



An Rialáil
Carthanas

Charities
Regulator

Guidance on Charity Communications

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Guidance on Charity Communications

Being open and transparent in all its dealings is vital in order to ensure that a charity can build and maintain the confidence of its stakeholders. Therefore, identifying all stakeholders and having a plan in place to ensure the charity communicates with them fully is an important function in a well-governed charity. This guidance document is aimed at anyone involved in communicating on behalf of a charity and covers:

- Identifying who communicates on behalf of the charity;
- Target audience/stakeholders;
- Communications objectives;
- Key messages to consider;
- Ways to communicate;
- How your stakeholders can communicate with you;
- Involving your stakeholders in planning, decision making and review processes;
- Complaints;
- Communications in a crisis.

Identifying who communicates on behalf of the charity

It is important that everyone in a charity knows who is responsible for communicating the charity's message and who the main spokesperson is particularly, but not exclusively, at a time of crisis.

The chairperson of a charity may be seen by many people as the figurehead or main spokesperson for that charity. If there is a manager/CEO, or a public relations officer on the board, the chairperson may delegate a significant amount of his or her public-facing duties or contact with the stakeholders to that particular individual. It is also possible to delegate some of these duties to other charity trustees or volunteers and employees, as long as everyone is clear about what they are or are not able to say on behalf of the charity.

Individuals communicating on behalf of the charity need to be able to do so in a manner which is informed and reflects well on the charity.

Target audience/stakeholders

A charity's stakeholders are any individuals or groups of people who have a legitimate interest in the work of the charity. Identifying who they are is important before you consider how you might communicate with them and how they might communicate with you. A charity's stakeholders may include:

- the people who benefit (directly or indirectly) from any services provided by the charity, also known as beneficiaries;
- members;
- employees and volunteers;
- partner organisations and supporters;
- funders and donors;
- regulators;
- public representatives;
- the general public.

Communications objectives

The first step in considering your charity's communications is to understand what you want to achieve when communicating with others. Communications objectives may include:

- Improving communications with all stakeholders;
- Raising awareness of the charity and what it does;
- Increasing transparency and ensuring greater accountability of the charity;
- Ensuring that all stakeholders can communicate easily with the charity.

Key messages to consider

When considering what you want to communicate to stakeholders try to keep your message clear, appropriate and relevant to your audience. It is important that stakeholders can understand what the charity does, how it does it and what are its objectives and values. The key messages to consider may include:

- Who are you?
- Where are you?
- What do you do?
- What is your legal status/governing form?
- Who funds you?
- What difference or impact do you make?

Ways to communicate

When considering which way to communicate with a particular stakeholder think about who they are, where they are and what might be the best way to communicate with them. There are advantages and disadvantages to using different communication channels and each charity has to decide which to use, given the communications objectives and the resources available to it.

A small charity with few resources serving a local community may consider that a leaflet-drop, posters or public meetings are good ways to get its message out to people who might benefit from the service provided or who may wish to volunteer with the charity.

A small charity with a national remit may consider that communicating through its website or by email would be an effective and appropriate way to engage with its stakeholders. Other methods of communication such as direct mail can be expensive and so may be dependent on a charity having the necessary resources available.

Communication tools as methods to communicate with stakeholders may include:

- Direct mail;
- Email communications;
- Brochures;
- Flyers;
- Leaflets;
- Posters;
- Local newspaper adverts;
- Public meetings;
- Website of the charity;
- Social media platforms;
- Annual reports;
- Reports to funders;
- Annual General Meetings (AGM).

You should ensure that the name and Registered Charity Number (RCN) of your charity is displayed on all of your written materials.

How your stakeholders can communicate with you

You should have a procedure for dealing with queries, comments and complaints. It is important that your stakeholders can communicate with your charity easily, that you publicise in your literature, website, annual report, etc. how they can communicate with you and that communications are acknowledged and responded to appropriately.

Possible ways stakeholders may communicate with you may include:

- Postal communications;
- Email communications;
- Website of the charity;
- Social media platforms;
- Public meetings;
- Telephone;
- AGM.

Involving your stakeholders in planning, decision making and review processes

Decide if and how you will involve your stakeholders in your planning, decision making and review processes.

For example, if you are developing a plan for the year(s) ahead to advance your charitable purpose you may wish to consult with your stakeholders as part of the process. This could be done at the charity's Annual General Meeting or through the use of focus groups.

If you are considering making a significant change to the service you provide that will impact on members or service users it can be advantageous to involve them in the decision making process rather than inform them of a decision after the event. Stakeholders brought into any decision early can provide ideas and help create potential solutions. For example, a charity may need to cut back on the provision of some part of a service because of a shortage of resources. If a meeting is arranged with those likely to be affected by such a cut back, a way might be found to help achieve the charity's objective with reduced resources while limiting the impact on members or service users.

As part of reviewing the service(s) the charity is providing it is important to hear perspectives of different stakeholders, including those availing of the service. Very often, stakeholders come from different backgrounds, and so they look at issues from differing perspectives. For example, feedback from the delivery of a training session can be captured by asking people to fill in an evaluation sheet at the end of the session. Alternatively, an online survey could be conducted sometime after the training session to gather feedback from those who attended.

Complaints

Charities do their best to deliver the best quality service at all times. However, there are times when service users or beneficiaries may be unhappy with some aspect of the level of service that they receive and they may wish to make a complaint. This should be seen as constructive feedback and something that a charity should want to hear about. For this reason, charities should facilitate the making of a complaint if appropriate so that it can be done easily and responded to efficiently.

A charity may have a complaints form available online and/or at the point of delivery of a service where appropriate. A complaints form may request the following information:

- What is the person concerned about?
- Who was involved?
- What happened and when?
- Has the person done anything else to resolve the matter?
- What does the person want to happen now?
- Is there any extra information and/or copies of other relevant documents that the person could attach to their written complaint that would help the charity to deal with it?

The form should also set out the process that the charity has in place for dealing with complaints.

Communications in a crisis

■ What is a crisis?

A crisis is any situation concerning a charity that is threatening or could threaten to harm people or property, seriously interrupt the work of the charity, significantly damage the charity's reputation and/or negatively impact the financial viability of the charity.

Examples of a crisis would be: a fire or significant storm damage to charity building(s), financial wrong-doing; inappropriate behaviour on the part of an employee or a volunteer; a scandal involving a member of the Board; a sudden dramatic loss of funding as a result of a perceived problem; or an investigation into the charity by a regulator or other public body e.g. on foot of a complaint.

■ Key points to consider:

- Anticipate crises;
- Confirm who is the key spokesperson to communicate at the time of a crisis (this could change depending on what the crisis is and who is available at the time);
- Make sure that the key spokesperson is an effective communicator;
- Establish who needs to be notified about the crisis;
- Is the crisis being discussed in the public domain? If so, can you monitor what is being said? Do you need to respond?
- Consider establishing basic holding statements that are ready to use if and when a crisis occurs and before you've had a chance to formulate the charity's response.

Other Relevant Documents

This document should be read in conjunction with our guidance documents on 'Risk Management for Charities', 'Risk Register template' and 'Guidance note on Planning'.