



COMMUNICATION REPORT

**WINCHESTER CITY COUNCIL
CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS**



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report has been commissioned by Winchester City Council to look at how the Council can promote itself more proactively and effectively with stakeholders, taking a leadership position in the Community. Key stakeholders are identified as staff, Members, local media, residents and partners.

There are three main objectives:

1. review the effectiveness of current internal and external communication channels
2. advise on what improvements are needed to enable the Council to communicate corporate messages clearly, consistently and timely to all stakeholders.
3. advise on how to embed good practice more fully into the organisation so that communication is at the forefront of all Council activity.

Following extensive consultations, the Council identified that there is an increasing need for two-way communication in order to build better relationships with stakeholders. Significant progress has already been achieved. A Corporate Communication Group was set up to produce a draft communication strategy. Additionally a content management system for the Internet website has been implemented and will be extended to the Intranet. A new team briefing system has been approved. The title of the Public Relations Officer has been changed to Corporate Communications Manager.

A review of internal channels highlights that:

- overall line management communication is good and better than general perception. However, employees want a more open and involving approach to communication with greater emphasis on information being shared up and across the organisation.
- the Intranet website is an underdeveloped communication tool. It's a visually flat, one-way distribution channel for information. Consequently it is used mainly by employees & Members to access the telephone directory.
- 'City Voice', the weekly electronic publication has useful information written in a friendly tone but the layout is not meeting the needs of online visitors. Consequently important messages are not being noticed or remembered.

A review of external channels highlights that:

- whilst media communications is centrally managed and implemented by the Communication Office (formally the PR Office) it depends on staff sharing and initiating stories. The Communication Office is well perceived of by the press but staffs' apathy for the local media hampers more proactive working.

- the Internet website is a useful information resource which should be managed by the Communication Office. The Council are losing their greatest opportunities to monitor opinions, communicate messages without going through the media, and build relationships with key stakeholders such as partners and Members.
- 'Insight', the Council publication, is too infrequent and broadly positioned to be an effective communication tool for the Council.
- Publications are traditionally the backbone of Council communication with stakeholders. They are too inconsistent in quality, design and message to be an effective communication tool for the Council. Very few publications are implemented from a communication plan. It is recommended that there is a further overview of Council publications.

There are four key problems:

1. the practice of communication is inevitably linked to the culture of the Council. Management's desire to support a culture of empowerment, accountability, and shared responsibility within departments, unintentionally can undermine the overall effectiveness and quality of communication.
2. the Communication Office has only an advisory role. Consequently Council communication is too dependent on the Communication Office having to build relationships with staff to persuade them to adopt good practice, rather than using their time more effectively to build relationship with key stakeholders such as Members and partners.
3. the lack of central responsibility and coordination for the majority of Council communication results in a fragmented and inconsistent approach dependent on the culture, skills and priorities of each department.
4. the responsibility for managing the direction and content of Intranet and Internet websites is ambiguous. Improvements are driven by the good relationship between the Webmaster and Communication Manager, and depend on technical resources and priorities.

The main recommendations are that:

1. new communication values are clearly identified & promoted to help change staffs' attitude and the practice of communication.
2. the Communication Office be made responsible for setting standards, and approving plans for all communication initiatives and projects. Only by staff clearly understanding and implementing good communication practice could a cultural change emerge.
3. the Communication Office be made responsible for the communication direction, implementation and management of the Intranet & Internet websites.

4. the Internet and Intranet websites become more than information resources and are used interactively to monitor stakeholders' opinions, communicate directly with different stakeholder groups, and build good relationships.

INTRODUCTION

This report has been commissioned by Winchester City Council to look at how the Council can improve communications with stakeholders.

There are three main objectives:

1. review the effectiveness of current internal and external communication channels
2. advise on how to establish a communication resource which enables the Council to communicate corporate messages clearly, consistently and timely to all stakeholders.
3. advise on how to embed good practice more fully into the organisation so that communications is at the forefront of all Council activity.

The recommendations are outlined on pages 15-23.

This report is based on meetings with a selection of management and employees, some Members and representatives from stakeholders groups such as the local media, partners, parish councillors, and volunteers. Additionally there was a review of consultations, reports, publications, and the Council Intranet and Internet websites.

This report considers corporate branding but this area urgently needs further consideration with the development of the new Customer Service Centre.

COMMUNICATON REVIEW

CULTURE

The practice of internal and external communication is intrinsically linked to the culture of the Council.

The leadership of communication practice at the Council reflects management's desire to create and support *a culture of empowerment, accountability and shared responsibility within departments. Unintentionally, this undermines the overall effectiveness and quality of communication.* It is very important for staff to understand that they have a responsibility for the reputation of the Council as it is influenced by their daily communication and behaviour with stakeholders. However, this needs to be clearly separated from the management and responsibility for consciously used forms of internal and external communications. The belief that communication is "everything we do" and "everyone's responsibility" makes communication too broad to be meaningful or manageable. Consequently, *good communication practice is interpreted and implemented differently* depending on departmental priorities, culture and communication skills.

A culture of shared responsibility means that in practice:

- internally, it's line-managers' responsibility to communicate in a way that suits their section and personal style, and employees responsibility to ask questions and access further information through the Intranet website. Consequently there is often a breakdown in communication. For example:
 - when staff complain that important emails are ignored, misunderstood or responded to too slowly, they do not consider whether the e-mail system was the most appropriate channel for the message or recipient.
 - staff write comprehensive reports which Members feel do not give enough consideration to their needs as recipients of the information.
- externally, Officers are more responsible for the timely transmission of a message than considering how the message might have been received or understood. For example: not considering the needs of volunteers and parish councillors, many of whom have other employment commitments and need to be communicated well in advance of changes and meetings.

THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNICATION OFFICE

There are two main problems concerning the role of the Communication Office. It has:

1. *a purely advisory role* (apart from its central role with the media) and has to persuade managers and other officers to adopt good practice. This means that:
 - *too much time has to be spent building good relationships internally to persuade staff to practice good communication* rather than building relationships with other stakeholders, such as partners, local business community and parishes. This is crucial as the role of Public Relations is "the deliberate, planned,

and sustained effort to build mutual understanding and good relationships between an organisation and its public”.

- *there is no authority to enforce communication standards* such as producing a communication plan for a project or a communication brief for a publication. Consequently, recommended processes and standards are often ignored. For example, inclusion of the Corporate Identity logo and house style on all media which damages any attempt to create a corporate brand. Currently, one well placed ‘blocker’ in a department can undermine any attempt by the Communication Office to improve communication practice.
2. *ambiguous responsibility for the Intranet and Internet websites*, which are key channels of communications. Improvements are dependent on the good relationship between the Webmaster and Communication Manager.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATON CHANNELS

STAFF LINE COMMUNICATION

Top management want *internal information to be communicated on a “need to know” basis supporting a shared culture of communication*. It is line managers’ and supervisors’ responsibility to communicate this regularly in a way that suits their section, and personal style, and employees responsibility to ask questions and access further information through the Intranet website.

Recent surveys show that *line management communication is working well*. The majority of employees feel they have sufficient information to do their job, have a good relationship with their line manager, and are satisfied with their job. However, the CPA survey suggests that internal information could be better with a consistent flow of information down, up and across the organisation. Consequently *a formal team-briefing process has recently been approved and is being implemented*.

My review showed that employees want a more open and involving style of communication. This means:

1. *receive relevant and timely information to their job or position as an employee in the Council*. In the review, staff emphasized poor examples of communication which impacted on them as employees of the Council. For example, the Council Open Day, the resignation of the new Customer Service Centre Manager, why the bulletin board was no longer available.
2. *more involvement* in issues that affect them or their relationship with the public. Recent examples include: the number of ‘break-out rooms’, the reduction of refuse collections.
3. *take an open approach* to communication. This means not necessarily being told all information all of the time, but knowing the why, what, when and who of the communication. When employees believe management is trying to conceal information they assume a destructive hidden agenda. A current example is

communication about the Customer Service Centre. A perceived lack of openness could be the result of an ad hoc communication initiative which might not have considered the broader communication needs of staff.

4. *share information between departments* which might have press repercussions and affect a service's relationship with the public. Currently there is no process which facilitates this.
5. *communicate simply* so that the messages are quickly and easily understood. Ironically perhaps management's attempts to communicate openly to all staff result in many staff not understanding the messages. Recent difficulties include: the CMT summary in 'City Voice', acronyms & business jargon used in committee reports & personal presentation, and the accessibility and relevance of information on the Intranet. It is not surprising therefore when some important messages are not registered or remembered.

MEMBER COMMUNICATION

Generally Members feel that internal communication is improving but that there is still considerable progress to be made:

1. *receive relevant and timely information to their role as Members.* In the first instance, Members want *short pithy reports with clear priorities and access to further information* which individual Members could access if they need it. The reports need to be written in clear English with short sentences avoiding any departmental acronyms, and answering the question, 'why is this important to Members?' Consequently *greater consideration needs to be given to the receiver* of the communication.
2. the Intranet website could be designed more to be accessed more intuitively and with Members needs in mind.
3. *the telephone directory on the Intranet could be improved* to include photographs and a short description of the role as it is difficult for Members (and staff) to know what the title involves.
4. want *greater consistency and sharing of information and knowledge across departments.* The fragmented departmental culture dilutes the strength of the Council being seen as one organisation.
5. staff to *take an open approach* to communication with them. Often they feel that they are perceived and treated as the 'outsider', and deliberately kept in the dark on issues which concern them.

INTRANET WEBSITE

The Intranet is a vital tool to communicate timely and consistent information directly to all employees and Members. The website has a great deal of useful information but is substantially underdeveloped as a communication channel and *used mainly by employees and Members to access the telephone directory.* While in the past some information has been dated and inconsistent with the Internet website, a new content management system is being implemented.

There are a number of issues that limit the potential of the site:

1. *ambiguous responsibility*. The responsibility for the development, implementation and management of the Intranet & Intranet is unclear to those involved, and to staff. Improvements seem to be driven by the good relationship between the Webmaster and Communication Manager, and limited by conflicting department priorities and budgets. For example: until recently the Webmaster who is responsible for the technical implementation and management of the Intranet and Internet websites was also responsible for office moves in the Council.
2. *lack of direction and management*. There is only vague direction about the communication role of the Intranet.
3. *little consideration for the receiver*. As it is perceived to be the employees' responsibility to access information they need, there seems little attempt to attract or keep the attention of users. The result is a text driven, visually flat, one way distribution channel for Council information. Sometimes it appears that information is included simply for the sake of it. There is no apparent attempt to:
 - motivate
 - prioritize
 - involve
 - tailor messages and language for employees
 - check understanding
4. *little consideration for users in the online environment*. Most of the information is created as a cut and past job from existing documents with few amendments for the needs of the user in online environment. Generally users do not like having to scroll down the page for information, and do not read sentences but scan them.
5. *low awareness*. Few employees know what information is available, and why it might be important to them. Generally many employees find it easier to contact their line managers than navigate through what appears to be an overloaded information resource. This wrongly reinforces the view that employees do not want to be involved or take responsibility for communications.

'CITY VOICE'

'City Voice', the weekly electronic publication, has useful corporate and staff information written in a friendly tone. However, the layout and design does not attempt to attract the attention of readers, or cater for the online environment (as above). It is not surprising therefore if some corporate message are not acknowledged or remembered. Additionally, as it takes three clicks to open the latest version of 'City Voice' it is not accessed weekly by all staff or Members.

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

MEDIA COMMUNICATION

Communication and *the relationship with the local media are perceived by the local media as very good.*

Media communications is centralised and handled by the Communication Office but also needs to be initiated by each department. The Communication Office is available in an advisory role and will help to produce media strategies for projects when asked to. However, it was not apparent that any current projects have dedicated communication or media plans. For example, whilst the new Customer Service Centre had a project plan, the communication plan was not complete or available.

Whilst management and Members would like the Council to be more proactive in promoting good news stories, *general apathy towards the local media hampers more proactive working.*

1. *expect negative stories:*
 - most of the papers rely on Council news. However, the local media can not be seen by the public as a PR mouthpiece for the Council, so *few positive stories will ever be published.*
 - the political environment of local government means that Members will inevitably use the local press to put conflicting views on Council initiatives so *there is little point trying to get across good news stories.*
2. *no point in responding to negative press* as it will just continue the debate. However, employees believe management and Members should support them by responding actively to negative press as it influences their day to day relationship with the public.

INTERNET WEBSITE

The Council website is a useful information resource for all stakeholders and could also be designed to address the specific needs of partnerships, volunteers, the business community and young people.

A content management system is installed to ensure that the information can be amended easily by each department. This is important as many employees, Members and stakeholders believe the information was, until recently, dated. Currently, the content of the site is mainly a cut and paste job of existing brochures, media releases, reports, newsletters, committee reports.

There are a number of issues that limit the potential of the site. Many of these are similar to the issues identified under the Intranet website but are reiterated (as some readers might only be interested in certain sections of this report), and developed:

1. *ambiguous responsibility.* Whilst a good working relationship has developed between IT and the Communication Manager, the responsibility for the development, implementation and management of the Internet site is unclear to those involved, and to staff.

2. *limited vision.* The website is designed essentially as a one-way top down, information resource for all stakeholders. This means that the Council *is losing one of their greatest opportunities to monitor stakeholder opinions, interact directly with stakeholder groups and build good relationships.* Importantly, messages could be communicated directly to stakeholders without going through the traditional media gatekeepers.
3. *content management.* The recent content management system is a vital development for keeping the site up to date. However, without adequate resources in the Communication Office for managing the content, the website runs the risk of damaging rather than enhancing the Council's communication with stakeholders. There are number of problems:
 - *not tailoring information for online users.* Information is likely to be copied from existing documents with little or no consideration for the ultimate user in an online environment. Generally users do not read on websites, they scan sentences to get the information they want. Contributors need to think about how to present information to encourage visitors to stay on the site.
 - *lack of direction for the editorial style and visuals.* As a result the Council are losing an opportunity to proactively present a planned image the Council (as community leaders) or reflect the positive culture of Council staff. For example, the friendliness and enthusiasm to do a good job in the community. Currently too many small images are used which do not enhance an overall message or image.
 - *lack of editorial input in the Home page.* There are so many short headlines (which visitors have to scroll down to access) that key corporate messages are lost in the mass of information.
4. *usability.* This concerns physically how the visitor navigates around the site, and could be improved. The navigation should better complement and enhance the content. It should be logical and have clear visible links which are meaningful to its visitors. Links have a high action to reward ratio. Access to any page should be kept to the minimum. In order to keep visitors engaged information should not be more than three clicks away. The response time should be kept to a minimum, although this depends on users' systems. Around 10-15 seconds is meant to be the limit of people's ability to keep focused while waiting.
5. *low awareness.* There needs to be an on-going traditional media communication campaign to make sure stakeholders know what information is there, how they could find it and why it would benefit them.
6. *irregular analysis.* Meaningful and regular analysis of the site is important. Contributors could then improve the content so that it better entices and satisfies visitors' requirements in the shortest possible time. Knowing the number of hits onto a Home page is not sufficient.

'INSIGHT' - COUNCIL PUBLICATION

Currently this is too infrequent and the audience too broad to be an effective communication tool for the Council. Whilst the few questions in the Citizen Panel survey had a positive result, their views might not be reflective of all residents.

Given the very small annual budget of the Communication Office, it is a drain on resources, and open to criticism from the public. Generally it is poorly regarded by employees and Members.

PUBLICATIONS

Publications are traditionally the backbone of Council communication with external stakeholders. Whilst the majority of publications are produced through the in-house print section, some are produced on office publishing systems. The vast majority are initiated and managed by employees in each department. *Few publications are designed and implemented from a communication brief, and few staff seek the advice of the Communication Office.*

Little thought is given to the receiver of the communication or whether a publication is indeed the best channel to communicate the message. It seems that a publication is produced because it is expected within the departments, and can be produced cost-effectively using the in-house Print Section. However, *publications are produced at a substantial cost to the Council.* It is estimated that £200,000 is spent on print publication alone which does not include the resources for producing and managing the publications.

Despite the support for producing publications across the departments, *the result is a fragmented and inconsistent image of the Council.* Whilst the quality of a publication varies tremendously, the overall quality is low. In many cases, the publications seem over designed with conflicting typefaces, logos, headings and colours. The grammar and spelling is sometimes poor, and in most cases sentences are too long and complex for publications.

The design and print team are in a similar position to the Communication Office. They feel that they *can only advise staff on how to implement a quality publication.* Without a detailed communication brief for the publication the designer is left to interpret what is required and the needs of the recipient. The Print Section feels under tremendous pressure. Any attempt to get staff to adequately plan and schedule work in advance is ignored. Consequently most publications are done in a rush at the last moment.

BRANDING

The Council's image or reputation is a product of the Council's identity. *The identity of the Council is created through all verbal and non-verbal communication and how staff and Members behave with stakeholders.* Assessing the reputation of the Council amongst stakeholders and helping the Council promote and manage its identity requires a dedicated review and programme.

This report considers the corporate logo and house style which is synonymous with the corporate identity. *Whilst the corporate symbol is itself an effective communication tool, currently the Council is not managing this.* Whilst a logo and house style have been developed by the Communication Office and Print Section, neither feel they have the authority to implement the logo. Not surprisingly, the result is an inconsistent and fragmented use of the logo across all media.

RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

In order to successfully promote the Council amongst its stakeholders, *the Council needs to meet the growing public expectation for greater openness and involvement. This means giving a greater emphasis to how information could be communicated more effectively to different stakeholders, and how the Council is listening and acting on views.*

The recommendations below focus on identifying what communication values and practices need to be embedded within the organisation in order to make a difference, and practical suggestions on how to make current channels more effective.

NEW COMMUNICATION VALUES

There are three new communication values which management could promote.

1. The reputation of the Council is created through all verbal and non verbal communication, and *all staff are responsible for how they behave and communicate daily with stakeholders.*
2. Communication is not a shared responsibility. *Effective communication is the responsibility of the communicator who needs to communicate the message, not the receiver.* This means ensuring that those responsible for communicating both internally and externally know and could practice:
 - an *open and involving style* of communication
 - taking a more *strategic and structured approach*
 - *tailoring the communication to the receivers' needs.* For example, Members want shorter reports, parish councillors want earlier communication, employees want corporate message made relevant to their jobs and greater involvement. All want simple language and shorter sentences.
 - Communicating in a way that is *relevant to the receiver.* On-going monitoring of stakeholders views is essential for this.
 - how to *increase retention & motivation* by considering the content and channels
 - checking *how information is received*
 - *feeding back* how stakeholder views have influenced policies.
3. It is the *Communication Office's responsibility to set standards of good practice and harmonise all consciously used forms of communications* as effectively as possible to present a consistent and high quality image of the Council.

ROLE OF COMMUNICATION OFFICE

All internal and external communication initiatives should be coordinated centrally at the planning stage. Consequently this ensures that staff are taking a more proactive, planned and sustained effort to promote the Council and to build good relationships with

stakeholders. Only by taking an early planned approach could the Communication Office improve the quality and consistency of communication. A first step is to ensure that:

1. *all consciously used forms of internal and external communication are planned.* All staff responsible for communication, produce a communication plan for each project and initiative.
2. *there is greater Communication Office responsibility & authority.* The Communication Office is responsible for:
 - *approving plans and briefs* for communication projects and initiatives prior to implementation
 - *setting the standards and monitoring the inclusion of the Corporate Identity logo* and house style on all media. The policing of the logo must be down to print section with the authority of the Chief Officers and Chief Executive.
 - *illustrating good communication practices* so that employees understand the new behaviour required.
 - *monitoring stakeholder opinions* on current issues. For example, the title Customer Service Centre might create a negative response from Hampshire residents due to their poor experiences locally of other new centres.
 - *managing and implementing all corporate communication channels* including the Intranet and Internet websites.
3. *consultation knowledge on stakeholders is shared.* All Council consultations should contact the Communication Office before and after consultations are implemented. Consequently, the Communication Office could monitor communication needs of different stakeholders and produce a communication profile for each stakeholder group.

Despite the inevitable reservations that this system could stifle the culture of empowerment and accountability of officers, *employees would still be responsible for initiating and implementing the communication.* It does mean that everyone involved needs to take an earlier and more planned approach to communications. Initially some Officers with less communication experience may find this time-consuming. With support from top management and the Communication Office, planning all consciously used forms of communication would become the norm.

Additionally the Communication Office should:

- initiate regular best practice communication workshops.
- promote the skills of the Communication Office, and the benefit to Officers.
- identify good practice, share and celebrate success.
- look for outside recognition of good practice
- talk up improvements so staff are more positive about communication.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERNAL CHANNELS

STAFF LINE MANAGEMENT

Team briefing is the most important development currently underway. This should address many of issues outlined on page 8-9. Line-management will play a critical role in making corporate information relevant to employees' jobs as employees do not want to be overloaded with irrelevant information.

It is essential that line management understand what behaviour is expected under the new communication values outlined on page 15.

MEMBER COMMUNICATON

Many of Members concerns are addressed by the new communication values outlined on page 15, and through the recommendations outlined in the Intranet and Internet website below.

Additionally a new committee template could be designed giving staff guidance on planning and writing reports. The template could suggest the ideal length of the report, and the length of each section, and remind staff of the need to prioritise the information. Members could help identify the ideal length of a report and how the use of simple English and shorter sentences could enhance the reports, ideally with illustrations from previous reports.

INTRANET WEBSITE

There are a number of recommendations:

1. *the Communication Office has responsibility for the Intranet, its strategy, style and content management, and has adequate resources to achieve this.* The Webmaster has responsible for the technical development, implementation and management of the site.
2. *the Communication Office gives clear direction of the vision & strategy* so that contributors of the site understand its overall direction, editorial and visual style. The Council might envisage a website where employees across departments would be able to tap into knowledge, learn of employees' and Members views, and share experiences held by others in the organisation. Members should be able to access their own area where specific and more confidential information could be stored.
3. *use the channel to communicate* rather than distribute information. This means taking responsibility to:
 - motivate
 - prioritize
 - involve
 - tailor messages and language for employees
 - check understanding

4. *better understand how users behave in the online environment* so that information could be communicated more effectively. For example: create a Home page which would replace 'City Voice'. After logging in, the intranet could open with a front page which provides headlines of the current news of the day. Staff and Members would not be able to by-pass this and could then tap in for further information of issues relevant to them. This could include:
 - departmental news. For example, major decisions in committee meetings, project developments, awards, new partnerships, media sensitive issues, staff changes, awards.
 - general information. For example, one-off events, personnel issues, parking & office issues.
 - opportunities for staff to be asked vote confidentially on issues. This provides management with a regular gauge on staff views on different issues.
5. *improve navigation* so that users could more intuitively click on the information they desire and quickly access it. A visual theme might be more intuitive and engaging.
6. *promote the Intranet* to staff through line-management and using traditional media.

‘CITY VOICE’

There is one main recommendation:

1. *The Home page on the Intranet would replace 'City Voice', and the information should change daily.* This would help motivate employees and Members to use the Intranet, and provide a timely channel to communicate and share information across the Council. On a daily basis, it may have only one headline or twenty. *Staff and Members would be able to access more information about issues that they feel are important by clicking on a headline.* The information could then be provided without the need for scrolling pages. The very important information could be reinforced and made more relevant to employees at the monthly team-briefing meetings.

The style of the Home page needs to be informal, jargon free and brief. *It needs to be managed and written by the Communication Office, but depends on daily department contributions.* This should not be an onerous task taking no more five minutes in a day, but key managers/employees need to be given this responsibility. The Communication Office would also need to use their informal network to hear what is being discussed on the 'grapevine'. If a Council issue is being discussed on the 'grapevine', it should be mentioned.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXTERNAL CHANNELS

MEDIA

There are three main recommendations:

1. *The centralised and coordinated planning system (outlined on page 15-16) would help staff take an earlier, deliberate and sustained approach to communications, considering the different needs of stakeholders, and potential channels. For example: it is believed that the communication of the Broadway/Friarsgate development would have benefited from an earlier planned media approach, and might have gained television coverage.*
2. *The Internet could be used more effectively to communicate key corporate messages without going through the media, and respond to negative coverage on sensitive public issues. For example: a new Home page design would give the Communication Office the scope to prioritise the news and proactively promote corporate messages with just one or two stories with stronger images. The stories should change at least twice a week.*
3. *Establish an online newsroom. It could include features such as:*
 - daily news alert
 - press release search engine
 - a corporate profile, vision and priority statement
 - Councillor and Chief Officer profiles
 - latest reports search engine
 - press to register
 - archived audio and video (radio and TV coverage)
 - real time audio of key interviews
 - philanthropic/community activity
 - Council history
 - facts sheets on latest projects with councillor and staff features
 - editorial stories on latest projects
 - downloadable photographs.

INTERNET WEBSITE

There are a number of recommendations. Many of these are similar to the issues identified under the Intranet website but are reiterated (as some readers might only be interested in certain sections of this report), and developed

1. *the Communication Office has responsibility for the Internet's strategy, style and content management.*
2. *A new vision to develop the website into a two-way communication channel which monitors stakeholder opinion and build relationships. Contributors need to consider how to:*
 - motivate and hold stakeholders interest
 - prioritize messages
 - adapt language for the online environment

- monitor understanding
- involve stakeholders

Below are some important interactive features which should be developed to encourage greater stakeholder involvement:

- return visit encouragement
 - explicit invitation to return
 - news forums on sensitive issues, and for different stakeholders
 - discussion forums on prominent local issues with Members
 - customer feedback forum which allows the council to give timely and appropriate responses directly to customers
 - bookmark now feature
 - regular news alert service which could be accessed by stakeholder groups
 - opportunities to vote on issues and showing how views have changed policy
 - surveys to voice opinion on issues.
 - membership access for key stakeholders, such as partners and volunteers, with access to detailed information, and tailored newsletters
3. *the websites could project a warmer and more approachable image* of the Council. This needs a more engaging design, less text and fewer but larger powerful people images.
 4. *better understanding of how users behave in the online environment* so that information could be communicated more effectively. For example: create a new Home page as discussed earlier on page 18.
 5. *better user response*. There should be a consistent and more personal style for e-mail contact. Many e-mails contact are general and take days to be forwarded. Every user should get an automatic response within 24 hours confirming when the Council will get back to them.
 6. *improved navigation* so that users could more intuitively click on the information they desire and quickly access it.
 7. *promote the Internet* to stakeholders through traditional media.
 8. *regular analysis*. Contributors need regular access to:
 - period of time spent on the website, and on content pages
 - what content was downloaded, printed or forwarded
 - which browsers visitors uses
 - any broken links of damaged files
 - request for further information via e-mail or subscribe to an ongoing association
 - returns to the website at later date.

‘INSIGHT’ – COUNCIL PUBLICATION

There are two options for improvement, although not mutually exclusive:

1. *electronic newsletters*. These could be developed for specific stakeholders and be available through the Internet website, targeting the needs of partners, businesses, volunteers, local schools and parishes. The information could be updated more regularly, and produced cost-effectively. It may be that the older community might, through demand for ‘Insight’, require a dedicated printed newsheet.
2. *magazine*. Produce a more regular (every other month) quality community publication financed through advertising, divided into sections which target stakeholder groups. Additionally include discounts from local businesses and leisure facilities to encourage readership and interest.

It is important to emphasize that the electronic newsletters would need to be produced using dedicated publishing software for online use, and would not follow the flat text format which is currently imposed on the Communication Office for ‘City Voice’. The cost of this could be easily met by the saving made in printing and distributing ‘Insight’.

PUBLICATIONS

There are three recommendations.

1. *a thorough review of publications in their entirety* covering how many current publications there are and what they communicate. There is reason to suspect from this general communication review that many publications are unnecessary and are implemented simply because the ‘Council has always done so’, and are produced at substantial cost to the Council.
2. *early and consistent planning*. The quality would be greatly improved by the new centrally coordinated planning system discussed earlier on pages 15-16. This would ensure:
 - early involvement with the Communication Office.
 - clear communication briefs are prepared for the design team.
3. *simple “how to” guides*. The Communication Office and Design section should illustrate good practice and give explicit direction to staff.

BRANDING

There are four main recommendations.

1. The *corporate identity logo and house style* produced by the Communication Office and Print Section should *be approved and supported by the Chief Executive and Chief Officers*.
2. The Manager of the Print Section and Communication Office should manage the inclusion of the logo on all media, with the authority of the Chief Executive. *Only by taking a more discipline approach to managing the logo and house style could it help strengthen and support the Council activities*. Any exceptions dilute the opportunities to increase the visibility, scope and overall reputation of the Council.
3. There should be *a plan to implement the consistent use of the corporate symbol and house style throughout the Council*, not just its inclusion in all media. The corporate symbol is the Council's most simplest communication tool. It could communicate the spirit and values of the Council in a very simple and quick form.
4. The *development of the Customer Service Centre creates a sense of urgency about establishing an overall brand strategy* for the Council, considering the wider implications of all verbal and non-verbal communication with stakeholders. It is important *that specialist advise is sought* otherwise there is a danger that branding standards could be driven by the first department involved rather than a well considered branding strategy, and implementation plan for the whole Council.

STAGED DEVELOPMENT & RESOURCES

Good communication practice will only be embedded in the culture of the organisation by:

- *communicating the shared vision* of the new communication values
- communicating and *illustrating the behavioural changes* required.
- *explaining why change is needed* & creating a sense of urgency
- *supporting the changes with strong leadership* from Members, Chief Executive & Chief Officers.
- *identifying a cross departmental team of supporters* who could own the changes and the outcome.
- *creating a staged communication plan* so that the changes could be implemented and managed effectively with adequate resources in place.
- *continuing to communicate and involve* staff and Members in the change
- reinforcing and implementing changes until *the new good practices become the norm*.
- assessing and extending good communication practices.

There are resource implications. Currently there is only full-time permanent member of staff in the Communication Office. *Two new permanent staff are needed:*

- A full-time Senior Journalist and Editor with traditional and online experience.
- An additional full-time experienced public relations person (5 years experience) to allow the Communication Office to fully carry out their responsibilities efficiently.

As with any change programme, the change could be seen as a challenge to the culture and status quo of the Council. Inevitably there could be strong resistance, and the lack of resources could too easily be used as an excuse not to carry out the changes.

A more strategic, coherent and consistent approach could not be established at the Council without greater resources given to the Communication Office. The response that “we’re no worse and in many ways probably better than other Councils” may or may not be true. However, other Councils are identifying their communication problems and finding the resources to resolve the issue. A review of PRWeek over just two weeks showed that Dudley, Knowsley and Peterborough City Councils have bolstered their PR function with three new posts each! Their communication structure has been centralised communication in attempt to improve strategic planning, coherence and consistency (PRWeek 1st Oct, 8th Oct).

Understandably Council budgets are tight. *Whilst in the short term resources should be met to give the Communication Office the staff it needs to carry out its new responsibilities, in the long term all departmental communication resources might be better centralised.* This would mean that the communication resources would be managed by the Communication Office. If around £200,000 a year is spent on printing publications alone, most of which are implemented without a communication plan, the total communication cost to each department must be substantial. *If the overall communication resources were effectively and efficiently managed than it is very likely that the additional cost of running the Communication Office could be met out of the central communication budget.*

CONCLUSION

The Council needs a central communication resource which could deliver a planned and sustained effort to promote the Council and build good relationships with all its stakeholders.

Current practice is clearly fragmented and driven by department's desire for ownership and accountability for their activities. These are strong positive values but do undermine the effectiveness, efficiency and quality of communication.

Similar to other organisations the Council is operating in an environment of growing corporate distrust, and stakeholders have higher expectations for openness and involvement. The Council cannot afford not to implement some central management of communications to achieve a level of strategic planning, coherence and consistency. This is now a well established structure in most large organisations and an emerging practice in Councils.

There are many practical recommendations in the report. This is because the simplest and most cost effective approach to change the communication culture of the Council is to focus on changing the communication behaviour of staff. Shaping and changing staffs' beliefs and values towards communication is a long term and difficult process.

Consequently it is recommended that management support and communicate the new communication values but focus on changing behaviour. Behaviour change could be achieved through management commitment, communication and training. In time (even with resistance) good communication practice would become the norm, and the majority of staffs' values would change to support their new behaviour.