

COMMUNICATIONS – MOVING FORWARD

Submitted by: Head of Communications

Portfolio: Finance, IT and Customer

Ward(s) affected: All

Purpose of the Report

To outline proposals for enhancing the way the Council communicates with residents, elected members and staff while at the same time delivering efficiency savings as part of the budget proposals for 2017/18.

Recommendations

- a) Cabinet supports the proposals outlined in the report for developing the Council's external and internal communications.**

Reasons

Research from the Local Government Association has shown that residents who feel involved and informed with their council are likely to be more satisfied. Good internal communications are an essential tool in maintaining strong working relationships, output and morale.

1. Background

- 1.1 The Council's "communications mix" comprises a number of different elements for external and internal audiences. Requirements for communications and audience demands change and evolve quicker than in many other service areas provided by the Council due mainly to technological advances.
- 1.2 Existing external communications involve:-
- (i) The Council's newspaper The Reporter.
 - (ii) Our website www.newcastle-staffs.gov.uk
 - (iii) Social media – Twitter, Facebook, YouTube etc.
 - (iv) Press and public relations – press releases, interviews, statements.
 - (v) Leaflets, posters, booklets and banners.
 - (vi) Councillors.
- 1.3 Our existing internal communications requirements involve:-
- (i) Intranet
 - (ii) Monthly team meetings.
 - (iii) Monthly Core Brief from Executive Management Team.
 - (iv) Ad hoc communications via e-mail.
 - (v) Posters
 - (vi) Presentations and workshops.
- 1.4 The most up-to-date annual figures available show 78 per cent of borough residents who responded felt they were kept informed by the Council. The latest staff survey at the Council revealed 66 per cent of staff who responded felt they were kept informed by the Council.

- 1.5 Both these figures compare favourably with the national picture for both audiences.
- 1.6 In October 2016, the Local Government Association produced the latest in a series of regular reports on resident satisfaction with local councils. It showed 66 per cent of respondents said their local council kept residents “very” or “fairly well” informed about the services and benefits it provides.
- 1.7 In terms of staff satisfaction, it is more difficult to find comparable data as councils tend to treat results from staff surveys as internal documents and not for wider publication via the internet. However, some data is collected by Ipsos Mori and this reveals the percentage of staff in local authorities who feel they are kept informed by their employers in 58 per cent.

2. **Issues**

- 2.1 The Communications Service at the Council has evolved and changed in recent years to cope with a variety of pressures including financial, customer expectations and technological advances.
- 2.2 Staff numbers within the team have been halved during the last six years and savings in excess of £560,000 have been achieved as a contribution towards tackling the very significant financial pressures the Council continues to experience.
- 2.3 As members know, these financial pressures continue to have an impact and as part of the draft savings put forward for 2017/18, the service is expected to make further savings of £41,000. Details on how this will be achieved are outlined in section seven.
- 2.4 In addition to financial pressures, the ways in which people choose to receive information continues to develop at a rapid pace. An illustration is that just over three years ago the Council did not have any social media accounts at all. It now has several and a total of more than 17,000 people interact with the Council using channels including Twitter and Facebook.
- 2.5 The Council’s website has also gone from strength-to-strength and more than 40,000 unique users now use this channel to do business with the Council or to receive information – this is double the figure from just 12 months ago.
- 2.6 While technology is playing a greater part in communications, printed materials are becoming less well-used although it must be stressed they still have a place in the overall “communications mix.” The Council’s current contracts for the print and distribution of the civic newspaper The Reporter are due to end in March 2017.
- 2.7 As well as changes to the channels for communication, there have also been changes impacting on the personnel landscape within the Communications Service. A senior officer with 40 years’ local government experience has retired from the team; the Council is exploring new ways of procuring its print requirements via external sources; a restructure has been completed which will enable the realignment of resources.
- 2.8 This has resulted in a number of staff going through the job evaluation process in recognition of the fact their duties have changed to mirror the fact new skills will have to be developed to meet the demands of the proposals outlined below.

3. Proposals

- 3.1 As mentioned earlier in this report, technological advances impact constantly on the world of communications. The Council is looking to respond to this with a greater emphasis on digital communications and less reliance on what can be described as more traditional channels.
- 3.2 This is reflected in the proposals which are outlined below. However, there is recognition that some of the traditional channels still have a place in the “communications mix” and elected members are being asked to consider whether the shift in emphasis outlined below is one that they recognise and also endorse.
- 3.3 *News sign-up service* – this proposal involves production of a round-up of key news issues, decisions and information from the Council on its services, policies, events and activities. Residents will be encouraged to sign-up to receive this new service and they will be alerted to new bulletins via e-mail or text alerts. This was highlighted as an issue in the recent independent report on recycling and waste and was already under consideration by the Communications Service. It is now proposed to press ahead with the design and implementation of this initiative.
- 3.4 *Website* – the revolving banner on the home page of the Council’s website is already used on an ad-hoc basis to promote key messages, news and decisions to residents. As usage of the website continues to grow, this channel can be developed further with key messages supported by a scheduled programme of other messages such as those which could bring financial benefit to the Council commercially. The banner can effectively be an electronic “shop window” to highlight and promote Council services while at the same time raising awareness of commercial activities as the authority seeks to bolster its income to compensate for reductions in grant funding.
- 3.5 *Intranet* – as we develop and promote self-serve options for residents via the website, the same principle will be adopted for staff with regards to an intranet. A new intranet will be introduced ready for the move to the public sector hub and this will be designed and developed to meet staff needs as the Council moves towards a more mobile and modern workforce. Self-serve principles will support staff by ensuring key corporate documents; shared file storage areas; organisational structures and telephone contacts and a host of other features to support agile staff in a modern workplace are available on an intranet. In addition, it is proposed to work alongside the Council’s ICT team to develop and improve an intranet area for elected members.
- 3.6 *Social media* – in 2.4 (above) the growth in usage of the Council’s social media accounts has been highlighted and there is nothing to suggest the upwards surge in popularity experienced in recent years will change. The demands from these channels are more resource intensive because during office times customers expect virtually instantaneous communications with corporate channels. The Council needs to embrace and improve the way it uses these channels as more and more customers use them as their information channel of choice. Failure to meet this expectation can be damaging to the Council’s reputation. Because such huge numbers of customers feel comfortable with these communication channels it would seem prudent to try and increase staff resource in this area to improve effectiveness.
- 3.7 *Monthly Core Brief* - this is produced each month and forms the basis of all team meetings which take place across the Council. The brief contains corporate information from the management team. It is proposed to change the format with one new style serving two purposes. Each message will have a headline which will also act as an active hyperlink and underneath the headline will be a brief introduction to the

news item. Staff with digital access can access more detailed information if they wish via the hyperlink. Staff who have limited access to a PC can simply be provided with printed copies of these “summary” sheets to give them a working knowledge of corporate information with the opportunity for more detailed inputs from team meetings.

- 3.8 *Monthly Core Brief for elected members* – this will be developed in a similar format to the Core Brief which is produced for staff. It will be produced by the Communications Service working in partnership with the Democratic Services’ staff. The proposal is to round-up corporate news and information; key decisions; training and development issues etc. This will be available electronically via the members’ intranet area so can be used in the same way as the brief mentioned above. An active link will form the headline and below will be a short summary of the item. For elected members who wish to access more than the summary the active link will take them to a fuller online version of the item.
- 3.9 *The Reporter* – it is proposed to change production and distribution when current contractual arrangements finish with the March 2017 edition. It is proposed to produce two editions each year instead of the current four – one in May/June and one in November/December. A new A4 magazine format will be introduced instead of the A3 newspaper format which has been in place since The Reporter began around 20 years ago. It is recommended that these be made available for collection from borough-wide access points rather than through letterbox delivery. There is a further option of not producing any hard copies. If members choose this option then there would be an additional saving of £12,000.
- 3.10 *Walk the Job* – this will involve all members of Cabinet and Executive Management Team. The idea is to organise sessions in a variety of service areas as part of a “visible leadership” programme. These sessions will be organised each summer. As well as visible leadership, the sessions encourage communications in a “bottom up and top down” style rather than just top down. They can also help to generate greater awareness of roles and challenges within the organisation and can boost morale.
- 3.11 *Meet the Leadership* – it is proposed to hold these once a year with one session taking place at the Civic Offices (public sector hub) and the other at the Depot. These question and answer sessions can reinforce “visible leadership” and improve connections between all levels of the organisation. They will be relatively informal and ideally will involve the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive.
- 3.12 *Monthly team meetings* – Executive Management Team will be asked to attend team Meetings within their directorates at least twice a year.
- 3.13 In addition to the above, the Communications Service will continue to:-
- Provide a day-to-day media relations/management service – this involves producing official comments on behalf of the Council, organising and overseeing interviews, working with Cabinet members on media briefings etc. This will be balanced with a reduced focus on press releases.
 - Graphic design and print – the team will produce all corporate graphic design materials and oversee the procurement of all print requirements via a managed service.
 - Photography and video – continue to meet corporate photographic requirements and further develop video services to meet the requirements of channels such as YouTube.

- Research and consultation – ensuring all consultations meet standards laid down in the corporate framework as well as providing research and intelligence to services using data models such as Experian.
- Internal communications – the production and management of information for internal audiences such as such as executive bulletins from management team and everyone@..... e-mails on important corporate issues to all staff.

3.14 In addition to its “day job” as a support service at the Council, the Communications Service also makes an important contribution to “corporate leadership” within the Organisation through its support to Executive Management Team, Wider Management Team and also Cabinet on a variety of initiatives such as the change management programme linked to the public sector hub.

3.15 Finance, Resources and Partnerships Scrutiny Committee (FRAPS)

- a) The proposals which have been put forward were considered at the FRAPS meeting on 12 December.
- b) The main focus of the discussion was The Reporter and members raised a number of points for consideration by Cabinet.
 - (i) Some support was voiced for the proposals outlined in this report on the future direction for The Reporter.
 - (ii) Other members suggested The Reporter should no longer be produced in any format and the additional £12,210 savings this would generate should be put towards the MTFS budget gap for 2017/18.
 - (iii) There were concerns that the circulation method proposed would not work and if The Reporter was to continue to be produced then it should be on similar lines to that currently undertaken where contractual arrangements are in place with a distribution company that delivers the publication to the majority of addresses in the borough.

4. Reason for preferred solution

4.1 There are a number of reasons why changes to the “communications mix” at the Council should be implemented at this moment in time.

4.2 Contractual arrangements linked to The Reporter come to an end in March 2017 and although it is proposed to retain the civic publication as part of the “mix” moving forward it will no longer be distributed four times each year to homes throughout the borough. The format will change to an A4 magazine and it will be available twice each year for collection from a range of outlets including civic buildings. All content, design work and photography and graphics will be carried out in-house.

4.3 The Council’s print room is situated in the lower level of the Civic Offices. The Council’s impending move to the Civic Hub has resulted in a number of options being explored for ensuring the Council’s print requirements can continue to be met. This is because the hub will be made up primarily of office space with no capacity to house a light industrial council print section. Also, the Borough Council will occupy only around one third of the hub and will therefore have significantly reduced space available to it.

4.4 A six-month pilot project with Stoke-on-Trent City Council for print involving co-location at its Swift House B building in Stoke has been undertaken but it was decided not to pursue this for a variety of reasons. These included a degree of difficulty over

integrating the two teams and the human resources issues this resulted in combined with the fact a co-location financial agreement would not have been as beneficial to the Council as it would have liked in terms of the efficiencies the terms would have generated.

- 4.5 However, benchmarking work undertaken since the pilot has shown than using existing staff to manage print procurement from external providers can result in efficiency savings while at the same time meeting the Council's print requirements and also enabling these staff to be retrained so they can help to deliver some of the new work streams which are required to meet the communications demands outlined in this report which the Council faces moving forwards.
- 4.6 Trying to evaluate the impact of a senior officer's retirement – and the loss of extensive experience to the team – combined with the new duties and responsibilities is a challenge.
- 4.7 However, detailed performance management arrangements are being put in place to monitor the situation and an evaluation of new systems and workloads will be carried out during the first year to determine whether proposed staffing arrangements are appropriate, efficient and effective.
- 4.8 To mitigate the impacts of the loss of a senior officer within the team, a design apprentice has been taken on permanently. This supports the Council's goal of providing meaningful apprenticeships to young people who are recruited annually.
- 4.9 Linked to the points above is the ongoing requirement for the Council to save money whenever and wherever it can. While the proposals outlined in this report are believed to be the best way of meeting the demands of the "communications mix" they will also deliver £41,000 in savings towards the 2017/18 budget requirements.

5. Legal and Statutory Implications

- 5.1 There are no legal or statutory duties on the Council to communicate with residents, service users, elected members, staff or partner organisations. However, as the Council's current Communications Strategy points out, there are good business reasons for making sure all key audiences are kept involved and informed.

6. Equality Impact Assessment

- 6.1 It is not anticipated that the recommendations in this report will have any significant adverse effects on any protected groups.
- 6.2 However, the implications of changes to The Reporter – both in terms of frequency of production and also in the method of distribution – may have some effect on some groups who rely on more traditional methods of communication. Not producing any hard copies of The Reporter could obviously increase these impacts.
- 6.2 The impacts of these will be monitored via research and consultation work which already takes place at the Council.

7. Finance and Resource Implications

7.1 See table below for a breakdown of the financial implications of the proposals.

	Proposed expenditure	Current budget	Net
	££	££	££
The Reporter	12,210 – If hard copies produced	31,150	18,940 saving 31,150 if no hard copies produced.
Print	27,000	57,200	30,200 saving
Combined corporate print/publicity budget	79,700	85,000	5,300 saving
Service savings – various			600 saving
Staffing			7,134 cost
Equipment, training, SMS bulk purchase etc.			7,000 cost
Total			40,906 saving 53,116 saving if no hard copies of The Reporter produced

8. Major Risks

8.1 Failure to proactively and effectively manage print procurement could result in an overspend and jeopardise projected financial savings.

8.2 Paper is a volatile commodities market and fluctuating prices could affect pricing of The Reporter.

8.3 Staff development fails to raise skills and impacts on the quality of work produced moving forward.

9. Key decision information

9.1 The report raises issues affecting more than two wards so this is a key decision and has been included on the Forward Plan.

10. Earlier Cabinet/Committee Resolutions

10.1 None

11. List of Appendices

11.1 None

12. Background Papers

12.1 None.