



Executive Committee

No Direct Ward Relevance

31st March 2010

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY 2010 TO 2013

(Report of the Communications and Marketing Manager)

1. Summary of Proposals

This Communications Strategy follows a previous strategy produced in 2006 and will guide the Council's corporate communications over the next three years. It includes a Communications Action Plan for 2010 / 11, which will need to be updated on a yearly basis over the lifetime of this strategy.

2. Recommendations

The Committee is asked to RESOLVE that the Communications Strategy 2010 – 2013 be adopted and added to the Council's policy framework from April 2010.

3. Financial, Legal, Policy, Risk and Climate Change / Carbon Management Implications

Financial

- 3.1 Proposed work to be carried out arising from the strategy is itemised through the Communications Action Plan 2010 / 11 and is within normal budgets.

Legal

- 3.2 Effective communication is fundamental to all organisations and especially where public funds are being spent and representatives of the organisation need to be accountable. In Local Government, authorities' communications work is guided by the Local Government White Paper 2006; Stronger and Prosperous Communities. On a more practical level, communications activity has to adhere to the Local Government Publicity Code. The Code is currently being revised by Government following a consultation period (Redditch Borough Council participated in this).

Policy

- 3.3 Communications is embedded in the Council's work and there are existing policies that reflect the Council's communications activities. These include a Media Relations Policy (last revised in September 2009), a Corporate Identity (adopted in July 2009), and an agreement to produce a Council magazine four times a year (supported by an Editorial Panel of Member representatives).

Risk

- 3.4 The risk of not having a new strategy in place is that the Council's corporate communications work would become unfocussed and lack direction. As part of the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA), Councils are judged partly on how well they communicate with their customers. Having a strategic approach is judged favourably by the Audit Commission when producing an CAA assessment.
- 3.5 By taking a strategic approach the Council is better able to manage issues that may potentially harm its reputation or seize opportunities that may help raise its profile, as well as plan overall workloads. A plan within a strategy can identify communications that could help to protect reputation, raise awareness or enhance profile.

Climate Change / Carbon Management

- 3.6 Communications has a role to play in promoting the Council's response to the issues surrounding climate change and carbon management. While greater use of digital communication can reduce the need to make unnecessary travel to Council properties and external meetings, so helping to reduce carbon emissions.

Sustainability / Environmental

- 3.7 Digital communication has developed hugely since the last strategy was produced in 2006. Where possible, we will communicate electronically to keep costs down and to reduce the need for paper and printing materials, and therefore help protect the environment.

Report

4. Background

- 4.1 The Communications Strategy takes as its structure why a strategy is needed, the need for effective internal and external communications, the need to engage and consult, what we have done so far as a Council to communicate with our various audiences, our aims, communications priorities for 2010 / 11, roles and responsibilities and where do we go from here?

- 4.2 While consultation and engagement is mentioned, this strategy does not set out to cover the Council's community engagement role and activities in detail. This is to be reported in a separate and combined Bromsgrove District Council and Redditch Borough Council Community Engagement Strategy which will address both Councils' responsibilities under the Government's new Duty to Involve legislation, and will have separate actions for Bromsgrove and Redditch Councils.
- 4.3 A key part of the strategy is the communications priorities for 2010 / 11. These are based on the Council's corporate priorities of 'Enterprising Community', 'Safe', 'Clean and Green', and 'Well Managed Organisation'. They also include 'to increase digital communications activity' and 'help create a more positive image for Redditch'.
- 4.4 The Communications Plan for 2010 / 11, produced as an Appendix to the strategy, includes work and projects across internal and external communications. This includes media relations work and the issuing of press releases and responding to press queries, producing Redditch Matters each quarter, a monthly Communications Planner, Core Brief internal newsletter and Contact staff magazine, publications such as the Council Tax leaflet, Annual Report, Corporate Plan, marketing and communications support to the Council's services, and communications support for the Redditch Partnership.
- 4.5 A section from the Place Survey for Redditch 2008-9 is included in the Appendix that is relevant to the Council's communications. This is referred to in the strategy document. It shows that only 36 per cent of those surveyed said they were 'very well' or 'fairly well' informed about the Council and its services. Overall customer satisfaction with the Council - those who were 'very or fairly satisfied' - was 43 per cent, but with a large 37 per cent who were undecided. Communications activity since the survey was conducted, during autumn 2008, has sought to address these scores.
- 4.6 A further Appendix with the strategy is the Council's Media Relations Policy agreed in September 2009. With media relations a key part of our communications work, it is included here for ease of reference.

5. Key Issues

- 5.1 The Communications Strategy stresses that good and effective communication is vital if the Council's work, activities and policies are to be understood in an increasingly fragmented media landscape.
- 5.2 The Council's communications work has undergone considerable change over the past two years. Staff changes in 2008 saw the departure of the then Communications Manager, and Press Officer. A Member-led Task and Finish Group was appointed to look at Communications and reported its findings in the autumn of that year.
- 5.3 A new Communications and Marketing Manager was appointed from November 2008, joined by two Media and Communications Officers (replacing the previous single Press Officer post), a Senior Design and Print Officer (established post) and a part-time Administration Assistant (new post). The team also took responsibility for the Council's in-house Print Unit. It reported to the Head of HR and Communications (within the Environment and Planning Directorate).
- 5.4 With increased staffing, a great deal has been achieved since November 2008, particularly with the re-introduction of Redditch Matters, a Corporate Identity being formally adopted by Council, much increased internal communications activity, quality design and print work taking in other publications produced plus advertising and displays; media relations opportunities better utilised with increased staff (with the result that about 80 per cent of our coverage is deemed `positive`, and stories that could damage the Council's reputation are professionally managed), running several campaigns, developing online communication, and supporting partners involved in trying to create a more positive profile for Redditch.
- 5.5 There is no doubt that communication, for any organisation let alone the local Council, is a key management task that requires careful handling and a professional approach, if an organisation's profile and reputation is to achieve favour or be considered positive and good. With the rise of digital communication, especially through social media including Facebook, Twitter and blogging, communicating messages and managing reputation has never been more challenging. There are now multiple opportunities available to communicate, but at the same time multiple opportunities for the Council's customers and stakeholders to comment on its work and role in the community.

- 5.6 Much of this activity has the potential of adding to the Communication Team's existing workload, on top of activity undertaken through the more traditional channels of print and face-to-face communication. Interactive communication is most definitely changing that media landscape. But such change is also prompting the Council to consider amending some of its practices. A Task and Finish Group has examined the role of Neighbourhood Groups and has concluded, after more than 10 years of existence, they have reached the end of their usefulness. Various recommendations were put forward by Group Members and this strategy embraces some of them in the 2010-11 communications planning.
- 5.7 These are exciting times for any communicator as digital technology's potential for the improved targeting of messages opens up, as well as the opportunity to evaluate the Council's communications work more thoroughly. Traditionally, councils have not always been good at targeting their communication, evaluating the communications activities they perform or in communicating to the 'hard to reach'.
- 5.8 The sharing of services with Bromsgrove District Council will enable us to share best practice, work together where it makes sense (i.e. a new joint intranet site for staff, ensuring we have consistent messages particularly for our staff etc), yet also respecting the differences between Redditch and Bromsgrove and seeking to ensure each area's identity is maintained and its unique communication challenges are dealt with accordingly. Scope to obtain value for money from our communications activity and from our suppliers can also be enhanced through the sharing of services.
- 5.9 Communications also has a major and ongoing role to play as the Councils undergo the change management process, not least in the need to keep staff and Members informed and involved in the process, to consult the trade unions, to inform residents about the changes being made and improvements to service delivery they can expect to see, and also to inform the Council's many partners about the changes being made.

6. Other Implications

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| Asset Management | - | None identified. |
| Community Safety | - | None identified. |
| Health | - | None identified. |
| Human Resources | - | Delivery of this strategy assumes existing resources are in place. |

Social Exclusion - Our communications should always strive to be inclusive. As appropriate, we highlight translation services for those customers whose first language may not be English, make copies of print available in Braille or large print versions, and provide accessibility options for our web and intranet sites. We consult the Redditch Community Forum to help us communicate as inclusively as possible.

Environmental / Sustainability - As previously mentioned.

7. **Lessons Learnt**

Taking a planned and strategic approach is vital with so much communication coming from and into the Council.

8. **Background Papers**

Bromsgrove District Council Communications Review 2009.
Worcestershire County Council Marketing and Communications Strategy.

9. **Consultation**

This report has been prepared in consultation with relevant Borough Council Officers.

10. **Author of Report**

The author of this report is Adrian Marklew, Communications and Marketing Manager, who can be contacted on extension 3002 (e-mail: adrian.marklew@redditchbc.gov.uk) for more information.

11. **Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Communications Strategy 2010-13 (with appendices).