

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Scrutiny and Overview Committee 29 March 2012
AUTHOR: Cllr James Hockney, Chairman of the Task & Finish Group
Portfolio Holder: Cllr Tom Bygott, Policy and Performance

SCRUTINY REVIEW – CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

Purpose

1. To report on the work of the task & finish group looking at the Council's corporate communications and enable the committee to make recommendations to the portfolio holder.

Options

2. The Committee could endorse, amend or reject each of the recommendations in this report before agreeing to forward it to the Policy and Performance Portfolio Holder.

Background

3. At the start of 2011/12 the committee expressed an interest in reviewing communication and community engagement, once a new communications manager was in post.
4. At the meeting of 3 February the committee heard that the communications team would welcome scrutiny input on the development of a new corporate communications strategy. This needed to be updated to reflect the latest media channels available, and the growing need for transparency and effective engagement.
5. A cross-party task and finish group was set up, with a scope as set out at Appendix A and a one-day review was arranged for 1 March 2012.
6. The group was comprised of Cllrs Hall, Heazell, Hockney (chair), Murfitt, B Smith and Waters. The portfolio holder, Cllr Bygott, was also closely involved at each stage and attended the session on 1 March.

Gathering evidence

7. In preparation for the review, the task and finish group read the Council's 2011/12 communications strategy and strategies from three other councils: Redditch, Horsham and Portsmouth. The objective was to consider what a strategy should cover, and how it should be presented.
8. The group also re-read some of the evidence that had been used during last year's customer contact review: staff social media survey; staff focus group findings; and South Cambs magazine readers' survey. These showed that a majority of staff were becoming active on social media websites and thought that the Council should too. Readers of the council's magazine, when asked how they would prefer to hear Council news, scored the magazine highly, perhaps unsurprisingly. They also valued the Council's website, newspapers and radio but there appeared to be little appetite for social media amongst the magazine readers.

9. The group met the part time communications manager for East Cambridgeshire District Council, Tony Taylorson, who also works for the county council. He spoke about what works well at both councils, and key aspects of the role:
 - establish routes for effective 2-way communication
 - build trust and understanding, internally and externally
 - protect and manage the Council's reputation and 'brand'
 - stay abreast of council activities, news and performance
 - monitor residents' views through survey results and staff, including the call centre
 - provide advice on service areas' communications campaigns
10. Tony agreed with having communications champions in each service area but cautioned that they needed natural aptitude as well as training. Also, additional communication responsibilities may mean re-prioritising or re-assigning some aspects of their main role.
11. He agreed that there was a key role for Members to play in communication. They were the eyes and ears of the organisation, and had an advocacy role that depended on being kept well informed. He recommended regular training in media skills.
12. The task and finish group established that SCDC already uses all of the main internal and external communication routes in use at ECDC and the county council.

Meeting SCDC officers

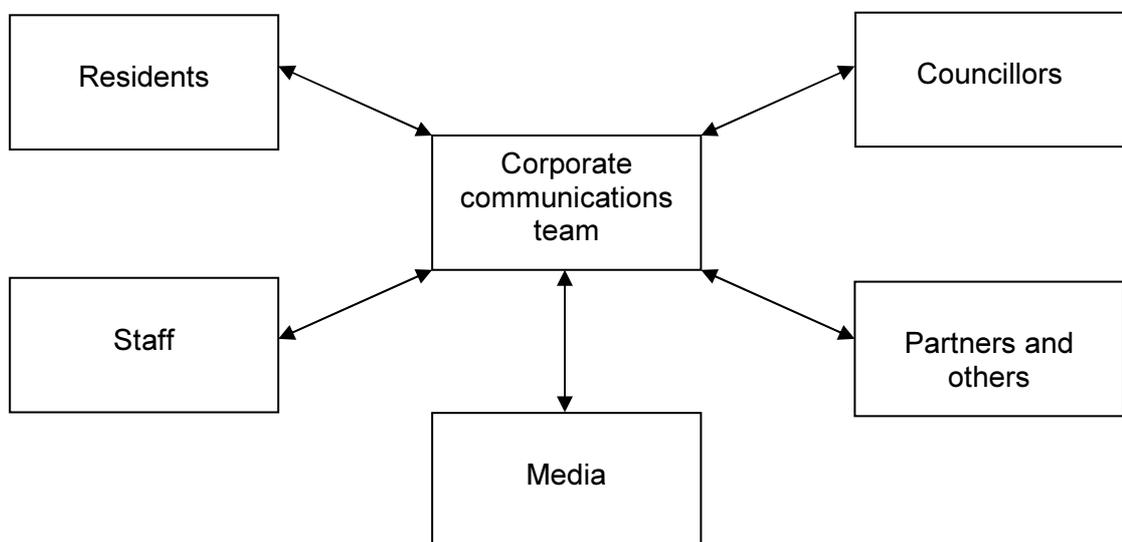
13. The task and finish group met three service-based officers whose work was heavily focused on communication with residents, partners and local businesses: a tenant involvement officer, a team leader for new communities and economic development, and a manager from environmental services who described his role as the service area's 'communications champion'. The task and finish group agreed that every service area needed such a communications champion, especially the new call centre team as they would be able to highlight callers' priority issues.
14. These three officers spoke of communications as a two-way process; the giving out and receiving of information. All spoke of written, online and face-to-face contact. Departmental team meetings regularly identified topics for corporate communication. However they were aware that some colleagues did not view corporate communications as a corporate responsibility in which they had a vital part to play.
15. The communications manager spoke about the need to manage outgoing messages. His team's role was to manage the Council's reputation and 'brand'. His brief was to focus on publishing Council news, and dealing with the increased media interest that this generated. Outcomes might include increased inward investment for the District.
16. This approach had led to a threefold increase in media traffic. However, there were still parts of the council not yet supplying timely information and so he intended to establish a forward plan of activities which would help the team to manage the flow of communication.

Recommendation 1: to appoint communications champions in each service area, including the new contact team, to liaise with the communications team, helping to maintain a forward programme of newsworthy events, a customer-focused website and social media presence, and a two-way flow of communication with colleagues, councilors, residents, partners and others.

Two-way communications

17. Communication is conversation. The task and finish group found many excellent examples of outgoing communication but was keen to explore the routes for inward communication.
18. The group recognised that the South Cambs magazine is well regarded and provides a useful route for publicising Council news and information. However, it was felt that more use could be made of it as a means of gathering feedback, for example through pull-out surveys.
19. The volume of news releases was felt to be high, and was achieving regular coverage in the press, TV and radio. These activities are vital but by their nature are one-way. It would be possible to gauge the effect of this output by surveying residents' satisfaction with the Council.
20. There was evidence that the Housing and New Communities teams provided a wide range of 'listening opportunities' for tenants, residents, parish councils, businesses and other partners: these included many off-site, face-to-face and informal events as well as surveys and on-line forums. It was unclear how this was fed back to the communications team but any possible gap could be addressed via the champions recommended above.
21. It was also felt that once the call centre was brought in-house, the communications team would have easy and timely access to residents' views and concerns.

Recommendation 2: the corporate communications strategy to address communication as a two-way process which may be expressed by the following diagram:



Internal communications

22. There was a concern that combining internal and external communications into one strategy had allowed the internal element to be overshadowed. Some councils produce separate strategies and there may be a case for doing so at SCDC. It was agreed that this decision should be left to the communications team.
23. Nevertheless, the task and finish group found that there was an excellent range of internal channels for communication output including: Insite, corporate brief, SCene, team meetings and posters. The group also discussed new ideas such as screens

around the council offices to display internal messages, and a regular newsletter from the Leader.

24. Again there was a need to view communication as a 2-way process.

Recommendation 3: to express the Council's strategy for internal communication in plain language, with an action plan to be regularly monitored

Social media

25. The task and finish group agreed that social media should not be viewed as a communication panacea, but as a complementary tool that could reach different audiences. Surveys had shown that residents preferred to find out about the Council via the magazine, leaflets and the website, although a growing number were using social media.
26. The communications team had not been sufficiently resourced to follow up the staff survey on social media, which had identified almost 30 staff who would like to be more involved.
27. The group discussed how to target communication via social media; for example whether each service area should have its own Facebook page. From their own experience, they preferred departmentalised information rather than having to trawl through everything from an organisation to find posts on their area of interest. They felt that service areas should be trusted to take responsibility for social media as they were for all other forms of communication.
28. However, the communications manager cautioned that social media demanded constant monitoring and rapid, accurate responses: and that output was published world-wide. The Council currently had over 800 followers on Twitter which was generating a workload that the communications team found hard to resource. Nevertheless he felt that this should continue to be managed by the communications team.
29. The manager also advised that retaining a corporate approach safeguarded the Council's 'brand'. He suggested that instead, there could be social media contacts in each service area who could supply responses to service-related comments and queries on the corporate social media site(s).
30. The group agreed that the Council's approach to social media, as to all aspects of communication, should be based on users' needs which should be identified through broad consultation, rather than on management objectives.

The role of Councillors

31. The task and finish group recognised the role of councillors as ambassadors and advocates. As in the review of Learning from Feedback, they identified the need for councillors and officers to maintain a 2-way dialogue; successful advocacy was based on being kept fully informed. There was also a need for regular media skills training for councillors; sessions would ideally be held monthly and in small groups.
32. The group also identified other possible roles for members: in the news release process, identifying newsworthy stories, test-reading leaflets and magazines, and continuing to serve on the magazine board.

Recommendation 4: to provide regular training for members and officers in media skills, presentation skills and communications

Resources

33. The communications team had recently returned to its full complement of two full-time-equivalent posts following a period of staff changes and maternity leave. It was therefore hard to gauge but the task and finish group wondered whether more staff were needed. Given the increasing demands of social media and the Council's corporate aim to listen to and engage with residents, parishes and businesses, the group suggested a benchmarking exercise to establish whether the team was adequately resourced.

Recommendation 5: to carry out a benchmarking exercise on the resources allocated to corporate communications; this to include councils where social media is adequately resourced.

Drafting a communications strategy

34. The task and finish group heard that there had not been time to monitor the existing communications strategy nor begin to develop a new one. The group was anxious not to further burden this small team but felt that a strategy and action plan would be all the more necessary, to protect strategic objectives from being overwhelmed by the day-to-day.
35. Based on examples of good practice, the task and finish group recommended that the next corporate communications strategy should be written in plain language, and in a short leaflet format so that it would be easily read and referred to rather than filed away.
36. The group felt that communication should be defined as a 2-way dialogue, rather than the issuing of information; and that all strategies and plans - corporate and project-specific - should be designed from the perspective of the customer, or other end user; rather than to meet internal management objectives.
37. The group also felt that there should be an off-the-shelf strategy for easy use during an unexpected episode of media interest, and this could be informed by lessons learned during the Hauxton project for example.

Recommendation 6: to develop a corporate communications strategy in plain language, and in a short leaflet format, setting out a clear aim for the document and supported by a separate action plan to be regularly monitored

Recommendation 7: all elements of the corporate communication strategy to be designed from the perspective of the customer, or other end user as established through broad consultation

Recommendation 8: to develop an off-the-shelf strategy for use during an unexpected episode of media interest, and this to be informed by lessons learned from previous episodes.

Community engagement

38. Corporate communication contributes to community engagement. The scrutiny committee may therefore wish to return to the broader issue of engagement during 2012/13.

39. Implications

Financial	Actions recommended in this report are expected to be achieved within existing resources. However, the recommended benchmarking exercise might identify that more resources would be needed
Legal	None
Staffing/ capacity	As set out in the report
Risk Management	If recommendations in this report are not implemented, there is a risk that opportunities for service improvements may be missed.
Equal Impact Assessment completed	An EqlA was completed in 2011 for social media. All impacts were identified as neutral, except one positive impact for age (young people) EqlAs will be needed for the communications strategies recommended in this report.
Involving young people	The task and finish group would recommend that officers consult with young people when progressing recommendations 6 and 7.
Climate Change	None

Consultation

40. The portfolio holder for policy and performance was involved at all stages of this review. Views were also provided by an external communications manager, SCDC's communications team, and officers as listed in the report.
41. Consultation with staff and magazine readers is also detailed in the report.

Effect on Annual Priorities and Corporate Objectives

42. Improvements to the Council's corporate communications will help to meet the Council's commitment to listen and engage with residents.

Options

43. The Committee may endorse, amend or reject each of the recommendations before agreeing to forward them to the Portfolio Holder.

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Contact Member: Cllr James Hockney, Chairman of the task and finish group

SCRUTINY REVIEW - SCOPING DOCUMENT

Review name	Communications across SCDC
Terms of reference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To provide evidence based recommendations informing the development of a corporate communications strategy
Summary of review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine SCDC's current communication strategy • Identify headline sections for the new strategy • For a selection of these categories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Examine current practice at SCDC ○ Help develop plans to improve communications across the organisation and in turn to our residents ○ Examine channels currently used and those needed in future ○ Discuss and develop plans to improve member communications ○ Identify solutions to potential barriers • Make recommendations to the PFH
Reason for review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current strategy has expired • Changes to available media (e.g. social media) • Some (new) managers and members unaware of comms as a council-wide responsibility
Potential outcome/s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framework for 2012/16 Communications Strategy • Increased awareness of comms as a council-wide responsibility • Improved comms/ PR benefiting all stakeholders
Relevant corporate and/or community strategy/ies	Being a listening council, providing first class services accessible to all
Potential witnesses	Managers, members, comms officers (SCDC's and others')
Existing data	Staff poll re social media Scrutiny review of Customer Contact service Magazine readers' survey
Portfolio holder	Cllr Tom Bygott
Members of the t&f group	Cllrs Hall, Heazell, Hockney, Murfitt, B Smith and Waters
Key stakeholders	Residents, staff, members and partners
Officer involvement	Lead officer: Gareth Bell: Scrutiny Officer: Jackie Sayers Gill Anderton, Anna Efford, Iain Green, Richard Hales
Timing	1 March '12 11am to 3pm
Report dates	SMT; Scrutiny 29 March; Cabinet 12 April