convey commitment to change;
- Provide facts to support case;
- Conduct two way communications exercises, i.e.:
 - Hold staff focus groups / community meetings to listen to concerns;
 - Conduct staff survey / community consultation;
- Reassess key messages.

Implementation

- Communicate vision;
- Brief key community groups and local press;
- Appoint change champions in each business unit which is affected;
- Involve staff in details of delivery;
- Provide regular information updates through one-way communications tools.

Operation

- Celebrate successful completion of move;
- Gather feedback;
- Create champions for similar future changes;
- Success of new office to be conveyed to internal and external audiences as appropriate.