

REPORT TO CABINET

REPORT OF: CORPORATE DIRECTOR (COMMUNITY SERVICES)

REPORT NO. DCS 39

DATE: 6 FEBRUARY 2006

TITLE:	COMMUNICATIONS WORK PROGRAMME
FORWARD PLAN ITEM:	N/A
DATE WHEN FIRST APPEARED IN FORWARD PLAN:	N/A
KEY DECISION OR POLICY FRAMEWORK PROPOSAL:	NON-KEY DECISION

COUNCIL AIMS/PORTFOLIO HOLDER NAME AND DESIGNATION:	COUNCILLOR PAUL CARPENTER - COMMUNICATIONS
CORPORATE PRIORITY:	A
CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS:	NONE
FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT IMPLICATIONS:	NONE Unless exempt, this report is a public document and available from the Council's website: www.southkesteven.gov.uk
BACKGROUND PAPERS:	COMMUNICATIONS ACTION PLAN

1. INTRODUCTION

The communications unit within South Kesteven District Council has the following long-term objective:

To position South Kesteven District Council as a leading and reputable public service organisation by ensuring fair, accurate, timely and accessible representation of its role, decisions and activities to a variety of audiences.

In line with this objective the communications unit has produced an interim communications work programme, concentrating on the period February – July 2006. The communications work programme sets out recommended key actions – both corporate and service-related-, based on nine council communication principles. These principles have been identified based on the factors as described in 2.

Background:

- ① Creating a recognisable brand identity*
- ② Building relationships of trust and confidence*
- ③ Communicating clear and consistent messages*
- ④ Responding to different audiences*
- ⑤ Establishing and maintaining effective communication channels*
- ⑥ Making communications fit for their purpose*
- ⑦ Making two-way internal communications a reality*
- ⑧ Investing properly in communications*
- ⑨ Measuring value for money.*

Please find the communications work programme attached.

2. BACKGROUND

Internal and external influences on the role of communications within SKDC

The following factors have contributed to the shaping of the role of communications within South Kesteven District Council:

- 1.1 In March 2004 the Audit Commission stated in its Comprehensive Performance Assessment report that internal communications within SKDC had been identified as an area of weakness. Good practice and learning were not shared systematically across the council, which led to the council not maximising its skills, knowledge and learning.
- 1.2 The residents survey, undertaken in 2005, makes references to the level of information residents receive. The following outcomes are quite significant and prove that further improvements are required:

Outcome 1

Just over three fifths (61.9%) thought that the council keeps them fairly or very well informed, but nearly a third disagreed.

Outcome 2

765 respondents (75.2%) were proud of their local community. A lower number – 444 (47.8%) were proud of their council.

- 1.3 The staff satisfaction survey, held in 2005, shows that, although, compared to the results from the staff satisfaction survey 2003, outcomes in 2005 have generally improved, there is still a significant discrepancy between information demand and supply, which the council needs to address through communications strategies.

The following outcomes are significant and have a direct impact on the role of communications within South Kesteven District Council:

Outcome 1

Those agreeing with the statement "I feel well informed" has increased from 23.8% in 2003 to 35.5% in 2005.

Outcome 2

More staff know what the Council's vision is. 69.5% of respondents in 2005 compared to 41.2% in 2003 agreed with this statement.

Outcome 3

The Corporate Management Team clearly explains decisions taken". 30.2 % of respondents agreed with this statement in 2005, compared to 16.6% in 2003.

Outcome 4

There has been a fall off in the percentages of respondents who feel that their manager clearly explains how council plans will affect them. In 2005, 33.7% agreed with this statement, compared to 42.6% in 2003.

- 1.4 With the appointment of a public relations manager (March 2005) and communications manager (October 2005) the council now has a dedicated communications unit in place, which has a responsibility for ensuring fair, accurate, timely and accessible representation of the council's role, decisions and activities to a variety of audiences. Activities undertaken to date include:
 1. Vast improvement of media relationships
 2. Assessment of current external information material
 3. Revamped council's priorities, values and vision posters
 4. Qualitative research into current internal communications structures
 5. Incorporation of the role of the communications unit into the council's Emergency Peace Plan
 6. Performed advisory role in restructuring of the housing department
 7. Ensured equality and diversity principles and policies representation on website
 8. Internal promotion of the role of the communications unit
 9. Production and distribution of a third issue of SKtoday
 10. Production and distribution of a fourth and fifth issue of SKoop.
- 1.5 In 2005 the LGA, IDeA and MORI launched "the Local Government Reputation project" last year, in a joint effort to improve residents' perception of their council. Local councils are invited to sign up to this project, which provides a helpful framework for councils to review their current performance on communications, and sets out good practice suggestions that can help councils improve their structures. The project challenges councils to commit to core actions on communications and liveability that will raise a council's reputation and standing in the eyes of local communities.

If South Kesteven District Council decides to formally sign up to the

Local Government Reputation project, this would show a true commitment towards the development of effective communications structures, according to the framework as recommended by LGA, IDeA and MORI. This would be a positive step and would thus be recognised by Comprehensive Performance Assessments and other future performance assessments.

Please note that there are no financial consequences, nor will there be any formal assessments by Local Government Reputation project committees. It merely formalises a commitment to improving standards of communications with all target audiences involved, based on sharing good practice.

The LGA will be able to monitor progress and measure success in the standing and reputation of local government. In parallel, the LGA will be stepping up its media work with the aim of raising the profile at national level of the good work that councils do in their communities, as well as continuing to use media channels to support its lobbying work and also to highlight the pressure of resources within this area of local government.

1.6 On 17th October 2005 Ben Page, director of MORI (market and public opinion research agency) visited SKDC to present to councillors why communications is the key to an excellent council performance. MORI's research has clearly shown a strong link between residents' satisfaction with their council and how well the council keeps them informed. Along with environmental issues, communications is able to make the greatest impact on how people perceive their councils.

Findings from MORI research:

Key drivers:

- Perceived quality of services overall
- Perceived value for money
- Media coverage
- Direct communications
- District/county's performance (in two-tier) areas
- A clean, green and safe environment
- Positive experiences of contact with staff

- Initial, top of mind impressions are almost exclusively negative – though having had the opportunity to reflect on the role and range of tasks local government is involved in, respondents become (a little) more charitable

Recommended communications core actions include:

- Effective media management
- Provide an A-Z guide to council services
- Publish a regular council magazine/newspaper
- Branding – effective and consistent linkage of council brand to community services
- Good internal communications

1.7 At the council meeting held on 27th October 2005 councillors promoted communications to an 'A' priority category. Communications is an issue arising from aligning the council's current priorities alongside the LSPs.

1.8 Internal and external pressures on local councils are constantly changing. Factors such as:

1. the restructuring of councils
2. future changes in council performance assessment
3. SKDC – internal restructuring

will have a fundamental impact on the role of communications within the council. Communicating change and the support required to implement change demands that the role of communications is integrated on all levels throughout the organisation.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. For cabinet members to endorse the communications work programme.
2. For cabinet members to actively promote the role of communications and the communications unit to all target audiences, both internally and externally.
3. For cabinet to formally sign up to the Local Government Reputation project.

(If the cabinet decides in favour of the Local Government Reputation project a form should be completed on the LGA website.)

4. DETAILS OF COMMUNICATIONS WORK PROGRAMME

The communications work programme as per attached has been developed in accordance with the aforementioned factors and developments, and sets out the work programme for the communications unit for the 6-month period of February – July 2006.

This programme is an integral part of the communications unit's service plan for 2006 - 2008, and focuses on establishing internal and external communications structures, or, where already established, improving these structures. Please note that activities identified in the communications work programme (and those activities already undertaken) are consistent with good practice as identified by the Local Government Reputation project.

Overall the communications unit makes a major contribution to all areas of council work at an operational, strategic and political level.

Please note that this communications work programme will be reviewed in 6 months time, after the results of the residents survey 2006 and the staff survey 2006 have been analysed. The reviewed programme will be part of the future communications strategy.

5. CONTACT OFFICER

Communications unit
Ellen W. Breur – Communications manager
Tel 01476 40 61 27
Mobile 07740 08 12 73
e.breur@southkesteven.gov.uk