



# Effective Communications

## A qualitative research presentation

Prepared for:  
Spelthorne Borough Council

# Objectives

## ***Business objective:***

- To develop, through consultation with residents, a communication strategy that ensures that the communication budget is used in the most effective way

## ***Research objectives:***

- To establish the sources from which residents currently pick up information from the Council, exploring for each:
  - Suitability as an information vehicle for Council issues
  - Credibility of the information
  - Influence over residents' behaviour
  - Optimisation
- With regard to local newspapers specifically, to determine:
  - How free and paid-for newspapers compare, in terms of their appropriateness and value as information vehicles
  - What parts of a newspaper residents tend to read and take most notice of
- To identify any other potential information vehicles which residents would value

# How are perceptions of the Council formed?

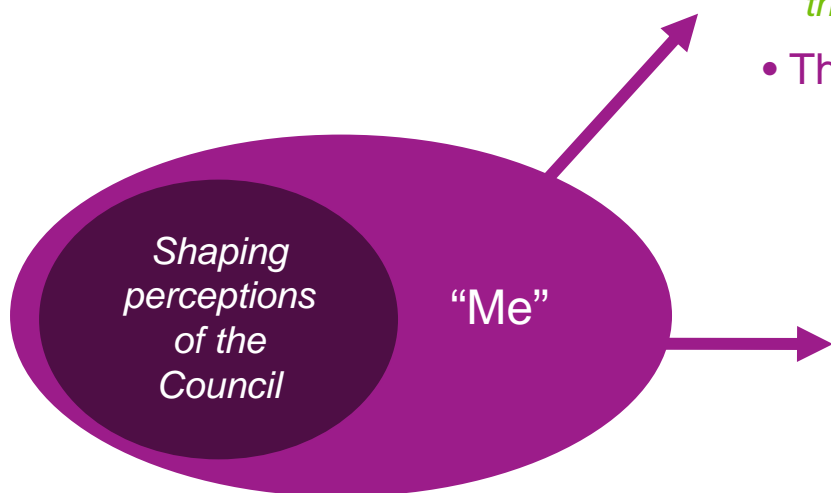
Residents are most influenced by the events that affect them directly on a day-to-day basis

## Personal experience

- They see what is happening in the Community first-hand  
*"We drive, we use the parking, we have to drive on the roads, so that's how we get our experience"*
- They have experience dealing with the Council, eg.
  - Being slow to respond to complaints
  - Not coming down hard enough on troublemakers

## Other people's experiences

- Another form of 'first-hand' information

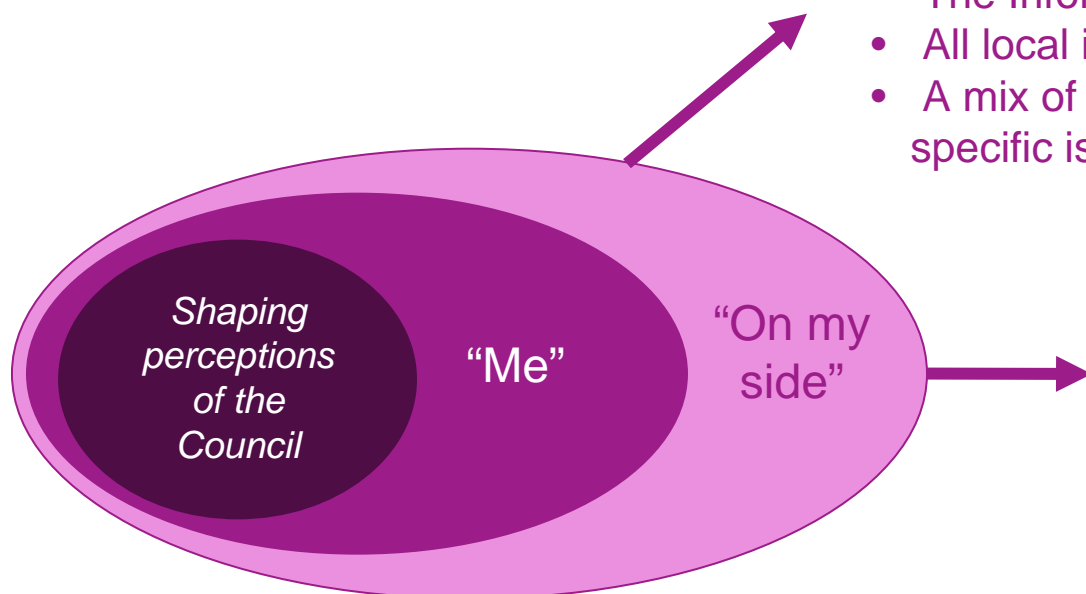


# How are perceptions of the Council formed? (cont'd)

Residents are also persuaded by the information sources they perceive to be independent, or on the side of the consumer

## *The local papers*

- The Informer, The Herald, The Guardian, etc.
- All local information that is relevant to residents
- A mix of fact, editorial, and the public's view on specific issues



## *The national news – newspaper and television*

- For a view on the broader context in which the Council operates

# How are perceptions of the Council formed? (cont'd)

And finally, a selection of key Council communications cut through to inform residents about what the Council is actually doing

## *The SBC Bulletin*

- The 'mouthpiece' of the Council

## *The SBC website*

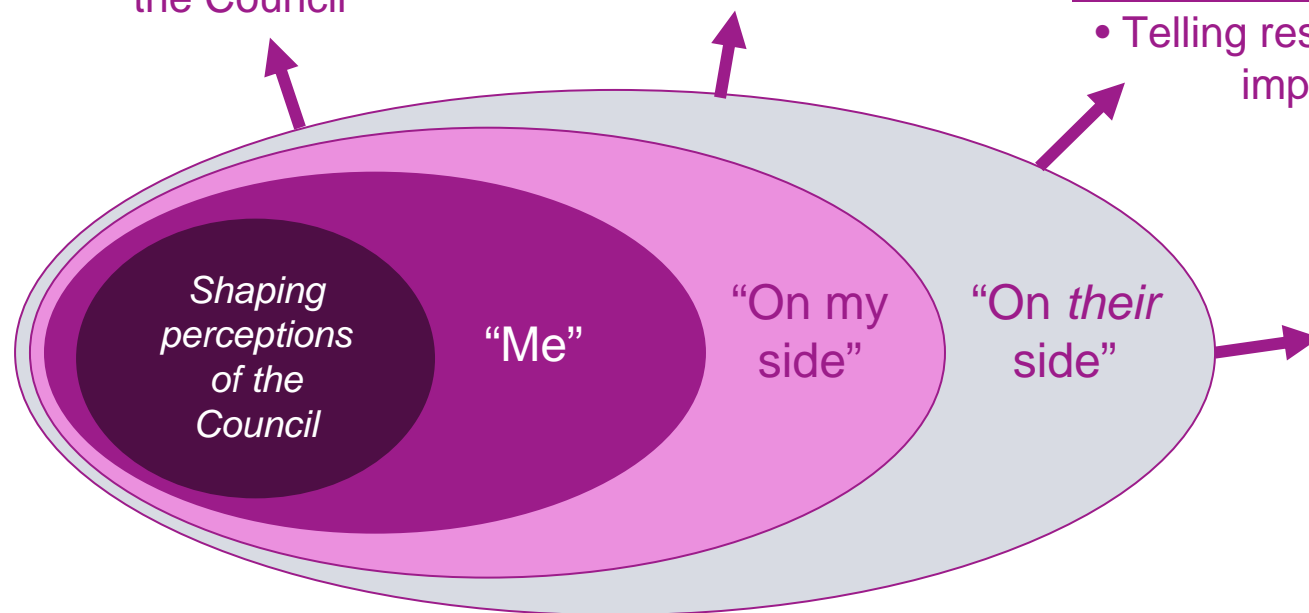
- Residents' direct link to the Council

## *Door to door leaflet drops*

- Telling residents 'what's important'

## *Promotional newspaper wrap-arounds*

- Pushing key Council issues into people's 'line of vision'



The above mechanisms are currently working hardest for the Council. Other items, such as the A-Z guide, Leisure Directory, notice boards, bus shelters, public flyers, post cards etc. are taken in sporadically, if at all

# Overview of current communications from the Council

## Potential to keep / develop further



- The Bulletin
- The A-Z guide / Leisure Directory
- The SBC website
- Door to door leaflet drops
- Promotional newspaper wrap-arounds

## Potential to discontinue / reduce



- Public flyers / postcards / newspaper inserts
- Roadshows
- Notice boards
- Council leaflets
- Borough Guide

# The Bulletin keeps residents in touch with what is happening around the Borough

*“They are accountable and that is how they tell us about what they’re doing”*

- ✓ An official account of the Council’s activities within the Borough
  - “Safety, policing, little pie charts on where your money’s spent”*
- ✓ A small magazine that can be ‘flicked through’ with ease
- ✓ Moderate readership – highest within the retired / post nester group
- ✓ For some, a handy reference to hold onto
  - “Maybe the change of opening times of say the leisure centre, or whatever”*
- ✓ Credible – because it is from the Council
  - “It’s in black and white and it must be correct, even if they have omitted something”*

- ✗ Can be out of date
- ✗ Boring to read (particularly strong feeling in the pre-nester and younger family groups)
- ✗ Only tells you the good news
  - “They’re not going to say that somebody was beaten up, they only tell you how many police are on the streets”*
- ✗ Flimsy, and easy to dismiss as ‘not serious’ enough to bother with
- ✗ A waste of paper for some – particularly alongside the push for waste reduction



## People do not distinguish between the A-Z Guide and Leisure Directory, but believe they are worthwhile resources

- ✓ Both are seen to be handy guides to services within the Borough
- ✓ Direct telephone numbers, not switchboard numbers

*“You know exactly where to go”*



- ✗ There is perceived to be overlap between the two resources
- ✗ Little to no awareness of either resource
- ✗ For the Leisure Directory, very few would take the initiative to go out of their way to obtain it

### ***Optimisation of the A-Z guide and Leisure Directory***

Residents feel that an *integrated* A-Z guide + Leisure Directory would be a better use of Council spend

***“Stop producing all these other ones ... put the cost into something that’s going to be more beneficial in the long run”***

- All the information would be in the one place  
*“You know where to go for the information, otherwise, ‘Oh did you see that flier? Did you see that book?’ Or ‘It’s in that book, in that book.’”*
- Might improve its chances of being noticed and taken seriously – especially if developed into a thicker document (eg. even using a card cover, similar to the phone book)  
*“If it’s got a bit of substance to it then you sort of think, oh what’s in here then? Why is this so big?”*

# Residents feel that the SBC website meets their information needs well

*“I would much prefer going straight to the website”*

- ✓ Is seen to contain the full range of information relating to the Council
- ✓ Easy – all the information is at your fingertips
  - “You haven’t got to be on the phone and get passed around”*
- ✓ Information is seen to be up to date
- ✓ Economical and environmentally friendly – saving on paper and printing

- ✗ Not everyone has, or wants, access (particularly strong feeling in the pensioner group)
- ✗ There is low awareness of the SBC website (particularly within the pre-nerster and younger family group)
  - “I didn’t know there was one”*



## **Optimisation of the SBC website**

- Awareness of the SBC website is key issue – the Council would benefit from promoting use of the website more strongly (eg. for instance, through advertising in local press)
  - There was some interest in a residents’ web forum

# Of the door-to-door leaflet drops, people found the recent recycling flyers most useful

- ✓ Leaflets come to them directly
  - ✓ Beneficial when it is about an issue that affects residents directly
  - ✓ People take notice – especially if they fear they might be penalised for non-compliance
- “If I don’t do it I’m going to get into trouble, so I’d better see what they’ve got to say about it”*

- ✗ Often too much information to read and take in
- “Look at all that writing, that block of writing! Oh my God!”*
- ✗ The design can come across as ‘boring’ and unattractive to the eye (eg. colour scheme, layout, photos)



## Optimisation of door to door leaflet drops

Following the ‘best practice’ example of the recent recycling flyers

- On an issue that affected all residents personally
- An example of ‘best practice’ design:
  - A header that hooked people in: “Changes to your rubbish”
  - Short, succinct blocks of information
  - Bright, vibrant colours: *“Unless it stands out, it goes with the rest, straight in the bin”*
  - ‘Inspiring’ photos of people to draw attention: *“It looks happy. It’s not like they’re standing there with their bins, ‘This is my recycle bin.’ It’s got a nice tone to it”*
  - In a user-friendly format: eg. calendar of rubbish / recycling collection

# Promotional newspaper wrap-arounds command attention in an effective way

- ✓ Readers cannot ignore it
  - “The (wrap around’s) quite nice, because you’re getting the paper and then you’re forced to read that part as well”*
- ✓ But at the same time it is viewed as non-intrusive – easy enough to skip over if not relevant
- ✓ And, subliminally, can add an element of credibility because it suggests that an independent source has endorsed the information



## *Optimisation of newspaper wrap-arounds*

A useful communications vehicle to alert residents to:

- Important changes occurring across the Borough
- Local events that relate to the local areas serviced by specific newspaper (eg. the Staines Informer)

# Overview of communications mechanisms outside the Council

Most potential to leverage Council issues



- Local newspapers (free and paid)

Less potential to leverage Council issues



- Local radio
- Bus advertising
- Cinema magazines

# Residents have great warmth towards the local newspapers

*“They’re supposed to be non-political, whereas the Council can be political, the Council can put their point over”*

- ✓ A balanced viewpoint – coverage of the good, the bad and the ugly
- ✓ Convenient when the papers come to you
- ✓ High profile and trusted – residents have been reading these papers for years



- ✗ Sporadic delivery of free papers  
*“They don’t put it in my door”!*
- ✗ People accept that the information may be ‘sensationalised’ to make for more interesting reading  
*“There’s no smoke without any fire. There’s a little bit of truth in there, but as you say, it’s probably been exaggerated”*

# Understanding readership

## Attitudes towards ... *free vs. paid newspapers*

- People believe that free newspapers tend to be less 'polished' than paid newspapers
  - Less detailed articles
  - More typos
  - More advertising
- However, they do not believe that free newspapers are any less credible, in terms of the *value* of information, than paid

*"With the local paper you get a brief account of it, and the one you buy they give you a proper account ...they elaborate more"*



The Council could utilise the free and paid newspapers equally well

## Attitudes towards ... *letters vs. editorial*

- People approach letters with a grain of salt
  - Correspondence goes in circles because they are written by the same people
    - "Harold Trace! I even recognise his name! There's a guy that writes every week"*
  - Councillors use it to promote their 'spin'
    - "They're just scoring points off each other"*
  - People can't be bothered to get involved
- Editorial is more meaningful because it is trusted as more independent – no agenda to push



Editorials are more persuasive in shaping public opinion than letters

# Residents feel that it is important for all Council communications to be appropriately branded

- People believe that Council communications must be recognisable to:
  - Grab attention
  - Flag that the communication may be 'serious' and relevant to them
  - Differentiate it from other communications they are bombarded with
- Currently, residents believe that Council communications tend to be well branded due to:
  - The Council logo – the tree is particularly familiar and usually bold
  - The blue / green colour scheme



The Council must continue to provide clearly identifiable branding across all communications