

Standards committees – raising your profile

1. Objectives and target setting – where do you want to be?

You need to start thinking about what you want to achieve out of raising your profile in terms of both aims and outcomes. How will raising your profile help you in your work?

In terms of setting your objectives, remember to think about all of your audiences, including:

- Local authority councillors/parish councillors;
- Local authority officers (including monitoring officers, legal officers, member services, chief executives, directors, communications, policy, and consultation);
- Officers working for town and parish councils;
- MPs;
- Other community opinion formers/intermediaries, for example, citizens advice bureaus, schools, voluntary organisations;
- Residents (old and young).

Which of these audiences might you want to target and for what purpose or outcome?

Some possible objectives might be:

- To make members aware of the standards that they must sign up to.
- To make sure people know you are there and what you do. This is so that people know how to get in touch with you if they have a complaint.
- To make people aware of investigations that you have undertaken.

Remember to make your objectives SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timebound).

Set yourself some deadlines and targets linked to your objectives.

2. Evaluation – where are you now?

In terms of setting measurable objectives and targets, it may be useful to look at where you are now:

- What are the levels of awareness and understanding of the standards committee within your authority or amongst local residents?
- Do people know what you do?
- Do people know who you are and how to get in touch with you?

Some research amongst your target audiences may help you answer these or other questions.

A good starting point is to look to see if any relevant research has been carried out either locally or nationally. If none is available, you could commission or carry out your own at little or no cost.

Options include:

- Citizens' panel. Most councils have a citizens' panel and may be willing to include a few questions on a future panel.
- Surveys mailed to target audiences, for example councillors, council officers and staff.
- Residents' magazine. Your council may include some questions about standards and the standards committee in their magazine.
- Website polls.

Consultation health warnings:

- Only consult if you are committed to acting on the findings and feeding back to those who have responded. Do not consult just because it seems like the right thing to do.
- There is a clear link between response rates and the extent to which people perceive that a consultation topic is either relevant or controversial. You will probably gain a better response from the citizens' panel (who are more predisposed to answering surveys) than from a survey in a residents' magazine or website.

3. Making it happen

a) Identifying resources

In working towards your objectives, you need to consider your resources in terms of skills, available support, and budget.

Think about the skills that you have access to either on the standards committee or in the council as a whole. You need to have the necessary skills and expert advice on hand to help you plan and design surveys, write articles and press releases, and talk to the media. You need to establish:

- What are your training needs, if any?
- What professional and expert support is available to you?

Professional support and resources may come from a number of different sources:

- Officers within your authority. In particular you should find out who leads on press, public relations and consultation for your council. Your members' support team may also be able to help.

- National organisations such as the Standards Board for England and the Local Government Association. The Standards Board in particular produces a range of leaflets aimed at various audiences. It also carries out research and promotes good practice so that you can learn from your peers.
- Your peers. Look to good practice from across the country. If another authority has been particularly successful in raising their profile, talk to them and ask how they went about it. If something has worked well somewhere else, there is every chance it could work for you. There is no point in reinventing the wheel!

Before you start looking at communications options, you need to establish a publicity or communications budget. This may be either from a budget allocated to the standards committee or from another budget within the council.

b) Communications channels and options

We live in an information age. The range of communications channels and options is increasing in terms of choice and interaction.

Start by identifying all of the communications options that already exist and that you can make use of. Some questions to ask are:

- What are the local papers and radio stations?
- Does my authority (or local parish or town council) produce a residents' magazine or newsletter?
- Does my authority produce a staff magazine?
- What are the local public websites (county/borough/town/parish) and is it possible to get information onto them?
- What national resources (such as leaflets and guidance sheets) are available?
- What opportunities are there to meet and speak to people at meetings, forums and events?
- What are the distribution points or outlets for posters and leaflets?
- What opportunities are there to set up training events?

continues overleaf

Your choice of communications will depend on your audience and budget. The following grid illustrates the primary audiences for different types of communication channels:

	Local councillors	Council officers	Community groups	Residents
Meetings	X	X	X	
Internet/intranet	X	X	X	X
Residents' magazines			X	X
Staff magazines	X	X		
Training events	X	X		
Leaflets	X	X		X
Newspapers/media			X	X
Posters			X	X

In budgetary terms it will cost less to use existing communications channels and resources than to create your own.

c) Create the right impression

If you are creating your own leaflet, poster or publication, or writing a press release or advert, professional input will help you create the right impression and ensure that the message and language is appropriate for your audience. Professionals can also help you in sourcing design and print for a reasonable price.

Remember that communications that look amateurish will do nothing for your credibility in terms of people's trust in your ability and effectiveness.

d) Messages

Identify two or three messages for each of your key audiences (linked to your objectives) and use them wherever possible in your communications. Regular repetition of these messages will ensure that you achieve your communications objectives.

e) Create a plan

Once you have identified your key audiences and communications methods, create a timetable of activities spread over the year to maintain an even profile.

This timetable may be informed or influenced by a number of different factors:

- Issue dates and publication schedules for residents' or staff magazines.
- National events that could provide a springboard for publicity (for example, Local Democracy Week).
- Local meetings and events that you may want to attend (town/parish council meetings, training events, council officer briefings).
- Standards committee business – meetings and investigations.

Be opportunist. In addition to sticking to your plan, be prepared to use local or national news events to make comment on topical issues.

4. Communications issues and constraints

a) Budget

Plan your communications to fit the budget available to you. Before committing any expenditure, ensure that you will get a good return in terms of raised awareness.

b) Engagement

The levels of interest shown in any communication will depend on how relevant (or entertaining) people perceive it to be to them. If you think about the relevance of your communications to your target audience from the outset, you'll be giving yourself a head start.

c) Competition

An increase in communication channels and options also means that we face more competition for people's interest. You need to be **creative**, **dynamic** and **engaging** in your communications to catch and hold people's attention. Given this, the golden rules are:

- Get in early with your key message. Don't bury it later on in the text by which time people may have switched off or moved on.
- Use simple language. Don't make it hard for people to understand.
- Keep it concise. The shorter your communication, the more chance that **all** of it will be read.

continues overleaf

d) Accessibility

Work on making your information accessible to all by writing simply and in plain English.

Some people may be visually impaired or may not speak English as their first language. Identify any access issues in your area and be prepared to provide information in alternative formats (Braille, electronic, audio or translated materials). Budget appropriately for any such requirements.

5. Effective communications

The RECIPE for success:

Relevant Put your article/story to the “so what?” test. What makes your story relevant to people’s lives?

Engaging Try and include a call to action. What are you hoping that people will do as a result of reading your story? Use active rather than passive language and use words such as “urge” and “encourage”.

Concise Keep your message short and easy to read.

Informative and interesting “I didn’t know that...”, “I must tell...”

Pictures and people These bring the human factor into your story and are more interesting than plans and strategies.

Evaluate Look at what coverage you get. How useful was it? Was it positive? What can you learn from it? What would you do differently next time?

6. In summary

- Start by looking at what you want to achieve by raising your profile.
- Think of your audiences and plan your communications appropriately.
- Identify your communications opportunities.
- Use available help.
- Have a plan of activities that will maintain your profile over a sustained period.
- Be creative – describe what you do in ways that will excite and engage.
- Make your communications accessible by writing in plain English and avoiding jargon.