

Briefing for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting: an update following the Communications Task and Finish Group's work - Wednesday 27 May 2009

1. Background

This briefing paper has been written by the Communications and Marketing Manager and accompanies his attendance at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 27 May, alongside the Head of HR and Communications. The briefing addresses the actions recommended by the Communications Task and Finish Group on the conclusion of its work in the summer of 2008.

The paper looked at seven areas: *Prioritising Communications, Communications Strategy, Internal Communications, Joint Working, Civic Newspaper, Corporate Branding and Media Relations.*

2. Prioritising Communications

The **strengthening of the Communications Team** with the appointment of a full time Communications and Marketing Manager (the previous manager worked part-time), an additional Media and Communications Officer, an Administration Assistant to support the team, and responsibility for the Print Team, was the clearest demonstration possible of this Council's commitment to communications and making it a priority.

These new members of the team joined an existing Media and Communications Officer and a Designer, and so enabled the creation of a team whose resources could now match those of other similar-sized councils and public/private sector organisations.

But good communication is not exclusive to this specialist team and must pervade across the whole council. Indeed, strengthened as the team may be, it is simply not possible for the team to carry out all the Council's communications work. Hence **Communications Champions** have been set up to cover all of the Council's services including the Children's Centres. Twelve champions will be meeting bi-monthly as a Communications Group, chaired by the Communications and Marketing Manager. Their role is to create strong two-way communications between their services and the Communications Team, and vice versa. They have a broad brief, from identifying stories and helping with internal communications, to gaining good practice and new skills in photography and marketing techniques.

The Corporate Management Team (CMT) now has Communications on all of its agendas. Each month the Communications and Marketing Manager presents a regularly updated Communications Planner to CMT. The Planner identifies sensitive issues for CMT's consideration and details how we will respond, as well as providing information on themed national weeks that the Council can support.

The **Controlling Group's role driving through improvements** is fundamental. The Group supported the expansion of the team and Members have worked closely with the team during the past year, especially at Leader and Portfolio Holder level.

The Task and Finish Group also considered the **position and location of Communications in the Council**. It was later agreed to locate Communications alongside HR and the Print Team as part of the HR and Communications service, led by Elaine Storer, as Head of HR and Communications. The service is part of the Environment and Planning Directorate.

It is fair to say that being part of a Planning directorate is unusual for Communications. The function is often to be found within the Chief Executive's department or corporate or policy.

But in the Redditch case it seems to work. And there are strong advantages in Communications working alongside the HR function, especially with respect to internal communications. The team makes a special effort to visit colleagues across all floors at the Town Hall and tries to break down the barriers of being located on the fourth floor at the top of the building. Being part of a service directorate also exposes Communications to the day-to-day issues and challenges councils face.

The Communications Team has made a particular effort to promote the **Council's vision and priorities** with the production of posters, press work, publicity through the Council Tax leaflet and Redditch Matters. It also led on the public and staff consultation when the new vision and priorities were proposed.

The Council's **Website**, managed through the hub arrangement with the County Council, is being re-designed and will see much improved navigation and a cleaner, modern style. The new website will be launched in September. At the same time, a new content management system (CMS) is being introduced and the Council's team of web authors are being trained to use the new system next month.

Web authors take responsibility for managing and updating content within their functional areas. The Communications Team, as one of the web authors, manages press releases on the site and has plans to create an online press office. It also oversees the Focus On features and the page for Redditch Matters where an online version of the magazine is available. It also provides content for other parts of the website depending on need, for example new photography etc.

Not mentioned by the Task and Finish Group is the whole area of **social media and networking**. Many councils are now communicating via the latest web 2.0 technology including through tools including Facebook, Twitter and Flickr. This is something we do want to embrace more, particularly as social media is an ideal method of communicating (and consulting) with those 'hard to reach groups'. A Facebook site for the Morton Stanley Fun Day is being set up, to market the event and promote the bands that will be playing during the day. Colleagues in planning have identified the usefulness of Twitter to highlight new planning applications and to consult residents.

But we are conscious that the Council's Internet policy for staff currently forbids access to social media sites during work hours and also outside core work times. This makes it difficult for staff to set up and manage legitimate social media to promote their services and needs addressing.

Internal communications is driven by a combination of email newsletters and updates, staff briefings, team meetings and online communication. See section 4 for more detail.

3. Communications Strategy

A new strategy needs to be produced and has been deliberately put on hold for the moment, to give the new Communications and Marketing Manager time to settle into the job and understand the Council's work and role within Redditch in greater detail. This will be produced later this year but will be widened into a Communications and Engagement Strategy

The strategy will reflect the vision and priorities, capture consultation activity (and ensure these are planned to ensure good response levels), link to other relevant plans, strategies and policies, and include an action plan that timetables major communications activity throughout the year – publication of the Annual Report, Corporate Plan, Council Tax leaflet, Redditch Matters, internal publications, Neighbourhood Group meetings, participation in the Community Forum etc.

The principal role of the Communications Team is to enable residents to understand how their Council works and the services it provides, and crucially to encourage engagement with the Council and those services. But many councils are now additionally looking to place shaping (or even place shielding to protect their areas against the current recession).

The Task and Finish Group did identify a need to **promote the image of Redditch** (which would fall within place shaping) and it is clear that the Council has a role to play here especially as few, if any, other local organisations are equipped or want to perform this role. However, as other councils have found, place shaping needs resourcing and has been most successful where regeneration, tourism and economic development resources are strong, not to mention the support of local people and stakeholder groups.

Redditch's reputation, certainly, county wide and regionally could clearly be improved, and is often unfair given many of the positives we could all point to. But changing perceptions will undoubtedly take time.

The Communications Team will do all it can to use opportunities to make local people feel proud to live here and influence those from outside. Opportunities that we could use now include approaching television and radio programmes to broadcast their programmes from Redditch - Gardener's Question Time, Antiques Roadshow etc. This will require effort to achieve as with all place shaping activity.

Much of our **marketing** revolves around producing quality print and advertising. Services from Shopmobility and Lifeline to the free swimming campaign and promoting the Palace Theatre all benefit from our design and marketing input. Inevitably services such as the Palace Theatre and our leisure centres are at the forefront of our marketing, having access to dedicated marketing funds and able to use more direct marketing channels to reach their customers such as mailing lists and e-marketing.

The Communications Team is conscious of the need to raise marketing standards across the Council and seeks to try and help those services with less marketing budget, in particular.

Member Communications are led by the Committee Services team. The Communications Team leads on the Members' Bulletin (see below) and has a role to play keeping Members informed of sudden and important news and developments. Members also receive a copy of all issued press releases.

4. Internal Communications

It is clearly imperative that staff are kept informed about the democratic process and decisions made by the Council, in addition to the general day-to-day news that affects staff. To this end the following tools are used:

- **Core Brief** is produced each month and emailed to all staff, and is for corporate news and information. Core Brief Extra is issued when there is important information to convey between editions.

- **Contact** is the staff newsletter produced each quarter and is for human interest stories involving staff.

- A **Members' Bulletin**, produced monthly, is a briefing for councillors and was introduced last year.

The Chief Executive has been discussing a range of new techniques to take forward, some have already begun including back to the floor (for senior officers to spend time experiencing the frontline) and open door sessions to meet Serco as they produce the business case for shared services.

A staff suggestion scheme, a staff survey, speed dating to enable staff to meet and talk to the CMT, are among several other techniques under consideration.

5. Joint Working

With the new Communications Team in place, it has been possible to work more closely with our County Council partner on joint communications activity. This includes current joint activity on the economic situation under the County Council's Economy Watch group, while the Council Tax leaflet is another example of joint working.

We also work closely with county and district councils on emergency planning, through the West Mercia LRF (Local Response Force). This has been very noticeable during the recent outbreak of swine flu.

And clearly there is considerable communications contact with Bromsgrove District Council, in line with the shared services agenda. We regularly share good practice and suppliers to achieve maximum efficiency.

The Community Forum in Redditch is a particular example of joint working as is the local strategic partnership. From a specific communications point of view, we could probably do more to share news across our partner's own publications and websites.

6. Civic Newspaper

Redditch Matters returned in March, following an 18-months absence. The spring edition was 32 pages long and included 5 pages of advertising to help offset some of the production costs. Work is currently underway completing the summer edition, due to be distributed from 1 July. A combined autumn / winter edition will be published in late November. Following competitive quotations, Newsquest was hired to distribute copies with the Redditch Advertiser and post about 850 copies to businesses. Printnote was hired to sell advertising space. The spring edition cost £4,600 to produce 40,000 copies and was within a £5,000 budget allocated for this first edition. With good advertising support it is hoped to bring the costs of Redditch Matters down further in the coming year.

The contents of each edition are agreed by an Editorial Panel comprising Councillors A Clayton (Conservative), Pearce (Conservative), Hartnett (Labour) and Thomas (Liberal Democrats). The Panel also provides feedback after each edition.

7. Corporate Branding

The Council's **Corporate Identity** has been revised and will be presented to the Executive Committee at their 22 July meeting for hopeful adoption by Full Council in August, and then it will be launched to staff.

The revisions include a consistent style for email footers, letterheads, presentations etc which has been missing, and new Plain English and style guides.

It goes without saying that the revised identity has a strong part to play in improving our internal communications, especially in helping all staff to communicate clearly and consistently, and so that the Redditch Council brand is well executed.

8. Media Relations

With two dedicated Media and Communications Officers now in place, we have been able to significantly increase the amount of pro-active press work we do. Since last November, when the new Communications Team came into being, over 80 **press releases** have been issued on a wide variety of topics (as the handout demonstrates). Every release issued has resulted in media coverage.

The Task and Finish were concerned that a **`disproportionate amount of media work is on leisure and the arts`**. A glance at the handout demonstrates that this not the case and press activity in this particular area is broadly in line with the amount of budget spent on leisure and the arts. Indeed the press office team has been careful to ensure that a wide range of services are able to benefit through media activity, in accordance with the Council's vision and priorities.

It is now policy to include **quotations from portfolio holders** in all press releases we issue with the exception of a very small number of releases where the inclusion of a quotation is not necessary.

A new **media relations policy** has been written and will be issued to staff and Members this summer, alongside the revised Corporate Identity. These are our protocols and include sections on the media we deal with; the roles of staff, Members and the Communications Team; as well as dealing with quotations and approving press releases.

Relationships with the media are good. There were a couple of stories concerning Dial-A-Ride and the new vision and priorities that caused some problems for the Council, although we did have the opportunity to respond. In the last few months there have been meetings with the Editor of the Redditch Standard and the Publisher of the Redditch Advertiser. This has been supplemented by regular contact with reporters from both papers as well as from the Birmingham Mail, Birmingham Post, BBC Hereford and Worcester, BBC WM, Wyvern FM, Touch FM, ITV Central and BBC Midlands Today – our principal media. We also frequently deal with the national media, especially with the Home Secretary being the MP for Redditch.

In addition, we have secured a monthly column in the Redditch Standard for the Leader of the Council to communicate her thoughts on Council activity and news at these regular intervals.

Media briefings are held on a regular basis. They range from one-to one briefings with the Chief Executive prior to Full Council meetings, to full briefings with several media in attendance e.g. the briefing staged before the launch of the consultation on the medium term budget strategy back in March.

We also produce **press statements** to respond to enquiries and will respond to **letters** in newspapers that require an official Council reply.

We would like to spread the excellent coverage we get locally to more coverage in the **trade press** (Municipal Journal, First – magazine of the Local Government Association, Local Government Chronicle etc), but this will only be achieved if we have a story to tell and one that is interesting on a national scale.

We have been in contact with the Editor of Worcestershire Life to encourage more articles on Redditch, and not necessarily on the Council, to be run in the county's lifestyle magazine. There may also be scope to increase feature coverage in the Birmingham Post and other regional titles, given that there is a desire to **raise the profile of Redditch** across the region and change some of the negative perceptions of the town. But again achieving this will depend on the availability of good potential feature stories and meeting the agenda of papers such as the Post.

Adrian Marklew
Communications and Marketing Manager
Redditch Borough Council

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