

IDeA
Consultation feedback summary
30th June 2009

Context

1. IDeA was asked to support a scrutiny review of communication, consultation and engagement activity in Stockton Borough Council. This is the first of two feedback summaries and covers the first element of that brief - internal and external communication.
2. High performing councils invariably have effective communication at the heart of all that they do. In these councils effective communication is integral to business and service planning. It is not an add on that is used to get the message out after decisions on policy are taken; communication specialists play an active role in offering strategic advice to inform decision making from within the top team.
3. The government wish councils to develop a greater customer focus and external communication plays a key role in developing the relationship between the council and residents. This is also a key element in the new comprehensive area assessment process. The CAA performance framework will increasingly be informed by local perception of service quality and satisfaction.
4. Since April 2009 the duty to consult has been enshrined in law and it is likely that the emphasis on working with, and empowering, local communities will become a central feature of the vision for local government into the foreseeable future.
5. The LGA recognises that good communication is central to the reputation of local government and this forms the basis of its ongoing Reputation Campaign. One finding from the LGA & IPSOS/MORI research is that authorities cannot rely solely on improving satisfaction scores from service users as a result of receiving a service. Positive satisfaction scores after receiving a service do not seem to transfer over into the overall satisfaction ratings that form the basis for performance review.
6. Although high scores on service specific feedback rarely translates into high overall satisfaction ratings IPSOS/MORI identify a number of core activities that when delivered well will enhance public perception of the local council. These are
 - Getting the core services right that affect the daily lives of everyone and publicising them well
 - Tell residents what you can and are doing for them and this will show what residents get for their money

7. Examples of the former include high visibility and strongly branded cleaning operations, one phone contact points, dealing with grot spots, timely removal of abandoned vehicles, a green flag award for parks, education and enforcement to protect the environment. Examples of the latter include good media management to promote and defend the council, an effective A – Z guide to services, regular information to the public via newsletters etc, a consistent council brand linked to services, communicating well with staff so they act as ambassadors for the council.
8. Communication is better addressed via community magazines rather than standard council leaflets. The major preoccupations of residents are twofold and these two aspects need to be addressed in any communication strategy. First, their own personal experience of the council whether directly or in relation to services that should be provided e.g. attending and requesting a service or the condition of the roads, second confusion on what services councils provide and what their council tax is spent on.
9. A number of councils have well developed communication strategies. Those councils that do one aspect well generally do all aspects well so although we identify specific areas to look to for good practice they all can tell a more detailed story. Good examples of positive council communications include Manchester, Westminster, South Tyneside, Lewisham, Southwark and Bristol.

Key questions

- Why are you doing this now, you need a clear focus on why communications are being reviewed, is it to improve performance against the indicator, is it to anticipate CAA and the focus on understanding your area, You need to start at the outcome you want and work back to the steps to take to get there.
- Its all perceptual – its about how you **are** viewed now, and knowing this across all your diverse staff and residents groups, and taking remedial action to tackle deficits
- The key is trust, clear and honest communication and transparency leads to trust
- (Re)Branding can be seen as a negative -another waste of council tax – it needs to be linked to credibility, for staff and residents, its not point saying how wonderful you think you are if the experience doesn't match up
- First contact and customer interactions are the most visible experience of the council and how you communicate the most with staff and local people. All staff who come into contact with people by phone, internet or in person communicate something about the council, make sure it's an experience that says want you want.

- Technology is there to stay, Bristol and Hampshire have a lead on many councils in the fields of technology, it's about more than a youth survey by text, its integral; to what you need to be doing.
 - Communications is not just about a better newsletter or telling someone about a particular service. The best performing councils have a communications specialist as an integral and active member of the top team and consider strategic communications within business planning, not just when they want to know what leaflet to send out to publicise something.
10. **Branding** – This is both the ‘personality’ of the council and the ‘promise’ that the council makes to residents. If you go to buy your sandwich in M&S you expect to pay a higher price but to have better than average quality. Similarly residents will have their own image of what Stockton council represents.
 11. It's key to understand how you are perceived, what people in Stockton think of the council, as no branding exercise can succeed without first knowing what you are already in the minds of people. This will vary widely across your population.
 12. Common issues that councils need to tackle in ‘brand management’ include too many priorities and complex messages, inconsistent use of corporate identity, too many ‘sub brands’ within the council, a credibility gap between what's stated and what is experienced first hand.
 13. The perception of the councils brand is based on
 - Purpose – what is the council there to do
 - The values that underpin it – what drives the council to do what it does
 - Delivery – does what is promised get delivered for the man in the street
 - Staff – how do residents get treated when they are your customers
 - Look and feel – how the council goes about business
 14. ‘Brand Stockton’ needs to be defined managed and reviewed by the top team with expert advice from communications specialist. Over half of all councils now have communications specialist playing an active role in the top team. Looking at communications strategically means considering how to get from here to where the council wants to be. This should link to specific areas of activity such as an external communication strategy rather than promoting individual aspects or services as and when or on an ad hoc basis, culture change for all, and internal communications. The behaviour of leading players has a significant impact on brand, be they senior officers or frontline staff.
 15. Developing Brand Stockton needs to include the following
 - Know what people think of you and why
 - Know what you want to be known as
 - Focus on key messages and say them in a way people understand

- Get it right – be credible don't just manipulate symbols
- Get good design
- Ensure all that you publish sits together well
- Do a visual audit of what messages you are currently putting out via buildings, vehicles and facilities
- Audit what you already put out so it coordinates with where you want to be going
- Get the credit – don't hide your light under a bushel, use every opportunity to get out there

16. **Internal communications** – The best performing councils are most likely to have staff that will speak up for them externally so winning over your own staff is a winner on two counts. First you are likely to be serving local people better, and secondly, research has shown that if frontline staff understand the importance of communications they feel more proud of being part of the council and tell people about this. To do this staff need to feel consulted, listened to and involved. South Tyneside has run an effective induction programme to increase awareness of communications across staff.

17. An internal communications action plan is a good starting point for improving internal communications. This would include

- An audit of existing internal communications
- Identify key stakeholders and opinion formers
- Develop clear messages and quick wins
- If you promise to listen to staff back this up with action to prove it and tell them the impact of what they said

18. Internal communications is not just top down but sideways. Ensure staff talk to each other, know roles and responsibilities and how to contact each other when necessary. This is often the case at call centres but can fall down when queries are passed on to the back office. Email free days and open days have been found to increase personal contact and help managers connect to staff.