

HIGHLANDS & ISLANDS FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE



Talkback

A STRATEGY FOR EFFECTIVE INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

BACKGROUND

Highlands & Islands Fire and Rescue Service recognises the importance that internal communication plays within the success of the organisation. The responsibility for this currently lies with Corporate Services Department.

It is now time to review progress and identify the next stage of development for the organisation. On reflection, internal communication within the organisation is generally effective but has scope for improvement. Mention must be made of some of the historically inherent barriers to effective communication within the organisation in order to provide some context with regard to some of the ineffectiveness of current communication. Firstly, the geographical spread of our stations and other buildings is not conducive to simple communication. Secondly, the lack of access to information technology on Fire Service premises has restricted our ability to communicate.

This policy has been shaped and developed by the Communication Forum prior to formal approval with the organisation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The success of the Highlands & Islands Fire and Rescue Service is built upon effective communication. ‘Talkback’ is a corporate strategy based on communication that applies to all people within the Service.

The guide incorporates a number of guidelines as outlined below.

The Internal Communication Strategy will:

- Support the aims and objectives of the Board.
- Demonstrate our commitment to communicate to all of our employees.
- Endorse communication as a priority for Highlands & Islands Fire & Rescue Service.
- Be reflected in service delivery at all levels of the Board/Service.
- Provide communication guidance to all sections and employees of the Board/Service.
- Provide information to all sections on the corporate communication activity planned.

2. RESPONSIBILITIES

CORPORATE SERVICES HAS RESPONSIBILITY FOR THIS POLICY HOWEVER THE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGY IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF EACH DEPARTMENT AND EACH EMPLOYEE OF THE SERVICE.

2.1 DEPARTMENT HEADS MUST TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION WITHIN THEIR AREAS OF WORK. THEY WILL ALSO:

- Ensure that all staff are fully aware of the communication guidelines and act upon them.
- Provide feedback to the Chief Fire Officer to assist with the development and implementation of future communication activities.
- Ensure that internal channels of communication enable employees to be informed, and to express their views and opinions on internal procedures, policies and practices.

2.2 KEY PRINCIPLES

The key principles of the ‘Talkback’ strategy are:

- Encourage honest and open, two-way communication.
- All communication – spoken, written, electronic – should be simple, clear, easily understood, appropriate and up-to-date.
- Appropriate listening and consulting.
- Wherever possible, information should be shared.

2.3 KEY AIMS

- To develop, improve and maintain clear channels of communication amongst our personnel.
- To provide our employees with the right information at the right time to enable them to undertake their roles effectively.
- To become an organisation which creates, manages and utilises information and communication to achieve its aims.

2.4 THE USE OF SERVICE MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT) AS A SERVICE WIDE COMMUNICATION GROUP

The existing SMT will facilitate the flow of communication through the organisation.

The SMT's **Terms of Reference**, to assist in the communications flow are as follows:

- To assist in the implementation of all aspects of the 'Talkback' strategy within the organisation, (with advice and support from the Performance Information Management Department).
- To liaise effectively with their personnel to identify any communication requirements.
- To work with the Performance Information Management Department on communication activities relating to their personnel to ensure effective communication practice within their Departments.

The SMT will meet fortnightly, with internal communication as a standing agenda item, they will discuss

- the information from minutes provided of all meetings within the organisation for that period;
- upcoming issues for internal communication;
- communication updates from each member of the group, on corporate issues.

All SMT members will be responsible for ensuring that minutes taken at the meeting of the group for which they are the lead officer eg. IT and Communication Group, Service Support Group and Service Delivery Group etc, for example, are sent to the Performance Information Management Department as soon as they are available.

3. COMMUNICATIONS

3.1 WHY DO WE NEED TO COMMUNICATE?

Effective communication underpins everything we do and is the key to our future success. All our personnel need to be actively engaged within the communication process (talking, reading and listening) to ensure they understand the direction the organisation wishes to be in and what is expected of them.

The creation, storage, dissemination and use of information through effective communication enables the organisation to use this knowledge to make effective managerial decisions on a daily basis. This improves the value of the service to the community and will result in maximum satisfaction for employees on a job well done. The use of communication is vital in the creation of a corporate identity - the 'we feeling' – that is vital to our continued success. A sense of involvement and belonging makes for a happier and more successful working environment.

Although communications and consultation require time and money, done well, they offer many benefits. They can:

- Improve organisational performance – time spent communicating at the outset of a new project or development can minimise subsequent rumour and misunderstanding.
- Improve management performance and decision making – allowing personnel to express their views can help managers arrive at sound decisions which can more readily be understood and accepted by personnel as a whole; this may be particularly important at times of emergency or where new practices or procedures are being introduced.
- Improve employees' performance and contribution – employees will perform better if they are given regular, accurate information about their jobs such as updated technical instructions, targets, deadlines and feedback. Their contribution is also likely to be enhanced if they know what the organisation is trying to achieve and how they, as individuals, can influence decisions.
- Help develop greater trust – discussing issues of common interest and allowing employees an opportunity of expressing their views can engender improved management/employee relations.
- Increase job satisfaction – employees are more likely to be motivated if they have a good understanding of their job and how it fits into the organisation as a whole and are actively encouraged to express their views and ideas.

3.2 STANDARDS OF INFORMATION

Communication can be as simple or as difficult as you wish to make it. In order to establish basic standards when providing information all employees should endeavour to undertake the following:

- To provide accurate, relevant and clear information to all personnel.
- To provide information in simple, easy to understand language.
- To provide information in formats that are easily accessible and appropriate.
- To be proactive in producing information.
- To share information throughout the organisation and ensure information is made available to others who may need it.

3.3 STANDARD USE OF LANGUAGE

All employees must make every effort to use plain language in all communications as it is:

- Simpler to read
- Easier to understand
- Conveys messages in a sociable/non-confrontational way

4. INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Internal communication refers to the ways in which we exchange information in order to do our jobs well and to provide good service to our personnel.

We all need to know what we are required to do to meet the needs of the organisation. We also need to know how, where, when and why. Often in an organisation like ours, people like to know lots of things that they do not actually need to know to do their jobs. Receiving only snippets of information causes confusion, misinterpretation, and fosters rumour.

Communication is a two-way process. As a result, face-to-face briefings and discussions between managers and personnel are the most effective ways of communicating. Even then, the success of such briefings relies on the quality of information and the messages being given, and the communication commitment of those participating in the process.

4.1 BEFORE DISSEMINATING ANY PIECE OF INFORMATION, WE SHOULD FIRST CONSIDER:

1. What is the message to be communicated?
2. Who is the target audience?
3. Who is the sender?
4. What is the medium?
5. How will the feedback be obtained?

4.2 HOW WILL WE KNOW WHO NEEDS TO KNOW WHAT?

Information is a structured means by which the organisation can determine what group of personnel needs to receive what information. The organisation will use different means to communicate different messages based upon speed and breadth of dissemination required. The following will be employed within Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service:

Core Information

Type: It is essential that this information is made available to all employees within the organisation. This information is required for employees to effectively undertake their role within the organisation and it is vital that all are given equal opportunity to access it.

Example: Any key changes in legislation or major changes within the organisation such as the introduction of the Integrated Personal Development System.

Communication Methods:

- Website
- Department/Station briefings
- Notice boards
- Hard copy to stations and departments
- E-mail
- Policies and Procedures
- Service Orders
- Aide Memoirs

Timeframe: This information will be made available within 10 working days or less.

General Information

Type: This information is useful for employees to know but is not essential for them to undertake their roles effectively. This information will allow for informed discussion.

Example: Issues relating to employee relations such as the pay award or job vacancies.

Communication Methods:

- Website
- Notice boards
- E-mail
- Department/Station Meetings
- Staff Newsletter
- Departmental Briefing Bulletins

Timeframe: This information will be made available within 10 working days or less.

Management Information

Type: This information is required at a management level within the organisation to make departmental decisions. This information will then be disseminated throughout the organisation on a needs basis.

Example: The development of organisational strategy and policy or decisions with regard to budgets.

Communication Methods:

- Service Plan
- Website
- E-mail
- Meetings and Minutes
- Service Management Team Minutes
- Fire Authority Minutes
- Through various groups agenda items i.e. Service Support/Service Delivery Meetings
- Staff Newsletter

Timeframe: This information will be made available as directed by the information provider.

Executive Information

Type: This information is required at the highest level within the organisation to make key strategic decisions. It will be used only by Executive Command, Service Management Team and the Elected Members. This information will be disseminated throughout the organisation on a needs basis.

Example: The discussion of national strategy / political decisions that affect the organisation i.e. Fire Board Pink Papers.

Communication Methods:

- Service Plan
- Fire Authority Meetings and minutes
- Executive Command Minutes
- Service Management Team minutes
- Dear Chief Officer Letters
- E-mail
- Scottish Parliament policy guidance

Timeframe: This information will be made available as directed by the information provider.

5. IMPROVING COMMUNICATION WITH ALL OUR EMPLOYEES

The geographical spread and the shift patterns operated within the organisation make it more difficult to establish a standard form of communication flow. It is vital that all groups within the organisation are able to access the information they require at a corporate and individual level. This will ensure that all employees and groups are engaged, have the information required to undertake their roles and feel part of the wider organisation.

The following process and set of communication channels has been designed to make information more freely available to the person who requires it to undertake their roles.

5.1 FACE TO FACE COMMUNICATION

Face to face communication is the most effective form, as the provider of the information is able to give it a context. This minimises the likelihood of misunderstanding and also engenders more of a commitment to the majority of receivers of the communication; they are more likely to feel engaged if time and effort is taken to personally explain key messages to them. The organisation places a great value on the use of face-to-face communication and it is one of the key elements of improving communication 'Talkback'. It is therefore fundamental to the success of the strategy that all core information released via the SMT must be communicated not only via team meetings / briefings but also via the Website and other channels identified.

5.2 GUIDELINES FOR FACE-TO-FACE COMMUNICATION

Face-to-face communication is both direct and swift. It should enable discussion, questioning and feedback to take place but ought to be supplemented by written material where information is detailed or complex and where records are important.

When spoken methods are used it is important that:

- The chain of communication is as short as possible.
- The frequency and timing of meetings are carefully considered.
- Managers are fully briefed on their subjects and able to put them across clearly and consistently.
- Opportunities are provided for questions and feedback.
- Employees are given adequate information and with sufficient notice to enable them to respond properly.

5.3 METHODS OF FACE TO FACE COMMUNICATIONS

The following methods of face-to-face communication will be used within the organisation to communicate core information.

(i) FORTNIGHTLY SMT UPDATE

The SMT meeting will be used as the primary method of communication for Senior Managers within the organisation. Attendance at this meeting is therefore compulsory and if a SMT member is unable to attend, they must appoint someone to deputise for them.

(ii) SERVICE DELIVERY MEETINGS

This group meets every four weeks. It is responsible for policy development and implementation. It also serves as an internal communication forum and is responsible for the management of departments, districts, stations and Community Response Units.

(iii) SERVICE SUPPORT

This group meets every four weeks and has the same broad responsibilities as Service Delivery outlined above.

(iv) AREA / DEPARTMENT BRIEFINGS

The SMT members will brief Group Managers / Section Heads following their SMT meeting. They will discuss all core information provided by the SMT Group and any other relevant issues.

These updates will be supported by core information being available to all via the established communication channels for this type of information.

(v) DEPARTMENT BRIEFINGS / STATION BRIEFINGS

Department / station briefings are a key process by which managers will inform their staff of all the relevant core and general information that is available within the organisation. They will also be a vital means of ensuring a two-way flow of information / communication within the organisation.

The briefings will take place monthly, however any core or general information which requires dissemination must be made available within the timeframe of 10 working days or less.

(vi) CHIEF'S EVENING MEETING

On a quarterly basis, 10 members of staff will be invited for a meeting with the Chief Fire Officer (travel expenses will be paid for). The Performance Information Management Department will select the group from a wide cross section of the organisation and subject to availability of rotas and so forth. The meeting will last one and a half hours. Prior to attending, each representative will be invited to provide the Performance Information Management Department with a list of questions

I like...
I don't like...
I wish ...

This will allow the CFO to have prior notice of the issues about to be raised and will allow him to access information to provide the necessary response.

Staff will be briefed about the arrangements before attending the meeting, and will be encouraged to raise 'bigger picture' issues rather than individual matters and issues that should be dealt with through the normal channels. All issues raised, and their responses will be made available by the Performance Information Management Department.

6. THE USE OF SECONDARY FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

6.1 E-MAIL

E-mail can be an extremely powerful tool, but, if abused, can also form a massive waste of resources. Its strength is in providing the opportunity to share information with one or more colleagues quickly and efficiently. The effectiveness of e-mail within the organisation is also reduced through a lack of access to e-mail facilities by all employees. The benefits are dissipated when inboxes are full of inconsequential material that individuals do not have the time to open. Because it is so simple to use, employees must not fall into the trap of overusing this resource.

Do use email to

- Share information / documents / files with a colleague or a group of colleagues.
- Leave important messages for a colleague who may be out or unavailable. However, senders of emails should use the tracking option to ensure that their message has been opened.

Don't use e mail if

- The issue can be dealt with more effectively in person, either by face-to-face or over the phone.
- You are going to say unpleasant things you would not say to your colleagues face.
- It is used as a form of disempowerment – do not copy other people into e-mails who are not involved in the decision or do not really need to know. Copied e-mails should not be used as a form of protection or buck-passing.

6.2 WEBSITE

The website facility within the organisation is used widely by most employees to access information and to communicate throughout the organisation. There are limitations to the effective use of this resource in its present capacity:

- Not all employees have direct access i.e. at station level and not all employees have consistent access to the use of technological resources.
- The content is managed by one individual who also undertakes a number of other tasks within the Performance Information Management Department. This results in a lack of significant development and publishing problems. It is not possible to undertake the organisations requirements with this level of resource.
- Suggestions Box available on the website.

The following use of the Website will be developed within the organisation:

- Provision of write access to Departments / functions to allow them to update the website. This will allow timelier update and release resource within the Performance Information Management Department to concentrate on development issues.
- Provision of a page for each department / station on the website. It will be the responsibility of each department to appoint a member of staff to be their own webmaster and update their own sites with the latest information and delete any information that is no longer relevant.
- The search engine will be improved to make it easier for users to locate documents on the website.
- Research into the production of a ‘Discussion Forum’ between staff, and including Principal Officers, will be undertaken with the intention of developing such a facility.

It should be noted that during 2006 the Service are developing an intranet that will further enhance communications.

6.3 NOTICEBOARDS

The use of notice boards is often overlooked as an effective communications tool as information tends to date quickly. They are accessible to all staff and a good way in which to promote both corporate and local messages and information. Notice boards will form part of this communication strategy and be used in the following way:

- All departments / Stations will have a notice board located in an accessible part of the building.
- The Performance Information Management Department will be responsible for distributing any corporate communication / information to all departments / areas, to be placed on the board.

- Each department / function / station will nominate a person(s) responsible for updating the notice boards in departments / functions / stations and forward the name to the Performance Information Management Department.

6.4 STAFF NEWSLETTER

A staff newsletter is an effective way in which employees can be communicated with on a broad scale. It enables the organisation to communicate important corporate messages as well as matters of personal and general interests to encourage ownership and participation from employees. The newsletter will:

- Be developed and co-ordinated by the Performance Information Management Department.
- Carry important corporate messages.
- Be released on a quarterly basis.
- Be made available via the website and in hard copy.
- Circulated to all stations in hardcopy.
- Encourage participation and suggested features from employees.
- Also be issued to Fire Board Members, Councillors and Retired Members Association.

6.5 CHIEF'S UPDATE

The importance of regular communication cannot be overstated given the geographical spread of the organisation. The organisation wishes to hear what the main issues facing the organisation are and what we are doing to tackle them, with the communication and information being provided on a regular basis. Employees are also keen to hear the Chief Fire Officer's view on such issues and identify with his thoughts. In order to introduce this regular channel of communication the Chief's Update forum will be used. It will:

- Be a summary of the issues affecting the organisation at that time.
- Be produced on a quarterly basis, or more frequently if required.
- Be co-ordinated by the Performance Information Management Department.
- Be available via the website and hard copy to all stations.
- The newsletter can be utilised for the update.

7. INDIVIDUAL COMMUNICATION STANDARDS

The development of set standards for communication will ensure that all individuals are aware of the organisation's expectation of them within their everyday working environment. All employees of Highland and Islands Fire and Rescue Service will be expected to follow the communication standards, as set out below.

- Everyone in the organisation is accountable for the effectiveness of his or her own communication. This especially applies to those who manage others.
- Unless told otherwise, managers are authorised and encouraged to communicate.
- Communication about significant happenings needs to be thoroughly planned. Being too busy is not an acceptable excuse for inadequate or ineffective communication.
- There is unlikely to be an effective exchange of meaning or understanding unless there is discussion and the opportunity for questions to be asked and answers obtained. Encourage discussion and two-way communication.
- We need to actively obtain feedback and listen effectively to what is being said - listening is critically important for good communication.
- Employees should always be able to say what is on their minds without retribution. We must not stifle discussion or debate.
- All communication must be truthful, with the impact and consequences of communication determined in advance and taken into account.
- When communicating, all employees should bear in mind our equality policy, which states that everyone should be treated with dignity and respect.

The Communication Standards will:

- Be made available to employee by the Performance Information Management Department;
- Be widely publicised through various visual messages and;
- The Performance Information Management Department will arrange a series of presentations at various locations to remind people of their responsibilities and exemplify positive methods of communication.

8. TRAINING REQUIREMENTS

Training of employees in the use of communications will be required to deliver more effective communication within the organisation. The following will be undertaken:

- A short-term training needs analysis exercise to determine any key deficiencies. This will be undertaken by the Development Department.
- The implementation of the Integrated Personal Development System will cater for long-term personal training needs.

Training will be provided to all employees who require it to ensure that communication skills are developed as a key personal and organisational competency.

9. EVALUATION

The evaluation of communication is notoriously difficult, however it is crucial in order to ensure that this strategy is achieving its aims and that constant improvements can be made. The success of this strategy will be reviewed in the following manner.

- i. Through the achievement of all time-bound actions contained within the Internal Communication Workplan (available from the Performance Information Management Department).
- ii. Through a communications audit which will be undertaken on an annual basis by the Performance Information Management Department, via a questionnaire and station visits. This will provide the baseline for comparison of employee satisfaction with internal communication on an annual basis and allow a cause and effect approach to be taken to improving communications within the organisation.
- iii. Through qualitative feedback gained via the various working groups within the Service.
- iv. Through the use of the structured de-brief process.
- v. Through a series of performance indicators which will measure areas such as number of hits on the website.

These are initial measures and will be further developed as the strategy is implemented.

9.1 FEEDBACK OF EVALUATION

- Suggestion Box.
- The results of all evaluations will be fed back through the Service Support Group and bulletin boards.
- All feedback will be core information and made available to all employees.