



Policy Statement

The purpose of this policy is to ensure that communication across the Public Sector is well coordinated, effectively managed and responsive to the diverse information needs of the public service and the public.

Scope

This policy applies to all public sector agencies to support effective communication internally and externally.

Communication under this policy includes:

- Internal and external communications
- Stakeholder engagement or public consultation
- Managing content on websites, social media and intranet
- Speaking to the media and at conferences or events
- Protocols for official functions or events
- Sponsorship

This policy excludes:

- Disaster or emergency communications – refer to National Disaster Risk Management Plan
- Responding to official information requests – refer to Official Information Requests Guide
- Managing official information – refer to Official Information Management Policy

Principles

The Public Service Act 2009 identifies the following values for public servants to adhere to:

Honesty	acting honestly, being truthful, and abiding by the laws of the Cook Islands
Impartiality	providing impartial advice, acting without fear or favour, and making decisions on their merits
Service	servicing the people well through faithful service to the Government of the Cook Islands
Transparency	taking actions and making decisions in an open and transparent manner
Accountability	being able to explain the reason for actions taken and taking responsibility for those actions
Respect	treating the people, the Government of the Cook Islands and colleagues with courtesy and respect
Efficiency and Effectiveness	achieving good results for the Cook Islands in an economical way

Delivering information and meeting internal and external communication needs, efficiently and effectively, requires cooperation. Public servants must respect the rights of individuals to be informed and have access to relevant information for decision making in all communication activities.

The Official Information Act provides that all agencies must ensure the public have access to official information relating to public policies, programmes and services.

Legislation and Regulations

Public Service Act 2009, Cook Islands Constitution Act 1965, Public Records Act 1984, Māori Language Act 2003, Official Information Act 2008 and other relevant legislation.

Definitions

Agency means any public service department, instrument, or agent of the Government and includes a body corporate or organisation that is wholly owned or controlled by the Crown

Communication for the purposes of this policy means sending or receiving information, ideas, thoughts or feelings by speaking, writing, or using some other medium to exchange information

Employee means any person who is an employee of the Public Sector

Employer means the Public Service Commissioner and Heads of Public Sector Agencies or their delegated authority

Official Information means any information or data created, received, recorded, stored or disseminated using government assets or resources

Public Service Commissioner means the Public Service Commissioner appointed under Article 73 of the Cook Islands Constitution and section 5 of the Public Service Act 2009

Stakeholders for the purposes of this policy means people who have an interest in the public service, including government, employees, private sector, non-government organisations, development partners and the general public

Procedures

Employers are responsible for administering this policy and developing procedures to support implementation of the policy. Employers are also responsible for ensuring all policies are easily accessible to employees. Employees must read, understand, and comply with this and other relevant government policies. A breach of the policy may be considered misconduct and may be subject to disciplinary action.

Communication

Communication requirements must be taken into account in the planning, implementation and evaluation of public policies, programmes and service delivery.

Communication involves:

- The way agencies communicate and engage with each other, stakeholders and the public
- The way agencies receive and disseminate information
- Using appropriate channels and modes of communication
- Ensuring access to reliable and accurate information

All employers must ensure that:

- a) The Official Information Act, regulations and policies are adhered to;
- b) Employees are trained and knowledgeable in providing information services to the public;
- c) Communication is timely, accurate and considers the privacy and safety of the public;
- d) Methods and channels of communication are used to meet the diverse needs of the public;
- e) Information issued by specific agencies is easily identifiable;
- f) Prompt and clear explanations are provided when information is unavailable;
- g) Agency service charters have timelines for responding to enquiries and complaints;
- h) Opportunities are available for the public to provide feedback on major policies, programmes and services, and such feedback is carefully considered in reviews or evaluations;
- i) Agencies have consultation processes that respect the views and interests of others; and
- j) Current information about agency mandates, structures and services are available.

Communication principles in practice

Effective communication enables the exchange and sharing of information. Information must be disseminated, readily available and easily understood throughout the Cook Islands.

The following principles must be upheld in the way agencies communicate.

All Agencies must:

1. Communicate in English and Cook Islands Māori

- The official languages of communication are English¹ and Cook Islands Māori²
- Use the Agency Cook Islands Māori name when engaging in official communications
- Communicate information on public goods and services should be communicated in a concise format, in both English and Cook Islands Māori
- Pa Enea dialects must be used where appropriate
- Use Cook Islands Māori salutations and closing remarks, such as 'Kia Orana', 'Kia Manuia' and 'Meitaki'

2. Collaborate to ensure coherent and consistent communication

- Employees must work collaboratively to ensure coherent and consistent communication
- Communication must be in formats that are easily understood and appropriate for the user/receiver of the information

3. Clarify information in a timely, accurate, clear and objective manner

- Employees have a duty to explain and inform key stakeholders of public policies, decisions and work programmes and ensure information is accurate and complete
- Communication should support active and meaningful participation in information sharing and ensure programmes and services are transparent

4. Coordinate better visibility, accessibility and accountability

- Information on services and programmes must be visible and accessible through relevant media such as: customer service, telephone, mail, print, broadcasting and internet websites
- Information from specific agencies must be clearly identifiable with the Crown logo and agency name or logo

5. Construct information in a variety of formats and ways to communicate effectively

- Information must be written in a way that can easily be understood and enable people to contribute to the design and delivery of public policies, programmes and services
- Information must be communicated to meet the diverse needs of people, wherever they reside

6. Consult with stakeholders

- Dialogue between agencies and the public must be continuous, informed, inclusive, relevant, clear, secure and reliable
- Research, evaluate and listen to the needs of people as this is critical to the design and implementation of public policies, programmes and services

¹ Cook Islands Constitution 1965
² Te Reo Maori Act 2003

Communication Rules and Protocols

Communication is a shared responsibility that requires cooperation among agencies to meet the information needs of the Public Service and the public. Every agency must develop and implement a communication plan outlining types of information, media and authorised employees to communicate and/or disseminate information.

See Annex 01 for a matrix on information types and mediums/channels for communication.

The following rules must be adhered to by agencies relating to the key areas shown below:

Internal communications

- Accurate and evidence-based information must be provided to Ministers
- Ministers and key stakeholders must be kept informed of issues as they arise ('no surprises' approach)
- Legal obligations and communication protocols must be complied with at all times
- Privileged or confidential information should be treated sensitively and disseminated carefully

External communications

- Official information should be disclosed proactively and published
- The Official Information Act provides that information held by agencies should be available to the public unless there are good reasons for withholding it
- All information must be factual, accurate, provided in a timely manner
- Agencies must ensure:
 - published information is available on request;
 - official information is current and is clearly identifiable;
 - external correspondence and communications such as media/press releases are approved by authorised agency representatives;
 - appropriate official languages with minimal technical jargon is used;
 - opportunities are available for stakeholders to provide feedback; and
 - Minister(s) are notified of any information to be released publicly before doing so

Protocols for official functions, events or meetings

- All major official functions, events or public meetings must begin and end in prayer
- Government, traditional and religious leaders must be acknowledged at official public gatherings
- All public servants must be dressed appropriately at official functions and behave in a manner that promotes the good reputation of the public service (domestically and abroad)

Stakeholder engagement or public consultation

- Relevant stakeholders must be identified and consulted on matters of public policy, programmes and services, and kept informed on consultation outcomes
- Open, honest and responsive communication should be apparent during consultations
- Factual information, in language or formats that are easily understood, will be presented
- Respect and follow the protocols of each Puna (electoral constituency) on Rarotonga and Island Governments in the Pa Enea

Managing content on websites, social media and intranet

- Agencies will maintain websites or social media to provide current and accurate information on agency policies, programmes and services
- The Office of the Prime Minister (OPM)- Information Communication Technology (ICT) Division will maintain an ICT network and intranet to facilitate communication across agencies
- Employees will be trained to prepare content for websites/social media and how to post these

Speaking to the media and engagements at conferences or events

- Only Ministers, Heads of Agencies and 'authorised' staff are permitted to speak to the media
- Ministers and Heads of Agencies are responsible for preparing Ministerial briefs to the media
- Opportunities to enhance the public service reputation through the media will be optimised
- Any reputational risks arising from misinformation or poor communication will be mitigated
- Staff invited to participate in various fora as speakers or panellists (domestically and abroad) must be duly authorised and trained to do so effectively, as government representatives
- All official speeches must be critiqued by authorised staff, prior to their public release

Sponsorship/Advertising

- Agencies may provide sponsorship to support activities or events that fall within the scope of agency mandates or cabinet directives, especially where they promote public-private partnerships and enhance the reputation of the public service
- Agencies must not advertise or endorse private sector products and services, except where they provide sponsorship towards government led events e.g. Te Maeva Nui
- Ministers, Heads of Agencies or staff may be required to represent government in sponsored events, but must not actively seek personal gain from such engagements
- Individuals or organisations are prohibited from using the 'Crown' logo, government or agency name, without written permission from the head of the agency

Developing, Implementing and Evaluating a Communications Plan

- **Background/Context** - understand the context and need for a Communications Plan. State the objectives of the Plan in addressing the information needs of the Agency's stakeholders
- **Research/Current perceptions** - gather the Agency's stakeholder information needs
- **Communications Plan objectives** - objectives must be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely)
- **Audiences** - identify your different audiences, information type/s and communication medium/channels to reach them
- **Key messages** - key themes and messaging (content) will differ by audience
- **Communication issues/risks** – be aware of any risks, issues, problems or opportunities that may impact on the communications plan objectives and mitigate these
- **Implementation plan** – the Communications Plan must identify the:
 - Communication objectives
 - Target audience/s
 - Information type (content) and medium/channel/s for communication
 - Persons responsible for implementation (what, how and when)
- **Evaluation** – The Plan must indicate how often communication objectives will be measured and updated (where necessary). Evaluations can be done through: focus groups, surveys/questionnaires, informal research and/or media feedback.

Role of Central Agencies, Agencies and Employers

The Office of the Public Service Commissioner is responsible for supporting Heads of Agencies administer this policy to strengthen public service communications.

The Office of the Prime Minister is responsible for coordinating and maintaining access to official information across the public sector as required under the Official Information Act. Refer to Crown Law or the Official Information Requests Guide for details on how to respond to requests for official information.

Employers are responsible for ensuring adherence with this policy and developing agency-specific communication plans that promote the good work and reputation of the public service.

Other Provisions

All records relating to key aspects of the communications process must be kept for at least seven years and will only be accessible by the employer and/or authorised staff. After the seven year period, the agency may destroy the documentation in adherence with government official information management policies.

The Office of the Public Service Commissioner is responsible for reviewing and updating this policy and associated documents annually.

Associated Documents

Code of Conduct Policy

Risk Management Policy

Official Information Management Policy

Official Information Requests Guide

Other information

For policy queries contact the Office of the Public Service Commissioner on phone (682) 29421 or email: opscinfo@cookislands.gov.ck

Annex 01: Communication Matrix

The following table provides a list of information agencies will disseminate through various media:

- Internal and external communication
- Stakeholder engagement or public consultation
- Managing content on websites and intranet
- Speaking to the media and at conferences or events
- Protocol for official functions or events
- Sponsorship

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION		
Information Type	Medium/Channel	Frequency
General information about agency staff contacts list and operational policies	Email/Phone call/Intranet	Permanent, but updated periodically
Agency major meetings, events and programmes	Email/Intranet/Media/Press Release/Newsletters	Monthly or as they occur
	Email/Intranet/Media/Press release	As they occur
Changes to functions, strategy and structures	Email/Intranet/Media/Press release/Newsletters	As they occur
Announcements of appointments to key posts	Email/Intranet/Media/Press release/Newsletters	Monthly or as they occur
	Email/Intranet/Media/Press release	As they occur
Key milestones and achievements	Annual Report	Annually
	Email/Media/Press Release	As they occur
	Newsletters and/or intranet	As they occur
Advice to Minister/s	Email/Phone call/Face to face meeting	As they occur
Advice to Staff/Employees	Email/Phone call/Intranet/Face to face meeting/Newsletters	As they occur
EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION		
Information Type	Medium	Frequency
General information on the public service and agency mandates, structures, strategic policies and programmes	Website/Social media	Permanent, but updated periodically
	Strategic Plan/Statement of Intent	Medium term
	Annual Report/Business Plan	Annually
	Stakeholder meetings	Periodically
Legislative or mandated changes to functions or structures (post Cabinet/Parliament approval)	Website/Social media	As they occur
	Ministerial interview	Media schedule
	Media release	As they occur
Major policy or strategy changes (post Cabinet approval)	Website/Social media	As they occur
	Annual Report/Business/Strategic Plan	Annually or as they occur
	Stakeholder meeting	Periodically
	Media/Press release	As they occur
Significant incidents (financial, operational)	Media announcement/brief	As they occur
	Annual Report	Annually
	Stakeholder meeting	Periodically
	Media/Press release	As they occur

Public Service and Agency performance	Annual Report	Annually
	Six monthly report	Mid-Year
	Media/Press release	As they occur
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENTS OR PUBLIC CONSULTATION		
Information Type	Medium	Frequency
Policy development or changes	Public notice/meeting	As they occur
	Email/intranet/media/press release	As they occur
	Website/Social media	As they occur
MANAGING CONTENT ON WEBSITES, SOCIAL MEDIA AND INTRANET		
Information Type	Medium	Frequency
Content development or changes	Email/intranet/social media/media/press release	As they occur
SPEAKING TO THE MEDIA, AT CONFERENCES OR AT OTHER EVENTS		
Information Type	Medium	Frequency
Press conference	Face to face meeting, Radio/television interview	As they occur
	Media/Press release	As they occur
Presentation or speech	Face to face presentation	As they occur
	Media/Press release/Website	As they occur
PROTOCOL FOR OFFICIAL FUNCTIONS OR EVENTS		
Information Type	Medium	Frequency
Protocol for various events	Agency operation manual/induction guide	As they occur
Dress code and conduct	Agency operation manual/induction guide	As they occur
SPONSORSHIP		
Information Type	Medium	Frequency
Types and scope of sponsorship	Agency operation manual	As they occur