Appendix 1 - Communications Review Report

1   Introduction

1.1   Objective

1.1.1   The objective of this short review has been to examine Council communications with the public. The Corporate Issues and Partnerships Overview & Scrutiny Panel wanted to find out what impact Council communications have on public views of the Council, and how they might be improved. Where appropriate recommendations have been made improvements in the way that the Council communicates information to the public.

1.2   Rationale

1.2.1   The Panel decided to do this Review because it recognised how important it is for the Council to communicate well with the public. The Council performs well and has been assessed as "Good" by the Audit Commission. A public satisfaction survey done late in 2003 showed high levels of satisfaction with most Council services. However public satisfaction with the Council as a whole is falling year on year.

1.3   Approach

1.3.1   This review has sought to examine possible reasons for the decline in satisfaction with the Council and to consider the relative importance of "satisfaction" with the Council as a whole in contrast with satisfaction with the services that the Council provides.

1.3.2   Given that satisfaction with services is high and performance is good, one approach is to assume that the key issue is around perception of the Council which has much to do with the way that it communicates with its stakeholders and customers both formally, informally and unintentionally. However the panel are aware that many issues other than 'communications' will affect 'satisfaction' levels.

1.3.3   The Corporate Issues and Partnerships Overview and Scrutiny Panel agreed, therefore, to commission the following pieces of work to provide a better understanding of the effects of Council Communications on customer satisfaction.

   o   An overview of the Council's current approach to communications in terms of resourcing and application of communications strategies,

   o   The creation of focus groups made up of members of the public to examine the effects of communications on public perceptions,

   o   A desktop review of good communications practice in other organisations and through an examination of research results

   o An assessment of the mechanisms the Council uses to communicate through a workshop event for Members of the Panel,

1.3.4 The review has been conducted over the period February to June 2004

1.3.5 It should be noted that the terms of reference for this review specifically excluded internal Council communications

1.3.6 This review specifically excluded any examination of

   o the effectiveness or relationship between internal and external communications,

   o satisfaction levels and the public's level of trust of the Authority

   o the Council's logo or straplines.

2 Findings

2.1 Baseline

2.1.1 The Council provides more than 700 services to a local population of 160,000+, and also provides services to a visitor population of many millions. The lead role for communication about Council services rests with individual Heads of Service.

2.1.2 A Communications and Marketing team of seven people provides professional advice and support and leads on corporate media relations, staff communications, market research and publications. Each year it issues some 500 press releases, produces four issues of Council News which go to all households, provides A-Z service information, operates a Citizens Panel, advises on public campaigns, etc.

2.1.3 A web based Council Information Service is managed through the Customer Access Programme, providing wide ranging information about the political management of the Council and its services.

2.1.4 The last Annual Report of the Council indicated that some £1.2m is spent on Communications, including staff costs. However, as this spend is not "overseen" by any one part of the Council, the result is a fragmented approach to communications of varied effectiveness

2.2 Focus Groups

2.2.1 From late February to early March 2004, four focus groups were convened. These had been recruited from the Council's Citizen's Panel and represented different facets of the district's population as follows

   o Bath (under 35's no children)

   o Midsomer Norton (under 55, with family)

   o Keynsham (over 55)

   o Chew Magna (any)

2.2.2   The timing of these groups occurred when Council Tax Bills and Council News had been recently issued, going to every household in the area. In addition, as the groups were drawn from the Citizen's Panel, they already had a reasonable understanding of the Council. However at around this time there was also much media reporting of funding issues regarding the Spa.

2.2.3   Focus Group Findings

2.2.3.1 Perceptions of the Council:

- o   The focus groups showed that the public have little sense of "ownership" or belonging. Younger people, in particular felt remote from the Council and Councillors. There was an overall perception that the Council over concentrates on the needs tourists and (from those living outside of Bath) on Bath City.

- o   When asked about the quality of service delivery, the groups were relatively neutral but highlighted parks provision and recycling as particularly good points. They also felt that the Bath Spa and political infighting had damaged the Council's credibility and they didn't like the name of the Authority.

2.2.3.2 Information Provision:

- o   The focus groups felt that they received information from the Council in the right format and were satisfied with the information that was provided.

- o   However, they were critical of the style of communication adopted by the Council and did not feel it was 'open and honest'. They felt that communications should be better targeted so that "local people" are kept informed of "local issues".

- o   Whilst they praised the "A to Z" and "What we do" publications they were particularly critical of Council News, claiming it to be patronising, too Bath oriented, too "trumpet blowing" and containing too much old or irrelevant news.

- o   Information that they claimed would be of particular interest was cited as follows

    - ▪   Good and bad news – i.e. honest reporting of Council activities

    - ▪   How and why (their) money is being spent as it is

    - ▪   Planned improvements

    - ▪   Targets and how the Council performs against these, where relevant, how the Council performs relatively (although national research shows that Audit Commission and CPA data is not interesting)

- o   Importantly, though, the focus groups wanted to see that the Council was demonstrating value for money in all that it does including communicating.

2.2.3.3 Improving Communication:

- o The focus groups recognised that not everyone wants to receive communication from the Council. The groups expressed a view that, in addition to delivering good services, the Council could do more to improve its corporate image through active marketing and making people feel a part of the process. They also recognised that communication also included the look and feel of services, people, vehicles and buildings

- o The groups also recognised and acknowledged that the local news media would not necessarily provide a completely accurate or balanced view of Council affairs. However, it was felt that the local press are more accomplished in targeting local news to local people

2.2.4 Conclusions Drawn from Focus Groups

2.2.4.1 Key themes, conclusions and recommendations from the focus groups appear to be that

- o Communications channels used by the Council are good but that style and content could be improved

- o Communications should be better targeted and that advertising could play a role in this

- o Communications need to be clear, adult and honest and need to involve the stakeholders, thus giving them a sense of ownership and empowerment

- o Good services are the best form of communication and hence, good communications and image is a shared responsibility of all councillors, employees and contractors in the way that they work, and present themselves, their vehicles and buildings. However, good services need to be supplemented with active marketing (this point is particularly the case for those that are not interested in receiving Council communications) and need to be branded so that associations between services and the provider (the Council) is established.

- o The main challenge faced by the Council is that even if communications are improved they still will not be successful unless people are interested.

- o People need to feel sufficiently involved/ engaged/ bothered. As such two improvements need to be made: 1) branding so that people associate services with the council this would help educate them, and 2) some sort of effort to make people interested.

2.3   Good Practice Evaluation

2.3.1   Officers from the Communications and Marketing service of the Council undertook research into published best practice and drew the following conclusions

- There is a clear link between how well informed public services keep people and how satisfied they are with them – IDeA research

- There is a direct link between how familiar people are with a service and how favourable they are towards it - MORI

- There is a need for "…more direct, unmediated communications from government through all relevant channels of communications" - The Phillis Report – An Independent Review of Government Communications (Jan 2004)

- IDeA Connecting with Community research found common problems within many Councils

  - too many priorities and complex messages

  - inconsistent use of the corporate identity

  - too many sub-brands

  - the credibility gap – i.e. a difference between what is promised and what people experience

2.4   Communication Workshop Results

2.4.1   A workshop event was held on 23rd June 2004 at which Members of the Corporate Issues and Partnerships Panel were invited to consider and comment upon

- Their personal experiences of Council communications

- The findings of the focus groups and other research

- The effects of unintentional communications – using photographs to stimulate discussion

- The use of leaflets and published information including information that is distributed to homes – Publications reviewed included Council News, Council Tax Bills and over 100 leaflets that had been gathered from 3 Council reception areas – the Guildhall, the Hollies and Riverside

2.4.2 Panel Members' own perceptions

- That there is a culture of friendliness and openness but that this is not everywhere

- Whilst the Council provides a lot of information, it can be difficult to find

- Council News needs to be revisited in terms of its purpose, design, frequency etc.

     o   There is no consistent image on publications and little guidance in respect of style

     o   There is a piecemeal approach to communications and a lack of consistency

     o   There is insufficient investment in communications

2.4.3 Members' impressions from focus group research

2.4.3.1 The Panel was pleased that the focus groups identified positive aspects about the Council but were concerned that many of these seemed to be historic, e.g. parks and that the only positive point arising from recent activities related to recycling

2.4.3.2 Members concurred with the view of focus groups that the format and style of written communications needed to be addressed so that the Council is not perceived to be patronising its stakeholders. They also supported the view that communications can and should play a fundamental part in developing a sense of ownership or belonging

2.4.4 Unintentional Communications

2.4.4.1 The Panel reviewed a series of photographs that reflected the work of the Council and were asked to comment.

2.4.4.2 The Panel noted that the Council undertakes an enormously diverse range of activities and that each of these and the way that they are carried reflects upon the Council. It was also noted that in many cases, a direct connection with the Council is not always apparent. Issues considered when looking at unintentional communications included

     o   the placement and prominence of the Council's logo on signs and vehicles,

     o   the appearance of reception areas,

     o   the cleanliness and condition of staff uniforms and

     o   the way in which Councillors and officers can work together

2.4.5 Review of Leaflets and Publications

2.4.5.1 Panel members expressed surprise and concern over the volume of leaflets and the vast array of styles and brands employed. Whilst they praised endeavours to establish stylistic themes for leaflets from a single service area, e.g. Planning, they were concerned that this may serve to subsume the wider corporate brand of "Bath & North East Somerset"

2.4.5.2 They also shared the Focus Groups' criticism of Council News and indicated that it was a publication with an ambiguous identity – too infrequent to be a newspaper but too ephemeral to be a reference/"what's on" guide

2.4.5.3 The Panel also noted that the text of some leaflets was too small to be read with ease and that the language of others was too complex.

3   Conclusions

3.1   The limited time frame and resource availability to conduct this review has only permitted the Panel to gain a very brief overview of Communications within Bath & North East Somerset Council. Despite this, the Panel has formed a clear view that Bath and North East Somerset Council is not communicating effectively with its customers and stakeholders.

3.2   This review has highlighted a range of issues about both the culture of the Council and its communications that have an impact upon its stakeholders. These have been themed as follows

3.3   Communications and Service Delivery

3.3.1   Communication is more than information that is sent out. It is also about how the Council treats its customers and what they think of the Council. Therefore the responsibility for maintaining the image of the Council is shared between councillors, employees and contractors in the way that they work and present themselves, their vehicles and buildings. At the present time, however, it does not seem that the link between image, good service delivery and communication has been fully made by and to all involved.

3.3.2   Whilst used effectively by some services, communications appear to be undervalued by the Council as a whole and are seen to be more of a by-product of service delivery rather than an intrinsic part of it. As a result many stakeholders do not connect services received with the Council.

3.3.3   As the Council's communications budgets are small and are devolved across the Council, it is not possible to derive economies of scale or to properly control what services say to their clients, how they say it or how they "sell" the Council's image.

3.4   Stakeholder Awareness

3.4.1   Stakeholders acknowledge that the Council provides good services and recognise that these are the best form of communication. Whilst the review did not include internal communications, the Panel recognised, however, that there is a vital link between informing and motivating staff, the level and quality of service they provide and hence the public's perception of the Council

3.4.2   Stakeholders feel well informed about the Services provided by the Council and consider that regular communications mechanisms used by the Council, e.g. a regular journal Council News, are appropriate.

3.4.3   The public may be more "media-savvy" than the Council gives credit for and, at times, may feel patronised by the way that the Council communicates, particularly if there is a perception of ambiguity and lack of honesty. The public have to trust that the Council provides value for money and has to believe that "what we say is what we do". The

Council has to earn that trust via honesty and openness in all that it says and does.

3.4.4 What a person thinks about the Council is largely down to whether they think that they are getting value for money – i.e. the right services at the right quality for a reasonable cost. Their experience of the Council must be positive if the Council wants their satisfaction and trust. In other words, the Council earns trust by doing what it says it will do when it says it will do it.

3.5 Media

3.5.1 Printed information, such as leaflets, can be difficult to understand. In addition, the sheer volume of leaflets available, in a variety of designs, colours and sub brands, can cause confusion. The confusion being compounded when several editions of the same leaflet are in circulation.

3.5.2 The style, format and content of Council News is often uninteresting, irrelevant or disengaging.

3.5.3 A "one size fits all" approach should be avoided – Information should be effectively targeted especially as the Council is perceived as being too tourist and Bath-centric (even by Bath residents)

3.6 Branding

3.6.1 There is no corporately agreed style guide. As a result there are a plethora of sub-brands. Whilst some serve to reinforce the service identity (e.g. Planning) there is no cohesive approach to sub-brand management

4 Recommendations

4.1 The Corporate Issues and Partnerships Overview and Scrutiny Panel firmly believe that to enhance the reputation of the Council greater emphasis needs to be placed on communicating effectively and that this can only be achieved by Councillors and Officers working together to

1) Raise the profile of the Communication function so that

- o the impacts of all Council activities (undertaken both by Officers and Members) in terms of what they say about the Council are better understood

- o The function of communicating is perceived as a legitimate Council activity in its own right

2) Achieve better editorial and stylistic control over press releases, leaflets and other publications by ensuring

- o the correct deployment of the Council logo and strapline
- o the effective control and utilisation of sub brands and styles

3) Make the Council and its activities more accessible to the population of Bath & North East Somerset in order to improve public relations and information provision

4.2 To this end, the Panel strongly urges the Executive Member to consider the following recommendations to help improve the Council's communication across the board and hence its reputation and trustworthiness.

4.3 Raising the Profile of the Communications

The Panel **RECOMMENDS** that

4.3.1 Action be taken within the organisation to build awareness of Council communications, paying particular attention to the effects of unintentional communications

4.3.2 Clear standards for communication with the public (style guides) are established for officers and Members and are applied across the whole Council, and that their effectiveness is evaluated through market research and other mechanisms as appropriate.

4.3.3 Senior Council Officers and the Communications and Marketing Team review their processes so as to better capture "breaking news" e.g. via attendance at Directors Group and Heads of Service Meetings and to position itself facilitate the rapid review and of outgoing communications

4.3.4 Council officers develop a more proactive approach to communication whereby service providers build sufficient time and resources into their processes to enable the production of high quality and timely press releases and other communications.

4.3.5 Improvements be made in the working relationship between the Council and the local news media through regular face to face meetings

4.4 Maintaining and Improving Stylistic and Editorial Control

The Panel **RECOMMENDS** that, in respect of communications from Services and Officers,

4.4.1 "Communications and Marketing should set guidelines and standards for all external printed and electronic communications. Communications requirements should be built into the staff core competencies currently being developed as part of the HR Improvement Project."

4.4.2 An audit of all Council communication to include internal, external and unintentional communication be undertaken that will
   o Provide a baseline of precisely what and how the Council communicates across all media and how that compares with the other Councils within our audit family
   o establish how people wish to be contacted
   o evaluate the effectiveness of current communications methods
   o Produce proposals for improvements

4.4.3   On the basis of the Communications Audit, a whole Council Communications Strategy should be developed which will lead to effort and resources being targeted in a way that promotes and protects the Council's reputation with the public.

4.4.4   Consideration be given to developing closer operational links between the Communications and Marketing Team and Linear Way Industries to improve stylistic control of printed media

4.5   Improving the Accessibility of the Council

The Panel strongly **RECOMMENDS** that steps be taken to use communication as a means of bringing the Council closer to the community so as to foster a sense of ownership. Actions to consider in achieving this goal include

4.5.1   Actively seeking to use local venues, e.g. village halls for Council meetings

4.5.2   In consultation with the public, reviewing the role of the Council Newspaper so that it can better meet the needs of the community

4.5.3   Making more use of recent photographs of local people in Council publications

4.5.4   Developing and implementing Council wide (Members and Officers) "Customer Care" and Communications training programmes to reinforce the need for effective communications and personal responsibility for the Council's image

4.5.5   Exploring the usage of alternative and emerging communications technologies including digital TV, radio, broadband, e-mail, SMS messaging and customer screens in public places e.g. post offices and shops.