

## **Chair's Foreword**

It has been my pleasure to Chair the Communications Task and Finish Group.

On behalf of my fellow Councillor Colleagues I would like to offer our sincere gratitude to all our expert witnesses who took part in this exercise. It must be said that without their generosity of time and expertise this report could not have been achieved.

We have found this piece of work to be both challenging and interesting as well as a steep learning curve as we grappled with the new scoping documents of Overview and Scrutiny.

I also must take this opportunity to thank our supporting Overview and Scrutiny Officers Helen Saunders and Jessica Bayley for their hard work in assisting the Panel.

Last but by no means least thanks to Councillors Kath Banks, Robin King, Jack Field and Andrew Fry for the many hours you have given to helping produce this report.

I commend this report to you.

**Councillor Juliet Brunner**  
**Chair of the Communications Task and Finish Group**

**Communications  
Task and Finish  
Group**



**Cllr Kath Banks**



**Cllr Juliet Brunner  
(Chair)**



**Cllr Andy Fry**



**Cllr Robin King**



**Cllr Jack Field**

# Contents

<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>pages 1-4</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>page 5-6</b>
<b>Key Findings from Stage One</b>	<b>page 7</b>
<b>Objectives of Stage Two</b>	<b>page 8</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>page 9</b>
<b>Prioritising Communications</b>	<b>page 10-12</b>
<b>Communications Strategy</b>	<b>pages 13-15</b>
<b>Joint Working</b>	<b>pages 16-17</b>
<b>Internal Communications</b>	<b>pages 18-19</b>
<b>Corporate Branding</b>	<b>pages 20-21</b>

# Contents

<b>Civic Newspaper</b>	<b>pages 22-24</b>
<b>Media Relations</b>	<b>pages 25-27</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>page 28</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>pages 29-30</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>pages 31</b>

# Recommendations

We would like to make the following recommendations, which have been set out in seven subject themes. We recommend that:

## 1. Prioritising Communications

- a) the Council adopts communications as an underpinning principle of the key priorities of the Council;
- b) Officers and Members undertake further work to establish what key messages the Council wants to promote;
- c) the Council website be updated on a weekly basis in order to convey the Council's key messages effectively;

## 2. Communications Strategy

- a) the Council's Communications Strategy be rewritten to:
  - i) improve the presentational style of the strategy;
  - ii) maintain a consistent report style throughout the document;

# Recommendations

- iii) shorten the document making it easier to read; and
    - iv) make the information contained within the strategy personalised to Redditch and Redditch Borough Council;
  - b) the Communications Strategy include a Public Relations Strategy to promote the image of Redditch;
  - c) the Communications Strategy include a Members Communication Strategy detailing how Members communicate with the local media;
3. Internal Communications
- a) Communications Officers regularly attend key meetings at the Council including Full Council, the Executive Committee, and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee;
  - b) Committee Services Officers and Lead Service Officers to proactively engage with Communications Officers on a regular basis regarding key decisions taken at meetings;
4. Joint Working
- a) the Council Communications Officers to utilise opportunities to receive informal advice and support from Worcestershire County Council Communications Officers;

## Recommendations

### 5. Civic Newspaper

- a) Redditch Borough Council produces a section of 'Redditch' pages that can be inserted in each edition of Word On Worcestershire;
- b) this arrangement to be reviewed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in twelve months. Prior to this, Officers from the Communications Unit to investigate options for reinstating the civic newspaper and buying pages in the local press to communicate information about Council activities;

### 6. Corporate Branding

- a) all service areas of the Council should adhere to the Redditch Borough Council Corporate Identity Guidelines for all external communications;
- b) all external communications material must be sent to the Communications Unit for verification before being released;
- c) the Council to provide a briefing, at least once a year, for all members of staff regarding corporate branding and customer contact standards;

# Recommendations

7. Media Relations
  - a) the Communications Officers produce a new local media strategy and protocol to improve channels of communication between the Council and the local media;
  - b) the Council designates an Officer in each service area to act as a 'publicity champion' and the Communications Officers to work proactively with the 'publicity champions' to increase the number of press releases sent to the local media; and
  - c) Communications Officers ensure that, where appropriate, all press releases contain a comment from a relevant spokesperson. If Portfolio Holders are approached for a comment, they should be contacted as soon as possible and given 24 hours to provide a comment.



# Introduction

This report presents the final findings and recommendations of the Communications Task and Finish Group and is a culmination of the work undertaken in both Stages One and Two of the exercise.

Stage One of the exercise began in July 2007 and was completed in January 2008 with a formal presentation and short report presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Wednesday the 16th January 2008.

The overarching objectives of Stage One were to:

- ascertain what perceptions of Redditch Borough Council and the Borough currently exist;
- establish what key messages the Council wants to communicate to residents; and
- establish what profile the Council wishes to achieve and maintain at the local, regional and national levels.

While the work undertaken in Stage One aimed to measure current perceptions and highlight the desired perception and profile of the Council, the aim of the work in Stage Two was to identify how current tools and processes could be improved to achieve these aims.

# Introduction

## **Communications at Redditch**

Redditch Borough Council adopted its current Communications and Consultation Strategy at full Council on Tuesday the 13th of March 2006. This Communications Strategy was based on national research into best practice in local authority communications particularly details contained in the Reputation report published by the Ideas and Development Agency (IDe&A) and Market and Opinion Research International (MORI) in 2005. However, with growing national evidence of the strong link between the reputation of a Council and the effectiveness of its communications, both Officers and Members felt that it would be an opportune time to undertake a review of the effectiveness of communications processes in Redditch.

## **Stage One**

We decided when determining the scope for the review that the work should be completed in two stages. Stage One was designed to ascertain what key messages the Council wanted to communicate to residents and what profile we wished to achieve and maintain at the local, regional and national levels.

## **Key Findings from Stage One**

During Stage One, we decided to undertake some primary research in the form of a questionnaire and in-depth face to face interviews with Members, Officers and partners of the Council plus communications managers from our family local authorities and local media representatives. This research aimed to gather participants' views on what they believed the perception of Redditch as a town and as a Council to be and what profile the Council should be aiming to achieve and maintain at the local, regional and national levels. The Group found that participants believed that perceptions of the Council were very poor. Participants believed there was a general lack of awareness of what the Council does and that the Council was 'unapproachable' and 'uncommunicative'.

## Stage One

### Key Findings from Stage One

The Group found that perceptions of Redditch were not much better. Participants noted that Redditch contained too many roundabouts, had cultivated a low wage economy, and lacked facilities, especially for young people.

These results were not very encouraging. However, through the same process, we were able to establish what profile participants felt that the Council and the town should be aiming to achieve. Many of the participants recognised that Redditch already featured many key facilities but that these needed to be marketed and promoted in a more effective manner. These features included the abundance of greenery, lack of congestion, and the accessible location of the town. They also included facilities run and maintained by the Council including both the Arrow Valley and Morton Stanley parks, the Abbey Stadium and the Palace Theatre.

Participants were also asked to give an opinion on what key messages they felt that the Council should promote about itself. Participants came up with a number of key messages, a selection of which included that:

- the Council provides high quality services;
- the Council is accessible to all; and
- the Council honest and accountable to its residents.

Participants were also asked to comment on what level they thought the Council should focus its communications. The majority of respondents felt that the Council should predominantly channel its energies into improving communications at the local level before concentrating on the national and regional levels.

## Stage Two

### **Objectives of Stage Two**

The objective of Stage Two was to examine the Council's communications processes and make recommendations about how these can be improved to tackle the negative perception of the Council and the town that was highlighted in Stage One. This would firstly involve examining the strategic approach that the Council takes to delivering communications at the Council. Secondly, we felt that examining the tools and mechanisms used in the day to day running of the Council's communications would be a crucial part of the exercise.

The Council's current Communications Strategy focuses on six key tools in its approach to communications:

- an A-Z of Services;
- media relations;
- branding;
- internal communications;
- a regularly published civic newspaper; and
- the Council website.

The key aim of Stage Two was to establish whether these tools were an effective way of communicating the Council's key messages.

## Background

### **Recent National Research**

Research commissioned by the Local Government Association (LGA) and undertaken by Ipsos MORI in 2005 demonstrated that even as service delivery by Councils had improved, the public perception of councils was not improving with it. Generally, the research showed that most people view their council as being low profile, bureaucratic and inefficient (<http://reputation.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pagelid=109165>). These findings were confirmed by the research we conducted in Stage One of our review.

### **Reputation Campaign**

The Ipsos MORI piece of work paved the way for the development of the LGA's Reputation Campaign, the purpose of which was to heighten local councils' awareness of the importance of achieving and maintaining a good reputation. This campaign has recognised that Councils with the highest satisfaction ratings are the ones that best demonstrate their services offer value for money. These councils are also the ones that tend to invest heavily in their communications processes. The LGA Reputation campaign promotes some core actions that councils can take when trying to improve their council reputation. These are to:

- manage the media effectively to promote and defend the council;
- provide an A-Z guide to council services;
- publish a regular council magazine or newspaper to inform residents;
- ensure the council brand is consistently linked to services; and
- communicate well with staff so they become advocates for the council.

(<http://campaigns.lga.gov.uk/reputation/home/>)

We have taken these core actions into consideration when considering recommendations for Stage Two.

## Prioritising Communications

### Making Communications a Priority

During interviews in Stage One with key stakeholders and other local authority communications managers, many participants commented that one of the most fundamental actions a Council can take to improve communications is to ensure that the function is adequately resourced. Participants commented that the importance of communications should be understood by all Officers and Members and that this should translate through the prioritising of the function within Council activities.

We discussed the possible implications of making communications a priority for the Council. We could see that if we were to make communications a priority then we may have to forgo one of the current priorities. However, we decided that each of the current priorities of the Council was reflective of the current aims and structure of the Council. We therefore decided that communications should not be a stand alone priority but one which interlinks and underpins all of the other priority areas.

**We therefore recommend that the Council adopts communications as an underpinning principle of the key priorities of the Council.**

### Key Messages for the Council

It emerged, through our primary research, that one of the potential barriers for the Council to achieving a positive perception and profile is that we do not have a clear set of key messages to promote to the general public. Participants in our research did give an idea of the types of key messages the Council should promote but a set of agreed messages was not established. As a Group, we feel that we could report these suggestions made to us but that it is not for us to agree these messages. This is a wider debate that needs to be addressed by the whole Council and not just by a small group of Members.

**We therefore recommend that Officers and Members undertake further work to establish what key messages the Council want to promote.**

## **Prioritising Communications**

### **The Council Website**

With regards to promoting the Council's priorities and key messages, we felt that using the Council website would be an effective way of doing this. However, all of the Group recognised that the Council Website was frequently out of date, inaccurate and generally ineffective as a tool of communication for the Council.

We noted that more work was needed on the website. The website could be the subject of a further scrutiny review. However, we all agreed that work should be undertaken now to look at how the website could be modified to promote the Council's key priorities and messages.

**We therefore recommend that the Council website be updated on a weekly basis in order to convey the Council's five key messages effectively.**

### **Increasing Perception and Profile**

As part of our research in Stage One, we visited Stevenage Borough Council to interview their Communications Manager and find out what approach, as a comparable Council to Redditch, they took to communications. As part of our discussions we found that whilst not experiencing as severe an image problem as Redditch, the Council had taken a very proactive approach in tackling the image of the town. We found that they had introduced such measures such as 'Stevenage Day' and had also employed a Projects Officer who was in charge of implementing mini projects and campaigns that helped to improve the image of the town with residents and people living outside the Borough.

Best practice, cited in the Local Government Association's reputation campaign literature, also refers to the benefits of utilising campaigns in order to provide residents with information about the roles and activities of their Council. The best practice guidance cites evidence that by making a concerted attempt to inform residents about what we provide for them, they will think more positively about the Council

## **Prioritising Communications**

We feel that bespoke campaigns undertaken by the Communications Unit are a proactive way of directly tackling the issue of poor reputation and negative perceptions. In addition to this we feel such projects would also help to develop civic pride in the town.

We believe that a public relations strategy should be included as part of the Communications Strategy.

We have also requested that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee review progress on the recommendations contained in this report in twelve months.



# Communications Strategy

## **Background**

One of the objectives of Stage One of the Communications Task and Finish Group was to examine Redditch Borough Council's Communications and Consultation Strategy and to judge whether it was continuing to fulfil the Council's needs. However, in Stage One, we made observations but did not make any recommendations about the Strategy.

## **Positive elements of the Strategy**

We examined the Strategy and recognised that there were many positive aspects to the strategy. These, we felt, could provide the foundations for improving perceptions of the Council and the town. It was evident that the strategy was based on national best practice and used examples and quotes from leaders in the field.

We agreed that the strategy was very comprehensive in setting out a protocol for media relations. The Strategy also demonstrates that the Council is committed to engaging with all stakeholders. We felt that the strategy was aspirational, provides a plan of action with measurable targets and suggested some form of method for monitoring these targets.

## **Respondents and Interviewees Comments**

The questionnaire undertaken as part of Stage One asked respondents to comment on the suitability of the current Communications and Consultation Strategy. This question elicited fewer responses than other questions. However, all the responses received were quite negative. Respondents felt that the Strategy was 'unrealistic', 'unachievable', 'not suitable' and generally needed to be reviewed.

In addition, some respondents commented that they did not believe the Communications Strategy had been fully acknowledged by Senior Officers and that some sections of the Council were not using the Strategy as a live, working document.

# Communications Strategy

Respondents were also asked to suggest what overarching criteria the effectiveness of the Communications Strategy should be measured against. The majority of respondents felt that satisfaction levels with the Council were a good indication of the effectiveness of the Council's communications. Therefore, they felt the Council should track satisfaction levels from customer satisfaction surveys and citizens panels. Respondents also commented that the Council should develop an approach to monitoring communications based on good practice from other local authorities.

## Presentational Style of the Strategy

Our own analysis of the Strategy revealed that it focussed on the six key tools (see page 8 ) that the Council uses to communicate and did not contain enough clear information about the strategic aims and objectives of communications at Redditch.

In addition to this, some expert witnesses commented on the importance attached to the tools in the strategy. They implied that such 'tools' were routinely used by Councils and that a Communications Strategy should focus on the wider, strategic picture.

As a group, we took the view that the current format of the Communications Strategy is not enhancing the profile and perception of Redditch and Redditch Borough Council. While undertaking our analysis of the Communications Strategy we also examined its presentational style and found that it was not easy to read because it:

- lacked a consistent report style;
- was weak at contextualising information;

# Communications Strategy

- lacked full explanatory sentences;
- was too lengthy, discouraging Members and Officers from reading it; and
- ultimately looked disjointed.

**Therefore, we wish to make a recommendation that the Strategy rewritten taking into consideration the comments contained within this report. We recommend that:**

- a) **the Council's Communications Strategy be rewritten to:**
  - i) **improve the presentational style of the strategy;**
  - ii) **maintain a consistent report style throughout the document;**
  - iii) **shorten the document, making it easier to read; and**
  - iv) **contextualising and making the information contained within the strategy personalised to Redditch and Redditch Borough Council**
- b) **the Communications Strategy to include a Public Relations Strategy to promote the image of Redditch; and**
- c) **the Communications Strategy to include a Members Communication Strategy detailing how they communicate with the local media.**

## Joint Working

### **Joint Working Opportunities**

During interviews with communications managers from other local authorities, we found that there may be the possibility of establishing informal joint working arrangements to enhance delivery of communications for the Council. In particular, Officers from Worcestershire County Council's Communications Unit felt that there were some key areas where they could provide assistance.

### **Secondment Opportunities**

Officers from Worcestershire County Council discussed with us the possibility of seconding one of their senior press officers to the Council's Communications Unit. These discussions occurred at an opportune time for the Council as the only press officer in the Communications Unit was due to leave. We recognised that this would leave a gap, at least until a replacement could be found and that it appeared to be a logical step to take up this offer from the County Council, if only for 3 months. The benefits of doing this were clear to both parties. It would mean that the Council would be able to employ an experienced Communications Officer almost immediately. It would also enable the seconded person to experience communications in a different environment. Most of all, it would facilitate the sharing of good practice and expertise for all Officers involved.

We have already brokered this process, along with Officers at Redditch Council with the relevant Officers at the County Council and this process is now underway. We decided we would be unable to make this a recommendation of the exercise. However, Members felt that they wanted to highlight this as a positive response to our review.

## Joint Working

### **Advice and Support**

We considered a further collaborative opportunity offered by Officers from Worcestershire County Council, of offering informal advice and support to our Communications Team. Communications Officers at the County explained that they offered an informal mentoring service to the District Councils, whereby Officers at the County Council would provide on-tap guidance and support when needed by Officers at the some of the District Councils.

**Therefore, we recommend that the Council Communications Officers make use of opportunities to receive informal advice and support provided by Worcestershire County Council Communications Officers.**

# Internal Communications

## **Staff as Advocates for the Council**

The remit of the Task and Finish Group did not require us to make any recommendations about internal communications. However, we recognised that good internal communications are of paramount importance in projecting clear and consistent messages to the public. We understand that if all staff were well informed about issues affecting the organisation, they would be more likely to act as good advocates for the Council. This is backed up by evidence from the Reputation Campaign where internal communications is listed as one of the key core actions that Councils should aim to achieve to improve their communications ([www.campaigns.lga.gov.uk/reputation/communications/communicate/](http://www.campaigns.lga.gov.uk/reputation/communications/communicate/)).

## **Dissemination of Council Key Decisions**

With this in mind, we felt that internal communications were not always as effective as they should be. The Group agreed that opportunities to disseminate information about key decisions made by Full Council and other Committees in the Council were frequently missed. We felt that this was mainly due to a lack of internal communication between the relevant lead service officers, Committee Services Officers and Communications Officers.

In order to address this, we believe that Communications Officers should be proactive in attending key meetings of the Council. However, we recognise that this may increase Officer workload. We felt that more emphasis should be placed on Lead Service Officers and Committee Service Officers liaising with Communications Officers to notify the Communications Team about key decisions due to be considered. Communications between Officers should also increase after key decisions are made so that Communications Officers can communicate this information to the public.

Essentially, we believe that there should be a proactive approach and an increased two way communication between these Officers to increase the quantity, quality and timeliness of communications regarding decisions that are made at the Council.

## **Internal Communications**

Therefore, we recommend that:

- a) **Communications Officers regularly attend key meetings at the Council, including Full Council, the Executive Committee, and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee; and**
- b) **Committee Services Officers and Lead Service Officers proactively engage with Communications Officers on a regular basis about key decisions taken at meetings.**

## **Corporate Branding**

### **Linking the Council's Brand to Services**

During our investigation, we examined the issue of corporate branding. Again, the LGA's Reputation Campaign has cited this as one of the key core areas for action that enables Councils to maintain good communications. The Reputation Campaign literature emphasises the need for the visual brand to be consistently linked to all services that the Council delivers so that people can recognise that the service is provided by the Council.

### **Corporate Identity Guidelines**

Currently, the Council produces the Redditch Borough Council Corporate Identity Guidelines which provides guidance for all departments on how the logo should be presented on all information sent out by the Council. These guidelines state that subsidiary brands are permitted (e.g. for the Palace Theatre or Forge Mill) and a variety of approved colours can be used on the literature. However, we found that the Council Website, and many leaflets and promotional information produced by different service areas, did not conform to these guidelines. We all agreed that it was imperative that these guidelines were followed.

While interviewing Officers about this issue, we found that it was very difficult to enforce these guidelines. However, we felt there was a clear need for this to be done. We suggested, therefore, that the most effective way of enforcing this would be for an Officer (s) from the Communications Unit to take responsibility for carrying quality control checks on all printed information that is released by the Council.



## **Corporate Branding**

We also recognised that corporate branding was not only about portraying a consistent visual identity but also about making sure that customers recognise branding through our verbal messages. We all agreed that it is important for all front line staff to reinforce the corporate image through their interactions with the public. Stating the name of the Council when answering telephones, being polite and courteous and as helpful as possible are all actions that staff should be taking to ensure that the corporate brand is conveyed to customers. We believe that by taking these small actions, the reputation and the profile of the Council with our customers will be improved.

**We therefore recommend that all service areas of the Council should adhere to the Redditch Borough Council Corporate Identity Guidelines for all external communications and that all external communications material must be sent to the Communications Unit for verification before being released.**

**We also would like to recommend the Council provide briefings, at least once a year, for members of staff regarding guidelines on corporate branding and customer contact standards.**

# Civic Newspaper

## Redditch Matters

Prior to the commencement of the Communications Task and Finish Group, the Council made the decision not to continue publishing their civic newspaper, *Redditch Matters*, due to a lack of funding. The last edition of this newspaper was published in March 2006. The annual cost of producing this newspaper for 2006 was £11,000. We were very keen to examine the impact of not publishing a regular newspaper on the Council's profile and reputation and felt that the Task and Finish Group exercise would provide a good opportunity to examine this issue in depth and perhaps reassess the Council's position on this issue.

## Good Practice

The importance of a Council publication has been stressed in all recent research published on council communications. One of the key core actions of the Reputation Campaign is for councils to "publish a regular council magazine or newspaper to inform residents" ([www.campaigns.lga.gov.uk/reputation/home/](http://www.campaigns.lga.gov.uk/reputation/home/)). Information given as part of the Reputation Campaign clearly sets out the reasons for councils producing a regular newspaper or magazine. Some of these reasons include:

- keeping residents informed helps to improve overall satisfaction with the Council;
- residents prefer to receive information directly from the Council; and
- it is the most direct and cost effective way of getting the Council's message across to the community.

([www.campaigns.lga.gov.uk/reputation/communications/magazine/](http://www.campaigns.lga.gov.uk/reputation/communications/magazine/))

We also heard much evidence from our interviewees that strengthens this argument for keeping our civic newspaper. All of the local authorities interviewed emphasised how important a council newspaper or magazine to communicate the key messages of a council.

# Civic Newspaper

## Resources

We wholly agreed that producing a regular newspaper was the only way to portray key messages about the Council and give information about what the Council does across to residents and in a way that the Council can control. However, we noted that the resources may not be available to implement this at the current time. We felt that in the long term the newspaper or magazine should be reintroduced and that Officers needed to carry out some in-depth investigations which would consider factors such as the design, delivery mechanism and number of editions but also the most influencing factor of cost.

## Word on Worcestershire

While discussing the options for informal joint working arrangements with officers from the County Council, the possibility of Redditch having dedicated pages in the Word On Worcestershire (Worcestershire County Council's publication) was raised. Officers explained that this could involve Redditch Borough Council taking out an eight page insert with the overall name of the publication tailored to those editions going out to Redditch residents as "Word on Worcestershire – Redditch Edition". Redditch Borough Council would have complete control over the content and style of the insert. Officers provided the Group with some approximate costs. For one edition involving the production and delivery of 40,000 copies the approximate cost would be **£1,200**. If the Council wanted to utilise the skills of the Worcestershire County Council Print and Design Unit, they could also design the pages for the Council at a cost of £500 per issue.

We felt that this offered extremely good value for money especially when compared with the costs of producing the previous civic newspaper. We felt that it would be a relatively straight forward process to implement and may also help residents understand the different responsibilities that the District and the County Councils have. However, as a group we did feel that there were some disadvantages to effectively sharing a publication. We still felt that the Redditch message may not be clear in a joint publication. There may also be the increased likelihood that readers would not get as far as the Redditch inserts and therefore fail to see any reference to Redditch Borough Council.

## Civic Newspaper

However, after taking into consideration all of the evidence, we felt that the joint publication with Worcestershire would be a chance to get some kind of publication out to residents in Redditch. This would at least mean that Redditch Borough Council would have a consistent channel for the publicity and promotion of its activities. We all agreed that this should only be a temporary measure that could be used while Communications Officers at the Council undertook a full investigation of potential methods of delivering a Council produced publication that could be considered at a later date.

### Using the Local Media

We also explored the possibility of using inserts in the two free local newspapers. Some of the local press representatives when interviewed suggested that the Council could produce an insert that would be distributed as part of the newspapers. Again, we considered this offer carefully and believed it to have similar benefits and problems as the proposal that we share a publication with Worcestershire County Council. However, the cost implications for this option were much higher.

#### Therefore we recommend that:

- a) **Redditch Borough Council produces a section of 'Redditch' pages that can be inserted in each edition of Word On Worcestershire;**
- b) **this arrangement be reviewed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in twelve months. During this twelve months, Officers from the Communications Unit should investigate potential options for reinstating the civic newspaper and buying pages in the local press to communicate information about the Council's activities.**

# Media Relations

## **Interviews with Local Media Representatives**

The Group conducted a number of in depth interviews with representatives from the local media. These interviews helped us to gain a useful insight into how the Council's communication with our local media representatives works in practice and how successful it is deemed to be by our local media representatives. There were a number of issues that were identified by local media representatives about the way in which current communication channels are structured. These issues are detailed below.

## **Promotion of Good and Bad News**

Many interviewees felt that the Council did not do enough to promote itself to the press and media. It was suggested to us that it is important for the Council to deal with the negative stories as well as the positive stories. They believed it was better to be open and honest about all issues, good or bad, than to try and cover up potential bad news stories. We were also advised never to provide a 'no comment' response to a story as this often does more harm than good to the Council's reputation in the long term.

## **Frequency of Press Releases**

Some local media representatives commented that the number of press releases they receive from the Council is particularly low, especially compared to the number of press releases they receive from other organisations. In addition, some interviewees felt that by not utilising press releases often enough, the Council was restricting the potential this tool could provide for them in getting their message across to the residents of Redditch. We agreed that the Council needed to be more proactive and less reactive when sending out press releases.

## **Timeliness**

The timeliness of press releases was also identified as an issue. Some interviewees commented that press releases would often be received too late for them to use and therefore a potential wasted opportunity to promote the Council's message.

# Media Relations

## Interviews with Local Media Representatives

A key issue for many of the interviewees was the opening of the channels of communication between Council Officers and Members and reporters. It was explained to us that it could be difficult to gain access to Officers for information on key stories and that there sometimes was a less than satisfactory exchange between officers and reporters. The media representatives that we interviewed felt that more could be done to build professional relationships between Officers and reporters, which they felt would enhance the sharing of information and result in more balanced media coverage. Some suggestions proposed by interviewees to enhance working relationships included:

- providing reporters with a list of key contacts of Officers and Members in the Council whom they can contact for information about a potential story;
- enabling Members to make a greater input into press releases. In particular, a comment from key Members of the Council such as the Leader or the relevant Portfolio Holder would be useful;
- the Council designating a 'Publicity Champion' in each service area who would work closely with the Communications team. This person would have responsibility for releasing accurate and up to date stories so that the Communications team would always be aware of the key issues affecting each service area; and
- continuing communications and media training for all Members and key Officers in the Council.

## Media Relations

Therefore we recommend that:

- a) **Communications Officers produce a new Local Media Strategy to improve channels of communication between the Council and the local media;**
- b) **The Council designates an Officer in each service area to act as a ‘publicity champion’; Communications Officers to work proactively with the ‘publicity champions’ to increase the number of press releases sent to the local media; and**
- c) **Communications Officers to ensure that, where appropriate, all press releases contain a comment from a relevant spokesperson. If Portfolio Holders are approached for a comment, they should be contacted as soon as possible and given 24 hours to provide a comment.**

# Conclusion

Stage One of this review provided us with a clear insight into how Redditch Borough Council and Redditch as a town is perceived at the local, regional and national level. It demonstrated to us that the Council is suffering from a poor reputation and that the town is known for a number of negative points rather than for the many positive features and facilities it has to offer.

Understanding these issues has helped us to focus on what the Council should be doing to tackle these perceptions. For Stage Two of the exercise we concentrated on examining the following key themes:

- making communications a priority;
- internal communications;
- joint working;
- corporate branding;
- civic newspaper; and
- media relations.

Where possible we have followed national good practice and have built our review on the 'core actions' that the LGA Reputation Campaign proposes as crucial to achieve effective communications.

We urge you to accept the recommendations contained within this report. We believe these recommendations would be instrumental to improving the way the Council communicates and engages with the residents of Redditch and would help to tackle negative perceptions that currently exists of Redditch Borough Council.



## Acknowledgements

### **Redditch Borough Council**

The Members of Redditch Borough Council who took part in the research

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### **Redditch Borough Council Communications Team:**

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Bobbie Ashby

### **Finance Officer:**

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## Acknowledgements

### **Representatives from the Local Media**

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### **Local Authority Communications Officers**

Fiona Narburgh (Wychavon District Council)

Nicola Pelligrini (Stevenage Borough Council)

Lee Shrimpton (Worcestershire County Council)

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Jo Wilkinson (Stevenage Borough Council)

# References

## **Local Government Association – Reputation Campaign Web Pages:**

The MORI Research behind the campaign

(<http://reputation.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pageId=109165>)

Why Reputation?

(<http://campaigns.lga.gov.uk/reputation/home/>)

Publish a Regular Council Magazine / Newspaper to inform Residents

([www.campaigns.lga.gov.uk/reputation/communications/magazine/](http://www.campaigns.lga.gov.uk/reputation/communications/magazine/))

## **Key Documents:**

Redditch Borough Council Communications and Consultations Strategy, 2006 – 2010

Redditch Borough Council Corporate Identity Guidelines – Summary Version, January 2007

## Overview & Scrutiny

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