



Communication Strategy

2010-2013

Detailed working document

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Analysis and discussion

Council's existing methods of communication

Council has a wide range of existing communication processes, the broad range of methods and strategies employed by the Council to communicate with the public are very effective, these include:

- Direct contact with Council officers and Councillors through conventional mail, email and telephone.
- Monthly Council meetings at a range of locations, including public question time at the beginning of each council meeting
- Council agendas and minutes
- Advertising, including public notices, through local newspapers, radio and television
- Regular media releases issued to local newspapers, radio stations and television stations
- Interviews on radio and television
- Photographs and stories in local newspapers
- Community notices
- Speeches
- The Council website, including Latest News, Council Agendas and Minutes, public notices, and community consultation
- Information publications such as brochures, flyers, posters and leaflets.
- Production and distribution of the *Your Community Newsletter* three times per year and other newsletters including Performing Arts, Visitor Information Centre, Art Gallery and Economic Development Unit.
- Community consultation
- Public meetings
- Community surveys and feedback forms
- Letters, surveys and communiqués
- Signage on buildings, warning signs, street signs
- Use of community notice boards
- Staff newsletter
- Weekly Council Assembly meetings
- Executive Management Team meetings
- Monthly program managers meetings
- Unit team meetings
- Informal discussions with friends, family, acquaintances and other stakeholders

This revised Communication Strategy explores the ability for Swan Hill Rural City Council to take its communications to the next level by implementing the actions outlined in the strategy.

Council's original Communication Strategy helped to improve the formal co-ordination of the communications activities listed above, which has in turn, improved message consistency and message clarity of the organisation.

This revised strategy will include the continuation of communication initiatives set out from the previous communication strategy and new initiatives also added to ensure this strategy achieves its aims.

Addressing gaps and inconsistencies

Through the implementation of the initiatives within the Communication Strategy, Council continually aims to improve the way it communicates to its community. There are several communication issues that were identified from the 2005 Communication Survey report that the Communication Strategy has addressed.

Current communication/consultation methods tend not to reach (or engage) people under the age of 40.

Council is strongly committed to supporting our youth and ensuring their voices get heard regarding the future direction of Council. Since the adoption of the original Communication Strategy in 2005, Council has taken a number of steps to engage and consult with the youth of the municipality with initiatives such as:

- The appointment of a full-time Youth Officer to work with young people throughout the municipality.
- The implementation of Youth Council to ensure youth get a voice.
- Regular updating of the Council website with relevant and current information and ensuring media releases reach media that cater for the under-40 demographic – such as commercial radio.
- The development of the Youth Strategy 2010-2013, in which more than 1200 youth across the municipality were surveyed regarding a number of topics affecting youth, and setting the framework for the future direction of youth across the municipality.
- The contribution and distribution via Council services that reach out and engage younger members of the community, such as Maternal and Child Health, Family Day Care and the Youth Support program.
- Contribution of information to primary and secondary schools.

Community engagement - a desire for Council to increase the level of consultation on issues perceived as important.

Council recognises the importance of consulting with the community in regard to issues and major projects that may affect them. Several steps have been undertaken since the original Communication Strategy in 2005:

- Communicating the purpose of the consultation at the commencement of each process.
- Identifying key stakeholders and affected members of the community at the beginning of each consultation process, and identify steps to ensure they are included in the consultation process.
- Maintaining regular contact with person(s) being consulted, where consultation covers an extended period of time.
- Provide regular updates on the stage of consultation, where consultation is a lengthy process.

- An increase in the types/methods of communication used when consulting with members of the community, including advertising, use of the Council website, media releases and articles.
- Including consultation information in Council reports to detail action that has been undertaken to consult with stakeholder(s) of the issue under consideration.
- Increase the awareness of the community on Council processes.
- Continue Council's regular Community Satisfaction Survey.
- Continuation of the Community Planning process, where communities within the municipality have the opportunity to shape the future of their town.
- Provide other methods for feedback to Council including use of the Council website.

The Council Plan 2009-2013 also recognises the need to engage the community and to develop open community relationships, identifying ongoing strategies to achieve this including:

- Maintaining public question time at the commencement of each Council meeting
- Conducting Council meetings at a range of locations
- Review of the Communication Strategy
- Providing senior management and Council representation at community group meetings
- Conducting service-specific satisfaction surveys

A significant lack of understanding about Council, its role and responsibilities

A number of initiatives have been implemented to address this issue both for the community and for Council staff including:

- The appointment of a Media Liaison Officer
- Commencement of the Your Community Newsletter, distributed throughout the municipality
- A fortnightly Mayoral Column in the local newspaper
- Regular distribution of media releases and increase in media interviews
- Contribution to community newsletters
- Continuing to provide reports on significant issues to formal Council meetings to enable the community to be informed of issues.
- Regular attendance at community meetings by Councillors and senior Council staff
- Raising staff awareness of their role in the implementation of communication priorities and promotion of Council services, activities and responsibilities.
- A regular internal staff newsletter
- Regular staff meetings
- Regular updating of the website, including implementation of a *Frequently Asked Questions* page.

Current challenges

Although many issues have been addressed since the implementation of the original Communication Strategy back in 2005, the 2009 Swan Hill Rural City Council Community Survey (which also assesses the communication of Council to its community), the Youth Strategy 2010-2013 and the 2008 Employee Opinion Survey has identified similar challenges for this review, demonstrating that the communication methods in these areas needs to be continuously addressed with ongoing initiatives.

- The need for Council to continue to reach those under the age of 40 years. The Youth Strategy 2010-2013 identifies that young people want to participate in and influence the future of their communities. Young people want to be consulted with and recognised that they have a vast range of skills and knowledge they can contribute when it comes to building and shaping their communities. A range of ongoing initiatives have been addressed in this Communication Strategy; including the role of social media and networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter.
- Opportunities for the community to participate in decision making. The 2009 Swan Hill Rural City Council Community Survey shows that this received one of the lowest ratings by community members. Along with the Council Plan 2009-2013, the Communication Strategy recognises the importance of developing open community relationships and achieving greater community inclusiveness and understanding of Council's operations and decisions.
- Continued understanding of Council and its role – this is an ongoing challenge for many Councils and one that is also recognised within both the Council Plan 2009-2013 and Communication Strategy. A number of ongoing and new initiatives have been identified within the Communication Strategy and the Council Plan to further develop the understanding of Council's role within the community. This understanding is also important in order to address the issue of misinformation regarding Council in the community.
- The Council Plan 2009-2013 recognises the need to communicate across the community, including continuing to engage with our Aboriginal community and recognising and celebrating the diversity of the municipality. The Communication Strategy outlines a number of initiatives to ensure continued recognition and engagement with the Aboriginal community as well as to communicate effectively with our multicultural population.
- Ensuring internal communication across the organisation – the 2008 Employee Opinion Survey listed “being listened to by Senior Management” as one of the top five improvement opportunities for Council. The Council Plan 2009-2013 recognises the value of staff and Council is committed to invest in its staff, including continuing to improve communication and trust throughout the organisation.

Reputation management

Although not all factors can be controlled that affect Council's reputation in the community, there are ways to manage or address issues as they arise to ensure that misinformation is not spread and the Council is seen as responsive to the community's opinions.

The "grapevine effect" is a large challenge of any organisation, in particular to a local government organisation whose decisions have a high impact on the community and its employees and where the impacts of these decisions are often discussed among community members or among its staff.

As we all know, news can spread very quickly via the local grapevine and while it can sometimes be useful for "getting news out there", it can also have a negative effect when misinformation is spread via this method.

The single experience or opinion of one person can create a negative impression of Council within a matter of hours and can have far-reaching effects among the community and while it is not possible to stop this grapevine effect, there are ways to minimise and correct misinformation within the community including:

- **Ensuring staff are well-informed** – staff who have the correct information can then correct any misinformation and rumours. Staff are community members too and as such, should also be seen as ambassadors for Council. The need to ensure staff themselves remain fully informed is also vital to any organisation. Staff who feel they are not getting the proper information within their organisation can also unintentionally form negative opinions towards their workplace, therefore, communicating internally to Council staff members is vital.
- **Publication of information** – Council has a range of publications that they release to the community every year including media releases, columns, advertising, brochures, flyers, posters, the Council website, community newsletters and municipal newsletters are all effective ways to provide information to the residents and ratepayers. In fact, the 2009 Swan Hill Rural City Council Community Survey shows that 56% of residents identified Council newsletters as their preferred method of receiving information from Swan Hill Rural City Council, followed by letterbox drops at 32%.

The Council website also has an important role to play in ensuring customers are well informed, with approximately 24% of respondents through the survey indicating that they would use the Council website to find community contacts and links, and a further 22% indicating that they would use Council's website to find information relating to Council jobs, services, processes and plans.

- **Encourage community members to seek more information** – Ensuring Council is approachable, willing to help and answer questions, and encouraging the community to seek more information from Council staff also helps foster good two-way communication. This includes (where appropriate) the publication of officer names and contact details for information regarding certain projects or events, as well as continued publicity for the Council website.

- **Strong customer service ethic and focus** – According to the 2009 Community Satisfaction Survey, most community members contact the Council in person (45%) or by phone (36%), while almost two-thirds (62%) of community members indicated that they had visited the Visitor Information Centre in the past 12 months. These figures demonstrate the high quantity of direct contact staff have with the public day to day – whether its front-of-counter, Building and Planning, the CEO, the Executive Team or Human Resources - it is the experience a customer has with a Council staff member that will often form an overall impression of Council. For example, if a customer has a negative experience with a Council staff member, they may immediately decide all staff members across Council have a similar attitude. The same goes for customers who have a positive experience of Council.

The 2009 Customer Satisfaction Survey demonstrates that the community have had positive experiences with Council in terms of customer service. In fact, four of the top five performing areas of Council largely relate to the customer service provided by Council staff, including the friendliness of staff, continuity of staff, knowledge and experience of Council staff and the consistency of information provided by Council staff. The Visitor Information Centre also rated highly, with 73% of those who had visited the information centre highly satisfied with the service and information they received. The main purpose for visiting the centre was in relation to event tickets (46%).

The media

The media provide one of the direct links in the flow of information to the community. The 2009 Community Satisfaction Survey demonstrated that when obtaining information through other communication sources, 72% of the respondents preferred receiving Council information through the community newspaper, followed by the radio (20%) and television (8%). From the same survey, 42% found the media coverage of Council to be positive, while 25% found the coverage to be negative.

It should be remembered that the media do play a highly important and powerful role in communication. As the survey results demonstrate, and as we know anecdotally, many people read their local newspaper, listen to the local radio or watch their local news bulletin. The media is one of the main methods that Council uses to continue to effectively spread its messages to the general public.

However, the media is also a powerful entity and can have a big impact on how the community perceives Council on particular issues and contributes to the community grapevine. How many times in conversation have you heard or used the phrase “I read in the paper/heard on the radio/saw on the news that...”?

Council has no control over how a press release or other Council information is used and the media is under no obligation to publish or broadcast any media release or information that Council provide them, unless it is in the form of a paid advertisement.

It is important that Council works with the media rather than against them and that information provided to the media, whether through a media release or an interview, is accurate and consistent, especially on a contentious issue where many different voices

(such as from members of the community, lobby groups, business, community groups etc) may also be cited. Therefore it is crucial that if staff are approached by the media, that they refer the request to the Public Relations and Events Co-ordinator as stated in the Swan Hill Rural City Council Media Policy.

Adopted by Council in November 2009, the Media Policy outlines the procedures for employees of Council, including Councillors, when dealing with the media.

It is important that all staff understand the Media Policy. Staff who are unsure about the policy or have questions regarding its procedure should talk to the Public Relations and Events Co-ordinator or their Director so they are clear about the policy.

The Council/media relationship continues to be a balancing act between ensuring the media's needs are met and that Council's messages are clear, concise and effective. Putting media requests, media releases and other information through the Public Relations and Events Co-ordinator is one of the best ways to maintain this relationship.

Social media and networking

The emergence of social media and networking sites such as You Tube, Facebook, My Space and Twitter provide the means to reach and communicate with an even wider audience than traditional communication allows.

Local and other government organisations are recognising the impact of social media and networking sites when it comes to communicating messages to the public and the role this medium plays when it comes to an organisation's reputation.

The importance of this medium and its ability to reach a wider audience, particularly community members aged under 40 years, is recognised within this document's initiatives, including the need to further explore the use of social media and to develop a social media policy regarding appropriate use by Council staff through this form of communication.

Discussion conclusion

Although a number of strategies have been actioned successfully since the implementation of the first Communication Strategy in 2005, there are still ongoing challenges that Council must address, including engagement with those under the age of 40 years, opportunities for the community to participate in decision-making, the continued understanding of Council and its role and ensuring internal communication across the organisation.

The Communication Strategy will identify a number of ongoing and new initiatives requiring action to continue to improve Council's communication methods to its community and staff as well as ensuring ongoing customer satisfaction.

Similar to the Council Plan, a regular review of the Communication Strategy will take place to ensure that these initiatives continue to be actioned, with a full assessment of the strategy to occur after three years.

Communication initiatives

1) To increase awareness of the Swan Hill Rural City Council, its functions, activities and responsibilities

Note: bold type indicates new initiative.

Initiative	Area	Timeline
Develop a media/events position to work with officers regarding events and communication initiatives for youth, media, Council website and social networking.	CL	2013
Fund communication initiatives, including advertising campaigns.	CL	ongoing
Introduce a media monitoring service.	M&E	2010-2013
Continue the fortnightly Mayoral Column in The Guardian.	M&E	ongoing
Establish a regular Mayoral Column in the Robinvale Sentinel.	M&E	2010-2013
Maintain regular monthly visits by the Mayor and CEO to Robinvale to meet with community members and local media.	CEO/Mayor	ongoing
Continue to answer media enquiries as quickly and promptly as possible.	M&E	ongoing
Maintain regular distribution of media releases to local media, including radio, television and print media throughout the municipality.	M&E	ongoing
Investigate the use of providing video and audio grabs to the media in conjunction with media releases.	M&E/IT	2010-2013
Conduct regular interviews in the media, where appropriate, from the Mayor, Councillors, CEO and senior staff.	CL/CEO/ Relevant PM	ongoing
Provide community notices to local radio stations when required.	Relevant PM /M&E	ongoing
Continue to distribute the Your Community newsletter throughout the municipality three times per year and review the distribution method and quantity.	M&E	2010-2013
Continue to publish and distribute service-specific newsletters such as Economic Development Unit, Art Gallery, Pioneer Settlement etc. Ensure these newsletters are also approved by the Media and Events Unit.	Relevant PM/M&E	ongoing
Continue regular service specific columns in local newspapers including Performing Arts, Pioneer Settlement and Art Gallery.	Relevant PM	ongoing
Regular attendance at community meetings by Councillors and Senior Council staff.	EMT	ongoing
Review signs on Council buildings, facilities and	Relevant	ongoing

projects to ensure appropriate information is provided.	PM	
Continue to ensure regular communication is maintained and the community informed regarding projects through advertising, community notices and media releases.	Relevant PM/M&E	ongoing
Continue to develop and distribute leaflets, flyers and posters on Council activities and services.	Relevant PM/M&E	ongoing
Staff to continue to deliver reports at Council meetings.	Relevant PM/EMT	ongoing
Regular attendance by senior managers at Council meetings.	EMT	ongoing

2) To continue to improve internal communication across the organisation

Initiative	Area	Timeline
Maintain the regular HR newsletter, including the CEO column, distributed to staff and Councillors once a month.	HR	ongoing
Continue regular briefings to ensure reception staff at all Council offices and service centres are aware of Council services and developments/activities currently being undertaken and movement of Council officers.	EMT	ongoing
Hold regular all-staff meetings to inform staff of Council direction and priorities, including meetings once a month to inform staff of Council meeting outcomes.	EMT	ongoing
Continue to hold weekly Executive Management Team meetings within different areas of Council, such as Pioneer Settlement, Depot, Robinvale Resource Centre etc.	EMT	ongoing
Ensure staff are aware of and can access agendas and minutes of weekly EMT meetings, Council meeting agendas and minutes, etc.	EMT	ongoing
Continue to inform Program Managers through monthly meetings regarding Council meetings, projects, staff movements etc.	EMT	ongoing
Continue to conduct the Employee Opinion Survey every two years.	HR	ongoing
Develop a staff Intranet where employees can see latest news, staff movements or any other news that needs to be conveyed, as per IT strategic plan.	IT	2010-2015
Continue to distribute all-staff emails including the electronic distribution of pay slips, leave applications etc.	Relevant PM	2010-2015
Continue to issue memorandums to staff on key issues.	CEO	ongoing
Directors and program managers to continue to ensure they brief staff on relevant issues as required.	EMT/Relevant PM	ongoing
Continue to use staff notice boards to distribute information.	Relevant PM	ongoing
Continue to provide regular staff training in communication and customer service.	Relevant PM	ongoing

3) To ensure elected representatives are kept informed and are skilled in dealing with the media and public.

Once a month, the CEO to email Councillors providing an update of key projects, Directors to ensure they provide updated information to the CEO within their areas of responsibility for this purpose.	CEO	ongoing
Ensure Councillors are kept up-to-date with latest news, by sending Councillors latest media releases as issued to the media.	M&E	ongoing
Continue weekly Council Assembly meetings, enabling Council to be briefed and updated by staff.	Relevant PM	ongoing
Continue to distribute relevant correspondence to Councillors via mail and email.	EXEC	ongoing
Provide training for Councillors in the area of communication including public speaking, dealing with difficult customers, media training etc.	CL	ongoing
Continue weekly briefing of Mayor by CEO	CEO/Mayor	ongoing
Continue Councillor representation at relevant working groups or committees.	CL	ongoing
Continue to provide electronic access to enable Councillors to better communicate with other Councillors and EMT.	CL/EMT	ongoing
Councillors to provide appropriate reports as per Council's Interstate and Overseas Travel policy	CL	ongoing
Encourage Councillors to arrange with the CEO to make a presentation in Councillor Assembly to inform fellow Councillors of significant meetings, forums or events.	CL/CEO	ongoing

4) To maintain and develop the Council website as another point of communication

Initiative	Area	Timeline
Develop a website officer position to better manage the Council website.	IT/M&E	2010-2013
Maintain and update a Frequently Asked Questions page on the website, with questions updated as issues arise.	M&E	ongoing
Explore opportunities to make the website more mobile-device friendly.	IT	2010-2013
Continue to post media releases on the Council website, as well as Council Agendas and Minutes, public notices and other information.	M&E/IT	ongoing
Investigate posting video and audio grabs in conjunction with media releases on the Council website.	M&E/IT	2010-2013
Develop and regularly update a major projects page	Relevant	2010-2013

on the Council website, which will provide information, including the progress, of projects in the municipality.	PM/M&E/IT	
Explore the creation of a subscription-based email service to distribute Council news and electronic newsletters.	M&E/IT/ Relevant PM	2010-2013

5) To reach and engage younger members of the community

Initiative	Area	Timeline
Continue to engage young people through Youth Council and the Youth Inc building	Relevant PM/YO	ongoing
Review Youth Strategy survey and regular community satisfaction survey methodology to increase level of participation by younger members of the community.	Relevant PM/YO	ongoing
Distribute information via Council services, such as through Youth Officer, Family Day Care, Maternal Child and Health and Environmental Health to engage younger members of the community.	Relevant PM/YO	ongoing
Through the Youth Officer, distribute information, including upcoming events, through primary and secondary schools in the area.	Relevant PM /YO	ongoing
Continue to utilise focus groups to identify ways to improve communication methods to reach and engage younger people.	Relevant PM /YO	ongoing
Develop a consultation resource to assist Service Providers and Council to undertake inclusive and effective consultation with youth.	Relevant PM /YO	2010-2012
Continue the Swan Hill Rural City Council Scholarship program.	HR	ongoing
Train Council staff and services that support youth so they are able to consult well with young people, (refer to the Youth Strategy 2010-2013).	Relevant PM /YO	2010-2012
Develop and adopt a Council Youth Engagement and Participation Policy, (refer to the Youth Strategy 2010-2013).	Relevant PM /YO	2010-2012
Investigate social media initiatives including social networking sites for Council events and latest news and develop a social media policy around this.	M&E/IT/ YO	2010-2013
Investigate the development of a texting database to get messages to youth through an SMS service.	YO/IT/ Relevant PM	2010-2013

6) To continue to recognise and engage our Aboriginal community

Initiative	Area	Timeline
Continue to support Aboriginal engagement through the Aboriginal Affairs Manager.	CL	2010-2013
Continue to acknowledge the traditional owners at Council meetings and functions.	CL	ongoing

Participate in and promote NAIDOC celebrations.	CL/AAM/ M&E	ongoing
Through the Aboriginal Affairs Manager, continue to support the Connectus and Horizons programs.	AAM/CL	2010-2013
Identification and respect of significant sites	AAM/CL/ Relevant PM	ongoing
Development of a Keeping Place at the Pioneer Settlement.	AAM/ BMPS	2010-2013
Continue to implement and review the Aboriginal Partnership Plan.	AAM/CF/ Relevant Director	2010-2013
Implementation of the Aboriginal Employment Plan.	AAM/HR	2010-2014
Continue to fly the Aboriginal Flag in front of Council buildings.	EMT	ongoing
Delivery of cultural awareness program to existing and new staff.	AAM/HR	ongoing

7) To communicate effectively with our multicultural population

Initiative	Area	Timeline
Continue to develop and strengthen relationships between various cultural groups and Council.	C&CS Prog	ongoing
Continue to support, as appropriate, various multicultural programs.	EMT	ongoing
Investigate and develop processes to communicate more effectively with different cultural groups, including verbally, rather than just written means.	Relevant PM	ongoing
Where appropriate, continue to use the funded access to VITS LanguageLink's telephone translations service. This service is available for many of Council's community services.	Relevant PM	ongoing
Continue to display notices in languages other than English.	Relevant PM	ongoing
Investigate providing information on the Swan Hill Rural City Council website in languages other than English, regarding Building and Planning, Health and Local Laws, etc.	IT/Relevant PM	2010-2013
Investigate and review other areas that require multilingual signage.	Relevant PM	2010-2013
Continue to promote and encourage participation in events such as Harmony Day, Go North Arts Festival, Australia Day etc.	Relevant PM/M&E	ongoing
Continue to support and promote Council's sister city relationship with Yamagata and with Robinvale's Twin Town Villers-Bretonneux.	CL/CEO/ M&E	ongoing

8) To increase the level of effective consultation with the community

Initiative	Area	Timeline
Communicate the purpose of the 'consultation' at the commencement of each process.	Relevant PM	ongoing
Provide training on consultation to relevant and appropriate members of the Council organisation.	EMT	ongoing
Maintain regular contact with person(s) being consulted, where consultation covers an extended period of time.	Relevant PM	ongoing
Provide written advice as to outcome of consultation process, and (if possible) how the views of the community are reflected in the outcome.	Relevant PM	ongoing
Identify key stakeholders and affected members of the community at the beginning of each consultation process, and identify steps to ensure they are included in the consultation process.	Relevant PM	ongoing
Include a regular heading in Council reports to detail action taken to consult with stakeholder(s) of the issue under consideration.	Relevant PM	ongoing
Continue to provide reports on significant issues to formal Council meetings to enable the community to be informed of issues.	CL/ Relevant PM	ongoing
Where required, provide regular updates on any major projects, including consultation with residents and businesses affected as well as provide information to media and update Council's website as required.	Relevant PM /M&E	ongoing
Where practicable, place significant reports on the website for access by interested members of the community.	Relevant PM	ongoing
Continue to provide senior management and Council representation at community group meetings.	Relevant PM /CL	ongoing
Continue the community planning process, including implementation of objectives and review of plans.	CF	ongoing
Maintain Public Question time at the commencement of each Council meeting.	CL	ongoing
Continue to conduct Council meetings at a range of locations.	CL	ongoing

9) To receive and respond to queries, complaints, suggestions and feedback from members of the community.

Initiative	Area	Timeline
Review the Customer Response Management System (CRMS) and recommend any improvements including computerisation.	Relevant PM	2011
Implement the outcomes of the CRMS review	Relevant PM	2011

Continue the Swan Hill Rural City Council Community Satisfaction Survey every two years.	HR	biennially
Develop alternative methods for providing feedback, including use of the Council website.	Relevant PM /IT	ongoing
Review Council's Customer Service Charter, including internal and external customer service, as well as customer response times.	EMT/Relevant PM	2010-2013
Conduct service specific satisfaction surveys	Relevant PM	2010-2013
Participate in the Annual State Government Community Satisfaction Survey.	CL	annually