

CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

Annual Review

April 2007 – March 2008

Background

Following the review of communications two years ago, it was agreed that reports be submitted to Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on the implementation of the communication review recommendations and other communications activity. The committee received a report in September on the first six months of the year. This report is a review of the past year and sets out the challenges of the year ahead. Considerable progress continues to be made on all fronts.

Efficiencies

- The introduction of a Strategic Approach to Publications policy, following on from the appointment of an in-house graphic designer, has resulted in savings of more than £200,000 per year.
- The decision by council to approve the self financing of City Matters by accepting advertising is saving the council £140,000 per year, while producing the A-Z of services, due to be published in June, in the same way will save around £35,000.
- The implementation of the review of advertising, aimed at developing a council-wide advertising policy with the focus on efficiency and effectiveness, is expected to realise savings for the council of between £250k and £450k
- A further investment in our graphic design service would result in savings of between £100k and £200k, depending on whether we deployed a further one or two graphic designers.

Publications and new media

1.1 Corporate Identity Policy

The corporate identity guidelines, which were introduced as policy in February 2007 have been updated and are available on the intranet and website. In the last year, we have strengthened our brand by providing clear guidelines both internally and externally.

We need to consider the introduction of the new Belfast brand and how we work with it.

In the longer term, we need to consider whether or not it would be appropriate to introduce a new Belfast City Council brand with the anticipated emergence of a new organisation with additional powers covering possibly a larger geographical area as a result of the Review of Public Administration. That is an issue we will ask the committee to consider sometime in the future.

1.2 Writing style guide

We are reinforcing our 'one council approach' by producing an online writing style guide, with the aim of achieving commonality of terminology and grammar. We aim to make this available in June 2008.

1.3 City Matters

Policy and Resources Committee agreed to using advertising to cover the costs of producing and distributing City Matters on a permanent basis (at a saving to the ratepayer of £138,400 on the next financial year). This follows the success of the pilot scheme for the December 2007 and March 2008 editions. The two year tender has been awarded to BPC Magazines.

The pilot exercise was restricted to public sector advertising, but committee agreed on 14 December, that we can seek advertising from private sector companies as long as their activities are in line with council priorities or have a public sector focus.

As part of the BPC contract, City Matters will be delivered as addressed mail (to the occupier) through Royal Mail. We aim for a delivery standard of at least 85% of all residents. This is supported by copies being sent to public areas, like libraries and surgery waiting rooms.

The spring 2008 edition was packaged in plastic but we are currently looking into environmentally-friendly options such as:

- biodegradable plastic, and
- tabbing (where the address is printed onto the back cover and the magazine is sealed with a recyclable sticker).

City Matters has ABC registration status (approved in January 2008) which confirms the circulation of the publication for potential advertisers.

City Matters was awarded Silver at the Chartered Institute of Public Relations Pride Awards for Best Newsletter.

Future work:

- City Matters to be increased to six editions per year in 2009.
- As a result, departments and sections to make more use City Matters to promote their activities and further reduce the number of departmental publications.
- Departments are encouraged to support City Matters in advertising, instead of using less targeted publications, newspapers and billboards.
- Move towards the development of City Matters as a public service magazine in conjunction with other public service providers, with the possibility of increasing revenue for the council.

1.4 A-Z directory of council services

An A-Z directory of council services will be published in June and distributed with City Matters. This is an annual publication, which will also be paid for through advertising at no cost.

1.5 Graphic Design

A total of 400 graphic design jobs were carried out on behalf of the council in the past year. A total of 120 were dealt with by our in-house graphic designer and would have cost £100,000 if they had been outsourced. As the graphic designer is only working on 30 per cent of this work, it is clear that further substantial savings could be achieved by strengthening that part of our service.

Due to changes in our financial procedures with the introduction of SAP, we only have figures for the past six months. The spend for the six month period on graphic design alone is around £140,000 and that figure can be doubled for the year to almost £300,000. The deployment of a second graphic designer would ensure further efficiencies for the council in the region of another £100,000 while two graphic designers would save us up to £200,000 per year.

We currently send 70 per cent of our design jobs to outside agencies, who charge on average £55 per hour.

Examples of what it costs to use an external designer are:

- Giant's Park - £8,230 (creative concept and artwork for entire promotional campaign).
- World Trade Centre - £5,587.50 (logo, brochure, eshot, stationery)
- New design for the Belfast Zoo - £30,000 (logo, style guide, signage, stationery and web design)
- Boost design costs (2007-08) £10,380.75

These are only a few of the projects which were sent out to design agencies. Even by bringing these four in-house by employing an additional graphic designer would realise further efficiency savings.

The advantages of having in-house designers are not only financial, but gives us greater control of our corporate identity.

Our designer currently looks for the most competitive print contracts on a job by job basis. It is our intention to set up a select list of both designers and printers before March 2009. This will allow us to negotiate more efficient contracts and reduce the number of suppliers we currently use.

1.6 Website

More than 1 million people visited the website in 2007. It currently attracts a quarter of all council website traffic in Northern Ireland (source: SOCITM Better Connected 2008). In March 2008, over 200,000 people visited the site - a 185% increase from March 2007.

This increase is due to better maintenance, better usability and better integration with other communication tools, for example, using the web

address in press releases and in City Matters.

The Better Connected report 2008 (by SOCITM, Society of IT Managers) graded the website as 'transactional', an improvement on 2007's 'standard' ranking. We are the only council in Northern Ireland to achieve this grade.

The site was highlighted as an example of best or good practice in four categories:

- newsworthiness,
- resilience or security,
- use of plain English and
- visitor usage.

The monthly Site Morse reports assess the site for accessibility, function, performance and code quality. Our site was ranked 16 out of 463 UK local government websites in March 2008 and reached the top ten in November 2007. It achieved a silver award at the Chartered Institute of Public Relations Pride Awards in 2007 in the 'best website' category.

1.6.1 Current projects

- Main priority - continued improvement of main council website
- An improved minutes system will be added in April 2008 (ModernGov), making it easier for people to find out about councillors and decisions taken by the council.
- Developing online payment facility that will allow people to buy their bins online.
- New websites
 - (1) Belfast Waterfront site was launched in November 2007 - a ticketing system, allowing people to buy tickets online, will follow in April 2008.
 - (2) Belfast Zoo website which will launch in summer 2008 and feature videos, audio tracks and an online shop.
 - (3) Grove Wellbeing Centre is currently being developed and will launch in April 2008.

1.6.2 Future projects

(1) Content Management System

This system, which will give control of website content to departmental representatives, has been procured by ISB has been selected. Corporate Communications need to develop a training plan, to enable them to devolve content publishing to the departments. The system should be implemented in summer 2008.

(2) New website development

- Ulster Hall,
- Malone House and
- Belfast Castle

(3) Partnerships website development

- Tall Ships,
- Belfast Community Safety Partnership
- Get Home Safe.

Decisions are needed on who is responsible for these sites.

(4) More customer interaction

This includes adding more online forms (for example, booking a sports pitch or applying for a job) and payment facilities (buying a dog licence or organising a bulky waste collection).

Website promotion

We need to promote the services we provide online and encourage more people to interact with the council via the website. We are making significant strides already but more has to be done as the public survey suggested that only around 10 per cent of our ratepayer use the site. However, our own survey of those who visit the website would suggest of the 200,000 unique visitors last month, 60 per cent of them were residents of Belfast – the rest being people who used to live in the city but now live abroad, tourists and others with a range of interests in Belfast.

However, we need to increase awareness of the site and increase access to services on-line and we will now focus on promoting the website as a source of jobs and information on council and consider other ways of attracting visitors to the site.

1.7 New media and technologies (see Appendix 2)

There has been an increase in requests from departments for:

- email marketing,
- podcasts and
- blogs
- texting
- Social networking and for using websites like MySpace and YouTube.
- and other new channels of communications, like touchscreens.

We also receive proposals from organisations proposing initiatives big screen advertising in various location in the city and from local government television channels. The number of new initiatives will continue as communications is one of the fastest moving in terms of technology and we need to be in a position to consider taking advantage of any opportunities that will improve our communications effort.

We are currently researching the pros (new ways of communicating with ratepayers, saving money and paper) and cons (resourcing and inability to have full control of the council's image and reputation) of using these technologies and will be bringing a report to committee in the near future.

We will be proposing that a portion of the efficiencies that will be achieved, through the advertising review and possibly further graphic design activity in-house, should be directed towards developing new communications channels particularly to get information to hard-to-reach groups.

Media Relations

1.1 Proactive media

Media Relations Officers are assigned to departments and attend monthly committee meetings. This has resulted in a more proactive approach to media relations and there have been significant improvements in the coverage of the council's work and activities.

1.2 Media evaluation

We are in the process of introducing a new system into the section to enable us to provide more detailed information to members of coverage and that will happen in the current year. In the meantime, a snapshot of media coverage taken over a two week period recently showed that around 70 per cent of coverage on the council in the media is positive which contributes to a more positive image and improves our reputation.

In terms of the work of the section during the period, we issued more than 400 press releases and dealt with almost 2,000 media enquiries.

The following percentage figures relate to the number of press enquiries responded to within one working day:

Development – 95%
Health & Environmental – 90%
Parks & Leisure – 90%

1.3 Media Issues

Most departments are currently finalising their plans for 2008/9 and when completed these will provide a clearer picture of the media requirements for the incoming year. In the meantime, a number of major current issues and campaigns continue to be regularly highlighted in the media and responses issued as and when appropriate.

These include:

- anti-social behaviour projects,
- development of Grove Well Being Centre,
- waste management and anti-litter initiatives,
- recycling provision,
- regeneration and development of the evening economy,
- parks management plans.

Longer term it will be necessary to focus on major corporate issues and have plans to deal with the less positive implications of issues such as:

- the development of the North Foreshore,
- stadium proposal,
- local area working,
- older people's initiatives
- community planning,
- safer city strategy,
- city cemetery provision

1.4 Members/Spokespersons

In the promotion and support of council activities, the rule of political primacy applies and will members will be the main spokespersons of the council. On occasions that the media specifically ask for an officer to deal with detailed operational queries or when a member is unavailable, permission will be sought from the committee chairs for officers to do interviews.

1.5 Improved services for members

We are currently considering ways in which we can improve services for members in terms of media relations, especially through the use of new technology. In consultation with members, we will consider the following:

- a dedicated site on the intranet with links to daily council news digests.
- up to date news releases, current issues documents and relevant stories from the media, together with 'lines to take'.
- use of e mail alerts or text messaging to draw members' attention to relevant news issues or breaking stories referring them to an online facility such as one of those above and/or an officer contact number for more information.

1.6 Improved services for the media

During the past year, we have improved on-line services on our website for the media, including the introduction of:

- online news facility, updated twice daily, publishes all press releases issued by the council, together with supporting photographs for press use.
- RSS feeds, which deliver news updates to journalists each time the website is updated.

We are currently considering a number of further developments which could be implemented, to provide a more detailed service, or 'Media Centre', including:

- Notice of forthcoming events, such as council meetings, press launches, public events;
- A more comprehensive photographic library, featuring council buildings and services, Belfast landmarks, members, council events, etc.;

- More detailed information on members – e.g. biographies, contact telephone numbers;
- An interactive facility for journalists to contact the media relations office directly from the website, to request further information, interviews with members, etc.

Internal Communications

Progress is now being made towards improving internal communications across the organisation. Scoping work is now complete and action plan is now being finalised with initiatives to take us through the short and medium term. The main issues that will have to be communicated throughout the organisation will be in relation to the Corporate Plan, the Review of Public Administration and the Human Resources Strategy.

1.1 Internal communications plan

An internal communications plan that is being developed will take into account the current issues facing the council including the external forces, internal issues, organisational culture, results of the employee satisfaction survey and feedback from employees. Together this information provides the backdrop and context for the recommended communications framework and channels that need to be introduced to improve communication with employees. The paper will also set out the key messages and major communication themes that will be used to inform employees about the strategic direction that the council is taking to shape, develop and manage the city, what this means for employees and the role they will play.

Communication channels

While the internal communications plan is being developed the existing communication channels are being reviewed and improved. These include:

- The staff newsletter Intercom, which has now been increased to six times per year..
- The monthly core brief which reinforces business messages and provides staff with relevant corporate information.
- Staff are kept informed of council decisions that are relevant to them through an ebulletin which is sent out the day following the monthly council meeting.

Belnet

Work is underway to provide staff with an improved intranet as the current Belnet is out of date and is difficult to navigate and as a result is not highly regarded by staff or members. A mini review was held in February to check that the system would provide the correct information for employees, the information architecture has been prepared and content is being written. The internal communications manager is working with ISB to finalise a launch date that will tie with the pilot 'getting people connected' project where four council sites across the city are to get PCs and computer training is to be provided for staff.

Advertising

A review of advertising has been carried out and was approved by the council at its meeting on 1 April. The first step will be to appoint an Advertising Manager who will implement the recommendations that will result in efficiencies of between £250k and £450k through a reduction in advertising spend and an increase in revenue by maximising our assets, such as vehicles, facilities and publication, as places to advertise.

Conclusion

At the time of the review of communications, it was agreed that independent analysis of the review should be conducted two years down the line. It is proposed that review could be conducted now, with a view to:

- Assessing the return on the council's investment in communications two years ago and the performance of the Corporate Communications section;
- Identify areas to improve communications on behalf of the council, improve services to members and departments and consider further opportunities for making efficiencies.

Members/Officers Working Group

The Strategic Communications Group, with each of the political parties represented, has been set up and the first meeting has been held. The group will oversee strategic developments and consider a range of issues such as the recommendations of the review of advertising, the future development of City Matters, corporate identity issues, web developments, role of members in communications, internal communications with members, public and media access to council meetings. The group will also consider the image and reputation of the council, which is one of the priorities listed in the Value Creation Map.