

Corporate Communications Strategy 2012-15



1. Introduction

2. Context

Key issues and influences
Rationale for investment in communications

3. Audit and analysis

Progress review against previous strategies
Performance and feedback analysis
Future communication challenges

4. Principles and proposals

Communication objectives and principles
Stakeholder issues and communication channels
Summary of proposals

5. Monitoring and evaluation

Performance management
Communication performance indicators

1. INTRODUCTION

The way in which people and organisations communicate with each other has changed more in the last decade than in the previous century.

The explosion of online social networks and ever-increasing sophistication of smart phones has transformed both personal and professional communications and radically altered the landscape of the traditional media channels.

In addition, the biggest ever squeeze on public sector spending means that organisations like Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service are having to make fundamental changes to their structures and the way their staff serve their local communities. At the same time, new legislation and guidance is insisting that Fire Authorities are more open, transparent and ensure greater community involvement in developing their services.

Taken together, this means that the Service's need for clear, effective and flexible internal and external communications is greater than ever. It also means a far greater emphasis on ensuring communication skills and techniques can influence and protect the reputation of the organisation at the earliest opportunity.

This Corporate Communications Strategy has been developed to set out the principles and approach the organisation will follow to improve both its internal and external communications over the next three years. It reflects the Service's corporate aims and objectives and will be critical to the delivery of key projects to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation. The strategy will be supplemented by annual team and departmental plans which will set out individual communication projects in detail.

The development of the Strategy has involved:

- an audit and review of progress against the Service's previous strategies
- an analysis of feedback from staff, residents and other stakeholders
- the development of principles and proposals
- the establishment of monitoring, evaluation and performance management arrangements.

The Strategy will be kept under review and established as a "live" document on the Service's Intranet with links to relevant internal and external documents and guidance.

Any comments or inquires about the strategy should be addressed to: Corporate Communications, Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters, Sadler Road, Winsford. CW7 2FQ. Tel. 01606 868657

E-mail: corporatecommunications@cheshirefire.gov.uk

2. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The Authority's first Corporate Communications Strategy was approved in 2005 at a time when the organisation was formalising the way in which it raised awareness of its services and policies both internally and externally. It provided a wide-ranging framework to cover all aspects of internal and external communication and to address areas of improvement identified during external reviews of the organisation. The three-year strategy fundamentally changed the Service's approach to corporate communications, ensuring greater clarity and consistency in key areas.

In 2008 a new three-year strategy was approved which looked to build on some of the improvements achieved over the previous three years. In particular, it aimed to:

- increase the effectiveness of the Service's website and Intranet
- improve communications with key partners
- develop specific lobbying campaigns
- continue to develop staff satisfaction consultations.

A detailed review and analysis of progress against the strategies and associated action plans is set out in the next section.

While these strategies included both internal and external communications, the emphasis has been largely on the latter. This was done to address ongoing concerns locally and nationally about the lack of community awareness over the diverse range of services provided by fire and rescue organisations. The launch of the Service's first staff attitude survey in 2007, however, provided key information about opinions on a range of internal cultural and communication issues. The survey has been repeated every two years and the next section reviews those trends and issues which are key to improving internal communications in the future.

Key issues and influences

There have been fundamental changes to the external environment in which the Service operates since the last communications strategy was developed. In addition, the political and management structure of the organisation has also changed dramatically, with an entirely new officer and Member leadership. The new leadership has brought with it a major shift in terms of communication and culture, with a greater emphasis on face to face discussions and the development of a Team Cheshire approach accompanied by a set of Cheshire-specific core values and behaviours.

Externally the establishment of a coalition Government has seen a major shift in policy direction and the implementation of an austere four year Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) for the public sector. Local government communications has also been in the spotlight, with frequent media attacks by Government ministers on the use of public sector 'spin doctors' as well as attempts to prevent councils from producing their own residents newspapers more than four times a year.¹

¹ CODE OF RECOMMENDED PRACTICE ON LOCAL AUTHORITY PUBLICITY *Communities and Local Government Circular 01/2011*

The key themes within the Localism Act 2011 highlight the need for local authorities to be more open and transparent in their relationships with the communities they serve, with the obvious implications for communications that involves. *“The Government believes that it is time for a fundamental shift of power from Westminster to people. We will promote decentralisation and democratic engagement, and we will end the era of top-down government by giving new powers to local councils, communities, neighbourhoods and individuals.”* (HM Government, Coalition Agreement; 2010).²

In addition, the new National Framework for fire and rescue services also puts significant emphasis on the use of communications and consultation to inform and involve residents and businesses in the development of future services and proposals. The introduction to the Framework says that fire and rescue services need to:

- *be transparent and accountable to their communities for their decisions and actions, and to provide the opportunity for communities to help to plan their local service through effective consultation and involvement*
- *have scrutiny arrangements in place that reflect the high standard communities expect for an important public safety service; and*
- *provide assurance to their communities and to government, on financial, governance and operational matters and on national resilience capability.*

Indeed, there is a specific requirement that *“Fire and rescue authorities’ integrated risk management plans must: be easily accessible and publicly available, reflect effective consultation throughout its development and at all review stages with the community, its workforce and representative bodies, and partners.”*

In response to these significant external challenges the Service has published its own four year strategy – “Planning for a Safer Cheshire” – to provide a clear and consistent sense of direction for the organisation. It sets out the Service’s vision, mission, aims and objectives and is supported by annual action plans which set out in more detail the specific projects and proposals scheduled for the following year.

The development of a new corporate communications strategy will need to focus closely on ensuring it supports the delivery of the Service’s strategic objectives during the critical final two years of the CSR. In particular, the early involvement of corporate communications will be critical in protecting and maintaining the organisation’s reputation as it starts to implement difficult decisions likely to affect both staff and local communities.

Social media

The phenomenal growth of social media and its influence on public sector communications is reviewed in more detail in the next section but it is important to note the significance of the challenges posed. While the Service’s last communication strategy highlighted the growth of Facebook, recent statistics show there were over 30 million active users in the UK in September 2011 compared to 3.69 million in 2008.³

² (HM Government, Coalition Agreement; 2010).

³ ‘Active users’ refers to people who update their account at least once a month

Meanwhile, micro-blogging tool Twitter was launched in mid 2006 in the United States, had 2 million users worldwide by 2008 but in October 2011 the number of users in the UK alone stood at 7 million. Some researchers have recently claimed that people are starting to spend more time each day updating their social network profiles than watching television.

The phenomenal rise in the use of social media has been supported by equally significant increases in the use of smart phones which have speeded up and improved mobile internet access. Recent statistics indicate that 91% of the UK population has a mobile phone⁴ with smart phones expected to account for over of half of all mobile handsets by July, 2012.⁵

Traditional media

The increased use of smart phones together with greater ownership of iPads and tablet devices has seen people increasingly obtain their local, regional and national news online –fundamentally changing the traditional newspaper media landscape. The following table shows the dramatic decline in circulation figures during the ‘digital decade’.

Newspaper	Dec-01	Dec-11	sales reduction	% reduction
The Sun	3,306,814	2,530,843	775,971	-23.47%
Daily Mirror	2,046,792	1,092,182.	954,610	-46.64%
Daily Star	696,029	616,498	79,531	-11.43%
Daily Record	571,047	274,505	296,542	-51.93%
Daily Mail	2,323,020	1,994,908	328,112	-14.12%
Daily Express	859,202	596,415	262,787	-30.59%
Daily Telegraph	957,534	587,040	370,494	-38.69%
The Times	654,036	409,060	244,976	-37.46%
Financial Times	470,151	333,771	136,380	-29.01%
The Guardian	384,406	230,108	154,298	-40.14%
The Independent	192,448	119,551	72,897	-37.88%

Source: ABC Ltd

Local and national newspapers have hit back by investing significantly in their websites which have proved increasingly popular - The Guardian attracted 15.7 million unique visitors in November 2011 alone.⁶ The online news channels generate little income, however, and with traditional advertising hit by both the drop in circulation figures and the recent financial climate, many publishers have cuts jobs and titles as profits suffer.

Based on analysis of the financial results of the four biggest regional newspaper groups, there have been claims that the regional press has lost up to 40% of its workforce and

⁴ Ofcom: The Communications Report 2011

⁵ Source: Kantar Worldpanel ComTech

⁶ Source: [comScore Media Metrix](#)

£1 billion in revenues over the past five years. Cheshire's media is dominated by weekly newspapers with all of the major groups affected:

- Newsquest, which owns the Guardian series has suffered a 56% fall in revenues since 2005
- Trinity Mirror, owners of the Chronicle series, has seen a 47% drop in sales to £331m over the same period
- The Northcliffe group, whose papers include The Sentinel, saw sales fall 43% to £294m.

In addition, the Manchester Evening News – bought in 2010 by Trinity Mirror - has cut 150 editorial jobs in the last few years. It has also closed the offices of all its weekly titles, including those at Macclesfield and Wilmslow, centralising reporting at its Manchester headquarters. After 156 years the Liverpool Daily Post, the city's oldest daily newspaper, stopped publication in January 2012, going to a weekly, with the loss of six editorial jobs.

Both the Winsford and Northwich Chronicles closed in September 2011 after many years in the towns, leaving only the Crewe and Chester editions in the Fire Authority area. There have also been changes to local radio, with Macclesfield-based Silk FM now owned by Chester station Dee 106 and Winsford community radio station Cheshire FM currently off air.

Taken together, this major reduction in the number of reporters and media channels in Cheshire poses a number of significant challenges and opportunities for the Service in ensuring it is able to continue communicating effectively with its local communities in the future.

Rationale for investment in communications

While Government expectations and requirements are emphasising the need for the Authority to inform and involve its communities more in developing its services, continuing to invest in communication during current financial cuts will always be challenged. There remain sound business reasons, however, for developing clear and effective internal and external communications. The well-established Local Government Association (LGA) Reputation Project has shown a clear link between how well informed people feel about their local public services and how satisfied they are overall. In other words, if residents believe a public service or organisation keeps them well informed they will be more likely to judge its reputation positively.

Studies by the LGA into data from the nationally-driven Place Survey of resident satisfaction showed that the top two drivers of satisfaction were perceived value for money and how well informed residents felt. The same studies also showed that both satisfaction with services and council tax levels have virtually no correlation with overall authority satisfaction scores.

There is also strong evidence that effective and consistent internal communications is a key component of successful organisations. A study commissioned by the former Improvement and Development Agency, now Local Government Improvement and Development (LGID), examined differences in staff attitudes between authorities

regarded as 'Excellent' and those classed as 'Poor' or 'Weak'. Two of the areas where staff attitudes in 'Excellent' organisations were markedly higher were *'Feeling that their authority keeps them well informed'* and *'believing that the reasons for change within their organisation are well communicated, and that change is well managed'*.

More positive employee attitudes also help to improve an organisation's reputation through employees acting as 'goodwill ambassadors'. The same research showed that staff working for 'Excellent' authorities were more than twice as likely to speak highly of their organisation than those working for 'Poor' authorities.

This Corporate Communications Strategy has been drafted to provide the clear principles and consistent channels which the organisation needs to demonstrate the value and importance it places on high quality, honest and effective communications.

3. RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

The scope of communications often varies significantly from one organisation to another, potentially covering everything from advertising and accessibility to YouTube and youth engagement. For consistency and to improve performance management, the Authority's existing corporate communications strategies have focused mainly on those internal and external channels which the organisation should be planning, structuring and managing.

This section of the strategy covers three main areas:

- A review of progress achieved during through the last two communication strategies and any outstanding issues
- An analysis of feedback and performance on internal and external communications
- An overview of future communication challenges.

Progress review

The Authority's first Corporate Communications Strategy in 2005 was based on an audit which examined issues under the following headings:

- **Corporate Identity**
- **Public Relations**
- **Media Relations**
- **Internal Communications**
- **Electronic communications.**

The strengths and weaknesses under each of these headings were analysed and an action plan developed to respond to any gaps and issues identified. A similar approach was followed when the three-year strategy was updated in 2008 and a summary of the updated position is provided below.

This section of the strategy reviews progress against that original action plan and then goes on to identify new and emerging communication issues which the Service will need to respond to.

A. Corporate identity

Key to progress in this area has been the establishment of an in-house design and publications team equipped with industry-standard graphic design tools and provided with relevant training. The inclusion of a video technician role has broadened the team's capabilities considerably as well as providing a cost-effective photography and new media service.

The development of a comprehensive Corporate Identity manual with supporting policy guidelines to ensure that all graphic design requests are channelled through the team has also played an important role in maximising the consistency and effectiveness of the Service's brand.

Future challenges:

- Potential conflict in maintaining awareness of the Service's brand during involvement and support for joint partnership initiatives such as community budget projects

B. Public relations

Since the adoption of the first strategy, all corporate publications have been written and designed in-house and, where practical, printed and finished using the Service's own advanced digital printing equipment. This has ensured consistency in content, style and design as well as providing significant savings and ensuring value for money.

Agreements with other local authorities have ensured Service information has been included in quarterly resident newsletters across Cheshire, Halton and Warrington. In addition, the Authority has developed its own Annual Report which is distributed to every home in its area and now features dedicated unitary editions.

A quarterly stakeholder publication 'Link' is produced in house and circulated to over 200 people including all local MPs and unitary councillors across Cheshire.

The creation of a dedicated events co-ordinator role has improved the consistency and professionalism of events, increased corporate branding opportunities, reduced duplication and helped the Service in raising its profile locally, regionally and nationally. In addition, the purchase of professional equipment such as staging, lighting and displays has increased value for money by ensuring that the Service does not have to repeatedly pay hire fees.

Future challenges:

- The closure and cutbacks in some of the councils' resident publications raises concerns about how the Service can directly communicate with all communities consistently
- Maintaining a balance between delivering high quality events and ensuring value for money
- Ensuring consistent support for emerging joint communication projects and proposals with key partners

C. Media relations

While individual stations are encouraged to develop good working relations with their local media, all corporate media inquiries are channelled through the Corporate Communications team who act as a first point of contact for all newspaper, radio and television inquiries. Media training and guidance has been provided to stations and to key staff in recent years with a regular programme now scheduled.

The principle of co-ordinating all corporate press releases through the Communications Team is now firmly established and the allocation of individual communications staff to unitary areas is improving local links.

Incidents are now updated on the website continually during normal working hours by staff in the communications team who monitor the mobilising system via the Intranet.

This has helped to limit the need for Control room staff to update the media voicebank. Procedures are also established to provide out of hours media cover for major incidents and for updating the website with routine incidents at weekends.

New systems have been brought in to cover both hard copy and online media evaluation and internal evaluation has been improved. Further developments are hampered by ongoing national digital copyright issues, led by the Newspaper Licensing Agency.

Future challenges:

- Establishing revised media arrangements post North West Fire Control
- Developing online media monitoring and reporting
- Expanding use of new technology to deliver news to local media channels

D. Internal communications

The number of printed internal communications has been rationalised during the course of the last two communication strategies and their design revamped to reflect the Service's corporate identity. Key internal communications now include:

- 'The Green' – a weekly bulletin
- Alert – a full colour bimonthly staff magazine
- Alert specials – produced to support key projects such as the staff attitude survey
- Core Brief – produced in electronic format to cascade key messages from the Service Management Team
- Key Development bulletins - produced at least week and circulated electronically and as part of The Green to keep staff informed about regional, national and international issues with a potential impact on the Service.

All of these internal publications are written, designed, printed and finished entirely in-house.

While work still needs to be done to improve the consistency of departmental and team briefings, other developments to improve staff communications and engagement have seen:

- programmes of roadshows by Principal Officers
- regular Chief's Briefings
- monthly 'Breakfast with the Chief' sessions
- the launch of an staff awards event
- regular management conferences.

The impact of these initiatives is reviewed in more detail in the next section which looks at the results and trends from the three staff attitude surveys completed by the organisation.

Member communication has involved circulation of the daily incident list, specific local Member briefings in the event of any fatal or major incidents and the circulation of corporate press releases and briefings on key issues. In addition, each of the Authority's 23 councillors are assigned a member of the Service Management Team as a 'buddy', available to provide further information and details about policies, papers or procedures.

Future challenges:

- Developing corporate team briefing guidelines and training
- Establishing a consistent framework and programme for senior management engagement with staff
- Developing electronic options for printed publications

E. Electronic communications

The Service's use and development of its website and Intranet has been transformed over the course of the two previous communication strategies. The website has been shortlisted for national communications awards, is regularly cited as an example of best practice by SOCITM (The Society of Information Technology Managers) and has the highest possible accreditation for accessibility.⁷

Interactive features have been added to the website on a regular basis, including a dedicated 'Kidzone' around fire safety for children and mapping tools to highlight responses to incidents.

The website is now the first port of call for most people seeking information about the organisation and the development of online application forms and publishing of key documents electronically has made a significant contribution to reducing transactional costs. In the last financial year, if all the documents downloaded by website visitors had been printed and posted out by the Service the cost would have been over £140,000.⁸

The Service's own social media channels are now well established and are used to push out information to residents and partners as well as engage in two-way discussion during consultations. Staff involvement and use of social media, however, has been limited by the current ICT acceptable use policy.

The Intranet has been redesigned around the needs of the user so people can customise the features and applications they see and use according to their role within the organisation. Again, wider use of the internet for business purposes is heavily restricted by the current ICT acceptable use policy.

A dedicated electronic image database has been implemented within the department to improve the storage, retrieval and management of electronic images. Options to broaden the scope of this across the Service are being explored. The significance of electronic communications is now such that an annual online services plan is produced to manage development projects and performance.

Future challenges:

- Revising the Service's acceptable use policy and agreeing protocols around staff use of social media channels
- Ensuring sufficient communications and technical staff resources to support future website and intranet developments

⁷ The Shaw Trust Accessibility Award has been attained as well as the Plain English Internet Crystal Mark.

⁸ Cheshire Fire & Rescue Service Website - Efficiency Savings Report April 2010 to March 2011

- Establishing the electronic image database and introduce protocols to ensure it is the sole source of photographs used in internal and external publications and promotions.

Analysis of feedback and performance

The Authority has information from a number of internal and external consultations which provide an insight into perceptions about the effectiveness of its existing communications and attitudes towards its reputation. This section of the strategy looks at the trends and emerging issues and also reviews performance against existing targets, indicators and standards.

Public consultations

Public attitudes towards the Service and all public local authorities were historically reviewed through nationally-prescribed satisfaction surveys co-ordinated and checked through the Audit Commission. In their final format the consultations were known as the Place Surveys and were carried out every two years, the last one being in 2008-09. That put customer satisfaction with the Service at 81%, higher than every other Cheshire public service highlighted in the survey apart from GPs.

As part of the Authority's annual consultation on its Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP), a tracking question is asked on how strongly residents value the organisation and this has consistently scored at over 97%.

The Place Surveys also asked residents how well informed they felt about a range of issues, including 'what to do in the event of a major emergency'. The 2008-9 average for Cheshire was 12.3% compared to a figure of 13.9% in the North West as a whole. A specific exercise to highlight communication around major emergencies was held in the Elton area of Cheshire West and Chester in October 2010 and resulted in a near 50% increase in awareness. The results of a similar exercise in Ellesmere Port in January 2012 are currently awaited.

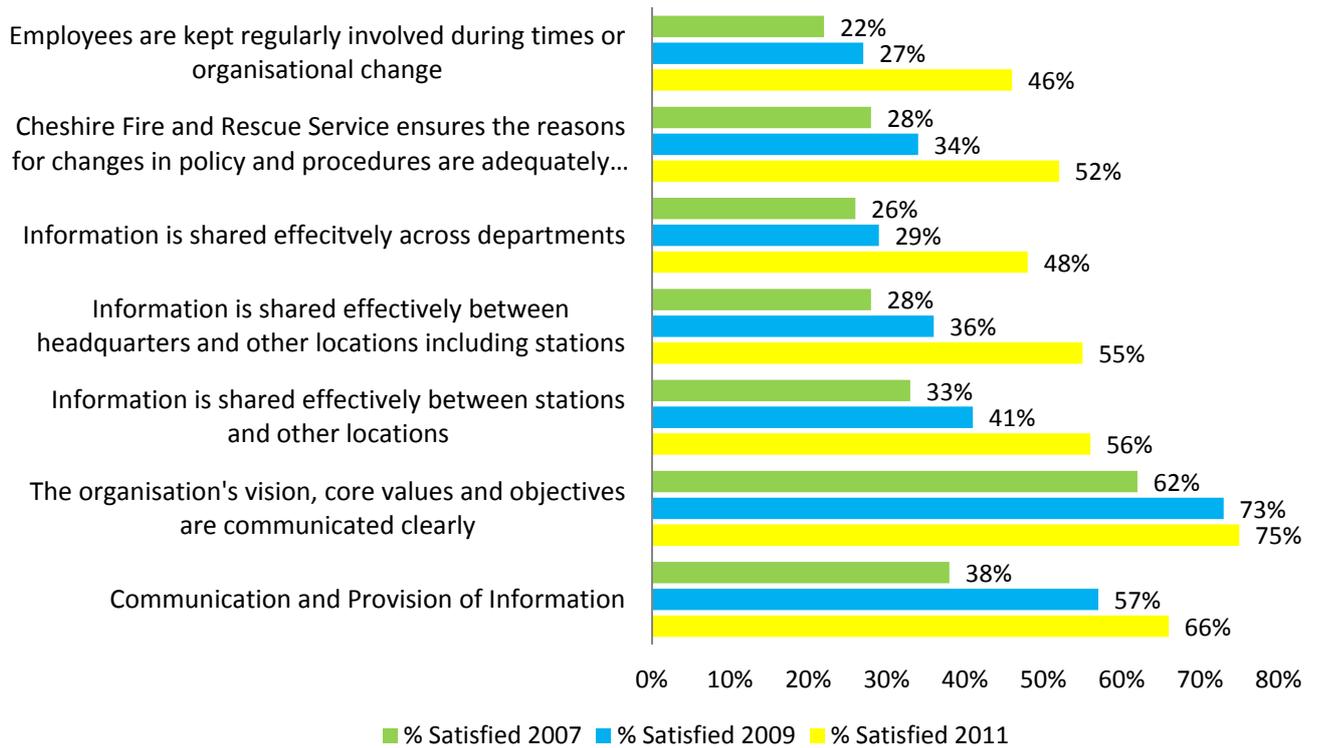
Feedback from recent IRMP consultations carried out by the Service has continued to highlight a lack of general awareness about the range of the organisation's activities and the need for ongoing communications and campaigns.⁹

Staff Attitude Surveys

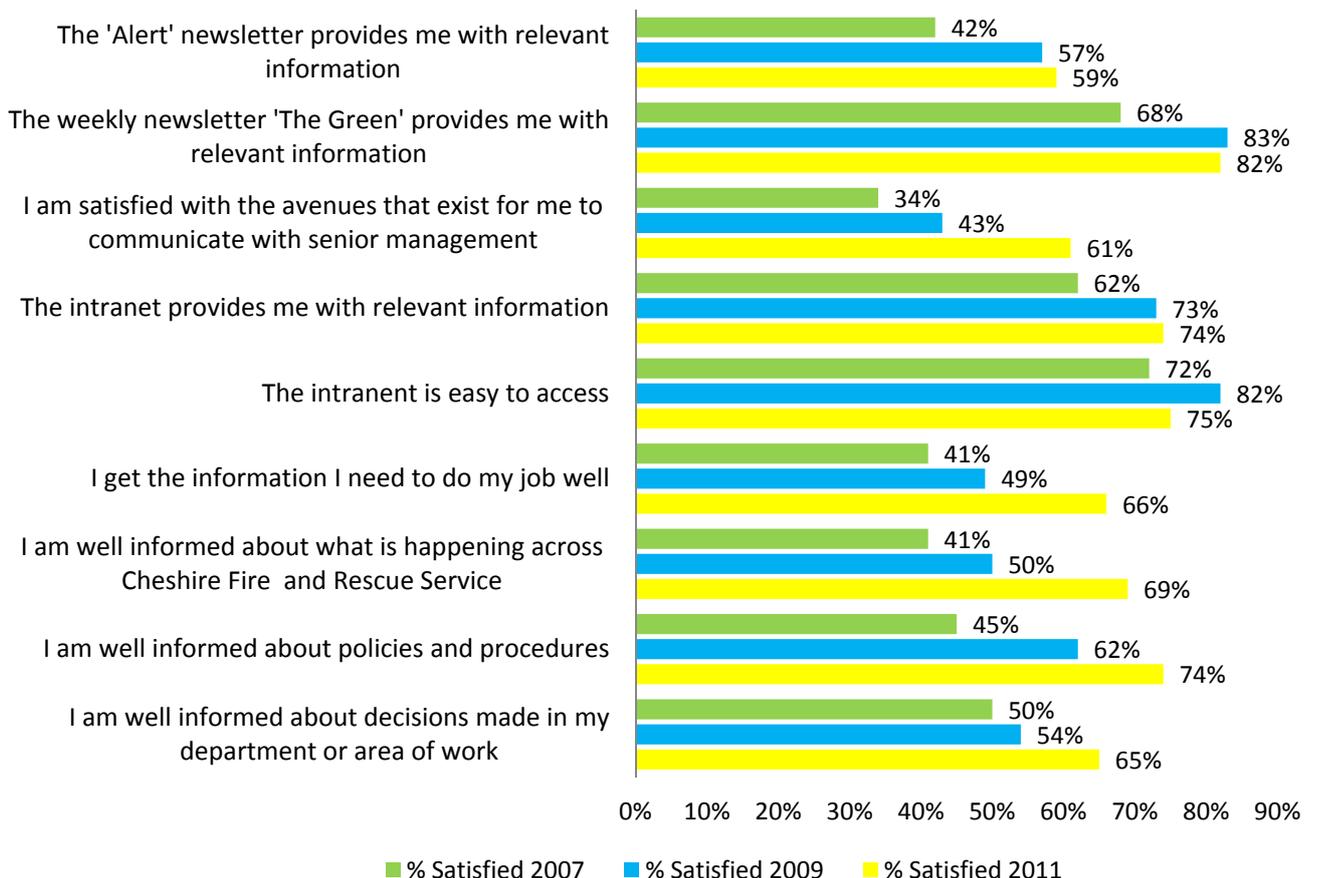
The Service has now completed three Staff Attitude Surveys, the first was in Summer 2007 and the most recent in July 2011. There have been major improvements in satisfaction in all main areas in the most recent survey and this section highlights key trends and issues relating to communications and staff engagement. The following graphs highlight all responses relevant to corporate or departmental communications.

⁹ Making Cheshire Safer – Integrated Risk Management Plan 2012-13 Report on public, staff and partner consultation, January 2012.

Staff Satisfaction Survey

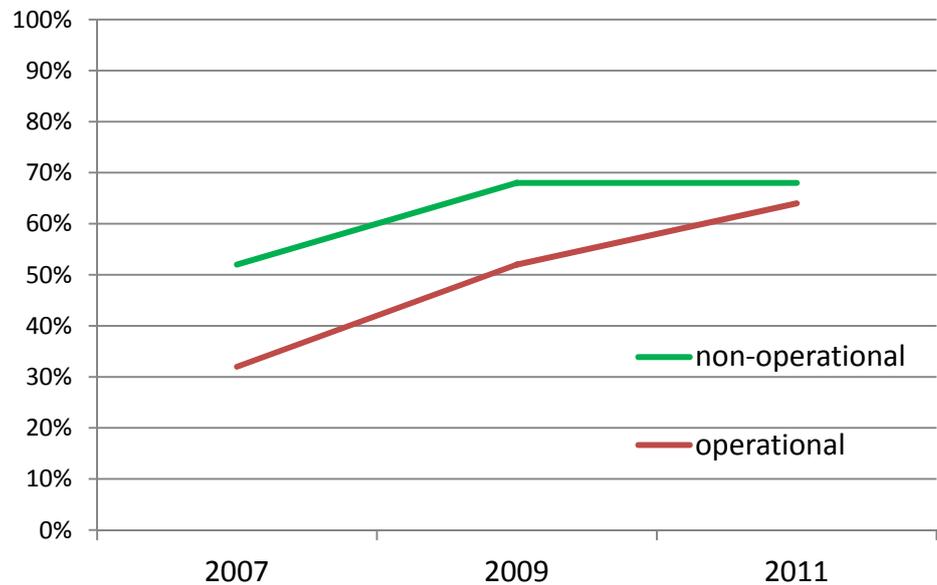


Staff Satisfaction Survey



The charts demonstrate that there has been continuous improvement in all main areas of communication, apart from satisfaction with 'access to the Intranet' which dropped by 7% in 2011. Follow-up interviews with staff at different locations and different levels in the organisation indicated that this was to do with the slow speed of the ICT network, rather than the content and design of the Intranet itself. This was backed up by the response to the question 'The organisation's IT Infrastructure is adequate for my needs' which saw a 5% decline in satisfaction in 2011.

Further analysis of the results shows that while operational staff used to be a lot less satisfied with communications than non-operational, the difference has reduced dramatically. In 2007, there was a 20% difference in satisfaction levels yet in the 2011 survey the gap was down to just 4% - see graph.



In addition to the quantitative results, the individual follow-up interviews also highlighted a number of comments around the future development of communications. These included requests for:

- greater clarity over responsibility for updating departmental information on the Intranet
- more structured use of The Green and the Alert newsletter
- communications staff to be more pro-active on internal communications
- support for managers and supervisors in cascading information
- restrictions on the use of emails to send out key information.

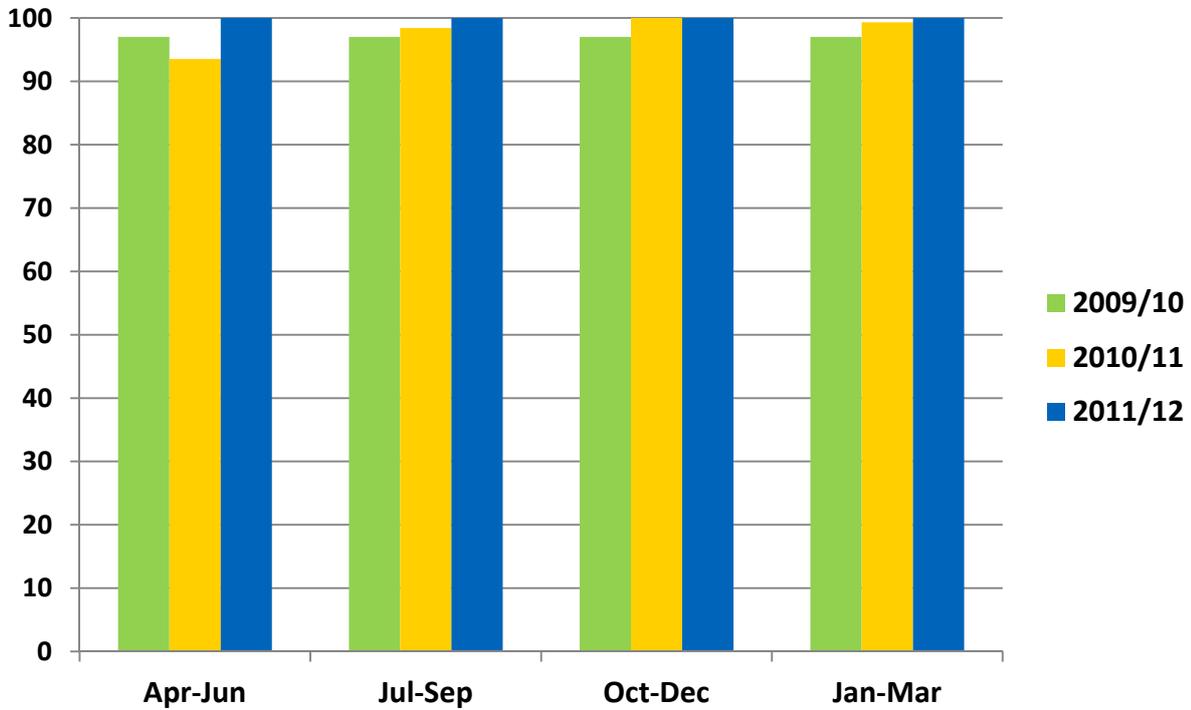
Communication performance indicators

A range of performance indicators, standards and targets were put in place following the adoption of the Service's first Corporate Communications Strategy in 2005. Despite a few minor amends and updates, most have been maintained in their original format for consistency and to allow trend monitoring over time. The headline indicator of overall public satisfaction with the Service has been referred to previously and is monitored as part of this strategy because of the link to reputation. In the absence of the national Place Survey, rigorous Service-specific public satisfaction surveys will be required in the future to monitor attitudes and organisational reputation.

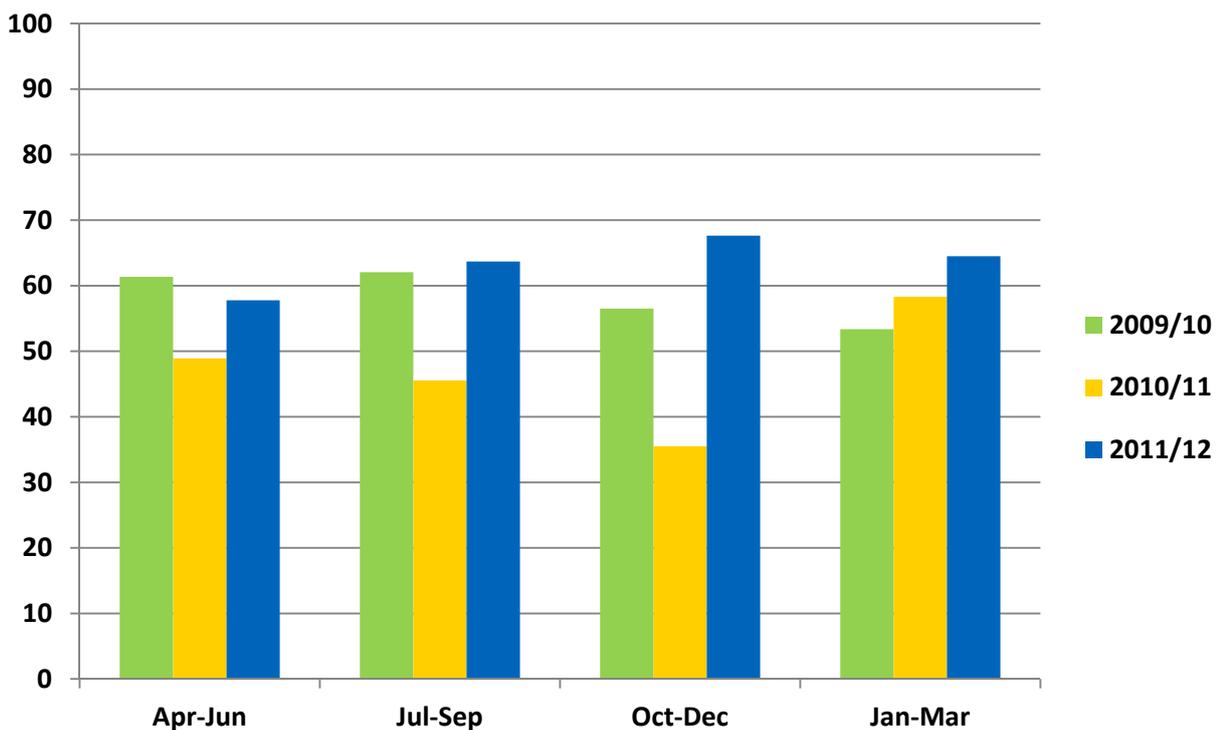
The key communication performance indicators focus on the effectiveness of the Service's in-house team, particularly their ability to ensure key messages are used by the media and picked up by local communities.

The following charts show performance over the last few years on some of the key performance indicators:

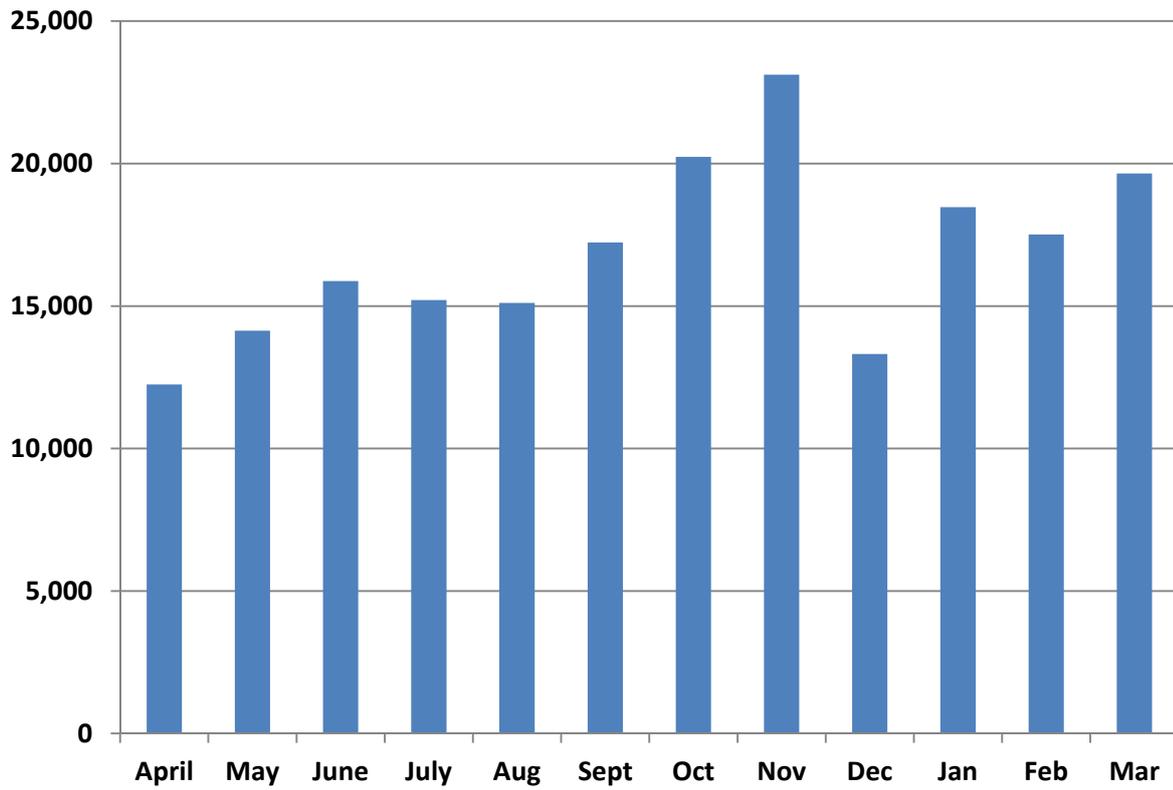
% of press releases which retain the key message



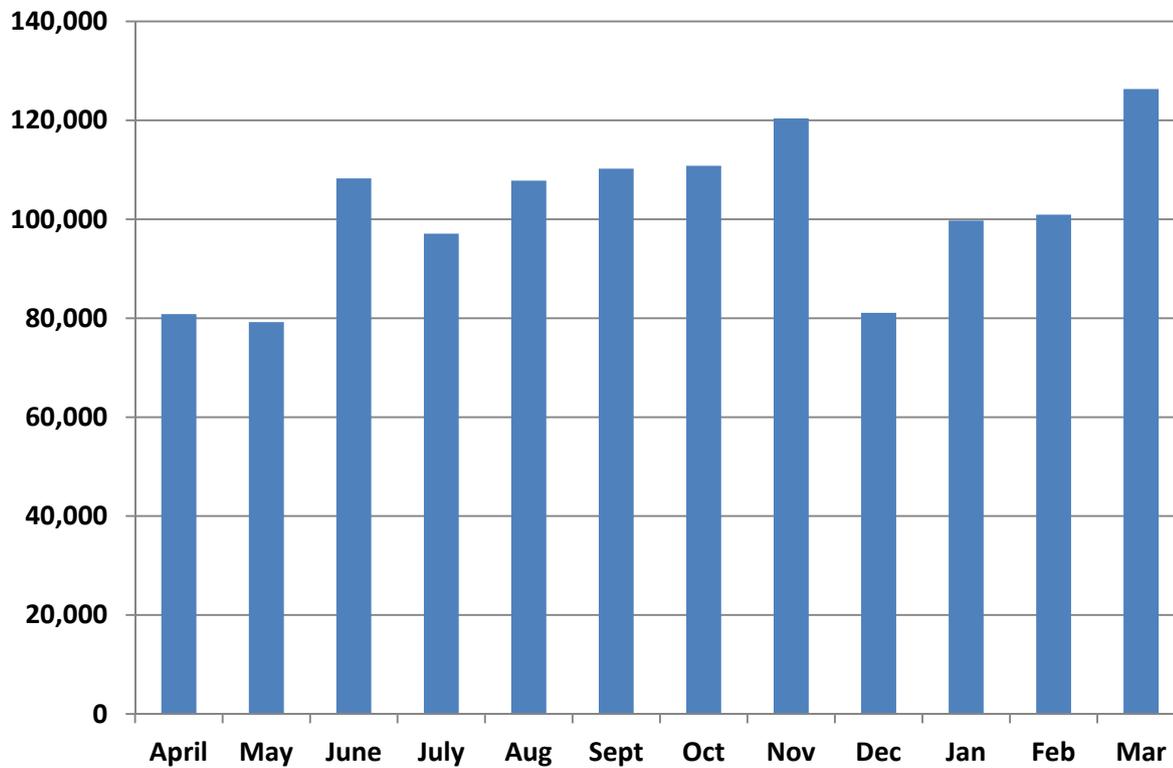
% of positive coverage in the media



Website visitor numbers – 2011-12



Website page views – 2011-12



Note: Changes to the monitoring software prevent yearly comparisons

Future communication challenges

Reputation: providing a balanced budget over the next few years will require the organisation to make changes which are likely to generate opposition and potentially damage the Service's public reputation. Clear communications and detailed plans to inform and involve all key stakeholders will be fundamental to ensuring consultation is constructive and maintains the organisation's standing with local communities. A revised public affairs strategy, detailed consultation and engagement plans and clear, range of audience-specific communications will be critical in helping the Service meet its corporate objectives.

Member communications: Members of the Fire Authority ensure the Service remains publicly accountable in the delivery of its services and the development of its policies. To enable them to perform that role effectively, it is essential that they have access to clear and timely information. Options to provide remote access to the organisation's Intranet are due for implementation by December 2012, while it is also proposed that the Head of Planning, Performance and Communications annually reviews Member communication needs in conjunction with the Chair.

Crisis communications: the Service's Corporate Communications department continues to provide support to both the organisation's own business continuity arrangements as well as playing a leading role in the Cheshire Contingency Communications Group. It is clear that current Government national and fire-specific policies are placing an increasing emphasis on local civil contingency partners playing a greater role in co-ordinating and delivering communications during major emergencies in their area. Options to develop, raise awareness and increase take-up of the Service's own warning and informing channels will need to be taken forward in conjunction with other Local Resilience Forum partners.

Local media: section two has highlighted the massive changes which are continuing to take place in the traditional local, regional and national media. The most significant impact of this upheaval is that the media are becoming increasingly reliant on others to provide them with the news and reports which they no longer have the staff numbers to gather and write themselves.

On the surface this should make it easier for the Service's communications staff to get content into local media challenges, provided it is written and provided in ways which require minimal editing. While the in-house team has a strong track record in this area, in future traditional press releases will need to be supplemented by good quality multi-media packages which can be used in the local media's online channels.

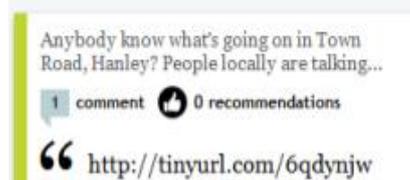
Potentially more challenging is the fact that this lack of paid professional media staff clearly creates opportunities for others to fill the void. 'Citizen journalists' are in fact now being increasingly encouraged by newspapers themselves, who see User Generated Content – UGC – as the next big thing to drive up online and traditional readership.



Tell us about your area

Nobody knows your area like you do. Tell us what's going on, where you've been and what you've seen.

- Write an article
- Upload pictures
- Create an event
- Join the debate
- Claim your business



Anybody know what's going on in Town Road, Hanley? People locally are talking...

1 comment 0 recommendations

http://tinyurl.com/6qdynjw

While newspapers have been urging residents to contact them with story ideas for years, now they are using the growth in online channels to allow people to send in the stories, photographs and videos direct. This creates potential concerns around people being able to pursue particular agendas and the ability of newspapers to validate claims and ensure accuracy and balance.

Being able to respond promptly to adverse publicity about the Service is becoming increasingly important, not only because of the growth of 'UGC' but also because of the speed with which stories circulate via the Internet. The Service's existing media monitoring will need to be revised to ensure it is more wide-ranging and able to provide real-time updates.

Social media: the growth in the use of social media was highlighted in section two and it provides a number of significant communication opportunities and challenges for the Service. On a positive note the increasing use of Facebook and Twitter by large sections of the community gives the Service:

- increased opportunities to inform and involve residents and businesses in its consultations
- extra communication channels to provide instant updates about incidents and events
- greater options to market the organisation's services and campaigns.

The flipside is that there are more opportunities for people or groups who may have an issue with the Service – legitimate or not – to air their views. Again, monitoring and taking opportunities to use social media channels proactively is going to become increasingly important in maintaining and developing the Service's reputation as it tackles the difficult financial challenges ahead.

The Service also needs to adopt a more mature approach to how its staff view and use social media channels and the wider internet. The Service's corporate Facebook, Twitter and other social media channels are increasing in authority and followers but there is considerable potential to get staff involved as part of their normal business practises. Culturally, many organisations are now recognising that social media channels can be extremely effective in improving their internal communications from both a work and cultural perspective.

To increase staff awareness and use of the internet and social media, the Service's ICT acceptable use needs to be revised and simplified. For this to be effective it needs to be supported by clear monitoring programmes capable of being monitored at a local level.

In addition, the organisation's online services plan needs to be updated to ensure that the needs of smart phone users are considered during future developments of both the website and Intranet. The resources, skills and roles of the in-house team will also need to be reviewed to ensure it is capable of providing effective support for what will be an increased demand for mobile working in the future. This will need to be supplemented by appropriate technical and programming support.

Joint communications: the local authority Shared Services agenda and the development of community budgets are increasing the demands on the organisation to share its budgets and resources with its partners. Because the Service works across

the whole of Cheshire, it is difficult to allocate specific resources to one local area without having an impact elsewhere.

To date the corporate communications department has been able to contribute both staff time and funding to a number of joint publications and projects, provided the same approach has been offered to all unitary council areas. However, with the four constituent authorities starting to take different approaches to communications because of funding cuts, this is likely to result in pressure being applied to the Service's unitary performance group budgets. To ensure consistency and effectiveness it is proposed that communications staff attend the meetings and provide a corporate perspective on any joint communication or marketing proposals.

Value for money: the Authority committed in its four strategy to carry out value for money reviews of all of its service areas. Communications is currently scheduled for review in 2013-14 when the work and effectiveness of the in-house staff will be evaluated using the organisation's own value for money methodology and the traditional Best Value approach of challenge, comparison, consultation and competition. To support the process it is proposed that work is carried out to identify benchmarking opportunities with other fire and rescue service and public authorities.

4. PRINCIPLES AND PROPOSALS

The Authority's existing communications strategies set out a number of principles to govern its approach to communication and help achieve its corporate objective to: "Inform and involve our communities and our staff in developing services and policies which are open, transparent and accountable." These have been reviewed and amended where relevant to address changes in national legislation and policy and to reflect recent developments within the organisation.

This section:

- sets out the revised objectives and principles
- identifies the communication channels to inform key stakeholders
- summarises proposals to improve external and internal communications and enhance the Authority's reputation.

Communication objectives and principles

It is important to set out how this Corporate Communications Strategy can help achieve its vision of "*A Cheshire where there are no deaths, injuries or damage from fires or other emergencies*" and support its mission to "*Help create safer communities, to rescue people and protect economic, environmental and community interests.*"

Detailed below are the specific communication objectives aimed at supporting the Authority in achieving its vision:

- To protect and enhance the reputation of Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service
- To ensure the provision of high quality, efficient and effective communication between the Service and its communities
- To increase awareness among stakeholders of the Service's vision, mission, aims, objectives and values
- To increase recognition of Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service locally, regionally and nationally
- To constantly review and promote effective communications within the organisation itself
- To continue developing the use of online services and channels for external and internal communication and consultation
- To maintain a unified brand across all Service activity and ensure it represents the organisation's core values

In achieving these objectives, the Authority will adopt the following principles and ensure:

- All communication from the Service is open, easily understood, non discriminatory, up to date and available in formats to meet audience needs
- All communications conform to a unified and recognisable corporate identity and strive to promote a positive reputation for the Service

- Communications recognise the principles of open government as laid out in the Freedom of Information Act, the Data Protection Act, the Localism Act and other relevant legislation
- The differing communication needs of key stakeholders, including Members, staff and representative bodies are met where possible and appropriate
- Information supplied to the media is in a form appropriate to their needs and all genuine inquiries are responded to positively within two hours. If a full response is not possible within that time, the media will be contacted and told when a reply is likely
- All corporate press releases are checked by a member of the Service Management Team for accuracy and with another member of the communications team for style, quality and conformance with corporate policies.

Stakeholder summary

The following table identifies the Authority's key stakeholders and the communication issues to be considered and address so they can be informed and involved in the development of services in the future.

Analysis of national and local research shows that residents' communication preferences continue to centre on information from local newspapers, the Internet, television and radio stations. Clearly the degree of support for the different communication channels varies significantly according to people's age and other social and economic background factors.

Despite reductions in circulation, profits and staff, the local media remain key influencers of public opinion through both their print publications and online presence. It is important, therefore, that the Service manages these relations effectively and maximises opportunities to promote its activities and key messages.

There remains a need for the Authority to have direct channels of communication to residents and key stakeholders. This is particularly important when key and sensitive messages have to be communicated as otherwise the delivery is dependent on media interpretation.

Key stakeholders	Communication issues	Communication channels
Residents	Enhancing two-way communications in the development of services and policies; Improving awareness and use of corporate social media channels; Maximising the accessibility of community safety information to all sections of the community; Maintaining and improving corporate reputation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual Report • Council newspapers • Online – website, social media, e-newsletter • HSA leaflets • Consultation events • Media
The media (national, regional, local, and specialist trade media)	Promoting awareness of key messages; defending and promoting the Service’s public reputation; maximising positive coverage of Service activity; increasing use of the Service’s automatic electronic communication services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Press releases • Online – website, RSS feeds, social media
Professional partners (Council, other emergency services, public, private and voluntary groups)	Awareness of key messages necessary to understand joint agendas; enhancing two-way communications; ensuring “joint ownership” of key information, eg community budgets.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link newsletter • Online – website, social media • Personal briefings • Media
Local businesses	Enhancing two-way communications and consultation; Promoting the Service’s corporate reputation; raising awareness of key messages; increasing contact with the Service.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual Report • Online – website, social media • Audit visits
National opinion formers (Government, MPs / MEPs, CLG, LGA)	Raising awareness; influencing the development of sub-regional and national policies and initiatives; promoting the Service’s corporate reputation; linking with lobbying strategy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link newsletter • Personal briefings • Specialist media • Professional groups - CFOA

Employees (staff, managers and unions)	Further developing two-way internal communications; encouraging take-up of digital channels; promoting corporate aims and objectives and understanding of policy initiatives; establishing communication standards and guidelines.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Green Bulletin • Alert newsletter • Core Brief • Intranet • Chief’s briefings, breakfast with the Chief • Management conferences • Team briefings • Representative bodies
Elected members	Increasing awareness of corporate policies, aims and objectives; Improving two-way internal communications; Supporting them in their role as community representatives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committee reports • Incident report • Member awaydays • Buddy system • Professional bodies
Harder to reach groups	Tackling barriers to accessibility, including provision of communications in appropriate formats (e.g. Braille, signing for the deaf, website accessibility standards.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner publications – CHAWREC • Online services • Joint advocates

Proposals to improve external and internal communications

The following table summarises the areas identified to improve and enhance the Authority's internal and external channels of communication. Detailed implementation of specific projects will be picked up and monitored through departmental and team plans and individual appraisals.

External communications	
Area	Proposal
Public relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CFRS to take a lead on reinvigorating pan Cheshire communication network to address branding, funding and joint communication issues. • Establish unitary council channels for direct resident communication and ensure appropriate CFRS response • Increase corporate communication involvement and support for unitary performance group meetings • Scope the prospects for establishing relevant communication benchmarking opportunities with other fire and rescue service and public authorities • Establish the electronic image database and introduce protocols to ensure it is the sole source of photographs used in internal and external publications and promotions • Carry out a further communications impact assessment and promote the development of accessible information
Media relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish revised media arrangements post North West Fire Control • Refine and develop online and traditional media monitoring and reporting • Expand use of new technology to deliver news to local media channels and develop online press centre • Develop multi-media packages which can be used in the local media's online channels
Reputation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revise the corporate public affairs strategy • Increase pro-active monitoring and response to social media channels
Crisis Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the Service's warning and informing communication channels and develop options to increase awareness and take-up • Identify opportunities to use the Service's social media channels to support communications during major emergencies

Internal communications

Area	Proposal
Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop protocol to provide training for managers in team briefings• Establish a consistent framework and programme for senior management engagement with staff• Develop electronic options for printed publications• Increase remote access to Intranet• Develop options to involve staff in the use of social media• Update ICT acceptable use policy in line with expectations around personal responsibility• Ensure future Intranet development provides a 'one-stop shop' for staff communication needs• Work with ICT to expand the use of video conferencing and other technological platforms.
Member communications:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide customised remote access to the Intranet• Seek the appointment of a dedicated Member champion for communications
Electronic communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure sufficient communications and technical staff resources to support future website and intranet developments• Develop website and Intranet in line with requirements of mobile platforms such as smart phones.• Increase use of online 'push' communication channels such as RSS

5. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

It is vital that the effectiveness of all corporate communications is properly measured and monitored to ensure that services continue to support and deliver corporate and communications objectives. Clearly the key measure of effective communications is whether the information and messages an organisation wants to convey are actually picked up by the relevant audiences. This can only be properly evaluated through surveys and consultations. The results of which can then be used to benchmark performance over time and in comparison with other organisations.

In the absence of nationally prescribed surveys it is proposed that the Service carries out its own public satisfaction survey to allow it to monitor and improve performance. Staging this biennially would allow the Service to carry out staff and public satisfaction surveys in alternate years and will supplement the organisation's 'Listening to our Customers' project which provides feedback from service users across the areas of emergency response, community fire protection and community safety.

Performance management

A range of indicators, targets and standards have been developed to provide performance information on all key aspects of corporate communications. All corporate communication indicators are included on the Service's electronic performance management database and progress updated monthly. Monitoring is carried out through the Service's performance management framework which ensures quarterly reports to senior management and to the Fire Authority's Performance and Overview Committee.

Departmental targets and standards are used as a quality check by supervisors to ensure the effectiveness of processes and systems.

Additional performance monitoring is to be introduced to allow the effectiveness of social media channels to be evaluated. In addition to these ongoing performance indicators, individual targets will be set to evaluate the effectiveness of one-off communication projects and campaigns, including the use of pre- and post-event attitude surveys.

Communication performance indicators

External communications	
Indicator name	Target 2012 -13
Customer satisfaction with the Service (allow differentiation between users)	85%
How well residents feel informed about what to do in the event of a large-scale emergency	25%
How well residents feel informed about the Service	45%
Website – no of unique visitors	5% annual increase -166,610
Website – no. of page impressions	5% annual increase - 1,070,900
% of press releases used by media	90%
% of press releases used by media carrying main message	95%

Internal communications	
Indicator name	Target 2012 -13
% staff satisfied with communications	n/a
Staff satisfaction with Intranet	n/a
Intranet - page views	5% annual increase - 1,162,840

Departmental management information	Target / standard
Response rate to media enquiries	% of responded to within target
Press in media, amount of media generated by press releases	% of press releases used and articles generated
Media evaluation	Evaluation of positive and negative media
Staff satisfaction with internal publications	Biennial from staff survey
Staff newsletter produced within deadline	% produced in line with annual plan
Production of public affairs plans	% of plans produced for headline projects