

Scrutiny Committee

Scrutiny Review of External Communications

Report for Scrutiny Committee – 31 January 2012

What's the review about?

The Council has a strong track record of communicating with residents using a variety of means. The importance of communications to residents was highlighted with the 'Your Area' listening days and programme. National research proves that there is a direct correlation between communication and the satisfaction of residents.

Communications and the expectations of residents in finding out about the Council are fast pacing and it is important that we continue to communicate in the most effective and efficient way possible. The Government's transparency agenda and increased development of other communications channels such as social media and e-communications are increasingly being used by residents.

The Scrutiny Committee therefore felt it an appropriate time to review external communications with our residents and look at how it can be strengthened in the future to be as effective and efficient as possible.

Who was on the review team?

- ▶ Councillor Warren Bennett (Chair)
- ▶ Councillor Mark Bradley
- ▶ Councillor Frances Walker
- ▶ Councillor Linda Woollard

What was the purpose of the review?

- ▶ To consider best practice with regards to external communications with residents.
- ▶ To investigate and understand the effectiveness and value for money from the current methods of communication both time and financial resources.
- ▶ To establish what members of the public think about the way the Council communicates and what they expect from the Council.
- ▶ To look at how we can communicate more effectively with the whole community.

- ▶ Make recommendations on how the Council could improve communications with residents.

What has the review done?

The review team has carried a great deal of research as part of the review looking at what happens now and what people expect for the future. Some of the research included:

- ▶ A review of best practice from other organisations through the LGComms Network, Local Government Association, Chartered Institute of Public Relations, Society of IT Managers and Centre for Public Scrutiny.
- ▶ Made use of existing and previous consultation and research carried out with the Citizens' Panel, Residents' Survey and 'My Area' consultation.
- ▶ Reviewed and assessed the cost of public relations and communications across the Council.
- ▶ An electronic survey of the Citizens' Panel.
- ▶ A survey of councillors.
- ▶ Meetings with the Council's Leader, Chief Executive, 'My Neighbourhood' Chairs, Director of Business Transformation, ICT Manager, Head of Human Resources & PR, Public Relations Officer and Assistant Public Relations Officer.
- ▶ Local newspaper editors have also been consulted.
- ▶ A visual audit and review of the Council's website and corporate branding around the borough has also been undertaken.
- ▶ Used three recent major issues as case studies to examine how communicate with our residents, which included waste changes, 'My Neighbourhood' and the Council's website.

What is the outcome of the review?

Following the extensive research of the task group have made the following recommendations:

Leadership and Culture

1. The importance of external communications be reflected as a priority in next year's corporate plan.

This cannot be implemented as it is not part of the agreed Corporate Plan, although it is recognised that it underpins and supports its delivery.

2. **There should be a minimum of quarterly communications meetings between the Public Relations Team and Directors.**

This is already implemented.

3. **The project management guidance should include guidance on embedding communications at every stage of a project.**

This is already implemented.

4. A C-SMART/business process review of the public relations policies and procedures take place to ensure the work of the team is prioritised, well-planned, reflects best practice and makes best use of the resources available.

It is not considered that this should be implemented given the resources required, although the PR Team are always striving to make effective improvements.

5. **The corporate identity and branding guide should be updated annually and consistently used across the Council.**

This has already been implemented for 2012 and will be completed annually each January.

6. **Officer communications champions are appointed from across the Council to promote communications and ensure a consistent approach is adopted across the Council.**

This can be implemented and lead officers are currently being identified.

7. **Further training and awareness raising sessions are provided for Officers to encourage them to make the most of the communications channels available and communicate more effectively with residents.**

This has been partly implemented and further sessions will be delivered as and when necessary.

8. All publicity and communications budgets should be pooled centrally across the Council to ensure they are prioritised, project a consistent message and spent more efficiently and effectively.

It is not considered that this should be implemented, due to the resource implications. Existing arrangements operate effectively.

9. Communications forms part of everyone's job description.

This can be implemented as it is already relevant for many posts, with job descriptions to be reviewed and updated as vacancies arise to reflect this.

10. The Council should promote South Ribble as a place to ensure people recognise the borough as a great place to live, work, visit and play.

This is being implemented.

Traditional Media

11. Quarterly meetings be held between the Leader/Chief Executive and local media editors.

This should be implemented as and when meetings are necessary, rather than quarterly.

12. The approach to prioritising and issuing press releases, targeting news to the various communications channel formats be improved further.

This can be implemented as part of endeavours to make further improvements.

13. Local media have direct access to senior Councillors and senior management team whilst keeping the public relations team in the loop.

It is considered that this should not be implemented, as it conflicts with the existing arrangements for Public Relations to be coordinated corporately.

14. FORWARD is a valued and effective means of communications. However, should resources be required for other communications methods the frequency and cost of FORWARD should be considered further.

This can be implemented if the situation arises.

Electronic Communications

15. A proactive social media strategy, policy and user guidelines is put in place to help the community do the communicating.

This is to be implemented as a pilot project within the Community Involvement Service.

16. Dedicated resources are provided for the website to improve the visual design, content and functionality to encourage our residents to access services electronically so that it meets the 4 out of 4 SOCITM standard by 2014.

This can be implemented – but needs to be considered as part of the ICT Work Programme, with any dedicated resources being identified as part of an overall project to review/improve the website.

17. The e-citizen programme is welcomed and should be proactively promoted to ensure take-up by residents and businesses as the preferred cost-effective communications channel for the Council.

This is already being implemented as part of the ICT Work Programme.

18. The Council should look to only support one website and the Visitleyland and Visitsouthribble websites should be incorporated into the Council's website.

It is not considered that this is implemented, as these websites are established and recognised nationally by businesses looking to invest within the Borough.

19. Mobile applications should be considered to make it easier, more secure and cost effective for residents to access our services.

This is already being implemented as part of the ICT Work Programme.

20. The possibility of webcasting council meetings to better engage with residents should be considered further to enhance openness and transparency.

It is not considered that this should be implemented, as it is likely to be prohibitive in financial terms, that would outweigh the potential benefits.

21. Email footers are used to promote key corporate messages and adopt a consistent style across the Council.

This can be implemented.

22. Telephone answerphone messages are used to give key messages to our residents.

This is already being implemented.

Noticeboards

23. An audit of noticeboards is carried out.

24. Each Member 'adopt' to look after noticeboards in their area.

25. My Neighbourhood Forums consider funding for more noticeboards.

It is considered that the above three recommendations should not be implemented, unless it is regarded as an issue/priority within each of the My Neighbourhood Forums.

Councillors

26.Councillors take full advantage and champion the communications channels available as part of their community leadership role.

This can be implemented.

27.Councillors' should have the facility to have their own webpage as part of the Council website.

It is considered that this is not to be implemented at present, although it will can be reconsidered as part of the plans to review and improve the website, taking into account any Governance and Standards issues.

What next?

We very much hope that the Council will agree and take forward our recommendations. The Scrutiny Committee looks forward to the Council's response and will monitor progress on the review in six months time.

We would like to thank all residents, partners, employees, councillors and other involved in the review for their time and help with the review.

How do I get more information?

For further information or to see the detailed and comprehensive information gathered as part of the review, please contact Darren Cranshaw, Scrutiny and Performance Officer on 01772 625512, email: dcranshaw@southribble.gov.uk or visit www.southribble.gov.uk/scrutiny.