

Report on impact of new Communications Service model

Introduction

The drivers for the changes made to the county council's approach to communications were improving quality, professionalism, planning, coordination, delivery and cost effectiveness. It was agreed that previous arrangements failed to deliver in this respect, with communications posts and functions being scattered throughout the organisation in different departments with no consistent way of working, little coordination of activity and a lack of both research and evaluation.

To address these challenges, in August 2010 the county council established a single communications service. It is responsible for advertising, design, e-communications, internal communications, marketing, media relations and print production. 75 posts in place before that date were abolished, with the affected staff able to apply for roles in a new structure with 45 posts. The service is managed by the Head of Communications, who until April 2011 reported to the Executive Director of Policy but now reports into the Chief Executive. All staff are located together at County Hall.

1. Performance

1.1 The key to delivering the required improvements in communications at a time when resources are shrinking is to ensure the available resource is targeted effectively. Effective targeting should apply in two senses: first, communications resource should be focused on those county council priorities where it can make the biggest difference to the end result and, second, each communications activity should be tailored to address the specific needs and wants of the audiences it is targeted at. The new service aims to bring about a change in the county council's communications culture that will enable it to do both these things. In the first six months there is evidence of it beginning to happen, although it will take longer for this to become truly embedded across the organisation.

1.2 An important initial step has been to establish a series of core performance measures which are reviewed monthly. For the first time, it means the county council is working to robust, credible measures that reflect the actual impact of our communications resource. These cover a wide range of areas, from measuring the views of staff about the quality of internal communications to how the reach of information about the county council is being increased through using social media channels. The lack of evaluation of communications activity prior to establishing the service means that in most cases we do not have year-on-year data to compare performance against; hence in Year 2 of the service we will begin to get more valuable information about our success against these measures.

1.3 There are however early indications of progress. For example all media coverage is assessed using an industry-standard measurement and this is one of the few measures where year-on-year data exists. The target of a 10% improvement is being consistently exceeded under the new arrangements, indicating more positive

messages about the work of the county council are reaching a larger number of people.

1.4 Internal communications is an example of an area where we lacked year-on-year data and, with employee engagement a high priority, needed to improve. In late 2010 the service conducted focus group sessions and an extensive survey of staff to establish a baseline across key measures such as whether staff feel well informed about the key issues for the county council and whether they have the information they need to do their job well. These will be measured again each year with targets established to improve ratings over time.

1.5 While to some extent the service has as yet been laying the foundations for good communications practice in these areas, it has already been able to demonstrate its impact in other time-limited activities by ensuring effective measurement of performance.

Figure 1

Examples of delivering effective communications where it counts	
1,113 enquiries from potential foster carers, exceeding 1,000 target and compared to 795 in 2009-10	Following an extensive region-wide campaign in which Lancashire out-performed all other local authorities in the North West, LCC exceeded its target of 1,000 enquiries.
Increase from 36% to 52% in public satisfaction with winter service	A stakeholder relations and communications campaign helped deliver a marked improvement in satisfaction despite another challenging winter, together with positive feedback from partner organisations.
Museum visitor numbers grow 11% year-on-year	A range of marketing initiatives helped ensure the museums service achieved a 11% year-on-year increase in visitors compared to a 10% target, with 262,309 visitors compared to 236,343 the previous year.
50 businesses interested in Rising Bridge Business and Enterprise Village in first 2 months, exceeding target of 30	A business-to-business marketing initiative helped attract 50 enquiries from companies interested in occupying space at the Rising Bridge development in Haslingden by the end of the financial year, following launch in late January.
743 staff attended conferences with the Chief Executive and Leader in late 2010, 93% reporting they were satisfied	Staff events held at the peak of anticipation ahead of the local government funding settlement attracted a large audience – 93% said they were satisfied with the conferences and 93% said the events helped them better understand why the county council needed to change.
3 new social media channels established, increasing reach of messages and directly achieving 2,500 extra visits to LCC website	For the first time the county council has established a corporate presence on twitter, flickr and YouTube. Data shows LCC has achieved significant reach through each of these media already, as well as generating an additional 2,500 referrals direct to our main website

2. Financial impact

Pay expenditure

2.1 The restructure of communications sought to deliver a £125,000 saving on staffing costs in the first part-year (August 2010-March 2011), with a full year effect from 2011-12 of savings exceeding £250,000. These savings were on course to be delivered. However in practice the savings figure will increase over and above the 2011-12 level as the service is now affected by the county council-wide savings programme and will be delivering a further 25% saving by March 2013.

2.2 Communications is by nature a people-intensive activity and reductions in staff directly impact on the county council's overall capacity. Effective prioritisation of work, which must be supported by colleagues in directorates in recognition of the limited capacity available, will be critical to the service's future impact.

Non-pay expenditure

2.3 Under the service model agreed with ELT in 2010, non-pay communications expenditure by directorates remains held in directorate budgets. The service agrees expenditure for specific campaigns or one-off activity with directorate colleagues on a case by case basis and then manages the investment as it implements campaign plans.

2.4 The service has produced reports for Executive Directors summarising relevant expenditure for the first six months since its inception. These provide an opportunity to review at a glance most of the communications expenditure taking place and also help to illustrate how in many cases the service has assisted directorates in minimising this type of spending. The improvements in information provided by this arrangement are designed to support directorates in understanding where money is being invested in communications and for both the communications service and managers within directorates to identify any problems with the way funds are being used – including any activity that offers no measurable return on investment. There is still some unregulated spending on communications materials taking place within directorates – at risk of both poor value and low quality – and work will be undertaken in 2011-12 to ensure the communications service moves towards being the only route for managing communications delivery.

Case study: The service has sought to assist directorates in reducing expenditure on communications and marketing materials and campaigns, while maximising the impact. One department enquired about producing a handbook for childcare providers, which had been published annually over recent years and would cost £19,800 to reprint. Communications staff considered the requirements of the county council and the needs of the target audience before suggesting a CD ROM and downloadable PDF file would be a suitable alternative to a printed document. The department proceeded with the option and the products were developed at a cost of just £100, saving almost the entire allocated £20,000 budget.

Income generation

2.5 The financial model inherited by the service accommodates some requirement for 'income' generation around advertising and print production, whereby income is generated through handling fees applied to expenditure in these areas by directorates. Income has dipped partly due to a reduction in activity and partly due to the removal of fees previously charged for design by Print Direct. The income, which contributes to funding staff salaries, is subject to fluctuation as a result of several external factors such as reductions in recruitment. This is an aspect of the service model that is currently being reviewed.

3. Feedback from staff who have used the new service

4.1 A Client Satisfaction Survey of colleagues across the organisation who have worked with the service since its inception was conducted in March 2011. It focused on satisfaction levels with the service overall and with various specific functions within the service.

4.2 Feedback is largely positive with 82% stating they were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall service, compared with 8% reporting dissatisfaction overall.

4.3 When asked about specific service areas, the most frequently used service areas – design, marketing and media – score highest for satisfaction in a range of 81% to 87%. These are the services colleagues have most direct contact with.

4.4 For both e-communications and internal communications a notably lower number of colleagues say they are satisfied, but the number who are dissatisfied is no greater than in other areas. This may be explained by the relatively small scale of these functions meaning they work on fewer projects; capacity limitations compared to what some departments were used to previously; and potentially a lack of understanding of their role.

4.5 The service has established a target to improve overall satisfaction from 82% to 87% by April 2012, with the satisfaction survey being repeated every six months.

4. Supporting members

4.1 The large majority of the service's time is dedicated to developing and implementing campaigns alongside more reactive services such as media handling and print production. However it continues to have a role in supporting county councillors in delivering their duties, both by providing guidance and training or by communicating with members as a key audience within its campaign activities.

4.2 The service has been closely involved in collaborating with officers and members to review the members' intranet portal, formerly known as E-xchange and recently relaunched as C-First. The review sought to address county councillors' concerns about difficulty navigating the site and to provide more up to date, relevant content – for example the introduction of a new news section, improved information about the role of champions and dedicated pages for each district footprint. There has been an initial surge in use of C-First since its launch (visits up 82% in March 2011

compared to February) and the service will seek to help maintain interest from members in accessing information through this channel.

4.3 Many members have expressed an interest in how they can take advantage of the increasing prominence of social media as a way of supporting their role. The service has been involved in identifying county councillors' needs in this respect and is currently developing guidance on how to use these tools and avoid the pitfalls, as well as protocols to ensure consistent standards of use. The potential for exploiting social media will be promoted principally through C-First, which will feature the relevant guidance, links to further information and case studies highlighting the work of members already using social media.

4.4 Following an assessment of members' development needs, the service will shortly be running sessions on understanding and working with the news media, which will be open to all members. These are being coordinated on district footprints and will be delivered by staff from the media team. They will seek to increase awareness of the media landscape in each part of the county and increase members' confidence in approaching and dealing with enquiries from journalists as a way of promoting their work.

4.5 Members as a whole group or on a more targeted basis will frequently come into contact with the service via its campaign activities. One example since the service's inception is the campaign around winter services, which identified county councillors as a key audience that needed to understand the council's strategy and receive relevant, up to date information about gritting activity. Elements of the campaign included a number of area-based briefing sessions for members and a twice weekly bulletin summarising recent gritting activity by area together with the forecast weather and operational response over subsequent days. In doing so the campaign sought both to reflect members' status as key stakeholders in the delivery of a high profile service and to recognise their valuable role in sharing information and responding to requests from within their communities.

5. Conclusion

5.1 The redesign of the county council's approach to communications has laid the foundations for a more professional, joined-up approach. This is exemplified by some significant early successes across the full range of functions within the service, together with generally positive feedback both from staff who use the service and staff within the service. The savings targets from the restructure have been realised and the service is using its perspective and expertise to support directorates in reducing expenditure on communications and marketing materials.

5.2 Overall, therefore, at this stage there appear to be solid grounds for describing the changes to county council communications as a success. The service is however at an early stage of development and there is more work to be done to maximise the benefits of the new arrangements.

5.3 A recent report to Management Team, on which this report has been based, identified recommendations across three main areas going forward:

- The way we use the county council's limited communications resource must be better prioritised so that it makes the greatest possible contribution to delivering our overall objectives.
- There should be regular reports on performance to track the impact of communications, principally in the form of quarterly reports to the Management Team.
- Ways of improving the efficiency of communications through partnerships with other organisations and increasing income generation should be proactively explored.

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