

Labour Relations Agency Communications Policy

A Draft for Consultation

Policy Introduction

All individuals and communities (clients) with which the Labour Relations Agency interacts have the right to access and understand accurate and timely information in a manner appropriate to their needs in order to be included in, and to benefit on an equal basis from, all the opportunities and services offered by the organisation. The provision of appropriate communication support to users of Agency services is an issue of equality of opportunity. It also helps combat the effects of racism, social exclusion and the removal of other discriminatory barriers to full participation in society. To enable this to happen, the Labour Relations Agency (LRA) has developed this communications policy. This and the remainder of this document encompasses that policy.

Policy objectives

The key objectives of this policy are:

- to make sure all LRA staff know what is expected of them and who is responsible for making information accessible
- to ensure consistency within the LRA
- to ensure the widest possible access for people who do not speak and/or read much English and for disabled and Deaf clients within resources available
- to meet all statutory obligations, and to go beyond what is required to reflect best practice
- to pursue value for money and effectiveness in making information accessible

To achieve these objectives the Agency will:

- ensure appropriate access to interpreting, translation and communication support for disabled people and people for whom English is not a suitable language of communication
- make sure communities are aware of their rights and entitlements by outlining arrangements for the provision of communication support facilities and how to access them
- allocate appropriate resources
- consult with clients to ensure that the communication support facilities are appropriate to their needs
- Give staff sufficient guidance and support to enable them to effectively put the accessible communications policy into action.
- regularly monitor the effectiveness of the policy and publish the results on the Agency's website.

The policy covers:

- All printed information available to the general public
- the LRA web site and intranet (when available)
- letters and e-mails
- public meetings and events
- public contact – reception, meeting and interview rooms, telephone contact

Definitions

Translation: The conversion of written text from one language to another.

Interpretation: The conversion of speech from one language to another (including British sign language and other sign languages).

Communication Support: A variety of forms of supporting and communication with those who do not use the conventional forms of spoken or written English, including Braille and other tactile forms of writing, lip reading and lip speaking and various communication technologies.

Plain English: Language that the intended audience can understand and act upon from a single reading.

Easy Read: Documents produced using simple jargon free English and pictures to support people with learning difficulties in accessing information.

Plain English

All formal written material produced by the LRA will be in plain English and avoid unnecessary jargon.

Translation and interpretation of written material into community languages

Translations of standard (public) Agency documents such as Annual Report etc. will be made available on request into community languages including British Sign Language (BSL). These are provided to enable clients who do not speak or read much English to access key LRA information. Translations will not be provided specifically for individual circumstances such as the provision of draft employment relations material tailored to a specific business.

The following key documents will clearly display information about obtaining translations of summary documents in community languages. The languages and the list of documents will be reviewed annually.

Key documents:

- Agency strategies
- Annual report
- Annual Report to the Equality Commission (NI)
- Annual Business Plan
- Corporate Plan
- Publications Scheme

Public documents other than the key documents can be translated at the discretion of the Agency in line with available resources.

Provision of written material in alternative formats

All standard documents will be made available in the following alternative formats on request:

- Braille
- audio cassette/CD
- large print
- electronic formats-floppy disk/CD-ROM/e-mail word/PDF and RTF

All publications will clearly display information on how to obtain alternative formats.

Public meetings and events

LRA events will provide the best possible access in line with available resources. LRA conferences and seminars that are open to the public will meet minimum access standards.

Invitations and publicity for events will include information on access provision and provide contact details for any requests for extra services.

Registration forms for LRA events will ask delegates to provide information about access needs.

The LRA will meet requests for extra services where it is reasonable to do so within available resources.

Contact with the public

Correspondence

Where it is clear that the correspondent is not fluent in the English language, the LRA will accept and respond to correspondence from the public in community languages and accessible formats such as Braille, tape or floppy disk.

Telephone inquiries

An interpretation service will be made available on request for telephone calls in a language other than English.

A textphone service is available for members of the public who are deaf or hearing impaired. The textphone number – 028 9023 8411 - will be publicised along with the Agency's main phone and fax numbers.

Contact at reception

Basic information about the LRA will be available at reception in a range of community languages and in Braille. An interpretation service is available on request for enquiries in a language other than English.

Website

The LRA will ensure that its public facing website is usable and accessible to all users, regardless of ability and browsing technology.

This website strives to comply with the Guidelines for the UK Government websites which supports the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 1.0. Our aim is to meet or exceed the provisions of the WCAG Conformance level "AA".

By following these guidelines, we will ensure our websites are viewable in all browsers, are compatible with current access technology and follow best practice in relation to accessibility.

Enabling staff to use this policy

The LRA will make sure that all its staff have appropriate support to effectively put this policy into practice. This will include the production of a toolkit containing clear operational guidance

Monitoring of the communications policy

The following information will be reported to the equality implementation group annually:

- A list of summary documents which have been produced in community languages and the numbers of documents distributed
- the number of requests for translation into languages other than English
- the number of alternative format publications supplied
- the number of requests for alternative formats
- cost of the above

Associated Documents (Annexes to this policy)

Annex A: Internal Communication Policy

Annex B: Public Relations Strategy (in discussion / in progress of drafting)

Annex A: Internal Communication Policy

The Agency is committed to information sharing at every level in a timely manner in both formal and informal processes. It is our aim to nurture a culture of openness and shared learning. The Agency recognises that good employee communications will help to improve both organisational and individual performance, and support the decision-making process. We aim to ensure that employees are kept informed about significant business issues that affect them. This prevents feelings of isolation, reduces speculation and improves social interaction. This policy is additional to JNCC process and the Performance Appraisal system.

HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE

Face-to-Face Communication is the primary channel for communicating messages to staff on key issues that directly affect them. Other methods, such as electronic media, memos, and circulars are mainly for making information available to employees and to supplement, but not replace, face-to-face communication.

We are keen to encourage employee involvement and staff feedback and managers and directors are encouraged to allow for this where practicable in team meetings and briefings.

AIM OF COMMUNICATION

To ensure everyone has the information to do their job and to provide opportunities for involvement and contribution.

WHAT NEEDS COMMUNICATING?

- 1 Organisational Developments - funding, budgets, future plans, changes to current working arrangements
- 2 Staff Developments – new roles, new faces, promotions, transfers, initiatives and opportunities, reorganisations, redundancies, retirements
- 3 Changes to technology
- 4 Changes in legislation, employment case law etc
- 5 News and stories about the business and its employees

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR COMMUNICATION

It is the responsibility of all managers to ensure that their staff have access to information and have the time and opportunity to absorb and understand it, and to ask questions and comment on what they receive.

CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION – formal and informal

DIRECTORATE TEAM MEETINGS – Formal meeting in each section of all staff monthly/quarterly¹ for information sharing and discussion, areas would include staff developments, new policies, procedures, internal/external feedback, business planning and training needs. It would also be useful if each Director once a year attended at least one meeting of the other Directorates to share information on what their Directorate is working on at that time. It is envisaged that this take place in one of the meeting rooms avoiding interruptions.

TEAM MEETINGS/BRIEFINGS – informal, ad hoc briefings in order to update on regular matters, discuss deadlines, division of work when workloads are heavy or to cover absences, delegation and feedback on how we're doing. Such meetings should provide some format for discussion and potentially could be arranged in the canteen around a coffee.

CROSS- SECTIONAL MEETINGS – There will be occasions when it will be appropriate to set-up cross-sectional teams to consider issues which affect certain areas of the business, a recent example where this was appropriate was the Telephony project.

KNOWLEDGE BASED / STUDY GROUPS – informal shared learning opportunities may take place as and when required. This can be requested collectively by staff and organised by line management or called by line management for issues not covered in the team meeting. Location of this meeting may be more suited to the library for reference to materials.

ONE TO ONE MEETINGS - with line managers, it is a wish of the Agency to meet each employee on a bi-yearly basis for discussion of workload, queries, concerns, feedback and suggestions concerning working practices etc. This in the main will be the joined with the yearly and half yearly personal reviews but ideally on a monthly basis. This does not preclude ad hoc meetings between the line manager and employee and vice versa.

CEO/AGENCY MEETINGS – 6 monthly meetings in order to discuss ongoing organisational developments, discussion of business plans, achievements, successes, future plans. This meeting should be attended by all staff and is an opportunity for updating on agency issues, questioning and contributions of all.

BOARD & CHAIR MEETINGS – the Agency provides regular contact with the Board and the Chair and summaries of ongoing discussions in the form of informal annual meetings, this should take place in an informal setting allowing for discussion and questions. The Board will take this opportunity to clarify ongoing issues and meet with staff in the Agency.

¹ The emphasis here is on regular meetings, which should be decided at the beginning of each year.

ANNUAL STAFF CONFERENCE - This conference should be attended by all staff and is an opportunity for updating on Agency issues, questioning and contributions of all and should include formal/informal items and outside speakers, and should be interactive.

EMAIL

Email is a quick effective way of communicating information however it does not replace face to face meetings where some discussion is required. To ensure that each member of staff is using mail effectively, the following actions should be taken:

- Consider a quick telephone call
- Do not copy in more individuals than required
- Delete mail regularly
- Appropriate language is important in the use of email, emails should be proof read in order to check tone and appropriateness.
- Subject Headings should be used in order to allow emails to be found and filed easily.
- Email time should be blocked into your day rather than allowing the received mail trigger to organise your day.
- Do not use email to avoid face to face contact

The Agency is committed to training in order to enable staff to make better use of the email system to file and store information correctly and reduce the amount of emails being sent or received. The Agency has a separate policy for dealing with internet usage; you are advised to make yourself conversant with this.

WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

In terms of written communication there are a number of Agency circulars, Employment law journals, Agency policy and procedures etc on a regular and ad hoc basis. This will be in the main for information purposes only. NIPSA Communication is also issued.

SOCIAL GATHERINGS

The Agency looks favourably on opportunities to develop professional working relationships and encourages informal gatherings within and outside the organisation in order to build on relationships and encourage communication.

Informal lunch talks will form a regular part of Agency life and you are encouraged to put forward ideas and issues on what you would like to see discussed at such meetings.

Consideration is being given to A Social Committee being set up for the arrangement of social events and Christmas events, membership of this will change bi-annually, you are encouraged to become involved in this group.

TEAM BUILDING

It is paramount to our success that we invest time in team building. The Agency will consult with staff about the formation of a team building group. It is hoped this group will oversee section team building exercises and cross section. This would facilitate, cross section team building and inter- team building as appropriate. It is important that all levels of the organisation get an opportunity to interact with others on a less formal basis. This may take the form of charity events, coffee mornings with CEO/SMT and all staff.

INTRANET

It is envisaged that it will be feasible in the future for a large amount of information will become available through the Agency intranet; a substantial amount of information is available in the public folders at present. The introduction of a quarterly/bi-annually newsletter/E-zine would provide an opportunity for staff to be kept updated on current events and news both external as they affect the Agency and internal interests. It is envisaged that this Newsletter/E-zine could cover some of the following topics:

- Business Planning
- Life of the Agency
- Section News
- In-focus, "A day in the Life of"
- Interesting Articles
- Charity Events
- Competitions
- Research conducted within the Agency
- Achievement
- Success Stories
- SMT Reports/News of trips/Seminars/Conferences

Some of the above information is already on notice boards, moving this information to the Newsletter or Ezine will allow for wider reaching impact.

Annex B

Labour Relations Agency: Public Relations Strategy

A discussion document

1. The Labour Relations Agency [LRA] is a pivotal source of expertise, advice and influence in the evolution of employment relationships, whether public, private or voluntary sector, in Northern Ireland.
2. The LRA operates within terms of reference that are broadly parallel to the work of ACAS [Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Services] in GB and the LRC [Labour Relations Commission] in the Republic of Ireland.
3. In recent years the LRA has maintained its organisational and information links with a number of relevant stakeholders but has not attempted to take a major pro-active stance in building a wider network for the dissemination of comment and information. The best available source of information on the work of the LRA is the Annual Report which is fairly comprehensive in coverage but is written within the constraints of the statutory obligation to present the Report to the Minister.
4. A number of factors have served to illustrate the advantage of a more structured strategy to ensure a better informed audience amongst the main stakeholders. First, the return of the Assembly and Executive has re-activated an interest in the role of the LRA where its activities are of interest to the new political institutions, and vice versa. Second, there is a continuing flow of legislative decisions on which the LRA must respond or issue advice. Third, there are developments from external sources that must be noted by the LRA and publicised to its clients (including employers and employees). EU policy and policy proposals need to be monitored. Policies in GB and the Republic of Ireland, similarly, merit monitoring. Legal rulings can impinge on local actions.
5. The range of topics, their sources and the mechanism to communicate to the right people is a critical question for decision within the LRA.
6. This short discussion paper is a first draft of an illustrative list of the key topics and another first draft of the institutional connections to stakeholders that may be relevant. These need to be cross-reference to devise a communications and distribution network.

7. The range of topics and the degree of professional detail and understanding means that the LRA can only function effectively if it has adequate resources to deliver the key parts of the full agenda.

Communicating what ...?

8. Some of the topics are necessary to build a better understanding of the way in which the LRA operates
 - a. Role and functions of LRA, general mission
 - b. Annual report & accounts
 - c. Special seminars or workshops
9. Other topics demonstrate general professional advice to employers and employees
 - A Codes of Practice, from recruitment to discipline and dismissal
 - B Codes of Practice, employment rights
 - C Specialist consultations, seminars and workshops
 - D Public or invited events
10. The LRA has a series of practical activities
 - i. LRA services: advice and information
 - ii. LRA services: mediation, conciliation and arbitration
 - iii. The LRA as a training resource for employment policies
11. The LRA has authority and influence in the progress of cases going through the Tribunals
 - a. Making conciliation an effective means to reduce referrals to Tribunals or to reduce hearing times
 - b. Industrial Tribunals and Fair Employment tribunals: preliminary procedures
 - c. Gibbons report
 - d. Dispute resolution ideas, incl. ADR
12. The LRA has a consultative role and, later, an information role in the debate on changes in legislation affecting employment relations and the implementation timetables
 - A. Legislative proposals and changes [e.g. working time directive]
 - B. Updates on legal changes
 - C. Corporate governance as it relates to employment policies and practices: prevention of disputes

Special topics

- 13 Many aspects of the work of the LRA are recurring. However, there will always be topics that are either ad hoc or specific to a set of circumstances. Each of these may call for specific communications programmes. Recent examples include:
 - a. An employment rights review
 - b. Bringing the self-employed into the framework
 - c. Migrant employees
 - d. Out-sourcing and contract working
 - e. Research of local labour market significance

Communicating to ...?

- 14 There is a large number of interested parties, including
 1. Minister, DEL
 2. DEL committee members
 3. Ministers with labour market responsibilities
 4. Spokespersons for political parties
 5. Invest NI
 6. Business organisations: CBI, IOD, NICCI, FSB, EEF, CEF
 7. Legal reps: Law Society
 8. Members of Industrial Tribunals, lay, employer, union and legal
 9. Employee Reps: NIC-ICTU, main TU [NIPSA, Unison, Unite]
 10. Senior civil servants: DEL, DETI, DFP, OFMDFM
 11. Academics with HR interests; CIPD
 12. Local authorities: Councillors and NILGA
 13. Labour market issues as they cross-border: links with LRC and ACAS
 14. European Commission, NI Brussels Office, OECD
 15. Media: special correspondents
- 15 If these draft suggestions are accepted as appropriate (or as amended) then a link between topics and interested parties should be developed and plans made on the forms of communication.
- 16 Building a long wish list illustrates the width of the potential impact of the LRA. However, the immediate need is to identify priorities and build an implementation strategy. A common theme to each priority is that a formal internal briefing system should prepare the focus for public debate. That formal briefing should then become the basis for, or a contribution to, a better collective understanding of the 'mind' of the LRA.

Early priorities: what, where, when?

- 17 Key stakeholders, particularly those who have a role in providing resources to the LRA, need to gain a better understanding of the current work load pressures. Towards the top of those priorities are (a) the policies and legislation which determine the role and procedures of the Tribunal system and (b) the resources allocated to the LRA so that it can be adequately equipped to manage the current workload particularly as this affects advisory and conciliation services.
- 18 The LRA needs to enhance its role as an active participant in Tribunal processes. For example, a consultative process on the Gibbons recommendations should be informed by an effective local debate. Papers and seminars might be organised by the LRA and most of the stakeholders (mentioned in para.14 above) would usefully come within the network. The starting point, based on policy as agreed within the LRA, might focus on the political interests, employers and employee representatives. The communications tactics for each of the main stakeholders (from the 15) would need to be carefully designed to minimise the scale of the effort but ensure that the debate was tailored to each group.

Priority: Conciliation and Tribunal process

Papers for consultation

Responses from employers/employee reps, Tribunal members

Consult with Law Society and Bar Council, and academics

Meetings with senior DEL officials, then Minister

Briefing paper to MLAs and debate with DEL committee

Timetable: ??

- 19 The more immediate need is that the LRA should have resources to work more expeditiously. The case for an increased budget has been aired but now needs to be driven strategically. This leverage needs to be enhanced by gaining support from the wider group of stakeholders. This should not be delayed since any impact on funds for 2008-11 needs to be sought now.

Priority: Budget 2008-2011

Initial paper already with DEL

Supportive paper now needed to present to MLAs and DEL com'tee

Public stance on benefits of improved services: media briefing

Timetable: Immediate and next three months

20 There are some current proposals on legislation affecting employment and employee rights. For example this includes: the employment rights of temporary workers or agency workers; the application (or not) of the working time Directive as formulated by the European Commission. The LRA should be playing a lead role in the debate, the research evidence of possible impact, and then in explaining the impact of changes to the relevant stakeholders.

Priority: Proposed legislative changes

On a regular basis the LRA should tabulate a list of new legislation

Circulated to the stakeholders as a quarterly information bulletin

Timetable: immediate and continuing.

21 Paragraphs 17-20 are illustrative. The LRA may wish to add to this list, or amend it.

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