

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

COMMUNICATIONS OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held at County Hall on 9 July 2010.

PRESENT:-

County Councillor Margaret-Ann de Courcey-Bayley in the Chair.

County Councillors Val Arnold, Bernard Bateman, David Jeffels, Mike Jordan and John McCartney.

Officers in attendance: Ray Busby (Scrutiny Support Officer), Helen Edwards (Head of Communications Unit), Jonathan Spencer (Policy and Partnerships), Neil Irving (Policy and Partnerships) and Josie O'Dowd (Legal & Democratic Services).

Apologies for absence were received from County Councillor Carl Les and County Councillor Helen Swiers.

COPIES OF ALL DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED ARE IN THE MINUTE BOOK

46. MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 30 April 2010, having been printed and circulated, were taken as read, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

47. PUBLIC QUESTIONS OR STATEMENTS

Josie O'Dowd (Legal & Democratic Services) reported that no advance notice had been received of any public questions or statements to be made to the Committee.

48. EXECUTIVE MEMBER'S UPDATE

County Councillor Carl Les had sent his apologies for absence for the meeting but wished his sincere thanks to be recorded in his absence, for all the hard work undertaken by the Committee over recent years. He also sent good wishes for the merging of Overview and Scrutiny Committees to form the new Corporate and Partnerships Committee.

RESOLVED –

That the comments relayed were noted.

49. UPDATE REPORTS SUMMARISING PROGRESS ON KEY ISSUES IN COMMUNICATIONS AND HR

CONSIDERED –

The reports of the Assistant Chief Executive HR and OD.

(a) Progress of communications report

CONSIDERED –

The report of the Assistant Chief Executive HR and OD which updated Committee on the progress of internal and external communications within the authority.

Helen Edwards, Head of Communications introduced the report. Regarding external communications she noted that much work had been undertaken on the website and also with the local media. Regarding printed information issues of consistency of style and format had been addressed to ensure that communication was conducted more efficiently. Print Service staff were guiding clients to ensure that consistent standards were applied. Regarding the efficiency agenda, the future of NY Times was being reviewed once again, and next year there would be even closer working with all partners to ensure that resources were shared and best use made of them. This should be particularly evident with design and print services.

Regarding internal communications, following the staff opinion survey carried out in autumn 2009, action plans were being drawn up to implement resulting recommendations. Directorate representatives were due to report back to Management Board in the autumn regarding outstanding actions and proposals for the future regarding the next survey - cost considerations would remain paramount within these discussions. The intranet would remain a key means of communication with staff including fortnightly messages from the Chief Executive and also the detail of the Chief Executive's workshops. Members commented as follows:-

- Regarding procurement around print services, had bench marking undertaken with the private sector? Helen Edwards, Head of Communications advised that the print contract was last let at the beginning of May 2010. 60 printers were involved in bidding and 6 were subsequently appointed under the framework contract. It was a two year contract which should ensure positive benefits for both the County Council, and the successful suppliers. She also noted that the Print Unit had acquired a new machine which would also aid efficiency.
- Regarding NY Times the question was posed should it be self supporting via advertisements, surely there would be sufficient interest within the County? Helen Edwards, Head of Communications, reported that this had been considered before but the issue would be revisited once again in light of the impending review.
- A suggestion was made to use Member post boxes at County Hall instead of delivering post to home via Royal Mail.
- Closer working arrangements could perhaps be pursued with the District Councils, enabling the production of their news sheets to be dove tailed with that of NY Times. It could be a means of reducing and sharing costs. Helen Edwards, Head of Communications, noted that the Police were keen to take space in NY Times to help save the cost of publishing their own information. She noted that the options arising from these suggestions were:-
 - (a) To produce a compendium version of NY Times which goes in the same format to all households or
 - (b) To work on the basis of a post code match and to have an insert for each local area.

She added that not all Districts had a newspaper of their own, for example Harrogate. Regarding those that did have their own newspapers, each tended to have their own arrangements with a different number of issues per annum, so this would add to the complexity of the review.

- It was helpful to have the opportunity to discuss the staff survey and the action plans arising would be key. However, it was concerning that only approximately 30% of staff had completed the exercise.
- Disappointment was expressed that Parish Council representatives were not allowed to attend the recent Member Seminar on the Waste PFI. This was felt to have been a missed opportunity to share and cascade information. In view of this, the Member concerned was going to write an informative article, for inclusion in his local newsletter.
- It was felt that there should be an opportunity to publically cascade information regarding the Waste PFI via presentations to Area Committees.
- Comments made by Eric Pickles regarding the future of Local Authority publications were noted. Helen Edwards, Head of Communications, confirmed that she was aware of this and understood that the Code of Practice was currently being revised.

Summarising the Chairman, County Councillor Margaret-Ann de Courcey-Bayley, noted that as long as NY Times continued it would be a matter for the Corporate and Partnerships Overview and Scrutiny Committee to address.

RESOLVED –

That the Communications Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the progress made on all areas of communications.

(b) Web and intranet update report

CONSIDERED –

The report of the Assistant Chief Executive HR and OD updated Committee on the progress of the Council's website and staff intranet.

Helen Edwards, Head of Communications reported that the website had been reviewed and subsequent improvements made. As a result of external benchmarking a three star rating had been given (out of a possible four) and an overall rating of three (very good, the maximum). Whilst this reflected good progress it was noted that the pace of change within the world of web management and design was rapid and therefore an on-going challenge to keep pace.

The migration to NYCC on line would certainly bring efficiencies with many bookings and requests for services being conducted via the website in future. For example the registration of births, deaths and marriages on line would represent a much more efficient means of working, saving time for the public and officers alike. The requirement to publish on the website any County Council expenditure over £500 needed to be in place from January 2011, meeting this target would involve a lot of additional work.

Regarding improvements to the intranet, content would be self managed and there would be improved access for non-office based staff. It was also planned to develop

a shared knowledge site or a “How to Do” area which would enable good practice to be shared amongst colleagues. Members commented as follows:-

- If older people wish to access services on line, were facilities sufficiently signposted at libraries, and are staff available to demonstrate? Helen Edwards, Head of Communications, confirmed that staff already undertook this in part, however more support could be developed.
- It was felt that staff working in the Contact Centre could also be further developed to provide a higher standard of support to callers. Helen Edwards, Head of Communications, noted that staff needed to optimise use of web based information rather than holding separate lists of their own which may not always be as up to date as information on the website.
- Some concern was expressed about the sheer number of web sites, 50 in total, with 23 being in Children and Young People’s Services. Perhaps a more corporate co-ordinated approach should be taken to these sites?
- Future feedback was requested from the pilot being undertaken regarding the booking of Adult Learning sessions on line.

RESOLVED –

That the Communications Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the progress made on both the website and staff intranet.

50. UPDATE ON DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARISH CHARTER

CONSIDERED –

The report of the Head of Policy and Partnerships updated the Committee on the findings of the consultation exercise undertaken on the proposed parish charter and online parish newsletter.

Jonathan Spencer, Policy and Partnerships, introduced the report and explained that some of the consultation meetings had become pre-occupied with the delegation of functions and the Contact Centre. He reiterated that the aim had been to improve communications and establish clear mutual expectations. The consultation period ran from the 14 April through to the 16 July 2010. The report which would go forward to the Executive would include all the responses received. It was felt that the number of responses received had been reasonable, given the historic low level of engagement:

Regarding the proposals around the on-line newsletter, it had been suggested that this should include a list of any public consultations on going at any given time, and that longer consultation periods should be allowed for Parish Councils, perhaps three months. It was also suggested that there should be a more user friendly web page for Parish Councils explaining the distinction between County Council and District Council work. Also a request for training to be made available to Parish Councillors and perhaps they could be included in Members Seminars held at County Hall. Frustration had been expressed regarding communication over highways issues since this was now channelled through the Contact Centre, where formally this had been direct with Highways Officers. Regarding the delegation of services, there had been limited interest and seven had requested more information. The Town Councils appeared to be more positive in this regard with a number already involved. The suggestions made regarding use of local volunteers to help spread salt and grit during adverse winter weather proved popular. Regarding the provision of

information and access points some Parish Councils were prepared to take this on but would generally expect payment. It was noted that Access to Services would follow this up, but that it was not currently an NYCC priority.

In summary it was hoped that the Executive would support the recommendations regarding the Parish Charter but with out a distinction being made between Parish Councils with quality accreditation and those without.

Members commented as follows:-

- Concern was expressed at the poor response/uptake.
- It was queried whether there was a clear demonstration of NYCC commitment? Jonathan Spencer, Policy and Partnerships, reiterated that the practical offers of assistance had been highlighted, and he regarded the mutual pledges as a starting point for improved communication. It would enable Parish Councils to hold the County Council to account.
- In view of the limited uptake, would a Parish Council champion assist as was used in Lancashire County Council?
- The response from Town Councils was clearly better and it was speculated that this might have been due to the fact that tend to meet monthly compared to Parish Councils who generally met three monthly.
- Regarding the use of volunteers to spread salt, it was confirmed that where services were delegated the budget would follow.
- It was noted that in Ryedale two Town Councils had taken on the provision of delegated services for grass cutting and salting. This seemed to be working well given they could exercise discretion regarding how services were delivered and what was done, where and when.
- Perhaps those Town Councils and villages involved with Britain in Bloom might be more likely to take up the challenge?
- It was suggested that the report could go out to all Area Committees.

RESOLVED –

That Committee:

- (i) Noted the findings of the consultation exercise on the proposed parish charter and online parish newsletter.
- (ii) That the draft parish charter be amended to remove the distinction between Parish Councils with quality accreditation and those without quality accreditation.
- (iii) Recommend to the Executive that the parish charter be approved.

51. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT UPDATE REPORT

CONSIDERED –

The report of the Head of Policy and Partnerships updated Committee on community engagement developments both within the County Council and through joint arrangements with partner organisations.

Neil Irving, Head of Policy and Partnerships, introduced the report explaining that this issue was now in the spot light as the Government had reinforced its position regarding the Big Society community engagement promise. Information was available on line, including guidance and a toolkit. Consultation was necessarily sensitive in view of the current financial climate. County Council partners were keen to know what was happening, when and why, and their ability to influence outcomes. It was noted that the engagement data base was shared with partners and accessible to them. It was readily searchable in various ways enabling cross cutting issues to be researched. Users were advised to check with the engagement database first before initiating new consultation - the database contained 300 entries currently. A workshop had been held with local engagement forums also involving Members, to further develop this facility, and the project was now part of mainstream activity. Chairman County Councillor Margaret-Ann de Courcey-Bayley stressed the need for the presence of this data base to be advertised. She noted that invitations to more workshops were currently going out to relevant parties. Members commented as follows:-

- Was the information going out to all 72 Councillors? It was confirmed that this was not the case, however any interested parties could notify Neil Irving, Head of Policy and Partnerships. He noted that community representatives were the key target as they would be the active participants in this. The issue would be included in a future Members Digest and added it had already been covered in a previous Member Seminar.
- Concern was expressed about contacting those sections of the community that were notoriously hard to reach for example shift workers. It was felt that the Police provided a good model of public engagement for example their involvement with lunch clubs and church groups and also the voluntary sector. Chairman, County Councillor Margaret-Ann de Courcey-Bayley, requested that the suggestions be relayed at the forthcoming workshops. Neil Irving, Head of Policy and Partnerships explained that it was a closed workshop to encourage real responses but added that such forums were not by any means the only form of engagement.
- It was suggested that the Area Committee's could provide a useful vehicle as a number of relevant parties were already regularly in attendance.

RESOLVED –

Members noted the developments in community engagement.

52. WORK PROGRAMME REPORT

CONSIDERED –

The report of the Head of Scrutiny and Corporate Performance provided an opportunity for Members to review the Committee's Work Programme.

Ray Busby, Scrutiny Support Officer, circulated a table of information and took Members through the implications of the amalgamation of the three Overview and Scrutiny Committees of Communications, Corporate Affairs and Safe and Sustainable. He suggested how these respective Work Programmes could be

combined under the new Committee. It was anticipated that the new work programme could be divided into the following headings:

- In depth reviews - which were already on going or committed to,
- Overview reports,
- Regular items and progress monitoring,
- Proposed and possible projects,
- Previous reviews still to be looked at.

There was an opportunity to filter and re-prioritise, although it was noted that Safe and Sustainable had been the designated CDRP channel and that that element of work must still be reflected under the new Committee's Work Programme. It was felt that this was a matter for discussion by the existing Chairmen and the new Chairman. Members were asked to pass on any feedback and thoughts on the issue of the future Work Programme to Ray Busby, Scrutiny Support Officer.

Thanks were recorded to County Councillor Margaret-Ann de Courcey-Bayley for the very conducive way in which she had chaired the Communications meetings. Her personal style was felt to be key to its success. She also conveyed her thanks to all Members and officers who had contributed to the work of the Committee over recent years.

RESOLVED –

That Members review this Committee's work programme which will be carried forward to be considered by the new Committee in its work planning.

JOD/ALJ