

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

21 JULY 2010

COMMUNICATIONS OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

STATEMENT BY THE CHAIRMAN

1. The Communications Overview and Scrutiny Committee has met once since my last report to full Council on 19 May 2010. This was the last meeting of the Council since the decision to reduce the number of scrutiny committees.

Communications

2. During a period of unprecedented change as the pressures of public sector spending mount, good communications remain of the utmost importance. We have reviewed progress of internal and external communications within the authority since the review of the Council's two year Community Strategy by the Committee in July 2009. That Strategy set out strategic communication aims for the Council and how it endeavoured to approach them. Progress against a range of activities has been impressive, particularly in our relationships with local media; corporate design guidelines and improvements to publicity material have been evident.
3. The North Yorkshire Times has enabled the Council to continue to inform residents about a series and range of developments including budget, transport plans, school admission and so on. There is demonstrable evidence that communication has been a key element of supporting the current Council's Equality Agenda, particularly in gaining 'Achieving' status in the Equality Framework for Local Government.
4. Internal communications were reviewed as part of the Staff Opinion Survey and Investors in People, and the new Committee might like to keep a weather eye on these as the detailed report and results become available.
5. In summary the Committee was pleased with the progress that has been made.

Progress on the Website and the Intranet

6. Periodically the Committee has been updated on the progress of the Council's Website and staff Intranet since its launch in 2008. The latest update pointed towards significant improvements over the last 18 months, particularly in terms of content, through reviewing and

updating of content. Closer working with the Customer Services Centre has helped identify further improvements.

7. The Society of IT Measures conducts and audits local authority websites. It is pleasing that NYCC has been highlighted as one of the top 20 of the best developed websites where authorities should look for a broad benchmark and for good practice. This is the first time the Council has appeared in the list.
8. Efforts to encourage customers to use the website to find more information, book services and carry out transactions instead of telephoning or visiting the Council, will continue to deliver efficiencies. The NYCC on-line project has been created to facilitate improved transactional elements to the website and work is underway in a number of areas, including the introduction of on-line booking of appointments with the Registration Service, reviewing on-line purchase of items through Archives as well as looking at the Music Service and elements of Adult Social Care and Libraries.
9. There does need to be a rationalisation of the number of additional websites that the Council has. This will be guided by scrutinising the top tasks carried out by users as well as adapting to new methods of communication, including social media and other technological developments, for example, accessing the website from mobile devices.
10. Since its launch in 2008 and subsequent improvements, the Intranet has now become the main source of information for staff with all other channels of internal communication linking through to updates and background. Continuing efforts are being made to evaluate how best to improve access for staff.
11. Nothing stands still and future development for the remainder of 2010 and 2011 is geared towards carrying out more activity on-line and increasing focus on the Intranet as a communications tool and the development and sharing of skills.

Parish Charter

12. The purpose of the parish charter is to set out the expectations that a county council has in its working relationship with parishes, including some understanding of mutual obligations. The Committee supported the view that a formal signing up process was best avoided because this can prove both cumbersome and difficult. Furthermore, in practice the Council's expectation of parishes and vice-versa would be no different whether they had signed up or not.
13. The consultation results were mixed, being roughly divided between those who support it and those who were sceptical. For those in

favour, a model charter provided by DEFRA seemed to be the right approach with no demarcation between parish councils whether they had been “quality accredited” or not. There was some support for on-line news letters with suggestions about what could usefully be included, for example, changes within the County Council, forthcoming consultations, County Council policies, road closure maintenance and grant funding opportunities.

14. Whilst there is further work to be done the Committee was happy to recommend to the Executive that the Parish Charter be approved.

County Councillor Margaret-Ann De Courcey-Bayley
Chairman

County Hall
Northallerton
9 July 2010

Background Documents: Nil