

Subject:
Communications Strategy

Status: For Publication

Report to: Policy Scrutiny Committee

Date: 27th July 2010

Report of: Head of People & Policy

Portfolio

Holder: Finance and Resources

Key Decision: No

Forward Plan General Exception Special Urgency

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 Report the findings of the Local Government Associations reputation Campaign.
- 1.2 Report on the performance in relation to the current Communication Strategy.
- 1.3 Consult with Members and obtain their views in relation to the development of the new Communications Strategy.

2. CORPORATE PRIORITIES

- 2.1 The matters discussed in this report impact directly on the following corporate priorities:-
 - Delivering quality Services to our customers
 - Promoting the Borough
 - Providing value for money services

3. RISK ASSESSMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 All the issues raised and the recommendations in this report involve risk considerations as set out below:

Revising the strategy could lead to a reduction in the opportunities to promote the Council which could impact on customer satisfaction.

4. BACKGROUND AND OPTIONS

CONTEXT – Council reputation and the impact on Customer Satisfaction

4.1 The purpose of this report is to consult with Members in relation to the Communications Strategy. The development of the Strategy is influenced by the changing political dimension and recent research.

4.2 The Local Government Association's study into enhancing the reputation found the following: Having a good organisational reputation affects an organisation's performance, value and can improve satisfaction amongst residents. Three issues were identified for Councils in relation to determining reputation within a community:

- Leadership – Having clarity about what a Council stands for and this being understood by the whole Council.
- Brand – Having a clear sense of purpose and believing in those values.
- Strategic Communication – Having the right skills to improve reputation.

4.3 A detailed examination of the Place Survey contained within the same study identified five rules of reputation as the most important drivers of resident satisfaction with a Council:

- A perceived value for money.
- A commitment to always informing and engaging in two way communication.
- Building trust and confidence by acting on residents concerns and promoting their interests.
- Improving people's lives.
- Improving Council Services.

In the eyes of the public there are four top services in terms of reputation, these key services are street cleaning, refuse collection, parks and leisure. Street cleaning is the most important service in terms of influencing satisfaction with councils, it could be thought of as a 'super service' in terms of reputation. In the Place Survey, it alone was better at predicting Council satisfaction. Improving the reputation of the Council is based on three things:

- what people say about the Council
- what the Council says about itself
- how actions and behaviours reflect what the Council stands for.

CURRENT ROLE OF THE COMMUNICATIONS UNIT

4.4 The role of the Communications Team is currently to deliver the Communications Strategy and to ensure that an effective programme of corporate communication is in place. The Team provides advice on a wide range of communications issues and supports other officers in particular within regeneration and communities to form effective communication plans to deliver high quality communications. Their role covers the following broad areas:

- **Strategic Communications:** Formulating the communications strategy and providing strategic communications advice.
- **Reputation Management and Public Relations:** Advising on the public relations implications of Council decisions on our stakeholders, providing crisis communication support and emergency planning communications and advising on the communication implications of ‘sensitive’ situations or public criticism of the council.
- **Branding support:** Overseeing corporate identity guidelines, providing corporate identity templates and toolkits for staff, advising on appropriate use of partnership logos and branding, commissioning of corporate photography and providing access to a photography library.
- **Communications Projects:** Delivering communications support to key projects.
- **Media Relations:** Advising colleagues how to use the media, explaining the council’s work to the media and awareness affecting the council, developing and maintaining contacts with key journalists, preparing press releases and briefings on council activities and issues, ranging media interviews, briefings and press conferences, providing a media enquiries service – answering and responding to media enquiries, monitoring the local press, maintaining a media guidelines booklet, encouraging staff to generate their own publicity.
- **Internal communications:** Producing Grapevine, sending Daily Message, Collating Team Briefing.
- **Marketing:** Commissioning marketing materials and signposting colleagues to external suppliers, commissioning corporate printed materials that comply with corporate standards including newsletters, booklets, leaflets, flyers, strategies, posters, procuring branded goods, providing advertising advice and ensuring that adverts meet corporate guidelines, a devising on effective written communication and responding to copy-writing requests, providing a corporate exhibition kit and display material, updating the news section of the website, promoting the Council and its services through social media e.g. Facebook and Twitter, commissioning professional graphic design services and professional photography.

FUTURE COMMUNICATION NEEDS OF THE COUNCIL

- 4.5 The purpose of this report is to consider the future communication needs of the Council in light of the existing strategy and consider what is affordable in the light of the Medium Term Financial Strategy this will inform the development of a new strategy.
- 4.6 Reference is often made to public relations or communication, which are broadly the same thing. Communication tends to be a broad umbrella term covering a number of specific disciplines – one of which is often Public Relations. The Institute of Public Relations (IPR) states: ‘Public Relations practice is the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and it’s public’. Whilst

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the Public Relations Consultants Association says that Public Relations is all about reputation. It's the result of what you do, what you say, and what others say about you. It is used to gain trust and understanding between an organisation and its various publics - whether that's employees, customers, investors, the local community - or all of those stakeholder groups. With Communications, the focus tends to be on what the organisational message is and how it will be communicated effectively to achieve organisational objectives.

The existing Communications Team currently use a number of different communication channels to get the message across the primary methods are as detailed below:

- Reactive Media Enquiries – The Council receives approximately 450 enquiries a year.
- Proactive Press Releases – The Council issues approximately 160 a year, a challenge is that the media may choose not to print a release, what is appealing to officers and Members may not appeal to the local press.
- Advertising – The Council advertises in a range of media and has a spend of about £20k a year.
- A Council Newsletter – The Council issues a Council News letter which costs £5,500 per edition.
- Council Website – The Website is an efficient way to communicate but not accessible to all.
- Social Media – The Council has established a social media site twitter and this is a positive way to engage younger audiences.
- Posters and Community Notice boards – Maintained by the Communities Team, they promote activities which are in the interest in the Community e.g. Council meetings and events but also Community events and activities.
- Daily Message – a quick simple way to get a message to employees and Members, on average 600 are issued a year.
- Team Brief – Key Corporate messages, produced monthly.
- Grapevine – Staff newsletter produced three times a year.
- Staff notice boards – Updated regularly with corporate messages and help to celebrate success.
- Council leaflets – Portable information for customers, on average 30 a year are produced.
- A to Z of Council Services – An effective way to inform Customers in relation to Council Services, which costs £5,000 a year plus distribution.

Research conducted by MORI in 2009 for the Local Government Association found that the majority of residents (55%) value a local 'A-Z of services' as the most useful form of council publicity. This is followed by the council website (40%) and council tax leaflets (38%). Newspapers are valued by just one in three residents (36%) (MORI, *Business Case for the Reputation Project: Research study conducted for the LGA*, January 2006, p.21).

BVPI Household Survey 2007

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Figure 31: Main source used to find out about Rossendale Council

	Number	Percent
Local media (newspapers, television, radio)	564	37.8
Information provided by the Council (newspaper/leaflets etc)	376	25.2
Council website/internet	81	5.4
From local Councillor	15	1.0
Direct contact with the Council	78	5.2
Word of mouth (e.g. family or friends)	165	11.0
Other source	181	12.1
None	14	1.0
Don't know	19	1.3
total	1493	

KEY COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

4.7 There are a number of key challenges in relation to the existing communication function including:

- A need to review the mechanism for press releases, currently the majority are written by the communications team, they may be requested in an ad hoc manner, there may be little press interest in the story and there is little priority given to their content for signing off.
- There is a need to review the training requirements for service areas to build capacity and confidence in relation to dealing with communication issues.
- A need to share learning in relation to what is a good news story and what will be of interest to the media.
- A need for service areas to plan their communication in advance and link in with the communications team as appropriate.
- Create ownership of communication issues within service areas.
- A need to agree a mechanism for prioritising the Communication Teams areas of focus linked to outcomes.
- A need to prioritise the updating of content on the web and confirm responsibilities in relation to the web.
- A need to review Rossendale Alive in light of the medium term financial strategy, and consider:
 - Cease publication
 - Reduce publication
 - Vary the method of production, however this may be influenced by government guidance on what can be published
 - Review the format and link into the Neighbourhood Forum and develop a form of community news.
 - Maintain publication as is.

COMMENTS FROM STATUTORY OFFICERS:

5. SECTION 151 OFFICER

- 5.1 The People and Policy Team have a financial savings target in line with the medium term financial strategy any reduction in costs as a consequence of the strategy would go towards those targets.

6. MONITORING OFFICER

- 6.1 No legal implications arising from the report

7. HEAD OF PEOPLE AND POLICY (ON BEHALF OF THE HEAD OF PAID SERVICE)

- 7.1 No Human resources Implications at this stage

8. CONCLUSION

It is now timely to review the current performance and feedback in relation to the current communication methods the Council utilises to assess their effectiveness and if they provide value for money. The linkages between customer satisfaction and an appropriate and effective communication strategy are proven. However evidence is that this must be under pinned by what people say about the Council in terms of what the Council says about itself and how actions and behaviours reflect what the Council stands for. The role of the Communications Team is only one element in improving the reputation and the satisfaction of Council Services by residents.

9. RECOMMENDATION

- 9.1 Members are asked to note the content of the report in relation to the linkages between Council reputation and customer satisfaction and Council reputation.
- 9.2 Members are asked for their views in relation to how the Council communicates with the public so these can influence the development of the Communication Strategy
- 9.3 Members are asked to contribute their views in relation to the current media utilised to communicate with the public including Rossendale Alive.

10. CONSULTATION CARRIED OUT

- 10.1 Communications Team, Management Team, Portfolio Holder

11. COMMUNITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Is a Community Impact Assessment required No

Is a Community Impact Assessment attached No

12. BIODIVERSITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Is a Biodiversity Impact Assessment required No

Is a Biodiversity Impact Assessment attached No

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No background papers

Appendix A

Feedback on previous member consultation

Members were asked about their views on what the Communications Objective should be set for the Communications Strategy – scoring each of the suggested priorities out of 10. Based on the feedback provided from members the priorities below are shown in rank order.

Communications Objectives (listed in rank order)	Score
To raise awareness of what the Council does, the services it provides and how to access them, so as to maximise service take-up, increase the number of people who feel that the Council keeps them informed and have a positive impact on customer satisfaction.	99
To encourage the provision of timely and relevant information to Councillors to assist them in fulfilling their Community Leadership role and help them to become more effective ambassadors for the Council.	95
To promote a positive image of Rossendale as a great place to live, work and visit in line with the Rossendale Alive Sustainable Community Strategy.	94
To promote the consultation opportunities provided to our communities and stakeholders to engage with and influence council priorities, policies, services and decisions and demonstrate that the Council listens to local people.	91
To improve the Council's reputation by helping stakeholders to gain a greater understanding of our priorities and achievements, the decisions we make and the reasons why, including explaining the challenges and limitations we face.	89
To maximise our influence with the local media, encouraging them to publicise the Council's positive achievements and to give fair, accurate and balanced coverage to issues where the Council is being criticised.	88
To facilitate inclusive communications with minority and 'hard to reach' groups in Rossendale and council services that are accessible to the whole community.	87
To demonstrate that what the Council is doing is relevant to local people and addresses the aspirations and needs of our community including the need to provide value for money services.	87
To facilitate effective two way dialogue with council employees and ensure that employees are informed of corporate information and messages in a timely and appropriate way so that they can be effective advocates for the Council.	86
To build a strong brand for the Council, ensuring that our corporate identity is used consistently and appropriately throughout the organisation and clearly linked to the services we provide.	79

Councillors were also asked to consider what they considered to be the most important core activities for the Communication Team – scoring each of the suggested activities out of 10. Based on the feedback provided from members the following core activities are shown in rank order.

Core activity (listed in rank order)	Total Score
Helping the Council to respond appropriately to sensitive and challenging situations	95
Updating news on the website	92
Developing communications strategies and providing advice	87
Supporting colleagues to write interesting and engaging information written in 'Plain English'	87
Providing communications support to key projects in the Corporate Plan	86
Media – providing a media enquiries service and issuing press releases	85
Internal communications - Daily Message, Team Briefing and Grapevine	83
Marketing (commissioning and approving all advertising, branded goods, printed materials, exhibition and display materials and graphic panels)	80
Publications (newsletters, booklets, leaflets, flyers, strategies, posters)	80
Overseeing corporate identity, correct logo usage and photography	73

Members were asked which areas of communication they would like to see more resources devoted to.

Main areas of communication activity for more resources	Tally responses out of 10
Website	6
Marketing	5
Strategic communications	4
Media Relations	4
Publications	3
Reputation Management	2
Internal communications	2
Communications projects	1
Branding support	0
Copywriting support	0

Main areas of communication activity for fewer resources	Tally responses out of 10
Copywriting support	9
Reputation Management	5
Branding support	4
Media Relations	3
Publications	3
Strategic communications	1
Internal communications	1
Website	1
Communications projects	0
Marketing	0

Members were then asked about various marketing activities where additional resources should be deployed and where fewer resources should be deployed. The results are as follows.

	Tally responses out of 10
Marketing - More resources	
Helping colleagues produce basic publicity materials which look good and are consistent	5
Working with graphic designers to create attractive publications e.g. newsletters, booklets,	3
Helping colleagues spend their marketing budgets wisely	3
Approving council publicity materials	1
Advising colleagues on effective advertising	1
Advising on effective written communication	1
leaflets, flyers, strategies, posters	0
Photography to promote council services and achievements	0
Providing banners and displays for events	0
Supporting the development of award bids and entries	0

	Tally responses out of 10
Marketing - Fewer resources	
Advising on effective written communication	5
Providing banners and displays for events	3
Supporting the development of award bids and entries	2
Working with graphic designers to create attractive publications e.g. newsletters, booklets,	1

Helping colleagues produce basic publicity materials which look good and are consistent	1
Photography to promote council services and achievements	1
Approving council publicity materials	1
Advising colleagues on effective advertising	1
leaflets, flyers, strategies, posters	0
Helping colleagues spend their marketing budgets wisely	0

Members were asked about the Council's media relations activity and which types of activity they would like to see more resources used on and activities they wanted fewer resources to be used.

Media - more resources	Total Score (10)
Encouraging colleagues to identify good news stories	7
Providing a central media enquiries service and a log of all media enquiries	6
Getting colleagues to respond to media enquiries within set deadlines	4
Coordinating a media response to 'sensitive' situations to protect our reputation	4
Helping journalists even if their enquiry is not about council business	1
Monitoring the local media for coverage of the Council	1
Persuading the local media to print corrections and apologies	1
Maintaining a media guidelines publication	0
Media training and informal media coaching	0
Evaluating the quality of the media coverage achieved	0

Less Resources	Total Score (10)
Helping journalists even if their enquiry is not about council business	6
Maintaining a media guidelines publication	3
Media training and informal media coaching	3
Monitoring the local media for coverage of the Council	3
Evaluating the quality of the media coverage achieved	3
Persuading the local media to print corrections and apologies	2
Encouraging colleagues to identify good news stories	1
Getting colleagues to respond to media enquiries within set deadlines	1
Coordinating a media response to 'sensitive' situations to protect our reputation	1
Providing a central media enquiries service and a log of all media enquiries	0

Members were asked about various activities which would help the Communication team to add value. As the following table shows the all of these measures attracted positive support (calculated by taking the number who agree and subtracting the number who disagree with each statement).

Adding Value	Agree	Disagree	Net index
More time delivering communications activity rather than producing strategies and planning for scenarios that may never happen.	8	1	7
More time spent promoting proactive 'good' news about the Council rather than reacting and responding to 'bad' news or criticism of the Council.	7	1	6
More focus on helping colleagues to improve their written materials rather than writing things for them.	6	2	4
More time encouraging service heads to identify and write good news stories	6	2	4
More focus on helping colleagues to do their own communications rather than doing everything centrally e.g. advice about how to write press releases, how to arrange a photo opportunity, advice on writing communication plans and help with commissioning publications and publicity.	5	3	2

Appendix B

The Pros and Cons of the media used by the Communications Team

External Communications

Activity and Description	Pros	Cons
<p>Reactive Media Enquiries The council receives approximately 450 media enquiries per year. These are centrally logged and responses are co-ordinated across the council.</p>	<p>Having a centralised system to log and respond to press enquires helps to ensure that the council responds in a corporate way (and that individual departments do not issue contradictory statements)</p>	<p>Reactive rather than proactive. Time consuming. Not time spent communicating what we want to say. Slow process of decision making within the council hampers and effective response within media deadlines.</p>
<p>Proactive Media Releases The council issues approximately 160 press releases per year. These focus on council achievements, new initiative, key projects, public information and examples of how the council is making a difference in the community.</p>	<p>Many people rely on local newspapers and local radio to find out what is happening locally and what the council is doing. Local media are a great way to get information out to a mass audience quickly and cheaply.</p>	<p>The council has no control over what is written. Not all press releases will be used by the local media. Not everyone reads local papers or listens to local radio.</p>
<p>Advertising The council advertises in a range of media and has an advertising spend of c£20,000 per year.</p>	<p>Advertising provides an opportunity to guarantee that promotional messages are carried by local media. Advertising can be targeted at particular audiences. Through effective design, adverts are more likely to capture people's attention than editorial coverage.</p>	<p>Advertising is expensive. The number of people receiving an advertising message is proportional to the amount spent on advertising.</p>
<p>Rossendale Alive newsletter An 8 page publication produced three times a year at a cost of Approx £5,500 per edition sent to</p>	<p>The only publication targeting 100% coverage of the borough. The only opportunity the council has</p>	<p>A significant budgetary expense and considerable amount of staff time producing it.</p>

30,000 homes in the borough.	to communicate its key messages in an 'unfiltered' way to all residents in the borough. Coverage is given to issues that would not normally be given coverage on local media. The only publication providing contact details for every local councilor directly into people's homes.	
Visual branding and signage Signage on council properties, land, regeneration projects, vehicles and operational staff	Helps to make the link between the council and the services it provides and what it achieves. Simple but very effective if done consistently.	Not all council services are consistently badged. Signage can be costly and considered wasteful. Limited ability to communicate complex/detailed messages
Corporate stationery	Simple but very effective to communicate short corporate messages e.g. 'putting customers first' positive about disabled symbol etc	Lack of consistency across the council. Limited ability to communicate complex/detailed messages
Corporate exhibition and display material	High profile and eye catching. Messages can be targeted at a specific audience attending an event or conference. People engage with a strong visual presence.	Many people never get to see the materials or are not targeted. Limited ability to communicate complex/detailed messages. Expensive if materials need to be regularly refreshed.
Branded goods and giveaways	A simple but effective way to raise the council's profile and useful when attending community events.	Not necessarily a priority when other budgets are being cut.
Council Website	Cheap form of communication. Easy and quick to update. Complex information and messages can be communicated as well as more visual	Not everyone has access to the internet. Use of web for transactions purposes is still relatively low. Customers have to be interested enough to visit the site. Quality control

	communications.	issues resulting from decentralised content responsibilities.
Social Media e.g. Facebook and Twitter	Cheap form of targeted communication. Easy and quick to update. Enable 2-way conversations to take place with residents. Appeals to younger residents.	Council has to be willing to act of the feedback provided. Danger of over reliance on new technology. Not everyone will want to use it and not everyone has access. More informal in style and tone.
Posters and Community Notice boards	Relative cheap to produce. Good for specific services and time bound initiatives e.g. meetings. Good quality graphic design makes posters appealing to look at.	A bit 'hit and miss' as not everyone reads notice boards.
Information leaflets and booklets on Council services	Portable – something that customers can take away with them. Flexible in terms of targeting and level of information provided. Require a good use of graphic and photography to be appealing to readers and need to be written in plain English.	Not everyone can read. Professionally designed and printed material are not cheap and internally printed material are not professional enough. Some leaflets are not appealing to read and are not in plain English. Can easily become out of date.
A to Z of Council Services	An effective way to highlight the wide range of council services provided. Able to reach every household. Helps to make council services more accessible. Portable.	Cost of production estimated at £9k every 2 years. Publication can easily become out of date. Fewer people use printed directories and more use the internet to find contact numbers. Some people are just happy to call the switchboard rather than using direct lines.
Flyers	A quick and effective way to raise awareness about a specific event of time bound initiative e.g. a public meeting. Relatively cheap to produce. Good for geographic targeting.	Often end up in the bin. Delivery issues.
Case studies - web based and in other	An in-depth way for the council to communicate its	Time consuming. Limited audience.

publications not produced by the Council	achievements and the impact the council has on improving people's lives. Good for raising the Council's profile nationally.	
Award entries e.g. Local Government Chronicle Awards	Good for staff morale and recruitment. Help to raise the council's profile nationally.	Time consuming. Limited audience. Not valued by local people.

Internal Communications

Activity and Description	Pros	Cons
Daily Message email The council sends out around 600 messages per year.	Quick and Cheap	Not sent directly to manual/non office based workers. Not always read by recipients.
Team Briefing Key Corporate messages together with an update on the main areas of focus within specific teams – produced monthly	Relatively quick to produce. Ensures that all staff receive the same messages in a narrow time frame. An opportunity for staff to ask questions and receive feedback.	Not all service areas are consistent in delivering the brief. Not all service areas contribute regularly to the brief. Not always timely in terms of fast moving decisions.
Grapevine Staff Newsletter Grapevine is produced three times per year.	Highly regarded by staff. A good mixture of corporate news and softer human interest focus. Visually appealing. Relatively cheap to produce (apart from staff time).	Current frequency means it is not always timely for breaking important corporate news. Time consuming to produce.
Staff Notice boards – Notice boards are updated regularly to communicate important corporate messages and to help the council celebrate success.	Cheap, effective and inclusive. Good graphic design can make corporate information more appealing. Easy to update.	Not everyone reads them. Staff time involved in updating them.

Evaluation of Rossendale Alive

Members were asked a range of questions about the Rossendale Alive newsletter. Most of these questions were also posed to the general public through the Council's Culture and Leisure Survey in 2009. These responses are included alongside the responses of members.

Rossendale Alive newsletter - In general, do you think the articles are useful for local people?

	Councillor views	General Public's views
<i>Mostly</i>	1	23.20%
<i>Sometimes</i>	7	57.20%
<i>Never</i>	0	7.30%
<i>Don't know</i>	0	12.40%

Rossendale Alive newsletter - In general, do you think the newsletter helps local people to access Council services?

	Councillor views	General Public's views
<i>Mostly</i>	2	16.90%
<i>Sometimes</i>	5	48.60%
<i>Never</i>	2	17.10%
<i>Don't know</i>	0	17.30%

Rossendale Alive newsletter - In general, do you think the newsletter helps local people to find out about local events?

	Councillor views	General Public's views
<i>Mostly</i>	0	16.30%
<i>Sometimes</i>	6	59.40%
<i>Never</i>	2	10.20%
<i>Don't know</i>	0	14.00%

Rossendale Alive newsletter – The newsletter is published three times a year. Is this...

	Councillor views	General Public's views
About right	4	54.40%
Not often enough	3	35.10%
Too often	1	4.10%
Don't know	1	6.40%

**Rossendale Alive newsletter -
The newsletter currently has 8
pages. Is this...**

Councillor views

**General Public's
views**

Too many	2	4.30%
About right	6	69.50%
Not enough	0	17.30%
Don't know	1	8.90%

**Rossendale Alive newsletter –
To what extent, if at all, do you feel
that the newsletter provides good
value for money?**

Councillor views

**General Public's
views**

Very good value	1	11.50%
Good value	0	28.30%
Reasonable value	5	40.40%
Poor value	0	7.70%
Very poor value	1	3.90%
Don't know	1	8.20%

**Rossendale Alive newsletter –
Should the Council continue to
produce the newsletter?**

Councillor views

**General Public's
views**

Yes	6
no	0
don't know	1

**Rossendale Alive newsletter –
Should we consider changing the
title of the newsletter?**

Councillor views

No change (Rossendale Alive)	5
Pride in Rossendale	0
Rossendale News	1
Pride in the valley	0
Others (Valley News)	1

Finally, Members were asked if there were any changes they would like to see in the newsletter e.g. more photographs or longer articles? The following comments were made.

- Encourage debate through it
- Fewer photos of members and more of council staff
- Less spin
- Less good news propaganda.

4.2 More two way dialogue - ask for com