



Information and Communication Strategy and Action Plan

2008-2010

This publication is available in other formats on request.

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1 Introduction

Cavan Local Authorities developed this Information and Communication Strategy and Action Plan [the Strategy] in order to set out:

- how we currently communicate with different audiences
- how we intend to improve our ways of communicating with staff and with people outside the organisation.

The Strategy will be used mainly as an internal document for Cavan Local Authorities' staff, but customers and outside organisations will be able to get a copy if they want one. The Strategy is an important document, because it commits us to:

- improving how we communicate
- adopting a common approach to communication right across Cavan Local Authorities.

The Strategy covers both information and communication:

- **information-giving** happens when we provide facts or knowledge to individuals or groups of people
- **communication** is a two-way process.

Cavan Local Authorities are information providers, but we also must receive and process information in order to carry out our work in a satisfactory way. Successful communication involves many elements, including listening to customers, consultation with the public and other stakeholders, and inter-agency work.

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Communication is about getting the message out about what we are doing. It is also about making sure that we really listen to our customers, so that their expectations can inform the ongoing development of the organisation. Only that way can we be sure that we are responding to real needs.

This Strategy is designed to be read and used alongside the House Style Guide, which outlines a standard approach to areas such as the use of the Council logo, the format of documents, and grammar. Using the House Style Guide will improve our corporate branding and will help us to promote a consistent public image. The House Style Guide is being piloted in one Directorate to assess how best to apply it to the organisation as a whole.

In line with our Strategy, this publication is available in other formats on request.

1.1 Background

Local authorities in Ireland perform a very wide range of functions on behalf of the State. Their activities include both regulatory functions and service provision in essential areas. They also provide leadership in local governance.

The nature of local authority business is constantly developing as new needs emerge in response to changes in Irish society. Managing these changes successfully requires co-ordinated communication. In addition, quality information management is essential for all local authorities, in order to ensure appropriate service delivery, coherent planning, evidence-based policy-making, customer satisfaction, value for money and access to resources. It is also vital for human resource management.

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In recent years, communication issues have come to the forefront of local authority activity because of:

- the growth of information and communication technologies
- the focus on improving customer service
- changes in performance assessment
- increasing ethnic diversity among customers
- greater awareness of the need for accessible communication for people with disabilities and people who have language or literacy difficulties.

Cavan Local Authorities' Communication Strategy aims to reflect these changes in Irish society and how local authorities do business.

1.2 National Policy

At national level "Better Local Government" [BLG], the local government modernisation programme, emphasises communication, requiring local authorities to improve:

- consultation and complaints procedures
- communication between staff and management.

BLG recognises the importance of communication in enhancing the profile of local authorities and improving awareness of their services. It says:

"There is scope to improve the level and quality of information provided about local authority operations. For example, the general public are often unaware of the full range of services provided by local authorities, how services can be availed of, and their obligations and duties as

customers...Local authorities could do more to highlight the good work that they do and their positive achievements in the service of the local community...Local authorities should consider the development of a more pro-active approach to the giving of information and greater targeting of information at those to whom it is relevant. The involvement of users in the preparation of forms, leaflets, and notices will lead to greater clarity and understanding” (Better Local Government, page 35).

“Towards 2016”, the current national partnership agreement, emphasises the importance of communication for stable industrial relations. It says:

“Many public services differ from services which are provided by the private sector in that they are essential services which the public cannot obtain from alternative sources. Providers of essential services and their staff, therefore, have a special responsibility to make sure that they have well-developed communication channels, and to seek to resolve problems before they escalate into industrial disputes” (Towards 2016, page 110).

1.3 International level

In 2006 the European Commission drafted a White Paper on a European Communication Policy. Previously, opinion polls showed that the public lacked information about Europe and felt that they had little influence on policy development. The White Paper aims to bring about a change from one-way to two-way communication, and from institutional-centred to citizen-centred communication. According to the White Paper:

“Good two-way communication between citizens and public institutions is essential to a healthy democracy...Bridging the gap between Europe and its citizens means creating and maintaining links between citizens and public authorities all the way from the local to the European level” (White Paper on a European Communication Policy, page 7).

1.4 Information and communication in Ireland

Irish local authorities have to make sure that they communicate information about their services and functions correctly. To do this, communication has to be of high quality, timely, planned and sustained, rather than reactive, haphazard or of poor quality. Communication is a two-way process, so local authorities also need to find the best ways to listen to citizens, other agencies and stakeholders, and also to develop new channels of communication.

County Development Boards [CDBs] came into being in 2000 in order to:

- improve the co-ordination of services
- help in the integration of local government and local development.

Local level inter-agency and inter-organisational communication have to be excellent if County Development Boards (CDBs) are to achieve these goals.

There is also a national and regional dimension to the communication role of the local authorities:

- nationally, they link in with the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, other Government Departments and State agencies, and the Local Government Management Services Board [LGMSB]
- regionally, they link in with bodies such as the Border Regional Authority, neighbouring local authorities, Northern Ireland local authorities, Irish Cross Board Area Network [ICBAN], Border Action, and many more.

As well as all that, Cavan Local Authorities act as an intermediary for communication from other local, national and European sources.

1.5 Cavan's Commitment to Communication

Cavan Local Authorities recognise the importance of good communication as a central element in the delivery of every function. Cavan County Council's Corporate Plan 2004-2009 names the development of a Communication Strategy as a specific action. The Corporate Plan identifies five high-level priorities:

- sustainable growth
- development of participation and democracy
- promotion of the positive image of Cavan
- service delivery
- internal organisational enhancement.

Good communication is critical to the achievement of each of these priorities.

Cavan County Council's mission statement asserts that "We will be the best at what we do". This also applies to how we communicate the organisation's message and how we receive information from other sources. Clear communication is essential for effective working arrangements with other agencies, councillors, communities, citizens and staff, and anyone else interested in issues relevant to the county.

1.6 Building on our Strengths and Weaknesses

This Strategy aims to build on Cavan Local Authorities' strengths and address the organisation's communication weaknesses. We still have some way to go

before we have truly effective communication, but we have been making progress, too: ¹

- **We need to be more proactive in communicating good news.** So far, we have done the following:
 - the Arts Office has produced a calendar of events²
 - the Corporate Affairs section has produced a display stand to use for publicity at events. It helps to promote the corporate identity of the Council and presents a consistent visual image of the Council
 - the Council website has become more interesting and easier to use, and gets over 10,000 visitors every month.
- **We want to improve our media presence.** To date the local and regional media have generally given favourable coverage to topics related to Cavan Local Authorities, but we want to do even better. So, for example, the Corporate Affairs section has held discussions with Northern Sound Radio about allocating a regular slot to local authority issues.
- **We want to improve communication with outdoor staff.** So far, we have made progress in relation to team meetings and the rollout of the intranet.
- **We want to make sure that staff are kept informed of decisions.** In particular, we want to improve communication between different departments, and between departments and area engineers. We want to make even better use of our excellent intranet facilities, which have been nominated for E-Government awards for two years in a row. We plan further improvements in internal communication systems.

¹ These issues were identified by staff involved in preparing this strategy document.

² This model has now been adopted by some additional service areas.

- **We want to improve communication between the Senior Management Team [SMT] and other levels**, and between Section Heads and other levels. The Senior Management Team now has regular meetings with Department Heads, and management in general now operates an open door policy regarding staff queries.
- **We want to make sure that telephone calls are answered in consistent way.** See page 32 for an action to address this issue.
- **We want to make sure that the Contact Management System [CMS] works well.** We will evaluate it in one department before it is rolled out to others.
- **We want to define service standards and outline customer responsibilities.** We have developed a customer charter for this purpose. The customer charter outlines Cavan Local Authorities' commitment to treating our customers fairly, gives details of our customer comment system, and describes services available in Irish. It also outlines the standard of conduct we expect from customers in return.

2 Aims and Objectives

The **overall aim** of this Strategy is to make sure that there is clear, consistent and appropriate communication between Cavan Local Authorities and relevant stakeholders, both in the organisation and external to it. The **purpose** of the strategy is to provide a co-ordinated approach to:

- conveying the local authorities' messages
- receiving information from other sources.

To achieve these goals the Strategy aims to:

- reinforce the image of Cavan Local Authorities as progressive and effective, and as an authoritative information source for the county
- enhance understanding of the local authority's role and services among its many audiences and stakeholders
- promote County Cavan as a place of innovation, enterprise, culture and tourism, and as a quality place to live
- create awareness of the local authorities' commitment to promoting information and communication technologies in the county.
- facilitate accurate media reporting of local authority activities
- encourage people who live in the county to get involved in local structures, and to make their views heard
- make sure that councillors and employees are kept up-to-date with information from other agencies and groups.

To achieve these ambitions, we have to have appropriate ways of providing regular information about the local authorities' work. We also have to make sure that information is accessible to different audiences, in particular to people with disabilities and people with low literacy or who are not native speakers of English or Irish.

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Cavan Local Authorities intends to work collaboratively with other agencies that are seeking to promote the county to different audiences (e.g. tourism services, enterprise services) or are otherwise involved in communicating on issues relating to the county.

3 Audiences

Cavan Local Authorities need to communicate many types of information to diverse individuals, communities and organisations. These include:

- **general audiences:** for example, the local community, tourists, people who live in other parts of the country
- **specific audiences:** for example, local authority staff, retired employees, volunteers (e.g. people working with the Arts Office), the Cavan Diaspora, children and young people, researchers and others seeking specific information, community and voluntary organisations, socially excluded groups (e.g. people with disabilities, lone parents, ethnic minorities etc.)
- **formal audiences:** for example, elected representatives, Government departments, other local authorities, the LGMSB, other State bodies, the local development sector, regional and cross border bodies, the private sector (especially Cavan ratepayers), the Social Partners, European groups (e.g. in relation to tendering and town twinning).
- **the media.**

4 Ways of Communicating

Cavan Local Authorities and their staff communicate in many different ways:

- **written communication:** for example, letters, memos, minutes, reports, news releases, emails, newsletters, Short Message Service (SMS) (text messaging), leaflets, posters, brochures, business cards, newspaper advertisements, signage, research reports
- **spoken communication:** for example, interviews, meetings, telephone communication, seminars, representation on groups and committees, radio advertisements, speeches, launches, talking to people generally
- **visual communication:** for example, photographs, graphics, presentations, display stands, signage
- **the media:** for example, newspapers, magazines, internet, DVD, television, radio
- **symbolic gesture:** for example, facial expressions, tone, silence and, very importantly, attitude.

At present Cavan Local Authorities use many communication tools. Some of the main ones are: the Corporate Plan, the Budget, annual reports, development strategies, business plans, the Workplace Partnership process and newsletter, a forthcoming Revitalising Areas Through Planning, Investment and Development (RAPID) Programme newsletter,³ the Local Authorities' intranet and internet, the Front Desk, the Contact Management System (see below) and the newsletter of the Community and Voluntary Forum. We also undertake research studies to explore specific issues and

³ RAPID stands for Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development. The RAPID Programme is a Government initiative to target investment at disadvantaged urban areas. All of Cavan town is covered by the RAPID Programme.

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then communicate the findings to various groups, the general public and the media.

A new Staff and Councillors Library on Floor One of the Farnham Centre is due to open later in 2008. It will play a major role in communication in the organisation. For instance, it will act as a central repository for reports and publications, making research and data searching easier, preventing duplication and providing more co-ordinated access to information.

The Contact Management System [CMS] is an online system for logging and processing information queries, including internal queries and requests from the public. It will improve customer service by making it easier to track responses to customer enquiries and helping to speed up response times. It will also help staff to organise their work.

The Contact Management System (CMS) is already in place in one department. When it has been reviewed it will be rolled out to all departments, along with procedures for its implementation. There will also be a staff handbook which will list people's areas of responsibility and common queries for each department.

A Short Message Service (SMS) facility is now available for staff who wish to send a text message to colleagues or councillors. Once an employee puts their mobile phone details on the intranet, other staff members can send text messages to them free of charge via the internet. Group SMS lists can be set up to send information to several people at once.

Cavan Local Authorities can use dedicated local authority publications to convey particular messages, share information and promote activities. These publications include "Council Review Journal", "Local Authority News", and the Institute of Public Administration's "Local Authority Times".

The public can access Cavan Local Authorities' documents through the post, Cavan's Public Library system, the website and email, and from area offices.

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The staff of Cavan Local Authorities communicate the organisation's message and promote its corporate identity through their representation on State and local development bodies and other organisations.

Structures such as the County Development Board, Strategic Policy Committees and Comhairle na nÓg (the Junior Council) have the potential to strengthen communication on many issues. For example, Comhairle na nÓg is elected annually to give children and young people a voice in local and national issues that affect them. It promotes active citizenship among young people and creates opportunities to hear their views. Cavan Local Authorities have consulted with children participating in Comhairle na nÓg on topics such as the county heritage plan.

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Cavan Local Authorities' Road Safety Officer gives presentations on road safety issues to young people in schools around the county. This is another way of communicating a particular message to specific audiences.

As well as all this, Council staff participate in many national and regional networks. The two-way communication in their meetings provides information and material for communication, both internally and externally. We need to step up our existing practice of circulating a brief summary of outcomes from conferences, seminars and other meetings, as it is a potentially rich source of information.

5 Providing Information

5.1 Legislative Responsibilities

Cavan Local Authorities have many responsibilities under legislation that relate to communication. These include the Local Government Act 2002, the Equal Status Acts 2000 and 2004, the Data Protection Act 1988 and the Data Protection (Amendment Act) 2003, the Freedom of Information Act 1997 and the Freedom of Information (Amendment) Act 2003, the Official Languages Act 2003 and the Disability Act 2005. These have an important influence on how we communicate. For example, the Data Protection Act requires local authorities to take great care with the security of personal data records, staff training and compliance.

The Official Languages Act provides a statutory framework for the delivery of public services through the Irish language. For example, it outlines the duty of public bodies to ensure that key documents of public interest, such as annual reports, are published in both Irish and English.

5.2 Accessibility of Information

Information must be accessible to its target audience. This is especially important for any communication that is intended for a general public audience, or for certain socially excluded groups, such as people who are not native speakers of English or Irish.

Another important group is people with disabilities, who make up at least 10% of the county's population. According to guidelines issued by the National Disability Authority [NDA], "public bodies are required to ensure that the services they provide to the general public are accessible to people with disabilities where practicable and appropriate".

Section 2 of the Disability Act 2005 defines these services:

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- Section 26 requires public bodies to integrate their services for people with disabilities with those for other people, where practical and appropriate. If Cavan Local Authorities deem a disabled person's request to be appropriate, we will provide assistance to access services. The Access Officer is responsible for making and coordinating arrangements. All front line staff are receiving Disability Awareness Training.
- Section 28 requires public bodies to make sure that their communications to a person with a hearing or visual impairment are, as far as practicable, provided in an accessible format, if the person requests it. Information provided electronically must, as far as practicable, be compatible with adaptive technology. Published information, relevant to persons with intellectual disabilities, must be made available in easy-to-read formats.

Cavan Local Authorities, through the House Style Guide, are committed to making Plain English standard in the organisation. Staff must inform customers that we would be pleased to provide copies of any document in an accessible format. We can provide documents on request in Large Print, Braille, Irish and in an easy-to-read version. The Access Officer is responsible for making and coordinating arrangements.

Cavan Local Authorities adhere to the National Disability Authority (NDA) Code of Practice on Accessibility of Public Services and Information Provided by Public Bodies. This is an approved code of practice for the purpose of compliance with the Disability Act 2005. It lists several formats in which public bodies are advised to consider making information available. These are:

- standard written communication
- accessible formats
 - Large Print
 - Braille

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- high contrast
 - electronic format
 - audio tapes
- verbal communication
- assistive technology
- electronic communication.

The National Disability Authority (NDA) notes that not all formats are suitable for all kinds of information. Audio, for example, is not suitable for lengthy directories or technical documents. In such cases, offering consultation services in person or by telephone might be more appropriate.

5.2 What Cavan Local Authorities are doing

Cavan Local Authorities are undertaking accessibility audits on all the websites we own and manage, including the Town Council and County Museum websites. We are also applying accessibility guidelines to internal communication mechanisms such as the intranet.

In a rural county such as Cavan, however, many people do not have access to the internet, so we cannot rely solely on information being made available in electronic versions. Traditional formats are also important.

Cavan Local Authorities consider Plain English as essential for any information that is communicated to the public. Plain English is essential for people with low literacy or who are not native speakers. We will produce as much as possible of our information in Plain English. Where this does not exist at present, we will provide a Plain English version if requested. This applies to both externally focused and in-house information.

The National Adult Literacy Agency [NALA] produces guidance on the key features of Plain English, and also provides tips for clear writing. These tips include using the active voice (e.g. “we provide information”, rather than

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“information is provided”), using terms in a consistent way, keeping sentences and paragraphs reasonably short and avoiding foreign phrases (e.g. de facto). (If you want to find out more there are Plain English resources available on National Adult Literacy Agency’s (NALA) website, www.nala.ie.)

Especially when communicating with the public, staff should avoid using jargon. We should also explain any abbreviations (e.g. SPC for Strategic Policy Committee) and acronyms (e.g. RAPID – see page 11). There are guidelines on the use of Plain English in the House Style Guide. There will be staff training in the use of Plain English in 2008.

Cavan Local Authorities will make sure that public events and consultations take place in venues that people with disabilities can access, with meeting space either at ground floor level or accessible by elevator (passenger lift) or by wheelchair lift. We will ask invitees in advance if they have participation needs, such as sign language interpretation or a loop system, and we will make them available if required.

To make communication easier for people with certain impairments, we will provide private consultation rooms for one-to-one communication with a staff member. We will encourage front line staff to use team meetings and the Performance Management Development System process to identify any training they may need in order to provide a quality service to customers who have literacy difficulties or other issues. We will also keep staff informed about where they can refer particular issues.

Cavan Local Authorities’ recruitment application forms ask if the applicant requires particular facilities or arrangements for interviews, such as wheelchair access. We are also aware of the difficulties some existing staff may have with our written communications, and we are taking steps to deal with this.

Cavan Local Authorities keep informed of the changing demographic profile of the population of the county. This may give rise to the need to supply services

and information in languages other than English or Irish. We believe that local authorities have a duty to meet the information needs of different sectors of society. A multi-agency approach will help us to help track the changing needs of the community and to plan co-ordinated responses.

5.3 Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

The Council's Corporate Plan asserts that information and communication technology (ICT) will be used as a "driver and a facilitator of development throughout the county". Cavan Local Authorities also aim to make the best use of ICT to deliver on communication objectives.

We now have web publishing guidelines which support our communication via ICT. The guidelines explain the key features of the local authorities' information and communication technology (ICT) design and outline a standard approach to style, writing and accessibility. They are a support for staff involved in the management and publication of web content, as well as personnel who post information on Cavan Local Authorities' websites. Much of the guidance is straightforward: for example, staff sign-off on emails should include staff positions, department and contact details. There is a summary of the guidelines in the House Style Guide, and the full guidelines are available on the intranet.

The intranet also contains a facility for creating email groups for sending text messages, for example, to councillors and members of the Community Forum and local authority committees. We can use this facility to provide information instantly and directly, and also to reduce the cost to the environment of paper copies.

At another level Cavan Local Authorities are involved in the promotion of broadband throughout the county, through the Knowledge Economy Working Group and through inter-agency work with other organisations.

6 External Communication

At present, Cavan Local Authorities do not have dedicated staff working in the area of communications, information or public relations, although we hope to have someone in place soon. This means that at the moment we do not have a centralised communication system. Instead, all departments share responsibility for communicating the message of the organisation. Some staff, especially those who work on the Front Desk, have very particular responsibilities.

Cavan Local Authorities' approach to communicating the message of the organisation includes the following features:

- We try to deal with **requests for information** promptly, fairly and systematically. Cavan Local Authorities operate a Customer Service Action Plan that commits us to providing quality customer services. It also sets response times, appropriate conduct and other standards.
- **Requests for interviews** from researchers or media representatives are referred to senior management or designated officers. It is they who decide on who is the appropriate interviewee.
- The local authorities' main **website** – www.cavancoco.ie – is kept up to date and is in line with accessibility guidelines.
- Everyone in the organisation answers the **telephone** in the same way: with a greeting (e.g. “good morning” or “good afternoon”), the name of the section, and the staff member's name.

6.1 Dealing with the media

Cavan Local Authorities adopt an open and honest approach to communication with members of the public and the media. The media help us to communicate our messages, so we need to maintain positive relationships with journalists, and to respect the function they perform in society.

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In County Cavan, the “Anglo Celt”, “Northern Sound Radio”, the “Cavan Echo”, “Cavan Life” and “Contemporary Living” are the main media players. Other regional print media, such as the “Meath Chronicle” and the “Drogheda Leader”, also take an interest in the events of County Cavan. Daily newspapers and national radio and television are interested mainly when an event of national significance takes place in the county.

Cavan Local Authorities take a proactive approach to celebrating achievements. We use different communication tools to highlight successes and developments in key areas. We seek to maximise positive media coverage by issuing news releases on major developments and policy change. We make particular efforts to apply for award schemes in order to generate positive publicity for the local authorities, or for the county as a whole. Examples include the Irish Business Against Litter awards, FÁS Excellence Through People, the O2 Ability Awards, and the NDA’s Excellence Through Accessibility Award. We see these as an added bonus to our work, rather than as an end in themselves.

6.2 Consultation and Participation

As this Strategy has already noted, good communication is a two-way process. As well as providing information on what we do, Cavan Local Authorities listen to the issues raised by the community and by other organisations. We do this through consultation processes that allow the opinions of others to be heard and documented, and to inform service delivery and policy development.

In particular, Cavan Local Authorities support community participation. The Health Service Executive defines community participation as

“A process by which people are enabled to become actively and genuinely involved in defining the issues of concern to them, in making decisions about factors that affect their lives, in formulating and implementing policies, in planning, developing and delivering services

and in taking action to achieve change” (Health Service Executive, Community Participation Guidelines, page 3).

Community participation is linked to the democratic process and complements the role of elected representatives. It encompasses both consultation and active citizenship processes.

Participation can mean different things. For example, it can mean letting people know what is taking place and asking for their comments or, at another level, it can involve looking for people’s input before any decisions are made. It can also involve working in partnership, engaging in dialogue and developing community voice. It helps to identify problems accurately and rallies the community round finding solutions. It is also an empowering process, as communities and individuals acquire skills, confidence and experience that are beneficial to subsequent development efforts.

The Government’s White Paper on Supporting Voluntary Activity endorses the concept of community participation:

“In the Government's vision of society, the ability of the Community and Voluntary sector to provide channels for the active involvement and participation of citizens is fundamental. **An active Community and Voluntary sector contributes to a democratic, pluralist society, provides opportunities for the development of decentralised and participative structures and fosters a climate in which the quality of life can be enhanced for all.** This is a key point. The Government regards statutory support of the Community and Voluntary sector as having an importance to the well-being of our society that goes beyond 'purchase' of services by this or that statutory agency” (White Paper, pages 9-10).[emphasis in original]

Structures such as Comhairle na nÓg, the CDB, Social Inclusion Measures Group [SIM] and the Strategic Policy Committees all support effective consultation and participation with members of the community. At the same

time, Cavan Local Authorities are developing guidelines on good practice in communicating with specific communities and sectoral interests in the county. We will give priority to strategies for consulting socially excluded groups identified through the Social Inclusion Measures [SIM] Group. In the spirit of encouraging fuller participation, we will seek to maximise the influence of the Community and Voluntary Forum, other existing liaison groups (e.g. CRAIC Advisory Group,⁴ Traveller Inter-agency Group etc.) and Cavan Library Service as ways of communicating and involving customers, particularly those who belong to socially excluded and marginalised groups.

The United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts that children have a right to express their views in all matters affecting them. Cavan Local Authorities intends to pay special attention to communicating with children, for example, ensuring that language used is accessible to them, and also by implementing a child protection policy.

6.3 Advertising

It is the policy of Cavan Local Authorities to include the Council crest in all advertising. We add other logos (e.g. European Union, Peace and Reconciliation Programme, National Development Plan) where appropriate and when contractual arrangements require it.

Recently, some sections of the local authorities have started to include Plain English versions of advertisements alongside legal and technical notices for planning and other issues. Over time the provision of Plain English versions will become a standard procedure.

⁴ CRAIC stands for Creating Reasonable Accommodation in Cavan. The CRAIC group aims to improve accessibility issues for people with disability.

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The Council will review its advertising (e.g. planning notices, road closures, recruitment) to ensure that all advertisements are presented in a consistent format.

6.4 Communicating in a Crisis

Sometimes Cavan Local Authorities have to give out information and advice in response to a crisis or emergency. This section of the Strategy contains guidance on how to handle such an incident, especially if it could have possible adverse effects for the local authorities, for example, in the event of an emergency regarding roads, housing, water, etc. Cavan Local Authorities seek to be proactive in handling sensitive information.

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If a crisis or emergency occurs, Cavan Local Authorities will take the following steps:

- Senior management will nominate a key person to deal with information queries. This person, or his/her nominee, will be the sole provider of information to the public during the period of the crisis.
- We will issue news releases as a matter of urgency, in order to prevent inaccurate speculation. News releases will give an accurate account of the incident.
- We will highlight any steps that the local authorities are taking to address the adverse effects of the crisis or emergency.
- We will keep the public informed of developments and the likely timescale of the adverse consequences.
- Senior management will be available for interviews or to comment on what is happening. Cavan Local Authorities will respond with appropriate information to any query and will not use the statement “no comment”, unless unavoidable. We will present an honest response in cases where we have not met our own targets or expectations.

6.5 Cavan Local Authorities' Image

Our systems and publications are not the only ways in which we promote a positive image of Cavan Local Authorities. Every employee needs to be aware that they are representing the image of the organisation when they are on duty. We need to dress and behave appropriately. Employees in frontline positions should be easily recognised as staff, for example, by wearing a name badge. Staff names badges have been introduced recently. Above all, we must build on our existing reputation of being helpful, patient, informative and good listeners, displaying a positive attitude to the people with whom we come into contact.

7 Promotional Work

7.1 Publications

As mentioned before, Cavan Local Authorities have developed a “house style” for all publications, apart from cases where there is specific reason for diversifying (for example, to give a unique identity to a local authority initiative). The House Style Guide outlines the overall approach, covering matters such as the type of font to use, text size, layout and colour scheme.

The Council Crest should feature prominently on the front page of all local authority publications, with acknowledgement where appropriate of other stakeholders, e.g. National Development Plan, Border Action, Peace and Reconciliation Programme.

We will provide printing companies which are contracted by the local authorities with the House Style Guide. This will help to achieve consistency in corporate branding.

7.2 Events

When we run public events, Cavan Local Authorities are on view for all to see. It is important that we do this well.

We need to think carefully about the timing and location of events, so that they suit the target audience. For example, we can locate events on public transport routes, and pay attention to school holiday times for events aimed at parents. All venues we use will be accessible to people with disabilities [See page 14]. Whenever it is appropriate, we will provide a reception desk or welcoming point, and have staff primed to greet guests.

Display stands help to promote the corporate identity of the Council. The portable display stand produced by Corporate Affairs is available to all sections of Cavan Local Authorities for use at public events [See page 7].

8 Improving Communication in the Local Authorities

We have many ways of making sure that we have a good standard of internal communication in Cavan Local Authorities. These include:

- the line management system
- the Workplace Partnership newsletter
- the intranet facilities
- a searchable internal phone and email directory
- a Staff and Councillors Library (opening later in 2008).

Staff also get circulars on policy change and other developments.

The Performance Management Development System (PMDS) aims to support professional development. It is part of the public service modernisation programme. Performance Management Development System (PMDS) helps to make sure that there is good communication between staff, line managers and senior management. It clarifies issues such as work goals and progress on achieving them, and also offers a way for staff to identify training needs.

Cavan Local Authorities' staff want to improve cross-sectional communication. Committees and working groups which involve staff from different sections are an effective way of improving internal communication. At the moment cross-sectional groups include the Creating Reasonable Accommodation in Cavan (CRAIC) Team, the Irish Language Committee, a Website Committee, Department Heads Group, Business Planning Group, the Social Inclusion Working Group and a Contact Management System Committee.

The Contact Management System is a computer based communication system for logging and responding to information queries. It also helps to promote effective internal communication [See page 11]. Cavan Local Authorities' IT policy outlines appropriate use of internet and email facilities.

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From time to time there are staff surveys which aim to find out employees' views on various subjects. There is a section on the intranet which publicises internal surveys. Visiting it is a good way of keeping up to date with developments in Cavan Local Authorities and the issues they work on.

One of our most pressing challenges concerns how we as an organisation coordinate our work programmes. We must avoid duplicating inconvenience for communities that results in comments such as "they are digging up the road again". We can do this by ensuring that all sections of Cavan Local Authorities are aware of each other's programme of work. We intend to do this through an online corporate diary, in which all sections can post information on planned activities. Through better external communication, we can also try to improve our awareness of the work programmes of other stakeholders that may impact on an area or community.

8.1 Staff Training

Cavan Local Authorities' Training Co-ordinator keeps records of staff training requests and uses them to develop a training plan for each year. In recent times Cavan Local Authorities staff have been able to benefit from many kinds of training. Some of the main initiatives are listed below.

- Frontline staff have received training in adult literacy awareness.
- Many staff have undergone Disability Equality Training, and there are plans for more courses throughout 2008.
- 15 staff members have received training in the needs of mobility-impaired road users.
- Five staff members are undertaking a Diploma in Irish Language in National University Ireland in Galway.
- Outdoor staff can participate in a Return to Learning scheme, run jointly with the Vocational Educational Committee (VEC) and Workplace Partnership.

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- Contact management staff have been trained in customer care.
- There were leadership programmes in 2006 and 2007.

Cavan Local Authorities want this Strategy to be effective. To make this happen staff may look for training supports in areas such as:

- using the House Style Guide
- media skills (so that key staff can deal more appropriately with the media)
- presentation skills
- literacy awareness
- accessibility
- the use of Plain English
- language training (in English, Irish or other languages).

The Official Languages Act requires us to offer a service in the Irish language. Some staff may need training in order to be able to conduct business with Irish language speakers. We are also considering the possibility of training frontline staff in sign language.

8.2 Monitoring the Effectiveness of Communication

Cavan Local Authorities wants to make sure that this Strategy is working well. We will collect helpful data such as:

- the number of times a newsletter is produced, and how many copies are sent out
- the frequency of updating website content
- the number of people participating in consultation sessions.

We will track progress on the action plan by:

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- conducting customer satisfaction surveys
- monitoring media coverage, and keeping copies of press cuttings related to Council business in a central file. We will pay attention to the proportion of coverage that is positive, neutral or negative
- consulting with key groups to make sure that we are meeting their information needs
- reviewing the Strategy from time to time.

The Contact Management System, which generates a log of queries and response times, also helps in monitoring progress. At the end of each month, each department using the system, and its Director of Service, gets a report outlining the number of queries that have been addressed, and those waiting to be addressed.

9 Conclusion

This part of the Information and Communication Strategy and Action Plan outlined Cavan Local Authorities' approach to communication. The next part identifies the actions we are undertaking. Taken together, we are confident that they will improve how Cavan Local Authorities as an organisation communicate with different individuals and groups. We hope that the Strategy will be a useful resource for staff and will help us all to communicate better.

10 References

The team which devised this Strategy referred to many publications and other documents. A full list of references is available from Emer Coveney, ecoveney@cavancoco.ie , ext 8581.

11 Action Plan

Cavan Local Authorities' Information and Communication Strategy and Action Plan is a live document which will change over time as priorities and circumstances alter. This section gives details of the actions which are vital at the start of the Strategy's life.

11.1 Main actions

Action	Responsibility	Timeframe
Set up a Communication Group with representatives from the different Directorates.	C&E	2008
Secure funding to employ a Communication Officer (possibly via LANPAG, the Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group).	Communication Group and Equality Officer	2008

11.2 Actions related to Section 5 (Providing Information)

Action	Responsibility	Timeframe
Prepare a scheme on how to provide services in Irish, informed by the Official Languages Act 2003.	Corporate Affairs	2008
<p>Undertake accessibility audits on all Cavan Local Authorities websites.</p> <p>Set up annual live user testing of websites.</p> <p>Develop training on “Writing for the Web”.</p>	IT	Annually
Seek quotations for printing on both recycled and ordinary paper.	All sections	Ongoing
<p>Ensure that all signage meets the standards set in Cavan Local Authorities’ Signage Checklist.</p> <p>Use the Signage Brief Template at all times when ordering professional signage systems.</p> <p>Review key Council forms and documents to consider publication in languages other than English.</p>	All sections	Ongoing

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Action	Responsibility	Timeframe
Use Census data to find out about ethnic communities in County Cavan, and their language needs.	Community & Enterprise	2007 onwards
Ask the National Disability Authority and the CRAIC Team's Advisory Group to check the final draft of this Strategy for accessibility to local people with disabilities.	Communication Group	2008
Explore how best to provide information for people moving to County Cavan, to include maps and notes on matters such as amenities, recycling, planning and joining the electoral register. This might take the form of a "welcome pack" or a county guide.	Interagency basis through the County Development Board	2008
Explore the potential of having a dedicated page on the work of Cavan Local Authorities in the <i>Anglo Celt</i> .	Corporate Affairs	2008
<p>Undertake an audit of local authority documents.</p> <p>Prioritise them for publication in Plain English, in summary versions, Irish or other languages, and in formats other than standard print.</p>	CRAIC Team	2007-2008

Action	Responsibility	Timeframe
Review procedures for issuing public notices, prioritising those to be issued in an emergency.	Area Offices	2008

11.3 Actions related to Section 6 (External Communication)

Action	Responsibility	Timeframe
Develop a listing of local and regional media contacts, journalists and printers, and distribute it to staff. Update it annually.	Corporate Affairs	2008
Seek comment or suggestion forms from customers in the main reception areas. Review comments regularly and take action as appropriate.	Corporate Affairs	2008
Look into the model used in County Kildare to set up a research and statistics office for use by members of the Cavan CDB.	Community & Enterprise	2009

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Action	Responsibility	Timeframe
<p>Make the issue of improving communication with, and the participation of, socially excluded groups a key priority of the Cavan Local Anti-Poverty Strategy.</p>	<p>Social Inclusion Unit</p>	<p>2008-2009</p>
<p>Make sure that Cavan Local Authorities' advertising, including job applications, follows a consistent format.</p>	<p>Communications Officer / All Sections</p>	<p>When appointed</p>
<p>Develop a consultation strategy for use by all sections of Cavan Local Authorities. Include examples of good practice in consulting key target groups.</p>	<p>Community & Enterprise Planning</p>	<p>2008-2009</p>
<p>Make sure that staff know they should answer telephone calls in a consistent way. This means that they should greet the caller with "good morning" or "good afternoon", state the name of the section, and the staff member's name.</p>	<p>All staff</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>

11.4 Actions related to Section 7 (Promotional Work)

Action	Responsibility	Timeframe
<p>Draw down a specific budget for the development of the corporate image and for the promotion of Cavan Local Authorities, to include annual communication costs (e.g. advertising, printing etc).</p>	<p>Corporate Affairs</p>	<p>2008</p>
<p>Develop a Style Library, to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a library of images (e.g. photographs, drawings) that support the corporate branding of the Council. This could include illustrations, images of projects, events, infrastructural development and so on, all of which can provide a visual element to corporate communications a template, and elements of standard text, for press releases and advertisements • intranet versions of publication templates which follow Cavan Local Authorities' house style . 	<p>IT</p>	<p>2008</p>

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Action	Responsibility	Timeframe
<p>Provide at least one feature a year on a positive aspect of each Directorate's work to a local authority publication (e.g. <i>Council Review Journal, Local Authority News</i>).</p> <p>Encourage cross-sectional awareness by publicising each feature in advance on the intranet.</p>	All Directorates	Ongoing
<p>Use only fully accessible venues for public meetings organised by Cavan Local Authorities.</p> <p>Ask invitees in advance if they require participation supports, and supply them as needed.</p>	All staff	Ongoing

11.5 Actions related to Section 8 (Improving Communication in the Local Authorities)

Action	Responsibility	Timeframe
<p>Develop a protocol for considering the communication requirements of new initiatives from the start of each project. Ask sections to give reasons if there is to be no communication plan.</p> <p>Include communication actions in business plans.</p>	All sections	Mid 2008 onwards
<p>Make all staff of Cavan Local Authorities aware of this Strategy.</p>	Communication Group	2008
<p>Review the Contact Management System before it is rolled out to all departments. The review should include consideration of how staff are allocated to the Front Desk.</p>	Subcommittee established to review CMS	Ongoing
<p>Produce an monthly Corporate Diary, and calendars of events.</p>	<p>Corporate Affairs</p> <p>Arts Office</p>	2008
<p>Look into the need for sign language training for frontline staff.</p>	Corporate Affairs	Ongoing

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Action	Responsibility	Timeframe
Provide media training to the Chair and Vice Chair of Cavan County Council prior to taking up their posts.	Corporate Affairs	2008
Identify how Council meetings, together with the Corporate Policy Group, can promote Cavan Local Authorities' policies, plans and work.	Senior Management Team / Corporate Policy Group	2008
Provide training in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dealing with telephone queries • report writing • Plain English • media skills. 	Corporate Affairs	Ongoing