

NORTHERN IRELAND POLICING BOARD

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

1. Introduction

The Policing Board has now been operating for five years. Since its establishment there has been a high level of interest in its activities, its membership and its approach to key policing issues. The Board has faced a full agenda and has steered its way through a number of very controversial issues and police reforms. Its future credibility will continue to depend crucially on how policing issues are presented to its key target audiences including the police themselves, the general public, the media and key influencers locally, nationally and internationally.

Through its communication activities, the Board must present itself as a strong, credible and independent body. Efforts must focus on ensuring the public is aware of the Board's role, responsibilities and membership; and that it is delivering on its responsibility to hold the Chief Constable to account on all aspects of policing in Northern Ireland.

The first term of the Board has been largely dictated by the reform agenda and of various unforeseen issues which have featured highly on the Board's agenda; and which necessitated a reactive and immediate response from the Board.

The Board has agreed a new set of Strategic Priorities; and identified communications as a key element. If these are to be implemented, an effective communications strategy and action plan must drive and support activity. This will involve management of the reactive communications as dictated by the changing agenda of the Board and critical policing issues; and balanced by an ongoing proactive campaign designed to build public confidence in policing and increase awareness and understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the Board.

The unique make up of the Board represents the political and social make up of Northern Ireland. Decision making by the Board benefits from the diversity of its members. While political log-jams and social divisions are realities, they should not be allowed to become the driving factors. The need for a corporate approach from the Board on key issues will be critical to success and was most recently demonstrated by the Board's position on Restorative Justice schemes.

As the Board continues to drive forward the policing agenda it will be important to try and remove the service from being a political football. It will be important that the Board remains focused on its main objective – to deliver a police service for Northern Ireland which has, at its heart, a focus on real community policing, free from political identity and influence.

Political members may continue to take political positions on particular policing issues - this is somewhat inevitable. However independent members voices must also be heard, to ensure that politics doesn't represent the work of the Board.

The Board must be realistic about the challenging and the sometimes difficult issues and decisions that it will continue to take, and the public perception of its role.

It is in the Board's interest to match public expectation with what is organisationally achievable. That is why a comprehensive, consistent communications strategy needs to be adopted and applied to all aspects of the Board's work.

This strategy presents a number of recommendations; and takes account of the Board's agreed strategic priorities; and a number of key policing issues facing the Board in the short, medium and longer term. The strategy outlines a communication approach which will assist with Board positioning, taking into account the needs of a number of key stakeholders, which will help raise the Board's profile and showcase achievements.

The following sections set out the key elements of the strategy:

- Capacity of the Board to deliver
- Positioning the Board
- Board Values/Statutory Responsibilities/Ethics
- External Mandates
- Communication Objectives
- Communication Principles
- Key Audiences
- Communication Approach
- Evaluation and Monitoring

2. Capacity of the Board to Deliver

A programme of action to advance the objectives contained in the strategy will be developed. This programme will include specific activities with clear timescales: the timings of individual activities will naturally depend on progress in other work areas and due to resource capability, proactive activity may be impacted by the necessity to respond to reactive media and events. Specific sub-strategies will be integrated into the Annual Communications Plan. The following issues must also be considered:

- **Available Resources**
- **Communication Skills Training**
- **Media Policy**

2.1 Available Resources

Press and Public Relations comprises 3 full time communications staff – a Press and Public Relations Manager and 2 information officers and 1 administrative officer. The annual budget is £220k.

2.2 Communication Skills Training

All those involved in communication activities must have the skills to do the job. This will ensure the development and application of consistent messages. Media and presentation skills courses provide advice and guidance on communication skills and are recommended for all Members and senior officials.

2.3 Media Policy

The Board's current media policy states that the Chairman is the official spokesperson of the Board, but can delegate this function to other Members where it is considered desirable or appropriate when dealing with specific subjects against a pre-determined brief.

Opening this policy up would create more of a level playing field for all Members, would support the role of Committee Chairs, Vice-Chairs and Lead Members and would enable a wider range of views to be expressed. Pre-agreed briefs would be provided for all communication activities. The current policy in place has an impact on the capability of the Press Office to put forward spokespersons to respond to day to day policing issues in the media; which is of course dependant on Board Members availability to respond to media needs at short notice.

3. Positioning the Board

While change has happened, policing continues to evolve and the Policing Board exists and is operating within a divergent political environment. Policing remains a hugely significant media and public issue and there exists a huge appetite for information locally, nationally and internationally.

Positioning and influencing must form a key element of the Board's work. The Policing Board must present a strong public image on policing; lobbying, influencing and engaging with those who have the power to voice strong opinion or take decisions on key issues. If the Board does not voice opinion no one else will speak for it.

With the future implications of the Review of Public Administration and the prospective devolution of policing and justice, significant change is still ahead for the police, for the Board and for Northern Ireland as a whole. The Board must ensure that against this background of change its place in the policing architecture and position is understood amongst key audiences and stakeholders.

The media, political and public spotlight is on the politics of policing. The Board's objective should centre on shifting the focus onto policing – a concept which affects everybody in our society, one in which improvements in policing will deliver benefits to all. Without pro-active engagement and positions, the Board will be side lined. This area of work will form a key element of the Communications Approach.

4. Board Values / Statutory Responsibilities and Ethics

The Policing Board has a wide range of legislative responsibilities under the Police (NI) Act 2000, which must be fulfilled. It needs to build understanding among its stakeholders about these responsibilities and the approach and values it applies to its programme of work, as agreed in the Code of Conduct for Board Members. All those who speak on behalf of the Board are expected to uphold accepted professional standards and ethics.

This policy also applies to Board staff who shall also act professionally, and remain politically neutral, in carrying out communication activities on behalf of the Board.

5. External Mandates

The Board has a number of external mandates driving its activities to which its overall objectives relate; and mandates which the Board must consider in its approach to communications.

- Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000/2003;
- Oversight Commissioner' s monitoring of the Programme of Change;
- Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary reports;
- Criminal Justice Bill (in particular the provisions relating to Community Safety Partnerships and the devolution of policing);
- Human Rights Act 1998
- Northern Ireland Act Section 75 equality provisions/Data Protection Act
- Review of Public Administration;
- Open Government / Freedom of Information legislation

6. Communication Objectives

The Board's communication objectives will support strategic and organisational priorities. These communication objectives will be underpinned by key messages developed to support specific areas of work.

Objective 1: To increase public awareness of police accountability through the promotion of the functions and membership of the Policing Board.

Objective 2: To encourage support for, and understanding of, policing issues among key influencers and the community, and to encourage confidence in policing.

Objective 3: To ensure all Board publications / communications are accessible and of a high quality, thereby supporting the Board's reputation as a professional and credible body.

Objective 4: To build on internal communications within the Policing Board, its Members and staff; and District Policing Partnerships.

7. Communication Principles

All Board communications should be:

Open and Transparent – the Board is committed to openness and transparency in all its communications activities and in line with the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act.

Relevant to the Board's Responsibilities – it is proper and necessary for the Board to explain and justify its policies and decisions and when necessary inform, advise and encourage the public to support its initiatives.

Clear, Concise and in Plain Language - the Board will seek to ensure that all its communications are easily understood by using clear, concise and plain language. All corporate documents should adhere to the principles of the Plain English Campaign.

Conducted in an Economic Way – all communications should be efficient and effective with an emphasis placed on best value. This should involve carefully choosing communication tools and integrating campaigns where possible to ensure maximum impact and overall effectiveness.

Based on Equality – given the Board's commitment to equality, its communications and marketing activities should be inclusive and informed by the need to promote equality of opportunity. This should include systems to ensure that information is available in accessible formats, and in a timely fashion, where it is appropriate and practicable to do so, including provision for consultation and engagement with relevant interest groups.

Target Audiences

The Board's target audiences can be split into two broad categories – internal audiences and external audiences. In developing areas of activity the Board must be clear on the messages to be communicated and the communication approach to be applied.

8.1 **Internal Audiences** - it is important that the Board recognises and acknowledges the key role that all of its Members and staff have to play in the overall communications programme. These communication objectives can only be achieved when they are integrated and “owned” by all its members.

It is vital that all members of staff are fully informed of the Board’s corporate and business plans, and that relevant officials are properly equipped to develop, deliver and provide advice on key messages to be communicated to identified audiences.

There are also mutual benefits to be gained through the Board seeking to inform and work in partnership with other relevant bodies when appropriate – however the Board’s independence should, however, remain of paramount importance.

8.2 **External Audiences** – the Board has to consider the needs of a number of external audiences. These audiences can be divided into two distinct groupings – those who receive a service from the police, and those who are either members of the police service or members of other policing organisations:

- general public (as segmented by community background, religion, age, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, socio economic background);
- political representatives locally, nationally and internationally;
- opinion formers locally, nationally and internationally (including campaign and pressure groups);
- community representatives;
- business representatives;
- young people;
- educational bodies;
- Government and statutory bodies
- trade unions;
- media – mainstream/ local/ national/ foreign/ niche and specialist print and broadcast.

Those customers more directly associated with policing include:

- police officers;
- civilian police staff;
- custody visitors;
- Independent Community Observers;
- District Policing Partnerships;
- Police Ombudsman;
- Police Oversight Commissioner;
- Police Federation and Staff Associations.

9. Communications Approach

In delivering the strategy and supporting the work of the organisation a number of communication methods will be applied. In addition sub-strategies with agreed areas of activity will be developed to support particular areas of work or critical incidents. The following strategies are currently in place and others will be developed to support organisational need:

- Handling strategy for publication of Police Ombudsman's Report
- Communications strategy for introduction of PCSOs
- Communications and marketing to support the International Policing Conference
- London and Dublin briefings
- DPP Support
- Community Engagement

9.1 **Media Strategy** – the media strategy comprises a number of key areas of work; and in all media activity the Branch will consider and advise on the appropriate timing of the release of such stories against the overall media context and wider news and political environment. For the strategy to be successful, Board Members must be able to meet interview requests at short notice.

- 9.2 **Key Messages** – the objectives set out above will underpin communication activity however, due to the diverse range of the Board’s work, target audiences and issues, the messages which support them will therefore need to be tailored to meet differing needs; and will be built around strategies developed to support particular areas of work. However a number of key messages will guide all communications and these are attached at Appendix 2.
- 9.3 **Ongoing Media Relations** - the media provide an essential means for both positioning the Board on key issues and communicating with the wider public. Media interest about the Board comes from local media, national and international outlets. There are two main elements within the overall media strategy – a reactive role and proactive one. On the one hand, all requests from the media are responded to on an ongoing basis which includes clarifying queries, providing advice and guidance on key issues; facilitating requests for interviews and issuing news releases and statements. More importantly a range of proactive tools are used in planning for events that will draw media interest. These include:
- 9.4 **Media Relationships** – developing good relationships with the media is key to the success of the media strategy. Opportunities for the media to meet with key Board Members and officials for off the record within an informal, no agenda, environment over lunch/dinner will build relationships, but also allow for informal briefings to be delivered / and positions presented on key issues. The Board has agreed to hold 4 formal media dinners will be held each year and these will be geared around key issues.
- 9.5 **News Releases** on key Board issues, including information flowing from Board and Committee meetings; visits from international groups.
- 9.6 **Agreed media features and profiles** – provide opportunities to focus on specific aspects of the Board’s work, for example focusing on the role of Community Observers, focusing on policing issues in the international context, introduction of PCSOs.
- 9.7 **Media interviews** – profiling Board Members – independent and political on policing issues.

- 9.8 **Milestone stories** – specific media campaigns to target positive milestones for the Board for example around publishing of the Annual Report, publication of revised Code of Ethics, launch of Human Rights Annual Report, survey results, introduction of PCSO's, launch of Policing Plan, Policing Conference etc;
- 9.9 **Platform Pieces** –on key issues.
- 9.10 **Media visits** – the Board must demonstrate that it is prepared to see policing at the coal face and media visits/trips to see elements of policing with the media should be considered. International and National media have an interest in particular aspects of policing change and development and overseas visits should be used as an opportunity to profile the positive work of the Board.
- 9.11 **Photography** – opportunities to secure coverage in media and other journals on the back on Board events; visits; ride outs; launches, meetings with opinion formers and influencers etc.
- 9.12 **Keynote speaking events** – expert positioning can help inform the activities and responsibilities of the Board to identified audiences; and present key messages on policing. Speaking opportunities at key international events on policing, and events closer to home aimed at various interested bodies who have an vested interest in policing issues such as the local business community, community organisations will be developed. Maximising media coverage around such opportunities will be exploited.
- 9.13 **Events/Seminars/Exhibitions** - direct interaction with key audiences through seminars, exhibitions and other face-to-face opportunities provides an excellent opportunity for the Board to inform on its work. This will include attendance at political party events and conferences; and other agencies involved in the wider criminal justice system. Where there is a media relations aspect to such events, these opportunities will also be maximised.

9.14 **Website/Online Communications/DVD/CD Rom** - a new corporate website will be launched in the New Year. This site will be regularly updated with the latest information and news. It is anticipated that the website will be a valuable resource, not just for interested audiences, but will also include a section dedicated to community engagement.

In addition, other audit visual opportunities to highlight and educate audiences on key aspects of policing will be explored. This will include crime prevention initiatives; schools material and other new media opportunities.

9.15 **Advertising** - during the year a programme of paid advertising opportunities in key journals will be pursued to contribute to raising awareness of the Board.

9.16 **Publications** - the Board produces a range of publications to support achievement of its business objectives. Publications must be produced to meet the needs and reach identified audiences. All publication should be produced to a high standard and in accessible formats to meet the needs of section 75 groups and available in formats to those not fluent in English.

9.17 **Community Engagement / Consultation / Outreach** - the Board must listen to all its stakeholders and audiences and seek to consult and engage them whenever appropriate and practicable; and this also forms a key element of the Board' s Strategic Priorities. Community Engagement Branch will lead on this area of work and a strategy has been agreed by the Board. Key audiences such as business people, young people, community groups etc will be a feature of such engagements and public relations opportunities to maximise and support this area of work will be developed.

9.18 **Public / Political Profiling** - as outlined above, a programme of outreach will be developed by Community Engagement. In addition a supporting programme of meetings and briefings with political influencers and opinion formers locally, nationally and internationally will be progressed.

9.19 **Corporate Identity** – the Board has developed a set of corporate style guidelines to ensure that all internal and external visual communications meet established guidelines.

10. Evaluation and Monitoring

All communication activity will be evaluated, reviewed and monitored through the Corporate Policy, Planning and Performance Committee with a bi-annual report on activity presented to the Committee.

As outlined earlier the Board's capacity to deliver will rest in part on Board Member's time commitment to engagement and delivery on priority issues on key issues; and the outcomes and impact of communication activity must be considered. Some activity will be more strategic and have greater value.

Each year a Communications Audit of key audiences and stakeholders will be completed to review external views and identify further opportunities for improving performance.

Press and Public Relations Branch

November 2006

KEY ISSUES

- Restoration of the Assembly /future devolution of policing and justice
- Transfer of National Security
- Restorative Justice
- Implications of Review of Public Administration
- Police Resources
- Community Engagement and Public Confidence in Policing
- Reconstitution of the Policing Board
- Future of District Policing Partnerships / Support to District Policing Partnerships
- Hate Crime
- Police Performance

In addition to these strategic issues, there are a number of ongoing issues for the Board including:

- Anti-social behaviour, alcohol and drugs abuse, & night-time economy concerns
- Burglary, Domestic Violence, Racist & Homophobic Attacks
- Threat of, incidence of and response to terrorist & paramilitary incidents
- Parades
- Baton Rounds / CS Spray/ TASER & alternative less-lethal weapons
- PSNI Training, Education & Development Strategy – Police College development
- PSNI Human Resources Planning Strategy
- PSNI Estates Strategy
- PSNI Gender Action Plan
- PSNI IT Strategy – including call management
- PSNI procurement issues
- Organised crime – including level 3/cross-border activity
- Police vetting

KEY MESSAGES

- The Board is a strong body, independent of Government, whose role is to hold the Chief Constable and his staff accountable for all police actions.
- The Board takes its responsibility seriously and is committed to delivering effective and efficient policing for the whole community.
- The Board, through its work, wants to encourage people to have confidence in the PSNI; and in asking the questions and getting answers, the Board seeks to improve the quality of policing in Northern Ireland; and ensure the public can have confidence in policing
- Northern Ireland is one of the safest places to live – the Policing Board is committed to working to make communities safer
- The Board works with the police to ensure there are enough resources to deliver effective and efficient policing.
- The Board exists to ask the questions about policing that the people of Northern Ireland want answers to.
- When the police get it right, the Board wants everyone to know about it. When the police get it wrong, the Board will also want to know what lessons have been learnt and how, in future, policies will change
- The Board's role is to challenge – its relationship with the Chief Constable isn't a cosy one, but it is professional and courteous.
- The Board's work is based on fairness, equality and promoting good relations.
- Police accountability needs stability. This Board can provide that stability.