

REPORT TO CABINET

Title: **COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY**

Date: 22 October 2009

Member Reporting: Councillor Liam Maxwell

Contact Officer(s): Andrew Elkington, Head of Policy and Performance
Anne Dackombe, Communications and Marketing Manager

Wards affected: All

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1.1 The Communications Strategy provides a focus and framework for the Royal Borough's communications activity and reflects the Council's commitment to effective, timely and relevant communications with its residents and staff. The strategy, which will be reviewed annually, includes an immediate action plan for ensuring the structures are in place to take forward focused, targeted communications activity in line with Members' commitment to take account of residents' views.
- 1.1.2 The strategy acknowledges the changing nature of communications, the differing ways that people expect to receive information through new technology and the increased speeds involved in the movement of information. It seeks to include a number of new ways of communicating with residents.

2. RECOMMENDATION: That the Communications Strategy and action plan be approved.

What will be different for residents as a result of this decision?
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Residents will be kept informed about how the Council is working on their behalf and how council taxpayers' money is being used to provide the value-for-money services that residents have said they want and need.
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3. SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 3.1.1 The Council is committed to putting residents first in everything it does. Good communications are of paramount importance if the Council is to let people know how it is working to provide the services they want and need and about the Council's ambitions for the future.
- 3.1.2 The Communications Strategy provides a focus and framework for communications activity and will bring about continually improving standards.

- 3.1.3 The strategy is a key part of the Council's statutory Duty to Involve (Local Government and Involvement in Local Health Act 2007), strengthening democratic accountability, setting a clear direction for the way the Council communicates its daily business and advancing resident and stakeholder involvement in creating and delivering our ambitions for the future.
- 3.1.4 The strategy complements the recently-agreed Community Consultation and Engagement Framework, which will inform communications about matters on which residents have given their views and have influenced policy and decision making. This will enable the Council to structure its communications activity in response to residents' priorities.
- 3.1.5 Building on the existing press and public relations base, the strategy will allow the Council to develop a broad communications service that has proactive and strategic communications at its core. It plots the course for reviewing current methods of communications, plans for the introduction of new methods and channels (including web-based and social media/forums) and will support communications excellence across the authority.
- 3.1.6 The strategy contributes to the Council's strategic framework and seeks to build on formal relationships with partner organisations developed through the Community Partnership.
- 3.1.7 There is a strong body of evidence that suggests residents' satisfaction rates with their local council are directly linked to how that council communicates with them (LGA - The Key Drivers of Resident Satisfaction with Councils, November 2008). Those councils that are good at communicating tend to have better satisfaction rates – residents feel more informed about what councils are doing with their money.
- 3.1.8 The strategy recognises the significant influence that the media has on residents' perceptions and seeks to build on the current good relations between the Royal Borough and the media, as well as forging new relations with both national and professional media.
- 3.1.9 Recognising the key role of elected members in the development of effective communications, the strategy highlights how they are in a unique position to further council communications and channel valuable local feedback about services for their continued improvement and development. This strategy will also enable members to target communications at specific groups of residents and should, together with the Consultation and Engagement Framework, provide information about the effects of specific policies. The availability of real-time information will in turn enable a more focused approach to service delivery and innovation in a period of increasingly restricted finance across the public sector.
- 3.1.10 The strategy is not just about outward-facing communications. It recognises the importance of effective interaction with employees. Gaining the enthusiastic participation of staff is crucial to the future health of the authority. The strategy aims to build on existing internal communication good practice and drive forward new ways of engaging with staff to ensure they are educated and informed about – and involved in – everything the Council does so they are motivated and effective ambassadors for the organisation and its services.

3.1.11 Relevant feedback mechanisms will be used to judge the success of campaigns and the progress of the overall strategy, i.e. the residents' survey.

3.1.12 The strategy will be a flexible working document, refreshed on an annual basis but capable of incorporating new elements at any stage.

4. OPTIONS AVAILABLE AND RISK ASSESSMENT

4.1 Options

	Option	Comments	Financial Implications
1.	Do nothing Not recommended	Communications will be provided on an ad hoc and unplanned basis without corporate overview and direction	Communications are funded by the individual services. Resources for communications may not be used in the most appropriate and effective ways.
2.	Adopt the new Communications Strategy and action plan Recommended option	This will: put effective communications at the heart of service planning; ensure the Council gives clear, timely and relevant information to its residents and customers; provide residents with information about how they can be involved in Council policy and decision-making; encourage feedback and involvement; enable two-way communication with staff	Budgets for communications are held by individual services. The adoption of the strategy will, however, ensure a more strategic approach, eliminate duplication and ultimately enable scarce resources to be used more effectively

4.2 Risk assessment

The risk of not implementing the Communications Strategy would mean an uncoordinated, disparate approach which would result in fragmented messaging that would not give residents access to the information they need to enable them to make informed choices or to make the best use of Council services. It would also fail to make best use of scarce resources, potentially resulting in unnecessary duplication of communications activity.

5. CONSULTATIONS CARRIED OUT

5.1.1 The draft communications strategy was circulated to partner organisations for their

comments but none were received.

6. COMMENTS FROM THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

6.1 The Panel endorsed the Communications Strategy, subject to the following comments/suggested amendments:

- Paragraph 8: Target Audience - The list to include MEPs
- The Panel welcomed the assurances given that there would be no incremental increase in operating expenditure arising from the implementation of the activities outlined in the action plan, although it was noted that officers from within the Directorate would assist the Communications Team from time to time to progress individual projects.
- Concerns was expressed at the additional burden that was likely to fall on the Corporate Communications Team, in particular the Corporate Communications and Marketing Manager, that would arise from the successful implementation of a number of the actions, such as the establishment of Directorate communications champions.
- The Strategy appeared to be weighted towards the communication tools and activities and did not adequately deal with the content of what was being communicated. The Strategy should be amended to redress that balance.
- It was considered that local authorities should not be at the leading edge of using new technologies and communication tools and that Cabinet should ensure and be satisfied that the communication channels used were considered appropriate and relevant

7. IMPLICATIONS

Financial	Legal	Human Rights Act	Planning	Sustainable Development	Diversity & Equality
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Background Papers: None

