



ST ALBANS CITY AND DISTRICT COUNCIL

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY 2005/06

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY 2005/06

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Council is determined to improve communication with residents. One of its corporate aims is “to build a community that is open, fair and inclusive where people support each other and participate in the democratic processes that affect their lives”. A key objective to support this aim is “to communicate council policies and decisions in a user friendly form”. The Council’s aims and objectives demonstrate the commitment to improving communication and have influenced this revised Communication Strategy. The strategy covers external communication only. The Council recognises the importance of communicating effectively with staff and aims to continue to improve this through other means.
- 1.2 This document provides the context for the Communication Strategy as follows:
- background to the development of the strategy;
 - the aims of the Strategy;
 - links with the Improvement Plan;
 - residents’ perception of communication, as identified in the MORI residents’ survey and best value performance indicator survey;
 - satisfaction with the Council;
 - the User Focus Assessment.
- 1.3 The elements of the Communication Strategy itself can be found on pages 10 to 12.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Council has had a Communication Strategy since January 2004. The Strategy was developed by an officer/member communication working party reporting to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Corporate Services) and approved by Cabinet. The strategy was considered by the Comprehensive Performance Assessment team to be a positive step forward, although more work needed to be undertaken to embed communication as a mainstream activity within all service areas.
- 2.2 The Council’s Improvement Plan agreed by Cabinet in October 2004 identified communication as one of the seven key strategic issues that need to be improved. The Communication Strategy has been reviewed as an action to support the Improvement Plan and builds on the work that has already been done. It will be more focused on enabling the Council to deliver better communication to residents and it is hoped will result in a higher percentage of residents feeling well informed, according to the Residents’ Survey to be undertaken by MORI in the summer of 2005.
- 2.3 The strategy will ensure that a multi channel approach is developed using a variety of methods for publicising the work of the Council and how it is meeting its aims and objectives. The Council recognises that it cannot rely on the press alone and must actively use the internet, email, telephone and consider other IT mechanisms (eg text messaging) to raise its profile and promote services and achievements.
- 2.4 The Council’s image is promoted in many ways and the actions of all staff in dealing with customers have a big impact on the way customers judge us. The Customer

Service Centre which opened in April 2005 is a critical part of promoting a professional image to the public. Good customer care across the organisation is also crucial and will be the subject of a customer access strategy to be developed to build on the revised Communication Strategy.

- 2.5 Customer expectations in respect of communication and customer care are raised when parts of the organisation already offer high standards. For example if one department is particularly good at promoting good news stories, people will wonder why other departments are not doing the same. This Communication Strategy aims to ensure consistency across all Council departments and the forthcoming customer access strategy will aim to do the same when dealing with individual customers.

3. **Aims of the Strategy**

- 3.1 The aims of the Communication Strategy are:

- To communicate effectively the work undertaken by St Albans City and District Council to achieve its vision, aims and objectives
- To raise the profile of St Albans City and District Council by actively promoting its services and achievements
- To use a variety of channels of communication to ensure the Council engages with the whole community in a user friendly way

4. **The Improvement Plan**

- 4.1 The Improvement Plan agreed by Cabinet in Cabinet October 2004 includes the following extract specifically about the need to mainstream communication:

'The important thing to remember about communication is that it is everyone's responsibility. Departments cannot rely on the corporate communications team to communicate for them or to know all the messages that need delivering. The communications team can provide support, advice and an essential link to the media, and can ensure that the messages are delivered in the most effective way.'

'The Council's communication strategy is a good step forward for improving communication. However, we need to build upon the strategy to deliver the improvements that we all want to see. Work needs to be done to create a culture where all managers and teams within the organisation are more proactive about promoting good news stories, something that cannot and should not be done from the centre.'

- 4.2 The Communication Strategy is just one element of the Improvement Plan and it will not be possible to implement it without close links to other key strategies. Customer access and information technology (IT) are intrinsic elements that will be delivered in tandem with the Communication Strategy in order to support the aims of the strategy. For example, the right IT infrastructure is essential if the Council is going to communicate with residents and other stakeholders in a variety of ways that are efficient and appropriate to the end user. Similarly the approach to customer care and customer access to services will have a big impact on the way

we communicate. The forthcoming customer access strategy will define the vision for how customers can access services and receive information. The Communication Strategy will be a living document that responds to developments in these areas.

- 4.3 The Council undertakes consultation with residents and other stakeholders. This aspect of communication is not covered in detail in this strategy, although the Council is working to ensure that consultation is co-ordinated corporately. This means that as well as carrying out MORI surveys to find out general opinions of the public, we will also ensure that service or project specific consultation is joined up and we make the best use of the feedback received across departments. A consultation database has been developed to share the results of consultation, and a consultation calendar enables us to plan consultation exercises corporately, making best use of our resources and avoiding “consultation overload” for the public.

5 Residents’ Perception of Communication

- 5.1 The Council consults residents on a regular basis to find out whether they are satisfied with the way the Council communicates with them. There are two key mechanisms for doing this: the Residents’ Survey and the Best Value performance indicator satisfaction survey. Both of these surveys are carried out by MORI on behalf of the Council. The timescale for past and future surveys is as follows:

Residents’ Survey	1998	2002	2005
Best Value performance indicator satisfaction survey	2000/01	2003/04	2006/07

6 MORI Residents’ Survey

- 6.1 The following paragraphs provide details of the findings of the MORI Residents’ Survey carried out in the summer of 2002. Comparison with the 1998 survey is also included.

44% of residents felt fairly or very well informed in both the 2002 and 1998 residents’ surveys

- 6.2 Effective communications are important in raising people’s perceptions of the Council and overall satisfaction ratings – those who feel the Council keeps them informed are far more likely to be satisfied and have a positive image of the Council than those who feel they do not receive much, if any, information.
- 6.3 The proportion of residents who feel that the Council keeps them informed about the services and benefits it provides has remained stable since 1998: about half (53%) think they only get a limited amount of information or not much at all, while over two in five (44%) feel fairly or very well informed.

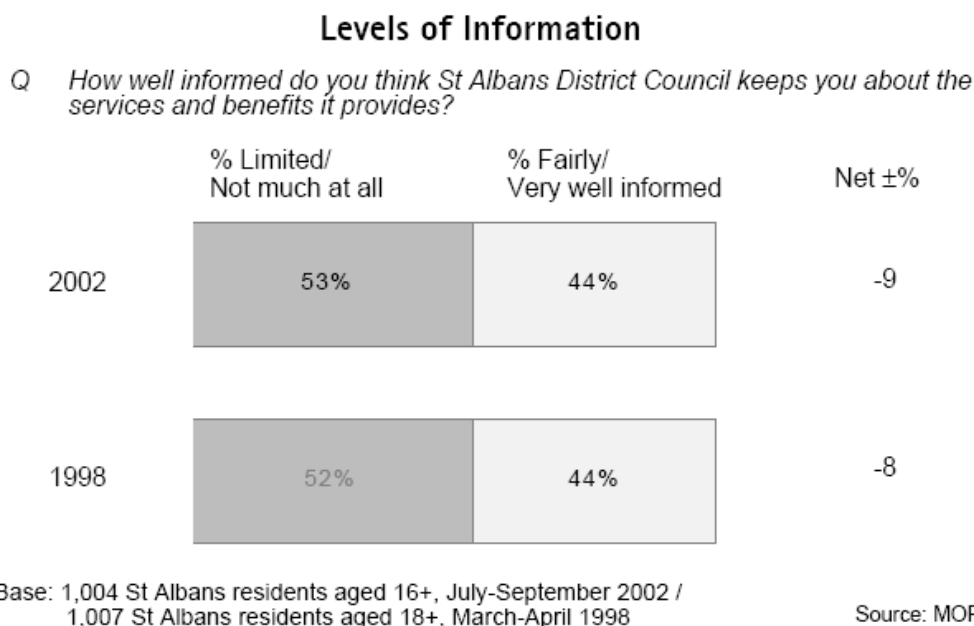
6.4 The survey asked the following question:

How well informed do you think St Albans District Council keeps residents about the services and benefits it provides?

6.5 The responses were:

	2002 %	1998 %
Keeps us very well informed	3	6
Keeps us fairly well informed	41	38
Gives us only a limited amount of Information	38	36
Doesn't tell us much at all about what it does	15	16
Don't know/no answer	3	4

6.6 This information can be shown diagrammatically as follows:



6.7 The Council is determined to increase the proportion of residents who feel that the Council keeps them well informed and this strategy explains how that will be done. Following consultation with MORI to ascertain what an appropriate target would be for the 2005 Residents' Survey, the Council has set a target of 47% of residents feeling fairly or very well informed. The advice from MORI was that this would represent a statistically significant increase, whilst balancing the fact that the general trends across the country show satisfaction levels declining.

6.8 MORI often finds that those who feel more informed by the Council are generally more likely to be positive towards the Council and its services. Those who feel informed are more likely to think that the Council provides good value for money, is innovative and forward thinking, treats all types of people fairly and are

less likely to see the Council as remote and impersonal. Naturally, they are also less likely to say that they do not know much about what the Council does.

6.9 There has been a slight decrease since 1998 in the proportion of residents who disagree that the Council is remote and impersonal. However, this has not resulted in more people agreeing, but rather more failing to express an opinion either way. Council tenants are more likely than average to disagree (32% compared with 23%), which is in line with findings in other authorities MORI works with, where tenants feel closer to their Council through the increased contact and communications they have.

6.10 The survey asked respondents whether they agreed with the following statement:

The Council is too remote and impersonal

6.11 The responses were:

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
2002	6	32	34	21	2	4
1998	8	33	25	25	3	5

6.12 As is the case in all MORI local government work, older residents feel more informed than younger people. It is also worth noting that residents in the St Albans area feel notably less informed than residents of other areas. Informed residents are more likely to have voted in the Council election than those who do not feel informed.

6.13 The most read local paper in St Albans is the Herts Advertiser, which is read by nearly four in five (78%) residents. Nearly as many read the St Albans Review (70%), while nearly three in ten (28%) say they read the St Albans Observer.

6.14 Residents aged 35 or over are more likely than younger residents to read a local newspaper. Residents living in the St Albans rural area are more likely than residents in other areas to read the Herts Advertiser (86% read this local paper), and those living in St Albans District South are the most likely to read the St Albans Review (79%).”

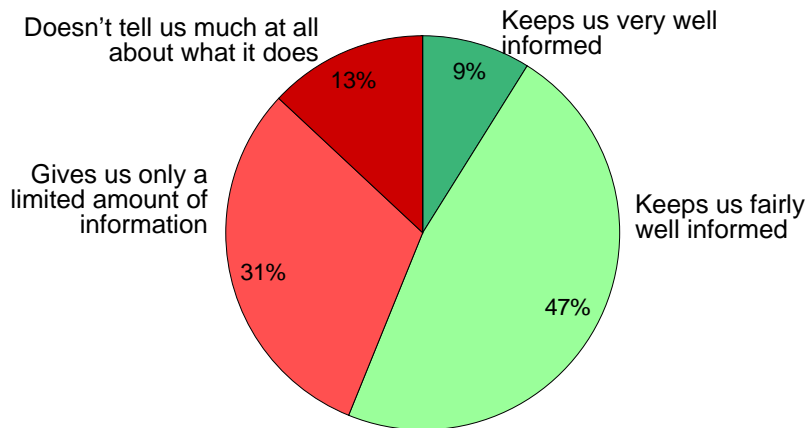
7 MORI Best Value Performance Indicator Survey

**56% of residents felt fairly or very well informed in 2003/04,
compared to 51% in 2000/01**

- 7.1 The MORI Best Value performance indicator satisfaction survey 2003/04 asked how well informed residents felt about the council's services and the benefits it provides. The result was as follows:

How Well Informed Do You Keep Your Residents?

Q *How well informed do you think St. Albans District Council keeps residents about the services and benefits it provides?*



Base: All valid BVPI responses (1,468)

Source: MORI

- 7.2 This shows that overall 56% of respondents felt that the council kept them informed. This is an increase since the previous survey in 2000/01 where 51% felt that they were kept informed.
- 7.3 The residents' surveys carried out in 1998 and 2002 also asked this question. As shown above in paragraph 6. These surveys both showed that 44% of respondents felt that they were kept informed. These surveys used different methodologies (the 2002 survey involved face to face interviews, the 2003/04 was a postal survey and questions were asked in a different order) which might partially explain the different figures.
- 7.4 Despite the 2003/04 result of 56% showing an improvement locally it is the lowest in comparison to the other Hertfordshire district councils and below the Hertfordshire average as this table shows.

	Percentage that think the council keeps residents well informed about the services and benefits it provides
Stevenage	70
East Herts	68
Herts average	65
Three Rivers	64
Dacorum	63

Broxbourne	62
Welwyn/ Hatfield	62
Watford	61
North Herts	58
Hertsmere	57
St Albans	56
Herts County Council	54

7.5 As mentioned above, the Council is determined to increase the proportion of residents who feel that the Council keeps them well informed and this strategy explains how that will be done.

8 Satisfaction with the Council

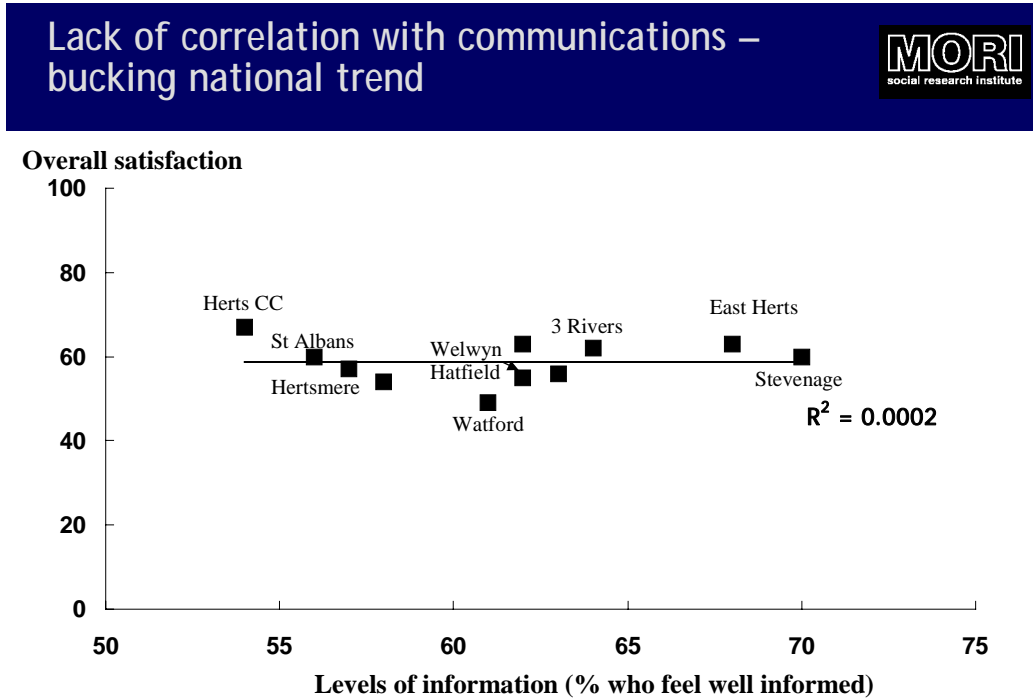
8.1 Analysis has been carried out to consider whether there is any correlation between overall satisfaction levels and how well informed people feel. The ODPM's topline report for 2003/04 states that "... preliminary analysis has shown that there is a clear relationship between feeling well informed about an authority and being satisfied (Table 16a). Over four-fifths (89%) of those who felt very well informed and almost three-quarters (71%) of those who felt fairly well informed were satisfied with the authority overall. This compares with a national average of 55%. In addition, those who feel very or fairly well informed are more likely to think that the authority has got better over the last three years (Table 16c)."

Table 16a: Overall satisfaction and how well informed respondents feel				
	Keeps us very well informed	Keeps us fairly well informed	Gives us only a limited amount of information	Doesn't tell us much at all
Very satisfied	34	5	1	1
Fairly satisfied	55	66	37	22
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	8	23	41	37
Fairly dissatisfied	2	5	17	26
Very dissatisfied	1	1	4	14

Table 16b: Overall satisfaction and whether respondents feel the authority has got better, stayed the same or got worse			
	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied
Better	27	7	2
Stayed the same	65	67	29
Worse	8	26	69

Table 16c: Information provision and whether respondents feel the authority has got better, stayed the same or got worse		
	Very/fairly well informed	Limited/no information
Better	25	9
Stayed the same	63	56
Worse	12	35

8.2 In Hertfordshire however, this is not the case as analysed by MORI below. It is however, important to consider the potential link as seen nationally.



8.3 The question ‘how well informed do you think St Albans District Council keeps residents about its services and the benefits it provides will be included in the 2005 residents survey so there is a window of opportunity to improve how we keep residents informed about the council. We should be able to measure the impact of the new initiatives in this Strategy via this survey. It is also assumed that it will be included in the next Best Value performance indicator survey compiled by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister that will be carried out in 2006/07.

8.4 Research has been undertaken to examine whether there is a link between Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) scores and communication. The report, carried out for IDeA knowledge, shows a definite relationship between CPA scores and communication. It highlights the role co-ordinated communication, combined with other factors such as member and senior management support, can play in contributing to achieving improved services and excellent and good CPA scores.

9 User Focus Assessment

9.1 In February/March 2005, the Council took part in a pilot project with the Audit Commission to assess our strengths and weaknesses in relation to user focus, as part of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment improvement plan. It covered

the methods we use to connect with communities (eg providing information, consulting etc), the different channels of communication we use (eg access points, websites, printed material), the way we interact with different groups, and the commitments we make in our policies to working closely with users. The pilot, which also involved four other Hertfordshire districts, has enabled us to identify areas for improvement and share good practice with others.

9.2 The Council's self assessment concluded the following:

The Council has a comprehensive user focus in its approach to consultation and engagement. MORI and Community Panel are key strengths. There are examples of where user feedback has influenced policy development and service improvement (eg evening appointments in benefits, repairs appointments in housing).

The Council is committed to making its services as accessible as possible, for example by enabling payments to be made through a 24 hour phone line, over the internet, by direct debit, in person by cheque/debit card etc. The Customer Service Centre will provide a better service for personal visitors.

The Equalities Strategy is the primary mechanism through which the Council plans its engagement with the whole community, and the equalities action plans are rigorously monitored on a quarterly basis through the service planning process.

The Council is sometimes slow to use the information gained from consultation exercises to take action to improve service delivery, and needs to improve the way it shares and learns from good practice across the organisation. Often results of corporate surveys are distributed to departments but little further analysis, investigation or action is taken. The Council could improve the way it feeds back to customers with results of consultation and the action taken as a result.

9.3 The Audit Commission made the following comments as part of its assessment:

“The Council’s overall judgement for its self assessment was that strengths outweighed weaknesses.

The self assessment undersells its strengths, especially regarding “commitment” but does not analyse weaknesses in any depth. The council should look at the “cause and effect” of these strengths and weaknesses and establish a realistic plan for improvement. We would recommend that the council concentrates on the “change” section in order to translate its commitment to actions that users would notice.

The overall judgements of strengths outweighing weaknesses is valid. In addition we would support a “4” on commitment.”

9.4 The four elements of the assessment were scored as follows on a scale of 1 to 4:

Commitment	4
Communities	3
Connections	3
Channels	3
Change	3

(1 = weak; 2 = weaknesses outweigh strengths; 3 = strengths outweigh weaknesses; 4 = strong)

10 **Freedom of Information**

10.1 The Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2000 gives a statutory right of access to all information held by public authorities, subject to some exceptions. The Act is designed to make public bodies, more open, accessible and accountable and impacts the way that this, and every Council, responds to requests for information.

The Act provides the public with two new rights:

- a right to know what information public authorities hold
- a right of access to that information

Under FOI, anyone, anywhere, can request information about the Council and its business.

This Strategy contains a guiding principle that the Council will communicate and share information as openly as possible.

11 **The Communication Strategy**

11.1 The preceding paragraphs provide the context to this strategy. As mentioned above the aims of the strategy are:

- To communicate effectively the work undertaken by St Albans City and District Council to achieve its vision, aims and objectives
- To raise the profile of St Albans City and District Council by actively promoting its services and achievements
- To use a variety of channels of communication to ensure the Council engages with the whole community in a user friendly way

11.2 A guiding principle for the strategy is that the Council will communicate and share information as openly as possible.

11.3 In order to achieve the aims of the strategy, the following objectives have been agreed, as statements of how the Council intends to operate:

1	The Council's vision and aims, together with the work to achieve them, will be communicated consistently through campaigns, integrated information provision and by presenting a consistent image
---	---

2	All members of staff, especially Heads of Service and senior managers, will think proactively about how to communicate and celebrate the work undertaken in their services
3	A variety of methods will be used to aid our communication, supported by appropriate information technology (IT) infrastructure
4	Promoting services, good news stories and handling sensitive stories will be as much a departmental responsibility as a PR responsibility, with the press and public relations team supporting, co-ordinating and ensuring corporate identity is maintained in a consistent way
5	The work of members will be communicated, both as policy makers and as elected representatives in the democratic process

11.4 The following explains what we have already done to achieve these objectives, and what we intend to do in the future. The future actions are translated into the action plan at the end of this strategy.

Objective	Action taken	Future action
1 The Council's vision and aims, together with the work to achieve them, will be communicated consistently through campaigns, integrated information provision and by presenting a consistent image	Publicity campaign for new vision and aims (April/May 2005).	All communication to link to corporate aims. All communication must comply with corporate processes and Council branding.
2 All members of staff, especially Heads of Service and senior managers, will think proactively about how to communicate and celebrate the work undertaken in their services	Media training provided to all senior managers (February 2005). All service plans contain a section explaining how the service communicates with stakeholders. All major projects have a communication strategy.	Awareness raising campaign to explain importance of effective communication. Further media training. Service plans to contain actions from this strategy. Heads of Service to review issues for communication at every departmental management team meeting. All team meetings to discuss communication, and share and celebrate success.
3 A variety of methods will be used to aid our communication, supported by appropriate information technology (IT) infrastructure	Community news wrap produced quarterly since December 2004. The website has been commended as "fit for business" (4th in eastern region) for accessibility for people with a disability (top in Herts). Community conferences held on key issues, eg Equalities (December 2004). Corporate plan, performance plan and council tax leaflet	Consult on whether demand exists for community news wrap in other formats (eg talking newspaper, other languages). Further improvements to the website, including proactive approach to ensuring the web contains key corporate messages. Provide more information about the area on website (eg ward profiles). Consider further community

	<p>are the key annual corporate communication tools. Key services delivered electronically for remote access by users, eg plans on the web.</p>	<p>conferences. Use customer service centre as mechanism for providing information, eg information screen, information kiosks. Identify further opportunities for increasing access to services (link to customer access strategy).</p>
<p>4 Promoting services, good news stories and handling sensitive stories will be as much a departmental responsibility as a PR responsibility, with the press and public relations team supporting, co-ordinating and ensuring corporate identity is maintained in a consistent way</p>	<p>Press and PR team issue press releases on topics of interest to media and residents. Publicity campaigns for key service issues and changes eg housing options appraisal, cash free payments.</p>	<p>Press and PR team to provide more advice to departments to encourage good news stories to be promoted. Press and PR team to proactively work with departmental management teams. Improve the way feedback is provided following consultation exercises (link to consultation strategy).</p>
<p>5 The work of members will be communicated, both as policy makers and as elected representatives in the democratic process</p>	<p>Overview and Scrutiny pages on website. Cabinet and Council agendas used to inform press release schedule. Promotion of Mayor and his/her work as first citizen. Local democracy week.</p>	<p>Develop Overview and Scrutiny communication strategy to raise profile and user involvement, including improvements to website functionality, and electronic newsletter. Communicate the ways public can be involved in democracy eg attending and speaking at meetings.</p>

11.5 The above actions will translated into an action plan which will enable this Strategy to be delivered.