

HARROW COUNCIL

CABINET – 18 MARCH 2010

REFERENCE FROM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 23 FEBRUARY 2010

Communications Plan 2010/11

The Committee received a report which outlined the proposed Communications Plan for 2010/11, due to be considered by Cabinet on 18 March 2010.

The Portfolio Holder for Performance, Communication and Corporate Services, the Assistant Chief Executive and the Head of Communications introduced the Plan. The Committee were informed that:

- Since May 2007 the Communications Plan had contributed to an increase in net resident satisfaction of 18%. Staff satisfaction had also improved. Cohesion indicators had however suffered as a result of the mosque protests in late 2009;
- The number of residents that felt informed about Council services and benefits had increased since May 2007, as had perceptions of value for money. The latest data had been gathered prior to the announcement of the Council tax freeze;
- Overall it was felt that the Council was improving steadily and was focused on the most appropriate drivers of satisfaction for both residents and staff;
- The Council's Communications Plan was operating in the context of delivering better services, learning from complaints and giving better customer service;
- Overall the objectives of the new Communications Plan would remain largely unchanged, although there would be an increased emphasis on targeting specific segments of the community. In particular, the Council would aim to improve communication with residents who felt moderately dissatisfied, disagreed that the Council provided good value for money or felt that they receive only limited information;
- The Council would develop and improve both new and existing forms of external and internal communication. In particular, the Council was looking to develop and expand the services it offered on its website;
- The Communications department did not operate in isolation and was working increasingly closely with the Chief Executive's Department, Partnership Development and Performance, Access Harrow and Human Resources;
- The data indicated that there was a strong correlation between resident satisfaction and staff satisfaction.

Following questions, the Portfolio Holder and officers stated that:

- In order to target young people, the Council was considering a range of options including the use of social networking websites. However, it was important that the Council utilised these new forms of communication appropriately;

- The Council would progressively invite residents to provide their e-mail addresses so that they could be contacted if necessary. As the Council's online services were expanded, this form of communication would become increasingly commonplace;
- It was accepted that demonstrating causality between communication activity and resident satisfaction was not straight forward due to the number of variables involved. However, cross tabulation and other advanced statistical analysis did allow the Council to demonstrate a certain degree of association between its communication activities and overall resident satisfaction. In addition, the Council regularly utilised the work of MORI, a leading market research company, to gauge the impact of its communications;
- The Council was increasingly engaging in collaborative projects with the Primary Care Trust. This included joint articles in Harrow People, joint research and joint branding. Such collaboration acknowledged that much of the work carried out by local public bodies was interconnected;
- The concept of a Media Score was used to measure the performance of a media team. Each media story relating to the Council was given a point score based upon a number of factors including level of exposure, the popularity of the media carrying the story and the overall tone. The Council actively pushed news stories based upon relevant national issues;
- Positive communication was never used as an alternative to providing good services. It was however used to publicise positive work;
- There remained a certain degree of uncertainty amongst residents as to which services the Council was responsible for. As a result, the Council was often criticised for poor services it did not control and, conversely, not credited for good services that it did. However, it was accepted that most residents were not interested in who provided public services, provided they were of a high quality. This was reflected in the Council's desire to engage in collaborative projects with other local public bodies. It was added that perceptions of the Council often lagged behind performance;
- During the purdah period the Communications Department would continue to adhere to Local Government guidelines. During this period the Communications Department would ensure that potentially sensitive information, especially concerning prospective candidates, was not published;
- Littering was a significant problem for most authorities and it was hoped that the problem could be eased by educating residents about the issue. The Council was continuing to run articles about littering in Harrow People and had encouraged local schools to discuss the topic with students;
- The Council did not provide free publicity to local businesses in the Harrow People magazine as there was a danger that residents would think that the Council was endorsing specific businesses. However, the Council had reviewed its procurement processes to allow local businesses to better compete and had also produced a guide for local businesses to help them deal with the financial uncertainty that the recession had caused;
- There were occasions when media outlets would not run Harrow related stories, despite the Communication Team's best efforts.

A Member of the Committee stated that many young people did not engage with the mainstream media and the Council would need to consider utilising alternative forms of communication if it was to successfully target specific groups.

Another Member stated that the report used the wording “focus on neutralising critics” and queried what this meant. The Head of Communication explained that the purpose of the Communications Plan was not to neutralise critics, but to listen to concerns and take appropriate action. He stated that the choice of wording in the report was confusing and would be changed.

The Chairman stated that he would like to see the Communications team publicising the work of the Council’s Committees as good work often went unnoticed. He stated that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had played a key role in the commissioning of an acute stroke unit at Northwick Park Hospital but that little publicity had been received. Another Member added that he recalled a media protocol being agreed by the Committee and queried whether this was still being adhered to. The Head of Communication stated that the Communications Department was expected to monitor Committee agendas to pick out any potential stories and that he would ensure this continued to take place.

RESOLVED: That

(1) the Communications Plan be noted;

(2) the comments of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be referred to the meeting of Cabinet on 18 March 2010.

Contact

Damian Markland, Acting Senior Democratic Services Officer.
Tel: 020 8424 1785 E-mail: damian.markland@harrow.gov.uk

Background Papers:

Report considered by the Committee on 23 February 2010