

CABINET

21 June 2006

SCRUTINY REVIEW – COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

REPORT OF CHIEF EXECUTIVE

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RECENT REFERENCES

PS 234 – Scrutiny Review – Community Engagement  
(Principal Scrutiny Committee – 5 June 2006)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Council's agreed Corporate Strategy for 2005 – 2008 identified 'open and honest communication' as a key value for the organisation, with two key aims of that strategy being

- to improve arrangements for communicating the Council's aims, objectives, policies and performance to Members, staff and the wider community; and
- to make customer service the key to all we do by seeking to provide services which reflect the needs of our citizens, by improving access to our services and by improving the timeliness and accuracy of advice and information we provide.

As part of its work programme for 2005/06, the Principal Scrutiny Committee set up an Informal Scrutiny Group to undertake a review looking at how well the Council was communicating and engaging with the community and thereby achieving its agreed aims.

The full report of the Informal Scrutiny Group setting out the process used and the evidence gathered through the review is attached to report PS234 and should be read in conjunction with this report.

In summary the review identified many examples of good engagement, ranging from the extensive communications exercise in support of the Alternative Weekly Collection pilot through to one-off meetings in individual Parishes to explain issues of local concern. It also identified communication and engagement that had been less successful, where messages had been confused, meetings poorly attended and agreed service standards for responding to correspondence not met. Examples of wider good practice were also considered, drawing on both national and local evidence.

The review concluded that the Council is most effective where communications are well planned, using appropriate and varied methods of engagement, with a clear focus on the message and good project management of the exercise.

At its meeting on 5 June 2006, Principal Scrutiny Committee considered the review's conclusions and made a number of recommendations to Cabinet designed to drive further improvement in this important area.

The Committee believes that the recommendations, if accepted, will help the Council achieve the aims set out in its 2006/09 Corporate Strategy, in particular

- Customer Focus – putting customers at the heart of our work
- Clear Communication – enhancing communication with customers, elected members and staff

The full list of recommendations is attached as an appendix to this report. In view of the number and nature of these recommendations it is proposed that they be given further detailed consideration by the Portfolio Holder for Performance & Communications.

#### RECOMMENDATION:

1. That the Principal Scrutiny Committee be thanked for its valuable work on this important issue.
2. That the recommendations of the Principal Scrutiny Committee be referred for detailed consideration by the Portfolio Holder for Performance & Communications, in consultation with the Chief Executive, to determine how they are to be taken forward.

#### RELEVANCE TO CORPORATE STRATEGY

As set out in the Executive Summary above.

#### RESOURCES

The review presents ideas to Cabinet for improvement. Some of these have no specific resource implications but others would either need to divert existing resources or identify new resources to be achieved. If the recommendations are accepted, further work will take place to identify resource requirements and submit these as bids in the preparation of the 2007/08 onwards budget.

#### BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Notes of meetings of the Community Engagement Informal Scrutiny Group  
Detailed notes of evidence given or submitted by those identified in section 4 of the attached report.

Above documents are available, on request, from the Chief Executive's Directorate.

#### APPENDIX

Recommendations made by Principal Scrutiny Committee.

## Scrutiny Review – Community Engagement

### **Recommendations**

Cabinet is asked to agree the following recommendations, designed to drive further improvement in the Council's communications and community engagement. It is recommended that

1. the Council prepares a rolling Public Engagement Plan that includes notice of public consultations and engagement envisaged in the next six months.
2. on important issues, the Council uses a variety of methods to advise the public of the public engagement process, with a toolkit of such methods being prepared for use by officers.
3. each public engagement exercise is well planned with clear goals, an adequate time scale, sufficient resources and a good promotional programme.
4. the results of each Citizens Panel consultation are made available to relevant scrutiny panels to discuss.
5. the Cabinet is clear as to which Member is accountable for public engagement, public consultations and communications.
6. public engagement outside the town of Winchester is improved through working with clusters of parishes and/or with public forum meetings in geographic areas on the lines of the Winchester Town Forum. This would help the Council to achieve progress in neighbourhood empowerment the Government is seeking without creating another layer of government.
7. the Council encourages and supports communities to prepare Parish (or neighbourhood) Plans, with clear procedures to allow issues raised to be reported back to the City Council and Winchester District Strategic Partnership.
8. the Corporate Management Team is urged to consider whether it would be useful to name a senior manager as the chief contact point for parishes or groups of parishes.
9. the Corporate Communications Team approve all Council publications, standard letters and one-off letters intended for wide distribution and be asked to review the wording of statutory notices.
10. training in letter writing is reviewed.
11. officers are urged to improve their performance in answering letters and telephone calls from the public, with Internal Audit asked to carry out checks to see where some parts of the Council are finding it difficult to achieve the Council's minimum standards. CMT is asked to ensure that the service standard is being met in response to letters to Parish Councils.
12. the review of the Council's many publications involves Members who have a view on which publications are of value to them in their work.
13. an online customer feedback form for the public to comment on specific services is developed, together with arrangements for residents to text the council
14. a list of key corporate policies and strategies is published on the Intranet showing when each was approved and when it is due to be reviewed.
15. a mobile van to visit parishes on a regular basis with information on local services is considered with the costs covered by sponsorship.
16. advertisements in the local media, in particular Statutory Notices, are reviewed to improve their presentation and put in a format that is easier to read.

17. the Planning Development Control Committee is asked to address the complaints of Parish Councils that the time spent on waiting to appear at meetings appears to them to be unreasonable.
18. officers presenting to the Planning Development Control Committee are asked to respond to all points made by Parish Councils in their comments.
19. attendance by Portfolio Holders at meetings of the Winchester Joint Consultative Committee with the Winchester District Association of Parish and Town Councils is reviewed by the Cabinet in the light of Parish Council complaints that the City Council is inadequately represented.
20. understanding of the role of the voluntary sector is improved by holding a conference for Members and senior managers on the work of the sector, involving not just those organisations that are funded but others as well.
21. Cabinet obtain a copy of the LGA checklist on empowerment and consider how this could be used in the district.
22. the effectiveness of the Council's community engagement is reviewed annually by Principal Scrutiny Committee, aided by a report to be presented by the accountable Cabinet Portfolio Holder.