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**Governance Code for Sport**

**Communications Planning**

Guidance Notes, including crisis communications

Disclaimer

Sport Ireland is making available a range of resources including guidance notes, policy documents and templates for selected areas aligned to the Governance Code for Sport which will support sport organisations, boards, management and staff in the development of relevant governance processes and procedures particular to their own organisation.

For the avoidance of doubt, the final decision on the nature, type, extent and format of approved governance policies, procedures and processes for each organisation is a matter for the board / highest governing structure of the organisation and the resources and material provided may assist the approval process.

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**Why an organisation needs a communications plan?**

The most successful and enduring organisations and leaderships cultivate a reputation founded on trust, transparency and integrity. It is essential that the organisation communicates to its stakeholders across a range of communications platforms in a way that inspires confidence. That may be in the form of regular media briefings, public speaking

engagements, government meetings, monthly newsletters, regular meetings with fans and member clubs or staff forums in Type C organisations, through to having a website and a journalist contact for Type A organisations. An organisation ideally will have a designated spokesperson and a plan in place in the case of a crisis. All organisations, whether Type A, B or C should communicate with its stakeholders.

Having a communications plan speaks especially to principle 3 of the Code, ‘Being Transparent and Accountable. Sub-principles 1 and 2 state that the organisation should:

* Identify those who have a legitimate interest in the work of our organisation (stakeholders) and making sure there is regular and effective communication with them about our organisation.
* Responding to stakeholders' questions or views about the work of our organisation and how we run it.

Furthermore, principle 5, ‘Behaving with Integrity’ has a sub-principle of ‘Protecting and promoting our organisation's reputation’ which is also supported through planned communications with stakeholders and having a crisis communications plan in place.

For Type C organisations, sport often comes with a public profile and expectation amongst members and fans to deliver success. The figurehead of the organisation can attract public and media attention and scrutiny in equal measure. For Type A and B organisations there may be less public attention, but still an expectation amongst stakeholders to communicate effectively.

There are a number of reasons why a communications plan is important:

* It gives clarity of purpose and explains your strategy - where you are going and how you intend to get there
* The plan should ensure that the organisation’s strategic objectives are linked to key events or communications from the organisation
* It helps define the stakeholders – who the organisation is trying to talk to and why – and it should cater to all stakeholders
* It helps align staff, volunteers and stakeholders - effective communications planning includes structured, facilitated conversations with key stakeholders
* A good communications plan will help the organisation prioritise the use of its resources
* It can be a way to measure success - a good communications plan should include benchmarks and an evaluation process.

Whose responsibility is it to develop a communications plan?

It is the responsibility of the Board to ensure that all the principles of the Code are being upheld and delivered. The executive lead / Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is often tasked with ensuring that the principles of the Code are being implemented in the organisation and thus will be responsible for ensuring there is a communications plan in use in the organisation. In larger Type C organisations there may be a Head of Communications whose role will include producing a communications strategy. In smaller Type A or B organisations there may be a PRO (Public Relations Officer) whose role will be to communicate with stakeholders.

**What should a communications plan include?**

A communications plan should include:

* A focus on each pillar of the organisational strategy i.e., performance, grassroots, governance, commercial, etc.
* Key communications objectives within each pillar i.e., improve reputation score, increase visibility of coach education, promote ticket sales, governance improvements, etc.
* A breakdown of the key opportunities in each pillar i.e., European championships, grassroots activities, sponsorship announcements or activations
* A content calendar, populated with events and promotional channels i.e., national championship highlights on YouTube, or AGM highlights on Facebook

What are crisis communications?

An organisation may encounter times of difficulty or crisis and on these occasions should be prepared proactively through a robust, road-tested Crisis Communications Plan. It is important first to identify a crisis and distinguish it from, say, a high-profile issue that generates short-term but intense coverage. A crisis is best described as *‘a time of great difficulty or danger; a time when a difficult or important decision must be made’*. A crisis communications plan will help to keep media intrusion to a minimum and enable the organisation to take control of a developing situation:

**The following are elements that can be included in a crisis communications plan:**

* For smaller organisations:
  + Put together a team who will deal with it (In Local Authority LSPs it would be the executive committee comprising of head of community, chairman and coordinator that would meet on these items)
  + Ensure communications are clear to all internally
  + Alert and update key internal and external stakeholders affected by the crisis e.g. Sport Ireland
  + Nominate a spokesperson from the team
  + Prepare and issue a statement
  + Monitor social media
* For larger organisations
  + It is recommended that a Crisis Group is appointed, with the key members obliged to convene before the crisis breaks, and/or within minutes of it developing. The Crisis Group shall incorporate CEO and/or President, Board Chair, Head of Communications/PRO, leadership team, subject-specific experts, legal counsel (if required).
  + Establish all facts and online sentiment - monitor social media and track specific keywords, names, online handles, and hashtags that could be associated with the crisis
  + Keep a media call log of further enquiries
  + Alert and update key internal and external stakeholders affected by the crisis to ensure a flow of accurate up-to-date communication. Brief relevant sponsor and/or Sport Ireland / department officials depending on the extent and news of crisis
  + Nominate and brief appropriate spokesperson(s).
  + Prepare and issue a holding statement (internal and external)
  + Monitor social media and log media enquiries. Owned media channels (website, social media) are advised to take control of the situation and the accuracy of messaging.
  + Prepare a media conference/formal statement. Be mindful of context when choosing correct tone, imagery and even dress during a crisis. Sombre occasions require leadership.
  + Consider other areas of the organisation and who may be affected (e.g., the person who answers the phone or development officers who act as ‘front line staff’)
  + Ensure the President, Board, Leadership Team, staff and other stakeholders are updated on the situation as it develops, subject to need-to- know basis.

What is a designated spokesperson?

A designated spokesperson is someone engaged to speak on behalf of the organisation. Designating one individual as the primary spokesperson to represent the organization, make official statements and answer media questions on behalf of the organisation provides consistency to stakeholders, and can be especially important in times of a crisis. Spokespersons must be trained and familiar with the basic principles of communications, including crisis communications.

The designated spokesperson should be someone who carries authority and has a natural ability to communicate the organisation’s news in a compelling manner. The spokesperson should faithfully represent and advocate for the organisation's positions, even when these conflict with their own opinion, and should understand the strategic goals – for these reasons it is generally someone from the Board/leadership, with a deep understanding of the organisation, so either the Chairperson or the Chief Executive.

Consideration should be given to training – ideally the spokesperson should receive some media/communications training. In bigger organisations there may also be a second designate (also ideally trained) available in the case of the designated spokesperson not being available at any specific time.

Implementing a communications plan: how and when to use it

The Board should be aware of the communications plan and should ensure that it is aligned with the overall strategic plan. The communications plan will be produced annually, as it is an operational plan, and needs to be responsive to changes in the operating environment. The Board should receive regular updates on communications progress and stakeholder interaction – from CEO/Head of Communications/PRO.

Media awareness training could be considered for all public-facing members of staff. This provides a platform for the organisation to speak confidently and engender confidence within all key stakeholders, internally and externally.

Internal communications are also important and the Board should give attention to communicating internally within the organisation with staff and volunteers – this may be by newsletter, email, volunteer workshops, staff days, etc.

Further links and resources

[Public Relations Institute of Ireland Website](https://www.prii.ie/)