

Communications and Media Policy – Outcomes of the HA21 Communications Working Group 2008

Context

HA21 is at a pivotal point in its development. Public awareness of HA21 and its objectives are still low at a time when it should be ideally placed as the “conscience” of the local green agenda. Local newspapers have been in the habit of contacting HA21 at the last minute. Eager for publicity, HA21 has made ad hoc responses resulting in some inaccurate and potentially damaging misquotes. At the same time, gaps have been identified in the organisations internal communications. To grow and be effective, HA21’s approach to both internal and external communications needs to change.

Objectives

The Communications Working Group envisages that the policy should enable HA21 to:

- encourage and facilitate interactive communication with and between members
- be less reactive and more measured in dealings with the media
- decide exactly what message to convey when publicity opportunities arise, and why
- choose a “preferred media outlet” with a more balanced stance, e.g. Harrow Times

Targets for Communication

The Communications Working Group suggests targeting:

- members and potential members
- young people aged 18 to 25
- groups specific to projects, campaigns or Action Groups, e.g. the Transport Group could target cyclists, pedestrians or public transport users

Internal Communications

The Communications Working Group would like to see:

- all Trustees having access to compatible software for sharing documents by email
- using the website and *In Contact* newsletter as the main means of communicating with members
- focussing *In Contact* on HA21’s achievements
- regularly emailing online members with links to news items, events and activities posted on the website
- use of email and post to communicate among/between Action Groups and Trustees

Key Messages

The main key message of HA21 is “*Think Global, Act Local*”

Any subsidiary messages must be locally relevant, e.g. “*Think before you drive*”.

Website

The Communications Working Group suggests:

- identifying one person per Action Group to keep its own pages updated
- making reciprocal hyperlinks to other local and national organisations’ websites
- using noticeboard or discussion groups in members’ area in preference to email newsgroups such as Yahoo! or Google
- appoint a dedicated webmaster to manage the overall maintenance of the website

Evaluation and amendment

The Communications Plan should be reviewed regularly by the Executive Committee. A communications working group can be reformed in the future to evaluate the effectiveness of HA21's communications policies and to recommend changes if necessary. Ways of measuring the effectiveness of the Communications Policy could include:

- number of hits on the website
- Surveys about attitudes to HA21 and local green issues. These could be online polls or perhaps questions included in the council's own residents' surveys.
- number of new members, and questions on joining about how they first heard of HA21

Recommendations

The Communications Working Group recommends that:

1. HA21 appoint a dedicated Communications Officer to the Executive Committee, preferably someone with Public Relations experience
2. Appropriate Executive Committee members, including Action Group chairs, be responsible for dealing with enquiries from the media or public
3. Enquiries received via members to be forwarded to the appropriate Executive Committee member or Action Group chair
4. All communications with external media to be approved by HA21's Chair or Communications Officer
5. A list of contact details for Action Group chairs and Trustees be sent to all members and be available in the Members' area of the website
6. At any time and especially after an AGM, any changes to the Executive Committee or contact details be highlighted in the *In Contact* newsletter and on the website
7. Templates and examples for HA21 press releases, newsletters, leaflets and posters available in the Trustees area of the HA21 website be used by Action Groups, officers and administrators for all such publicity and communication. (Rupal has produced one for press releases – see page 4 – and LR will design the others)
8. "Publisher" training be given to all volunteers producing leaflets and publicity
9. HA21 adopts a standardised style as follows:
 - Ariel type-face (amended from Verdana at May 08 EC meeting)
 - HA21 logo on all publicity and communication as standard
 - Standard green colour for titling etc.
 - Standardised 3-column format for newsletters and reports

Ideas for Action

- A regular HA21 column in the Harrow Times once a month, each focusing on issues of public concern, e.g. waste separation and recycling or the effects of new developments
- Giving talks in schools and inviting press coverage, perhaps co-ordinated by the Education Action Group.
- Approaching the University of Westminster for volunteers to take on specific communications roles

Guidelines for dealing with the media

1. Respond to media contact via email so there is a written record of what was said. This also allows time to consider the response.
2. Do not be bullied into a quick response because of press deadlines
3. Use a good soundbite or quote.
4. Don't waffle – get to the point and stick to it.
5. State your position in HA21 and use this descriptor (pithy statement of overall aims):
“Harrow Agenda 21 – Harrow’s own independent environmental watchdog”

Issuing a press release

1. Press releases are to be jointly composed by the relevant Trustee or Action Group chair and the Communications Officer or Schools Newsletter Editor.
2. Press releases are to be sent via the HA21 Chair or Communications Officer.
3. Press releases can be sent to *all* the reporters on a local paper.
4. It is best to aim for a press release to reach newsdesks on a Friday or a Tuesday.
5. A template of an HA21 press release, together with an example, is to be available in the Trustees area of the HA21 website.

Guidelines for Press Release Content

1. Include the basic facts of the story (Who, What, Where, When, Why & How).
2. Explain the story and set out the main facts in the headline and opening paragraph.
3. Be dynamic. Put in any interesting angle at the start, e.g. breakthrough, prize etc.
4. Base the interest in fact, not hyperbole, e.g. avoid the word 'unique'.
5. Expand the story in a second paragraph, with added evidence, e.g. scale of research.
6. Put any quotes from elsewhere in a third paragraph, e.g. credible authority's remarks
7. Give details of related events in the final paragraph, e.g. publications, regular meets
8. The style should be simple and plain, like a news story, not flowery or sensational.
9. Make sure the details are clear, e.g. date, time, address, contacts
10. Use active verbs. Make sentences short and snappy

Guidelines for Press Release Format

1. Keep it short, no more than one side of A4 paper
2. Make sure it is clear that it is a press release, not a letter or statement
3. Use no more than three shortish sentences per paragraph.
4. Create good margins for journalist's notes
5. Space text at one-and-a-half lines to make it easier to read.
6. If possible, attach a high resolution image (300+dpi)
7. Invite the paper's photographer and describe what is available to be photographed, e.g. model, huge cheque, dignitaries etc.
8. Add maps, graphs or illustrations where appropriate
9. Include contact details (including out-of-hours) to allow journalists to follow up the story.



For further information, contact

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26 March 2008

Film Night with HA21 – How Cuba survived peak oil

A fascinating and empowering story of communities pulling together in Cuba is the subject of a free film night on 31 March 2008 at Harrow Civic Centre. It is brought to local residents by Harrow Agenda 21 (HA21).

The film shows how Cuba, an isolated island nation, rebuilt its quality of life following the collapse of cheap oil supplies from the former Soviet Union.

Quote from Sarah Kersey, Chair of HA21 - *(provide an interesting and insightful quote)*

To attend or for further information, email info@harrowagenda21.org or telephone 07880 931537

Note for editors

Harrow Agenda 21 is Harrow's own independent environmental watchdog. Action Groups cover waste, energy, planning, transport, air pollution, consumer issues and education. Chairs of action groups are available for contact on these areas.

Harrow Agenda 21 is partnership of community groups, individuals, schools, businesses and the Harrow Council. It is committed to making Harrow a more sustainable place to live and work.

For further information, contact Sarah Kersey,
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