

Buckinghamshire County Council

Planning, Environment and Development Communications

Countryside and Green Spaces Project –

Communications Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Buckinghamshire County Council (BCC), like every local authority in the UK today, faces enormous financial pressures and resourcing issues over the short to medium term. Over the same period, the county is set to change rapidly in terms of population, housing and infrastructure growth.

BCC is responding to these challenges by carefully researching measured, innovative and enduring solutions. The Countryside and Green Spaces Project (CP and GS project) is one such work stream that aims to achieve the following:

- Overcome the shortfall in funds and resources that face the CP and GS service;
- Secure a long-term and more viable management structure for all Buckinghamshire's CP and GS sites;
- Find the most financially prudent solution(s) which will maintain and enhance CPs and GSs for the public into the future;
- Select a solution(s) which will be robust and properly resourced over the long-term;
- The selection process must stand up to scrutiny whenever it is required;
- The project must be clearly communicated at every stage to a large range of stakeholders.

BACKGROUND

At the time of writing this document a Project Initiation Document (PID) has been written. A Project Team and independent Programme Board are well established and they have recommended to Cabinet that the PID is approved and applied. On 28 Sept 2009, the BCC Cabinet examined, considered and unanimously approved the PID, requesting that a further report is brought before the Cabinet in the near future. This will present the results of a market sounding exercise and recommend a new model for the future management of Buckinghamshire's CPs and GSs.

Clear communication of the project's progress is vital throughout. This communications strategy provides an overarching approach and ethos. However, this should be viewed as an interim document which takes account of the six CP and GS management models which are currently under consideration. Once the BCC Cabinet approves a preferred management model, it is highly likely that an updated communications strategy will be required.

AIMS, OBJECTIVES AND EVALUATION

The aims of this communications strategy are as follows:

- i. Ensure the project's philosophy, objectives and progress are clearly, concisely and unambiguously communicated to all stakeholders at relevant times;
- ii. Provide confidence in and understanding of the project's social, environmental, legal, commercial and political aspects to all relevant internal and external parties;
- iii. Anticipate and proactively manage communications as far as practically possible and minimise the level of reactive working - which might otherwise impact on BCC's reputation, its' councillors and officers;
- iv. Plan activities and detail pre-emptive action to minimise disruption or circumstances that might delay the project's progress;
- v. Communicate in an open, honest and timely manner, which maintains the integrity of BCC - irrespective of whether the messages are positive or negative;
- vi. Communicate the project's progress, quickly addressing challenging issues and explain how this project will benefit residents now and in the future;
- vii. Remain alert to changes in the external environment and react accordingly.

Communications objectives derive from the approved PID and later Cabinet endorsement on 28/9/09 and aim to gain the respect, if not the buy-in of the majority of stakeholders by educating to allay fears and build trust. They are:

- i. To provide clear, open, honest and timely communications on all phases of this project's progress using plain English;
- ii. To ensure that communities living near all Country Parks and Green Spaces sites have full opportunity to engage with the project and easily find out more;
- iii. To address inaccuracies quickly where appropriate and provide balanced information to help residents understand the motives for this project;
- iv. To demonstrate high quality project management, partnership working and best practice communications through all phases of the project, by developing appropriate materials, a robust timeline of activities and specifically targeted messages for each audience;
- v. To uphold the reputation and integrity of the County Council, all CP and GS sites, the project team, County Councillors and officers by honest and clear communications;
- vi. To ensure that the CP and GS project communications compliment the Council's and department's wider objectives
- vii. To achieve effective media coverage which is predominantly balanced or positive in tone;
- viii. To ensure that this communications strategy is kept up-to-date and when necessary updated to reflect the project's progress.
- ix. To share lessons learned through this project with other similar projects and learn from 'best practice' elsewhere.

STAKEHOLDERS

The Project Team has undertaken a stakeholder audit which has identified a range of key internal and external individuals and groups. It is recognised that the number and types stakeholders are likely to change and grow over time.

It will be the responsibility of the Project Team to support the project communications officers of any changes or additions to the stakeholder audit. An overview of the audit will include the following:

Internal

- Cabinet and in particular the Cabinet member for Planning, Environment and Development.
- The Project Board
- The Project Team
- Country Parks & Green Spaces Team
- Natural Environment Team
- Historic Environment Team
- Dedicated Unison representative for the project
- Country Parks Liaison Committee (County Cllr members)
- All Buckinghamshire County Councillors
- Overview & Scrutiny Commissioning Committee
- Planning, Environment and Development staff
- The Achieving Outstanding Performance Board (Transformation)
- BCC Contact Centre

External

- All District Councillors (inc. all District Members of the Country Parks Liaison Committee)
- Relevant Town and Parish Councils
- Green Infrastructure Consortium
- CP and GS tenants
- All Bucks MPs and MEPs
- Appropriate District Council officers
- Local authorities in neighbouring counties
- Organisations invited to give comment in the 'Market Testing' exercise
- Any future protest groups
- Environment and countryside groups: Chiltern's Society, BBOWT, CPRE etc.
- Langley Park Friends Group
- Media: Local, regional and technical/trade

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS – 'the route to market'

As the outline list of stakeholders indicates, there is a wide variety of individuals and groups to communicate with, hence the project's communications team will utilise all channels available and undertake a range of activities to ensure stakeholders are kept informed of progress and have the opportunity for greater engagement. As standard best practice for communication activities a rolling '*Communications Action Plan*' will be operating, enabling all communications channels to be utilised and tailored to the audience.

A summary of these channels includes:

- **Briefings** – written, informal staff Q & A sessions and formal presentations;
- **Regular updates** – CP and GS staff, especially after each Board meeting and key milestones such as Cabinet meetings.
- **Web** – FAQs will be developed and regularly updated to reflect the project’s progress.
- **BCC intranet** – The BCC intranet will mirror the content of the CP and GS web pages. However, it will be supported by greater content e.g. Library of all staff updates, briefings, committee papers and presentations. Thus maintaining transparency through out the project.
- **Feature articles** in *Bucks Times*, *Changing Times* and *Manager and Team Briefs*.
- **Letters/email enquiries:** It is recommended that an enquiry database is established to ensure all enquiries are responded to within 20 working days (preferably 10).
- **FOI / EIR requests:** Will be handle through a similar mechanism to general enquiries.
- **Site visits** to CP and GS locations for internal and external stakeholders (if appropriate).
- When major milestones for the project are approaching, an offer to update Cllrs on the **Overview & Scrutiny Commission Committee** is recommended
- Progress updates for key **Local Area Forums**. If appropriate, attend meetings with the prior agreement by the committee chairperson.

Please note that a rolling ‘Operations timetable’ will support this communications strategy. This will encompass the key dates for each communications activity, the responsibilities of each group/individual within each activity and the deadlines that must be adhered to. For example:

- Copy writing dates
- Copy submission dates
- Publication dates
- Press release drafting and issuing dates etc.

This is essential as each of the four management models under consideration have varying delivery timelines.

KEY MESSAGES

Key messages to reflect the project’s progress are likely to alter overtime. However, the main drivers for BCC looking at alternative management models and the reasons behind this project will not. The following key messages will form a template for all communications activities and enquiry responses:

1. BCC in the past has reviewed the management and funding models for all CP and GS site to ensure we are getting the best value for money and delivering the highest possible level of service to all visitors to our sites with the budgets available.

2. The current review comes at one of the most financially constrained periods in local government history. Partly as a result of the wider economic downturn, but more significantly as BCC is preparing for major reductions in local authority funding from Central Government.
3. BCC understands that all 45 CP and GS sites are incredibly important to the half a million plus people who annually enjoy the 1,712 acres of countryside this authority manages and maintains.
4. The stark reality is that the management and financing models for these amenities cannot continue, otherwise we face the spectre of lesser amenities for the visitors
5. Buckinghamshire is set to grow significantly in the future and CP and GS sites will become increasingly important to the thousands of residents now and in the future.
6. At present all CP and GSs are self-funded. BCC and our residents want better CPs, but that means greater levels of investment when the funds aren't available.
7. It's a sensible step to research and examine all the alternatives to see if they will enhance our CP and GSs in the future.
8. Nothing is ruled in and nothing is ruled out.
9. Other authorities have looked at different options and we are learning from these examples and employing the best practice from these case studies
10. We know that BCC staff work extremely hard to improve all CP and GS sites. The same staff want to see improved sites for our all visitors, which is another reason we need to looking at all possible long-term solutions.
11. In the coming weeks and months, we expect to have much more detail on all the options under consideration.
12. BCC's Cabinet will make an informed decision on the best management model to safeguard and improve all Buckinghamshire CP and GS sites in the near future.
13. BCC will continue to keep residents informed as this work develops.

RESOURCES AND BUDGET

All communications for this project will be delivered by David Spencer and Anushka Desai, through the dedicated Planning, Environment and Development communications team structure.

No communications budget has been allocated to this work, however as the project progresses and the Cabinet endorse the next phase of work, it is likely that a small communications budget will be necessary. This will cover resources needed at any public meetings (Local Area Forums),

photographic costs and site visits. Any budget will be identified at the earliest opportunity to ensure it does not compound the financial constraints this authority is already subject to.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Below is a list of the key BCC individuals and their role in the CP and GS project

Councillor Martin Tett

Cabinet Member/ principal spokesperson for the project and final approver of all communications activities.

Cllr Michael Edmonds

BCC Spokesperson on Countryside matters, Board Member and the BCC spokesperson for Countryside and the CP and GS project.

Neil Gibson

Portfolio Director and Project Board Chairman. Principal endorser for this communication strategy

Mike Woods

Group Manager for Countryside and Heritage, Board Member, Project Manager and principal approver for this strategy and all internal and external communications activities.

Andrew Fowler

Country Parks Team Leader, Project Team member and secondary approver for all communications internal and external activities.

Penny Gray (UNISON)

Project Team member. Integral role as the CP and GS is likely to have implications for staff working in these service areas, it is imperative that a UNISON is involved in all aspects of the project's progress. The UNISON representative will be supported by BCC Human Resources officers on the Project Team. This will ensure that any communications issues are highlighted early and can be acted upon swiftly and efficiently.

David Spencer (and Anushka Desai)

Senior Communications & Liaison Manager, author/originator of this strategy and will be supported by Anushka Desai, will be responsible for delivering all aspects of communications for this project.

COMMUNICATIONS PROTOCOL

All internal and external activities and updates to stakeholders will be drafted by David Spencer and Anushka Desai. These will then be amended / approved by either Mike Woods or Andrew Fowler, before Cllr Martin Tett gives final authorisation to release the materials.

This three-stage sign-off procedure will ensure a consistency of approach to all internal and external communications through out the project.

BRANDING

All communications activities will observe the corporate communications strategy and will fully comply with BCC's 'rolling hills' corporate brand.

MONITORING

Success in achieving the aims and objectives listed earlier in this document, will be measured through the following mechanisms:

- Regular feedback from CP and GS staff via their line managers and / or Mike Woods
- Feedback from
- The regular county-wide Satisfaction Surveys
- Direct feedback from internal/external stakeholders
- Newsflash software will monitor and evaluate the tone of media coverage.