

Lancashire County Council

Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the Meeting held on Friday, 13th May, 2011 at 10.00 am in Cabinet Room 'B' - County Hall, Preston

Present:

County Councillor John Shedwick (Chair)

County Councillors

S Chapman	P Malpas
Mrs F Craig-Wilson	D O'Toole
C Crompton	Mrs L Oades
M Devaney	P Steen
K Ellard	D Westley
Mrs J Hanson	B Winlow

1. Apologies

No apologies for absence had been received.

2. Disclosure of Personal and Prejudicial Interests

None were disclosed.

3. Minutes of the Meeting held on 8 April 2011

Resolved: That, the minutes of the meeting held on 8 April 2011 be confirmed and signed by the chair.

4. Communications Service

The Chair welcomed Tim Seamans, Head of Communications, and Louise Wood, Deputy Head of Communications, to the meeting.

The Committee had received a six month progress report on the newly established communications service.

Mr Seamans explained the background to the significant re-structuring of the County Council's Corporate Communications and Marketing functions. In January 2009 the County Council had initiated a review of its marketing functions which was then later widened into a full restructure of all communications activities carried out centrally and within component Directorates of the County Council. The new structure was launched in August 2010 with:

- The formation of a newly centralised communications service;
- Establishing a council-wide approach to communications; and
- A 35% reduction in communications staff.

It was reported that the new single communications service was responsible for advertising, design, e-communications, internal communications, marketing, media relations and print production.

The Committee was informed that whilst it was too early to provide a detailed analysis of progress and performance since the inception of the new single communications service, the report nevertheless gave an overview of their performance over the first six months. An additional briefing note on the approach to communications was handed out at the meeting, a copy of which is set out in the Minute Book. The current structure chart for the service was also handed out at the meeting.

Mr Seamans recognised that assessment of performance for internal communications lacked year-on-year data. It was anticipated that by year two of the re-structured service a comparative measure performance could be drawn.

Examples of initiatives and campaigns to which the service had a role in assisting Directorates of the County Council achieving key corporate priorities were set out in the report.

The Committee was informed that whilst savings targets delivered by the restructure had been met, the Communications Service would still be affected by the County Council wide savings programme and would need to deliver a further 25% saving by March 2013. Officers were currently considering future options for income generation as one way of coping with such reduction in budget allocation.

A client satisfaction survey carried out across the authority had been conducted in March 2011. Feedback had been largely positive with 82% stating they were satisfied with the service overall. Officers intended to use this figure as a baseline for performance. The service had also set a target to improve overall satisfaction to 87% by April 2012.

It was reported that the new service would continue to have a role in supporting Councillors in their duties, providing guidance and facilitating training. However, this aspect did not constitute the bulk of the work carried out by the service. Early successes had been achieved by the service especially in relation to the campaign on winter services which recognised the status of councillors as key stakeholders in the delivery of such a high profile service.

Overall, officers felt that there was more work to be done to maximise benefits of the new arrangements and had identified recommendations across three areas to move forward on, being:

- Use of the county council's limited communications resource should be better prioritised so that it makes the greatest possible contribution to delivering the County Council's key objectives;
- Regular reports on performance to track the impact of communications, principally in the form of quarterly reports to the Management Team; and

- Improving the efficiency of communications through partnerships with other organisations and to proactively explore increasing income generation.

Councillors raised a number of comments and questions. The main points of which are summarised below:

- The 11% growth in museum visitor numbers was welcomed. However, the committee queried the extent to which these figures related to efforts made under the previous communications structure, on the basis of the generally accepted time lag of at least 6 months that existed between the launch of an effective marketing campaign for services and its consequent impact on increased footfall.
- Councillors noted that, when the restructure was implemented, many officers moved away from the areas they had previously been working in. Concern was expressed about the possible loss of expertise this entailed, especially in relation to cultural services. Whilst this point was accepted to a degree, it was felt that many of the skills were transferable, and also that the moves helped develop a wider understanding of the council's work among communications staff and could bring a freshness of approach
- The committee felt that, whilst there was a necessary emphasis on reporting the decisions and actions of the executive, this could mean that the work of other councillors was being under reported. In particular, there was scope for greater publicity of the Overview and Scrutiny function, both internally and externally. This point was accepted, and communications officers agreed that work could be done to develop this, perhaps commencing with consideration of the Overview and Scrutiny annual report due shortly.
- Regarding turnaround of press releases, Councillors were reassured that a 24 hour turnaround was expected and that a media protocol was in place which set out the process for approval.
- One Councillor enquired about the financial shortfall between what was centrally funded for the operation of the communications service and the income generation needed to maintain the level of staffing and service delivery, and what sources of external income generation the service could expand upon as a means to reduce the shortfall. Councillors were informed that the shortfall was in the region of £300K. However, officers were currently in the process of prioritising and rationalising work coming in to the service. Furthermore, officers were looking at the needs of existing clients and negotiating better rates for external customers. With regard to external income generation, officers confirmed that they were looking to expand on their design, print buying and advertising services. Officers were also looking into the possibilities of providing such services to district councils in Lancashire.
- Questions were asked in relation to the use of social media by the County Council. In particular, Councillors were interested in what editorial measures were in place for providing "out of hours" responses and how the use of websites such as Twitter could be developed to enhance County Council services. It was reported that the council is currently using

Twitter and other social media sites, although this needed to be carefully managed to ensure effective use of resources and to manage expectations appropriately. The Committee was informed that creating accounts on social media sites was at no cost to the county council and that such platforms were instant hits for potentially large audiences. It was reported that there were approximately eight thousand followers of the Twitter feed run by the Environment Directorate on winter services and gritting. It was reported that a draft strategy on e-communications had been developed and was currently with the Member Development Working Group for comment.

- In relation to how Directorates were charged for work carried out by the communications service, it was confirmed that directorates were not charged for staff time but were only charged if external partners or services were bought in to complete a given task. A work plan was also being drawn up to support the work of the directorates.
- Some concern was expressed about where responsibility for informing the communications service about important announcements, activities and initiatives carried out in the Directorates lay. It was noted that information came from a range of sources, most notably through the Account Managers set up in the restructure. It was acknowledged that, on occasion, opportunities had been missed, but that generally this was not the case.

Resolved: That,

- i. The report be noted;
- ii. The minutes of this item be passed on to the Head of Communications in order that he and his officers might consider some of the suggestions made by members of the committee for improvements to service delivery.

5. Establishment of a Standing Joint Lancashire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Committee considered a report on the proposal to establish a standing Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee between Lancashire County Council, Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council and Blackpool Council. Draft terms of reference for the Joint Committee were also presented.

The Committee was informed that such a body was required under the Directions to Local Authorities (Overview and Scrutiny Committees, Health Scrutiny Functions) as issued by the Secretary of State in 2003 where the NHS was making proposals for substantial variation to services affecting more than one local authority area

The Committee noted that the Joint Committee would only consider substantial developments or variations proposed by the NHS that would affect all three authorities and that provision would also be made to involve Cumbria County Council where any such proposals would affect all three Lancashire authorities and Cumbria.

The Committee also noted that the Joint Committee would only meet when necessary and that it in no way would direct or affect the work of the individual Overview and Scrutiny Committees. Where all authorities agree, the Joint Committee would have the power to refer appropriate NHS proposals to the Secretary of State for independent review.

The Committee was informed that nominations for membership from the County Council would be politically balanced and that clerking, support and chairing arrangements for the first year were subject to further discussions.

A similar report would also be presented to the Health Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on the 17 May 2011.

It was explained that the three District Council representatives would be determined between the District Councils in line with the former Multi Area Agreement clusters. As on the county council's own health committee, the district council representatives were to be non-voting.

The committee expressed the view that the balance of representation from the three authorities should be reviewed to more accurately reflect the relative size and area of the three member authorities, and that a further report on that subject should come to the next meeting.

Resolved: That,

- i. The establishment of a standing Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee be approved;
- ii. A further report on the composition of the Joint Committee be presented at the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on 10 June 2011

6. Task Group Updates

The Committee received an update on current task groups and their proposed completion dates.

County Councillor Steen, Chair of the task group "Who Cares? Cross Boundary Looked After Children explained that there had been a good response from a variety of public, private and voluntary bodies to provide evidence to the Task Group. He anticipated that a draft report and recommendation would be presented to the Committee at the 9 September 2011 meeting.

Resolved: That, the update on existing task groups be noted.

7. Recent and Forthcoming Decisions

The committee had been given the opportunity to view and consider recent relevant decisions made and also forthcoming decisions including those set out in the current Forward Plan.

Resolved: That, the report be noted.

8. Workplan 2010/11

The workplan for the committee was presented for noting and comments. The Chair gave an outline of the work to be carried out by the Committee over the coming months.

Resolved: That, the report be noted.

9. Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee will be held on 10 June 2011 at 10am at County Hall, Preston.

I M Fisher
County Secretary and Solicitor

County Hall
Preston