

Item No.	Classification: Open	Date: 14.01.03	MEETING NAME Executive
Report title:		External Communications – Vision & Improvement Plan	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All	
From:		Amanda Hirst – Head of Communications & Customer Relations	

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Following the Best Value review of External Communications, members of the Executive are asked to approve the Vision for the next five years (see summary of future vision in section 4, full version circulated separately), and in particular to agree the following recommendations:

- a) A four year, socially inclusive, corporate communications strategy is developed, with a clear vision, values and priorities by the end of February 2003
- b) Strategic communications becomes an integral part of the annual service planning process
- c) The roles and responsibilities of the central communications unit be revised in accordance with the recommendations in this report, with the key role being to provide the 'professional' lead for communications across the council
- d) All service-based communications activities across the Council be centralised under a professional communications function within each department, and supported by the multi-functional skills of the Corporate Communications Unit
- e) In the absence of national performance indicators, a series of Southwark-based indicators are developed to monitor performance of communications activities across the Council.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2. The following is a summary of the future Vision (from which the recommendations in section 1 are drawn).

3. Positioning Southwark

Debate about the basis for the future promotion of Southwark was extensive during this review. At the outset, four core aims were identified and these were tested throughout:

- establishing and promoting the reputation of Southwark Council;
- supporting the council's community leadership role;

- promoting, and informing people about, council services;
- and developing the use of new technology.

4. Whilst the key focus is on Southwark Council, the wider promotion of Southwark the borough is equally relevant and crucial in helping to achieve the council's core priorities, alone and in partnership with others. The new vision, values and priorities should therefore set the future framework for communications in Southwark.

5. *Future vision*

- Strategic communications becomes a part of the annual service planning and budget making process
- Members and COT take full ownership and responsibility for the development and implementation of a four year corporate communications strategy and annual communications programme (see below), monitored quarterly at COT and Executive meetings
- Joint communications activities with partner organisations become formalised via agreement at a senior (chief executive / borough commander / chair) level; protocols and regular liaison meetings are planned to ensure maximum effectiveness for all joint communications initiatives.

6. *Benefits*

- Consideration of communications issues becomes integral to policy and strategy development, and to the annual service planning process
- Communications activities across organisational boundaries become significantly more powerful as a result of smarter working between partners.

7. Shifting to a proactive communications agenda

Achieving such a shift is a significant challenge but crucial if Southwark is to be successfully re-positioned in the way outlined above. The proposals outlined in the Vision are designed to support the change in culture required to promote ownership and delivery of a more proactive communications agenda.

8. *Future vision*

- Significant culture shift from over-emphasis and defensive response to local news stories, to proactive news management and sound forward planning
- Early warning systems and news management well-developed, mechanisms in place to support managers and their teams in actively seeking out proactive opportunities, to celebrate success and reinforce performance improvement at a local level
- Support mechanisms to be in place which enable members and staff to effectively undertake their roles as ambassadors and advocates for the Southwark, both the place and the council.

9. Corporate Communications Strategy

The absence of such a strategy creates a significant gap in the council's ability to achieve consistency of message, identity and branding. A clear strategy that promotes a strong council vision, values and priorities and the actions being taken to deliver them is required as a matter of urgency.

10. *Future vision*

The Strategy will need to address the following:

- Vision, values and priorities
- Identity – full implementation of Southwark branding
- Equality – audience segmentation and analysis to ensure accurate, timely and relevant targeting of all audiences (including a definitive policy and framework for inclusive communications)
- Key channels – preferred communications channels
- Protocols – to establish minimum standards and roles and responsibilities (including standard communications and branding requirements of external organisations delivering services on behalf of the council)
- Evaluation models – to review communications and campaign proposals before execution, and to monitor the success and performance of communications activities once completed.
- Four-year overarching communications programme – outlined in more detail each year through an annual communications programme.

11. Benefits

- Clarity amongst all staff of Council vision, values and priorities and their role in supporting the delivery of these
- Greater focus on the audience, their requirements and the most effective way of reaching them
- Cost savings and economies of scale as a result of better forward planning, improved co-ordination and a rationalisation of communications activity council-wide.

12. Social outcomes of an inclusive approach to communications

There is currently a lack of coherence and quality in the way the Council considers, understands and subsequently communicates with its various audiences, including those with special communications needs.

13. Future vision

In future, people should receive council-related information that is:

- Appropriate to them as individuals
- Clear, accurate and timely
- Designed to meet particular communications needs – ie people whose first language is not English, or who have a sensory disability or low levels of literacy
- Efficiently produced and available in a variety of forms, at locations convenient to them.

14. Role of Corporate Communications Unit

Nationwide reviews carried out by MORI, DTLR, LGA and IdeA all identify the pivotal role of a central communications function in delivering strategic communications. They also recognise the importance of full support and ownership by senior members and officers. Many of the organisations consulted during the review, including the GICS (Government Information and Communications Service), saw culture change and early consideration of communications in policy and strategy development as crucial to the success of any future communications activity.

15. Future vision

- The 'professional' lead for communications is retained by the Corporate Communications Unit, working closely and proactively with Members (Executive and Scrutiny), Chief Officers and DMT/SMTs, and partner organisations.
- Multi-functional teams are created to support the professional development of departmental communications functions and ensure a 'joined up' approach across all communications activities centrally and departmentally.
- The Corporate Communications Unit takes responsibility for proactive marketing and management of film location activities, in conjunction with property services, and provides communications support (subject to resource availability) for community councils and other community partnerships.
- The Corporate Communications Unit takes strategic responsibility for developing and monitoring the Corporate Communications Strategy, corporate identity and inclusive communications and access policy.

16. Benefits

- Higher council priority given to strategic and proactive external communications
- Improved sense of consistency and a seamless one-stop approach to departmental communications initiatives and specific budget-limited campaigns.

17. Role of, and support for, Departmental Communications Officers

Professional communications provision within departments is inconsistent, ad hoc and, in some cases, non-existent. Even where such a function exists, business managers still exercise the right to 'manage' their own communications activities. Quality, targeting, language, accessibility and distribution each suffer as a result.

18. Recruitment and retention of good quality, professional and creative communications staff is a constant problem, within the central communications unit and in particular within departments. During a time of relative economic buoyancy, local government struggles to compete with the private sector.

19. Future vision

- Each department produces an annual communications plan, owned by the Chief Officer and management team, which fits within the structure, vision, aims and priorities of the overall Corporate Communications Strategy. This to be managed and implemented by a professional communications function within the department.

20. Benefits

- More effective publicity and information about council services – timely, targeted, socially inclusive, and distributed to maximum effect
- Service specific knowledge and contacts combined with professional communications expertise
- Greater efficiencies on communications spend across all council departments.

21. Improved co-ordination

Achieving a high degree of consistency and quality within a definitive corporate communications framework will only be achieved through tighter co-ordination of all

communications activities across the council. This applies equally across central, service and departmental boundaries as it does to cross cutting initiatives involving external agencies.

22. Future vision

- Monthly forum of communications officers from council, health, police and other external agencies (building on monthly Forum already in place for Council communications officers)
- Expanded terms of reference to bring mutual benefit to all partners and establish strong joint communications agenda

23. Benefits

- Information is shared across the organisation and beyond, and communications officers across the council work smarter and more effectively, within their own departments and with external communications officers.

24. Performance indicators

Unlike statutory services, there are no BV performance indicators for external communications and even attempts to compare basic aspects of performance are questionable in terms of common definitions. In the absence of national indicators, Southwark must develop its own.

25. Future vision

- Media relations targets should be developed as an absolute minimum
- MORI measurement bi-annually of the degree to which people feel well-informed about council services (need stretch target here).

26. Benefits

- Communications activities are measured to assess impact and effectiveness
- Development of communications strategy and annual plans becomes a more iterative process.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

27. The recommendations in this report have been identified following a comprehensive review process, including consideration of other service delivery options. In reality, however, the real choices available for future provision of external communications are very limited and internal provision is really the only realistic option.

28. However from the consultation and benchmarking that took place during the review there is a clear case for a more strategic and proactive communications approach, which focuses on the needs of the public as customers rather than the internal administration and service delivery structures of the council.

29. During the first three stages (challenge, comparison and consultation) of the review, a number of clear themes emerged and these were a key influence on the development of the overall Vision and the four key recommendations above:

30. Strategic approach to communications Whilst national government, the IDeA and the Audit Commission (through the corporate performance assessment inspections) place a high value on the need for a strategic communications approach within local government, only a very few local councils have reached the same conclusions. Where corporate communications strategies do exist, they still vary substantially in content and strategic significance. This absence of proactive, strategic communications is reflected across many other public sector organisations, including Southwark.

31. By contrast, the Department of Work and Pensions, like other government departments, sees communications as a priority, owned and underpinned at the highest level by the close involvement of a Minister. Private sector companies also regard communications with their customers as a crucial business investment, focusing on marketing activities that add value and win customer loyalty, through product and brand research and development, loyalty programmes, advertising, web development and other commercial marketing activities.

32. A strong focus on the public as customers, and associated marketing strategies to win over their confidence in the ability of public services to deliver, are only just starting to be developed in local government.

33. Structure for delivering communications Within local government, external communications provision is generally based on a central unit with varying levels of departmental communications activity. The production of local service-based publicity materials at a business unit (as in Southwark) or equivalent level is a common problem, and the adverse impact on quality and cost and lack of a coherent council message is widely recognised.

34. Externalisation of the core communications function is rare, and does not currently exist anywhere within metropolitan councils.

35. Scope of communications function In most public sector organisations, the scope of central communications functions has grown in recent years to accommodate a number of additional functions, most notably website management which is probably the most significant development area. Within local government, communications and PR support for community forums and partnerships is another key growth area.

36. Corporate identity Nationally, it has been recognised that there is still much to be achieved in terms of councils developing a strong, positive identity. The complexity and diversity of council activities seems to result in few local councils achieving the consistency of branding associated with comparable private sector organisations with similar levels of turnover. In other sectors however, most notably health, consistency of identity is enforced through a definitive NHS brand for all health providers, established centrally. The corporate branding guidelines are being presented to the Executive in a separate report.

37. Information and overall resident satisfaction Through their research across local government, MORI has established a clear link between overall resident satisfaction with the way a local council provides services, and the degree to which local people feel informed. In Southwark, most residents would like to see more information about how to contact the council and about the services themselves.

38. Staff perspective Within Southwark, staff and members see significant scope for improvement in external communications. Staff clearly recognise the importance of good service delivery and good customer relations in underpinning sustained proactive external communications activity.

39. Communications culture A lack of a council-wide culture and prioritisation for communications within Southwark are considered by members and managers alike to be major obstacles in achieving effective external communications.

40. Clarification of roles and responsibilities Consultation within Southwark showed that the roles, responsibilities and remit of central and departmental communications staff need to be clarified, and a consistent approach established across the council. This will be addressed as part of the communications strategy that is to be produced..

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

41. Of course, the outcomes of the External Communications best value review identified in the Vision have been designed to benefit all parts of Southwark's community, and to achieve a significant shift in the council's culture, and the strategic positioning of communications.

42. It has been clear throughout the review that the positive potential of Southwark services and other initiatives is significantly under-exploited. Whilst the council's ability to manage bad news and respond to journalists' enquiries is highly regarded, there is a clear lack of planned, consistent and proactive media and marketing activity. Furthermore, consultation with staff clearly demonstrates a significant lack of understanding about target audience analysis and segmentation, and a tendency to consider residents' communications needs from an internal administrative and service-based perspective, rather than that of an individual outside the organisation looking in.

43. Whilst there is room for improvement across the board, historically certain groups have been overlooked more than others and particular attention is required to address such inequalities. New communications needs have also emerged and these too must be considered in the development of future communications activities.

44. Hard to reach groups

During the consultation stages of the review, members and staff recognised the council's weaknesses in targeting 'hard to reach' groups, such as young people, the elderly and non-English speakers, and people with sensory impairments. Such is the need to achieve improvement in the Council's communications with hard to reach groups that it is singled out for specific attention in the Vision (see section 4, page 17). A separate mini-review of translation, interpretation and other special communications needs is currently underway to establish an inclusive communications and access policy which will inform the overall Corporate Communications Strategy.

45. Business Community

The communication, information and consultation needs of the business community have been seriously overlooked for some time. Again, the specific needs of this key

group will need to be understood and addressed in the Corporate Communications Strategy.

46. Community Councils

Whilst the communication needs and expectations of different areas may vary, a Corporate Communications Strategy is still required to set out the overall vision, priorities and values which will establish a clear framework across the borough, and ensure a consistent and coherent message, and common quality standards for all communications activity.

CONSULTATION

47. Significant data already existed on aspects of external communications, however to ensure that the consultation approach adopted was timely, up to date and comprehensive, the following consultation programme was undertaken:

- Communications Audit (conducted by an independent Communications Consultant)
- Independent survey of journalists
- 4 focus groups involving council staff
- postal questionnaire to corporate and departmental communications staff
- postal questionnaire to business managers
- postal questionnaire to members
- depth interviews with all three political party leaders
- telephone interviews with a representative sample of 600 Southwark residents
- partner interviews with representatives from the Health Authority; Metropolitan Police; WS Atkins and CSL (now Liberata).

48. Communications staff across the Council were also closely involved in the review.

49. The Vision and Improvement Plan has also been considered by an Internal Challenge Group (August 2002) and a Members Best Value Panel (November 2002)

LEGAL/FINANCE/E-GOVERNMENT/HR IMPLICATIONS IF REQUIRED/SIGNIFICANT AND NOT CONTAINED ELSEWHERE

50. Finance implications

Whilst more detailed work within departments may be needed to analyse the figures further, spending on marketing and publicity for 2001/2002 was estimated to be around £3M. An addition sum of around £0.5M was spent on recruitment advertising. It is intended that proposals outlined within this review should be achieved without any additional spend. Possible areas for savings were identified during the Best Value Review process. These are: use of e-communications rather than print; procurement of communications services both for departments and centrally; print savings especially through the consistent use of corporate branding; effective planning of communications campaigns. However, as yet, these have not been quantified.

51. E-Government

Whilst traditional communications methods still have a place in the Corporate Communications Strategy, new media has an increasingly important role to play.

52. An ever-increasing body of ABC1s (those who pay the most in council tax and seek the least services from the council), use the internet regularly for services ranging from banking to booking holidays. These are people who in the main pay their council tax without reminder, but are very short on time and often frustrated by poor service when trying to access services and information in person and by phone. The web is a significant communications tool for this group, and the cheapest access and communications channel to run for the Council.

53. Whilst the former are easy to reach, at the other end of the spectrum are children and young people, widely recognised as one of local government's 'hard to reach' groups. New media is probably the most reliable means of engaging this group as long as the look, feel and content resonate with them sufficiently.

54. A number of local councils have successfully run new media learning programmes specifically targeting older people and people with disabilities.

55. The crucial role of new media is recognised in the Final Vision and Improvement Plan, and Objective 4 in the latter is dedicated to successfully e-branding Southwark and developing the use of new technology.

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Best Value Review of External Communications – Final Vision & Improvement Plan	<i>Head of Communications and Customer Relations office – Town Hall</i>	<i>Amanda Hirst – 020 7525 7312</i>

Lead Officer	<i>Amanda Hirst</i>	
Report Author	<i>Amanda Hirst</i>	
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Borough Solicitor & Secretary	Yes/No	Yes/No
Chief Finance Officer	Yes/No	Yes/No
<i>List other Officers here</i>		
Executive Member	Yes/No	Yes/No
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