



Agenda Item No: 4

Report To: OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date: 26 March 2013

Report Title: Update report on Communications

Report Author: Dean Spurrell – Communications & Marketing Manager
Rob Neil – Head of Business Change & Technology

Summary: Following consideration of a report “Community Engagement & Consultation: Progress Report”, submitted to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in February 2012, this report provides an update on the work of the communications department over the past year.

The scope of this report has been expanded from community engagement and consultation, which was the focus of the previous report, to cover the broader work of the communications department incorporating major projects, highlighting key achievements and setting out priorities for the coming year.

Key Decision: NO

Affected Wards:

Recommendations: **That the Committee be asked to note the progress made and provide any feedback as to future actions.**

Policy Overview: The council has an obligation to ensure residents and the wider community are aware of the services the council provides and are engaged with the local decision making process. It is also important that new initiatives are shaped by community feedback.

Financial Implications: NONE

Risk Assessment NO

Other Material Implications:

**Exemption
Clauses:**

None

**Background
Papers:**

Community Engagement & Consultation: Progress Report,
February 2012

Contacts:

Dean.spurrell@ashford.gov.uk – Tel (01233) 330647
Rob.neil@ashford.gov.uk – Tel: (01233) 330850

Report Title: Update report on Communications

Purpose of the Report

1. Following consideration of a report “Community Engagement & Consultation: Progress Report”, submitted to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in February 2012, this report provides an update on the work of the communications department over the past year.
2. Following on from this previous report and after discussion with the Chairman, the scope has been expanded from community engagement and consultation to cover the broader work of the communications department incorporating major projects, highlighting key achievements and setting out priorities for the coming year.

Background

3. The council and the communications department have seen a number of changes over the past few years including: the restructuring of the corporate centre (reported to JCC on 2nd February 2012), several changes in personnel, the adoption of the council’s five year business plan and the launch of the Ashford 2030 document.
4. The communications team oversees all external and internal communications and is responsible for: media relations, PR campaigns, marketing, branding/corporate identity, website and online and social media, design, strategic communications, internal communications, producing the Voice e-zine and business newsletter, copy writing, leaflets/brochures and other printed material and events/public consultation.
5. The department’s aim is to consistently provide proactive communications to protect and enhance the council’s reputation through targeted and measured communications activities using a range of channels most appropriate to the audiences we wish to reach.

Progress

6. Over the last year, progress has been made on several key aspects including:
 - The bedding in of the new structure within the Business Change and Technology service
 - Recruiting two new members to the department to return the team to a full complement of four

- Providing communications support for the five year business plan projects and other key campaigns
 - Supporting nationally significant events such as the Queen's Jubilee, the Olympic torch relay and the Portas Pilot town bid
 - Delivering a new website to make accessing information and services from the council quicker and easier
 - Ensuring residents, staff and members are kept informed of the council's work
7. Since the department returned to full strength we have been able to work more closely with other services and provide a dedicated point of contact, so we are aware of upcoming work, and can to plan ahead, resource accordingly and proactively promote services.
8. High profile campaigns the communications department has supported in the last 12 months include:
- The core strategy/local plan planning consultation
 - Conningbrook Lakes and Chilmington Green developments
 - The successful Portas Pilot bid campaign
 - Olympic torch relay and Jubilee events
 - The affordable housing/new build programme
 - Council tax localisation consultation
 - Welfare reform changes
 - New recycling and street cleansing service
 - A new website launch and channel shift
 - Major arts/cultural events including the Arts at St Mary's Church programme, Create Festival and Jasmin Vardimon launch
 - Youth activities/events including the HOUSE and HANG 10 launch and various play park consultations
9. In December 2012 the new www.ashford.gov.uk website was launched. The new-look site makes accessing our services quicker, and it is easier for our residents to find information about the council. It also supports our digital by default objectives which are part of the channel shift project.
10. Using our website to get the right information, as well as using it to pay, report and apply for things online, is much quicker and easier for residents. The feedback has been positive, with people telling us that the new website looks great, is a real improvement and is simpler to navigate.
11. The way residents access council information is shifting away from more traditional channels such as local newspapers and radio towards online and social media. The council has almost 1,700 followers on Twitter, over 2,000 subscribers to our monthly residents' e-zine Ashford Voice and almost 1,500 businesses subscribing to our quarterly business newsletter.
12. The communications department is ensuring it strikes the right balance between meeting these changing needs while still maintaining strong relationships with the

local media to protect and enhance our reputation and publicise the good work that we do.

13. Members and staff are important ambassadors for the organisation and the communications department ensures they are kept up to date with key council decision and issues. Recent initiatives include the weekly Members' Update, Chief Executive walkabouts and all-staff briefings.
14. In the next 12 months the communications department will focus on supporting the roll out of a new recycling service, promoting the welfare reform changes and communicating the council's future aspirations for the borough as well as continuing to support the five year business plan projects.

Conclusion

15. The communications department has made great strides forward in the past year following a restructure and several changes in personnel.
16. The department has risen to the challenges faced and has played a key part in supporting the council's five year business plan and helping to protect and enhance the reputation of the council and the services it provides for our residents.
17. Members are asked to consider the progress made by the communications department and indicate any further steps they would wish to see taken.

Portfolio Holder's Views

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Contact: Dean Spurrell, Communications & Marketing Manager

Email: Dean.spurrell@ashford.gov.uk