

Response to Communications Task and Finish Report 2008

Background

Since the Communications Scrutiny Report was written four years ago, there have been a lot of changes in the Communications Team.

- In April 2011 a new shared Communications Team was appointed across Redditch and Bromsgrove.
- This new team comprises one Manager and two communications officers – replacing two managers, three communications officers and a communications admin post. Since January one communications officer has left, which leaves a manager and a communications officer covering communications for two Councils.

These changes have meant the service that the team provides *and is able to provide* is different to the recommendations set out in the scrutiny report.

In this report I want to take all of the recommendations and provide an update on them, as from April 2011, when I was appointed as Communications Manager – and set out the current functions of the Communications Team.

Communications in 2012

National research used in the original scrutiny exercise, the Reputation Campaign and research by Ipsos MORI has since been updated after research showed the measures recommended by both sources did not see a significant increase in resident satisfaction with the Council. This was also produced before the importance of social media was recognised – a new guide has since been published by the LGA

http://www.lgcomms.org.uk/asset/69/WCC_LGcomms_ReputationGuide.pdf

This need for fast-moving communications means news outlets now, even the weekly newspapers, operate a 24/7 news output so there is even less time to respond to a media enquiry or to produce a press release. The media are changing the way they require news – and we have to change the way we provide news accordingly.

Update on Recommendations

1. Prioritising Communications

- a) the Council adopts communications as an underpinning principle of the key priorities of the Council;
- b) Officers and Members undertake further work to establish what key messages the Council wants to promote;
- c) the Council website be updated on a weekly basis in order to convey the Council's key messages effectively;

Update

The Communications Team holds monthly meetings with the Leader, and fortnightly with the Chief Executive to ascertain the key messages or major

projects which are on the horizon. These are picked up in a communications planner which goes to CMT each month. As a result of the restructuring of Policy, Performance and Partnerships the Communications Team will report directly to the Chief Executive to recognise the importance of communications to the Council.

The team is responsible for updating the news section of the website which has recently been scored as '4*' by a customer. Other updates on the website are the responsibility of the individual departments however the Communications Team regularly work with them to ensure that what appears on the website is written in an appropriate style.

2. Communications Strategy

a) the Council's Communications Strategy be rewritten to:

- i) improve the presentational style of the strategy;
- ii) maintain a consistent report style throughout the document;
- iii) shorten the document making it easier to read; and
- iv) make the information contained within the strategy personalised to Redditch and Redditch Borough Council;

b) the Communications Strategy include a Public Relations Strategy to promote the image of Redditch;

c) the Communications Strategy include a Members' Communication Strategy detailing how Members communicate with the local media;

Update

A Communications Strategy, as per the above, does exist for Redditch Borough Council [Appendix 1]. As a shared service the Communications Team is currently planning to create a joint communications strategy which will obviously seek to maintain the individuality of each Council whilst maximising the resources that are available.

We are working closely with the departments to promote the image of Redditch and are supporting their communications plans to do so which will be picked up in the strategy. The media protocol will pick up how Members and the Communications work together to maximise coverage in the local media.

3. Internal Communications

a) Communications Officers regularly attend key meetings at the Council including Full Council, the Executive Committee, and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee;

b) Committee Services Officers and Lead Service Officers to proactively engage with Communications Officers on a regular basis regarding key decisions taken at meetings;

Update

The Communications Team strives to attend every Council meeting. If officers were to attend all of the above, then this would time in lieu spent out of the office. Instead the team works with the Committee Team, portfolio-holders and senior managers to ascertain what key stories are coming up so pre-press releases are issued. Telephone briefings with the two local newspapers are also held before and after each meeting. We asked the media if they

would prefer us to be at the meetings, where we are just hearing what they are, or to be available for further clarification/extra information, after the meetings. They chose the latter.

4. Joint Working

a) the Council Communications Officers to utilise opportunities to receive informal advice and support from Worcestershire County Council Communications Officers;

Update

The Communications Team is an active part of the County Communications Group and does work closely with the County Council's Communications Team on joint issues.

5. Civic Newspaper

a) Redditch Borough Council produces a section of 'Redditch' pages that can be inserted in each edition of Word On Worcestershire;

b) this arrangement to be reviewed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in twelve months. Prior to this, Officers from the Communications Unit to investigate options for reinstating the civic newspaper and buying pages in the local press to communicate information about Council activities;

Update

WOW no longer exists – but Redditch Matters is now published three times a year. When it was first reinstated it was published three times a year – but following the cuts to the Communications budget –and the implementation of the Shared Communications team it was agreed three editions would suffice

6. Corporate Branding

a) all service areas of the Council should adhere to the Redditch Borough Council Corporate Identity Guidelines for all external communications;

b) all external communications material must be sent to the Communications Unit for verification before being released;

c) the Council to provide a briefing, at least once a year, for all members of staff regarding corporate branding and customer contact standards;

Update

Our design team particularly, along with the Communications Team ensures, as much as possible that the branding and style guidelines are adhered to. It is important to note that to maximise the impact of all the different types of communications that they are all clearly branded as being part of the Council. As more teams become shared in order to maximise the effectiveness of communications within the resources available, a joint brand and style guide is to be produced picking up letterheads, banners etc. This will seek to maintain the individual sovereignty of each council and will need political buy-in from both authorities.

7. Media Relations

- a) the Communications Officers produce a new local media strategy and protocol to improve channels of communication between the Council and the local media;
- b) the Council designates an Officer in each service area to act as a 'publicity champion' and the Communications Officers to work proactively with the 'publicity champions' to increase the number of press releases sent to the local media; and
- c) Communications Officers ensure that, where appropriate, all press releases contain a comment from a relevant spokesperson. If Portfolio Holders are approached for a comment, they should be contacted as soon as possible and given 24 hours to provide a comment.

Update

A media relations policy was launched in 2009 [appendix 2], after this scrutiny exercise. As highlighted in section 2 of this report, the speed at which the media requires information so it can stream news 24/7 means there is now far less time to produce news. The Communications Team is writing a Joint media strategy to reflect these new ways of working. However, the team works closely with Portfolio-holders, cross-party senior members and senior officers to ensure the relevant people are quoted in press releases where appropriate and possible.

Communications Now – and Going Forward

Currently the Communications Team, across Redditch Borough and Bromsgrove District Council is made up of a Communications Manager and a Communications Officer – this is since a member of the team left in January but will hopefully be replaced in the next few weeks.

With reduced Communications Resources including money and staff, here is the service the Communications Team provides for Redditch Borough Council only.

- Produces 3 copies of Redditch Matters a year
- Produces on average 5 press releases a week for Redditch and responds to, on average, 6 media calls a day. [not including those for the Trading Standards at WRS]. The local BBC station said we were the best media team in Worcestershire (May 2011)
- Updates the website daily
- Makes sure Twitter feeds and Facebook entries are up to date
- Produces a monthly communications plan which, from March will be circulated to Managers before going to CMT
- Supports teams with their campaigns and news
- Produces a daily e-update for staff and a monthly newspaper
- Makes sure the intranet's news section is up to date
- Ensure the Council's corporate messages around initiatives e.g shared services, has a raised national profile and thus raising the profile of the Council

- Works with the Leader and senior Members, including portfolio-holders, to ensure the Council's corporate messages are promoted.

Going Forward:-

- Produce a joint media protocol
- Produce a joint brand and style guidelines
- Produce a joint communications strategy
- Rebuild Communications Team to full capacity

Summary

The Council's Shared Services project and budget constraints has seen the Communications Team re-shape the service it provides with resources in mind. In turn the Communications Team has refined its service to complement the changing needs of the media and residents need for news. Whilst the Communications Team works to the overall ethos of the Scrutiny Report i.e., that effective Communications is essential to any organisation and in particular a public service a lot of the individual recommendations no longer reflects these changes.

Appendices:

- 1 - RBC Communications Strategy 2010-13
- 2 - RBC Media Protocol 2009

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