

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS REVIEW TASK AND FINISH GROUP HELD AT COUNTY HALL, CHELMSFORD ON 1 MAY 2012

Membership

- | | |
|--------------|-----------------------|
| * G Butland | * J W Pike (Chairman) |
| * M Mackrory | |
| (* present) | |

The following officers were present in support throughout the meeting:

Vivien Door, Committee Officer
Robert Fox, Governance Officer

1. Election of Chairman

The Governance Officer opened the meeting and asked for nominations for Chairman. Councillor Butland nominated Councillor Pike and Councillor Mackrory seconded. It was therefore **Agreed** that:

Councillor J W Pike be elected Chairman.

2. Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies reported.

3. Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest reported.

4. External Communications Issues and the Strategy

The Group received an oral report from Richard Puleston, Assistant Chief Executive (Strategic Services) and Eleri Roberts, Head of External Communications and the Scoping Document (ES-SCR-01/12) which was reviewed as part of the presentation.

External Communications Strategy

The External Communications Strategy was being produced in line with the new Corporate Vision and the Corporate Plan 2012 – 2017. The three main strategies in the Communications Strategy were:

- To protect and enhance the County's reputation;
- To support the County to achieve its objectives;
- To recognise the County's drive towards commissioning commercial services.

The four key activities areas were:

- Reactive Media Management regarding press queries;

- Commissioning eight campaigns over a twelve month period in line with the County's objectives;
- Marketing, ensuring that the team had the capacity to provide the service;
- Targeting the audience by using Market Research, by moving away from providing documents to customers being able to source the information on the County's website.

Meetings would take place across the County's Directorate Teams to ensure that the External Communications Strategy was integrated. It was hoped that the strategy would be completed by the end of the month.

Focused Campaigns

The eight focused Campaigns were aligned to the Corporate Vision and would be discussed with the service areas:

- Supporting World Class Education;
- Supporting the infrastructure and environment to enable businesses to grow, work would take place with Highways for the infrastructure and with Tourism to align them with investment in Essex;
- Improve better health and wellbeing and encourage residents to provide provision for their own later life provision;
- Protecting and safeguarding vulnerable people, which would include Fostering and Adoption and the elderly;
- Transforming agenda regarding the Customer Programme Channel Shift to access information from the website whilst ensuring that all residents were able to access the information they require;
- Supporting the Olympics and the legacy for Essex;
- Good For Essex, working in partnership with Districts and other bodies.

Resources and Budget

The team had a £2 million budget, £1 million of which was the budget for the 29 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) Staff. £800,000 had been allocated for the eight focused campaigns. The original team for Events, Design and Communications were restructured into four mixed skill teams: People (Adults and Children's Services); Economy (Tourism, investment and Olympics); Transformation (Customer Transformation); and Environment Sustainability & Highways (Recycling, Highways, Culture and Country Parks). The recent savings were made from other parts of the Strategic Services Directorate and not from the Communications Team. There was more influence on value for money and the scrutiny of the budget.

Internal and External Communications

Internal Communications was run by Human Resources and provides staff information, for example, 7 Days and all staff engagement. It had a team of approximately 12 to 15 FTE. Discussions have taken place to link up the two Communications Teams in one unit but it had not been possible.

Social Media

The use of Social Media was used where appropriate. There was a successful twitter feed followers on communications regarding travel to work

as the team could explain why the problems were occurring on the networks. The younger driver campaign used a viral game on Facebook and Twitter to promote the campaign. Half a million people used the game which brought a different customer engagement to the County. Using Social Media could be good value for money but the team were aware that it may not reach all customers.

Knowledge and Experience of External Communications Team

As the team was a member of the professional body it could obtain bespoke team training rather than only one staff member receiving training. Eleri Roberts informed the Group that she was a member of the Local Government Communications Board; other members of the team attend these meetings as part of their development.

ECC and Districts/Boroughs Sharing Communications

Regular meetings take place with District and Borough colleagues to share information. Districts and Boroughs have different objectives than the County due to the nature of the work. Sharing communications with other bodies may be possible, for example, Essex Police had a strong Film Unit which the County could use, whereas the County were stronger on Campaigning and could aid Essex Police. Some development work was produced without a strong County feel to it make it easier for partners to use. It was acknowledged that all public authorities were facing difficult financial times.

Local Member Communication Improvements

It had been difficult to provide consistent effective communications for Members in a busy press office. Richard Puleston agreed to find a solution.

Business Plan

The Communications Strategy would be circulated to the Group.

Customer Knowledge

Customer knowledge was captured within the Tracker System by the Public Engagement Team and was reflected within the Corporate Vision.

Relationship with Broadcasting and Press

The team had a good relationship with the two newspaper groups although it varies for individual newspapers. At the moment the Brentwood Gazette had a strong anti-Member feel to it, regarding Member allowances, expenses and the restaurant. It was suggested that this was better than complaints about service delivery as this would cause more concern. The team need to maintain a positive relationship with the press and provide information in a timely way. The County deals with 25 media organisations, some papers were very small and now employ students, so that the Press Office could be dealing with continuing changing newspaper staff. The newspapers could group together to enable staff to specialise in particular areas and provide information for a group of papers.

During the discussion the following points were made:

- The capacity of the team could cope with the current workload but the capacity of the team may need to be increased;
- Different marketing skills were required when working in the public sector and the commercial sector;
- Approximately two years ago the Communications team was centralised although there may be officers within the services with marketing skills. The restructure of the team would provide information

on whether any extra posts could be filled from within the County's own skill set or whether they would need to be filled by external advertising;

- Each campaign would have a Service Level Agreement (SLA) which would include clear agreed deliverable objectives and targets which could be measured. Although some objectives would be easier to monitor, whereas objectives set for fostering and adoption would be the number of new enquiries and not the number of new families approved, as due to the nature of the work it was accepted that it would be a smaller proportion of enquiries;
- Campaigns promoting Jubilee event information on how to apply for a road closure. The number of web hits and applications within the timeframe would be used to monitor the objectives. Other objectives would be more long term, for example, road safety behaviour as it would take time to change people's behaviour. Although market research could be used to target the campaign to a specific audience (younger drivers) rather than a broader campaign, thereby making more of an impact;
- All Members had agreed the objectives in the Corporate Plan and Vision at a previous Full Council meeting;
- Marketing work would continue on the eight focused campaigns alongside the County's business as usual work;
- The Strategic Communications Board was chaired by the Leader. Membership includes Cabinet Members and Directors to oversee the priorities;
- Members highlighted that the local Member needs to be made aware of campaigns and or press releases before the press have the information as in the past they have not been given advance information which had disadvantaged them in their role as Members. In the past some local Members had been given incorrect information which then contradicted the Cabinet Member advice, thereby providing the public with inconsistency;
- The External Communications Forward Plan would be available on the Intranet;
- The majority of staff have professional qualifications. Previously the professional membership had been paid by the County but it was not known whether this payment could continue;
- Braintree District meets regularly with local press to provide a pre-briefing on Full Council, the Budget and Cabinet meetings enabling journalists to meet deadlines with the correct information. The journalists also attend the public meetings. Richard Puleston would look into this style of working;
- Information released to the press would be approved by the Cabinet Member before being released although it was not always possible due to the press tight deadlines. Information was obtained from the Service Officer and cleared by Eleri Roberts if the Cabinet Member was not available, rather than "no comment" from the County;
- The Press Office receive 100 enquiries per week;
- The press could contact a Cabinet Member direct for a quote but would inform the Press Office of the call so that everyone had the same information;

- The Officer Protocol states that officers have to refer press enquiries to the press office;
- Members requested media training and guidance which the officers agreed to supply in discussion with Joanna Boaler, Member Support Manager and David Wilde, Chief Information Officer.

The Group **Agreed** that:

- It was essential that Members should receive an email informing them of the press release or campaign in advance of it if being published to the press/public. Richard Puleston would work on a solution to this issue;
- Members should receive media training and guidance which Eleri Roberts and Richard Puleston would organise.

5. The Next Steps

The Group **Agreed** that:

- The next meeting should include Social Media information and ways to ensure that customers unable to access the website would not be disenfranchised produced by David Wilde, Chief Information Officer and Martin Chaney, Website Content and Strategy Manager;
- Structure Charts should be provided for both Internal Communications and External Communication Services;
- Benchmarking information should be provided regarding other County and London Borough Authorities resources both staff and funding;
- Progress report on local Member interface;
- The remit of the group should be extended to include reviewing Internal Communication Service.

6. Dates of Future Meetings

The Committee **Agreed** to set a date in approximately three weeks time.

There being no urgent business the meeting closed at 11.50 am.

Chairman