



Northern Ireland Ambulance Service
Health and Social Care Trust



NIAS

Communications Strategy

2010-2015

Introduction

The development of a Communications Strategy is a key action for any organisation seeking to deliver on its corporate and related strategies. It is therefore necessary for NIAS, as a Trust delivering healthcare to the population of Northern Ireland, to have in place a strategy that informs its own staff and other key stakeholders on a range of issues as diverse as corporate issues and procedural or protocol developments, in order that any interaction with the public, on behalf of the Trust is viewed as positive.

This strategy outlines NIAS' approach to maximising the impact of, both, internal and external communications over the next five years.

Internal

The Communications Strategy will provide a framework to support all members of the Trust to communicate effectively with each other taking cognisance of the Communications Principles as outlined in the strategy.

External

The Communications Strategy also seeks to enhance the external communications processes currently used by the Trust in its engagement with the media, political representatives and other external stakeholders.

The Trust is committed to the principles of openness and transparency in all its dealings while remaining mindful of the need for patient confidentiality.

Purpose

The NIAS Communications Strategy contributes to the achievement of the Trusts strategic objectives and assists in the realisation of the Trusts vision and mission statements.

Strategic Context

NIAS, since its establishment in 1995, is an organisation which has had to develop in a climate of unparalleled change within the health service

- A strategic review provided the vision for the way forward in 2000, mapping out the most radical changes in the delivery of pre-hospital care in a generation
- Agenda for Change became an agenda item in 2004
- NIAS developed its own organisational change programme and
- The Comprehensive Spending Review, and associated efficiency savings, became a major issue in 2008.

With change comes uncertainty among staff and a resultant impact upon morale. Poor morale can lead to a reduction in individual performance and therefore may impact negatively on organisational performance. It is in such a context that a clear communications strategy can enable the Trust to maintain and build upon good employee relations to ensure that all staff, and operational staff in particular, who are the public face of the service and therefore our best ambassadors, portray a positive image of the Trust in all they do and say.

The next number of years will continue to be a period of great change as central government seeks to address a budget deficit and, although in UK the health budget has been ring-fenced, it would appear that the NI Assembly will be expecting all departments, including Health, to contribute to the new round of expected efficiency savings.

In the expectation of a further sustained period of change, NIAS has developed a strategy for the period 2010-2015 to deliver a process of communications that will be of benefit to all within the Trust.

The Communications Strategy is influenced by a number of factors including

- NIAS Strategic Plan
- NIAS Trust Delivery Plan
- Trust Board Assurance Framework
- Comprehensive Spending Review
- Ministerial Priorities for Action
- HSCB Commissioning Plan
- Information Governance Legislation

The Communications Strategy 2010-2015 replaces the previous strategy 2005-2009.

Strategic Aims and Objectives

NIAS continues to embrace change in the pursuit of clinical excellence and the continued provision of safe and effective care for the benefit of patients.

The Communications Strategy is key to ensuring staff are well informed and motivated to act as ambassadors for the Trust in all that they do and say.

Aims

- Create an environment where information flows freely both within and from the organisation in a timely and relevant manner.
- Develop communication processes fit for delivery of information to the workforce, patients and other relevant stakeholders (in an environment of continuous change and uncertainty).
- To protect and enhance the Trust's corporate reputation.

Objectives

- NIAS will seek over the lifetime of this strategy to identify those perceived barriers to effective communication which have resulted in a negative return within the Staff Survey 2009 and to ensure the structures and mechanisms are in place to address these.
- NIAS will deliver relevant and timely information to staff and ensure they are well informed.
- NIAS will create a culture of two-way communication to improve staff engagement and increase opportunities for opinions to be expressed and suggestions made that will increase staff engagement in decision making processes.
- NIAS will increase staff awareness of the Intranet site to enhance its use as a major communications tool within the Trust.
- NIAS will increase public awareness of procedures for feedback and comment.
- NIAS will maintain and develop positive media relationships by conducting business in an open, transparent and responsive manner.

- NIAS will ensure greater utilisation of the Trusts Internet site for engaging with the communities we serve and to also ensure a more proactive and measureable engagement with the media.

Methodology

In order to map out the direction of the Communications Strategy for the period 2010-2015, a review exercise of the previous strategies was conducted at a Communications Workshop in November 2009.

The purpose of the workshop, attended by managers from across the Trust, was to identify

- Successes of the previous strategy in terms of recommendations that have been implemented
- Areas in which work can continue towards successful implementation of outstanding recommendations
- Outstanding recommendations that, whilst desirable, may not be deliverable
- Key stakeholders.

In order to ascertain the perceived effectiveness, or otherwise, of the Trust's current communications processes and to identify key improvements in terms of process and message a number of meetings ensued with relevant stakeholder groups including managers within a number of Trust Directorates, Area Managers, Trade Unions and a focus group representative of operational and administrative staff.

Benchmarking with other UK based Ambulance Services was undertaken as a vital element in the development of the strategy.

Communications Principles

NIAS will adopt the following principles of communications

- Accessibility – Every member of staff and external stakeholder will have access to the information they need, when they need it and in an accessible format which fulfil legislative requirements within acceptable financial constraints.

- Dignity – Communications will be delivered in a language and format easily understood, respecting the views, values and opinions of all with whom we communicate
- Consistency – Any message will be simple, focussed and consistent.
- Responsiveness – Communications will be a two way process with opportunities provided, in a timely manner, for open and honest feedback.
- Appropriate – Communications will be targeted at the appropriate audience and delivered through the most appropriate and effective delivery channels
- Honesty – NIAS will communicate openly and honestly (within constraints of confidentiality requirements.)
- Planned – NIAS will seek to plan communications in a proactive manner rather than communicate on an ad hoc basis (with regular input from the Trust's senior managers).
- Effectiveness – NIAS will evaluate feedback on a regular basis to maintain effective communications.

Responsibilities

Every member of staff has a role to play in the implementation of the Communications Strategy to ensure the development of a positive communications culture within the Trust and a subsequent enhancement of the Trust's corporate reputation.

The Director of Human Resources and Corporate Services will be the lead Director for Communications within the Trust, reporting on Communications activity at organisational and Trust Board level.

The Communications Officer will take lead responsibility for facilitating and promoting good communications within the Trust. The Communications Officer will also be responsible for the provision of professional advice and support to the Board and Trust Representatives.

SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITIES

Trust Board

The Trust Board will be responsible for:

- Endorsing and adopting the Communications Strategy and supporting communication activities
- Ensuring that clear channels of communications with the Trusts' stakeholders have been established
- Establishing appropriate processes to ensure that such channels operate effectively in practice

All Staff

- To maintain an awareness of key issues affecting the Trust.
- To seek relevant information from their line manager.
- To participate in suggestion and feedback schemes.
- To make use of the communication processes provided by the Trust
- To refrain from inappropriate communication which is likely to damage the reputation of the Trust or to undermine public confidence in NIAS.

Chief Executive

- To develop key organisational messages with the management team and to ensure consistent support for their dissemination.
- To reinforce the role of communications as a key management tool and competency.
- To lead by example in terms of being a communications role model.
- To lead at Board level in the implementation and monitoring of communication processes.
- To give confidence to the communication process.

All Directors and Managers

- To promote and ensure effective two way communications across the Trust.
- To ensure that issues of importance are communicated to relevant staff in a manner which is timely and accurate.
- To seek the guidance of the Communications Officer in communicating Corporate messages and the use of the most appropriate process.

- To ensure a free flow of information within their Directorate/Department.
- To ensure consistency of style in communications
- To ensure that opportunities for feedback are afforded to all staff.

Delivery

An annual action plan will be developed to support the implementation of the strategy.

NIAS will primarily make use of the following communications channels:

- Intranet
- E-mail
- Notice Board
- Face to face
- NIAS news
- Monthly organisational updates
- Memos
- Internet
- Press Releases/Responses
- Freedom of Information requests
- Public Information leaflets

Evaluation and monitoring

Delivery of the Communications Strategy will be monitored by the Communications Forum, which is comprised of three Executive Directors and the Communications Officer.

Progress reports will be fed into the General Management Executive meetings by the Director of Human Resources and Corporate Services. Confirmation of progress against actions and risk issues will be communicated formally to Trust Board through the Assurance Framework.

The Communications Focus Group, established as part of the development process of the Strategy and comprising representatives of operational and administrative

staff, will meet at least annually to evaluate delivery of the process from a staff perspective.

Corporate Communications will remain a central theme in staff surveys.