

EAST HERTS COUNCIL

CORPORATE BUSINESS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 19 MARCH 2013

5. REPORT BY HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS, ENGAGEMENT AND CULTURAL SERVICES

UPDATE ON COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT PLAN

WARD(S) AFFECTED: ALL

Purpose/Summary of Report:

- This report responds to Members' request for an update on the communications plan and engagement activity resulting from the work of the Task and Finish Group on Community and Public Engagement that was completed in March 2011 and provides a six months review of the new Communications Strategy as adopted by the Executive 10 July 2012.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CORPORATE BUSINESS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE: that

(A)	Progress against the communications plan and engagement activity be scrutinised; and
(B)	The Executive be advised of any recommendations.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The Community and Public Engagement Task and Finish Group that completed its work in March 2011, made a wide range of recommendations which are shown in the attached **Essential Reference Paper B**.
- 1.2 To complement and develop these recommendations a new communication strategy for East Herts was approved by Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee (CBS) on 29 May 2012 and subsequently approved by the Executive on 10 July 2012.
- 1.3 This report invites scrutiny to review progress against the original task and finish recommendations and on the first six months (or so) of the communications strategy and action plan.

2.0 Report

2.1 Highlights of progress delivered as a result of the Task and Finish group is presented as follows:

- 2.1.1 The Community Voice arrangement was decommissioned as recommended. In its place £8,500 was made available in 2012/13 for Councillors to cover the costs of ward level engagement activities. Costs drawn from this fund have amounted to only £244, claimed by seven different councillors for meeting venue hire and associated costs and printing. Consequently it is proposed that, for 2013/14, this budget is merged with the approved additional allocation of £10,000 for that year, into a £18,500 community grant fund for general community benefit and for Councillors' engagement activities as requested.
- 2.1.2 As recommended, community engagement seminars have been held for councillors and these general sessions have developed in small Action Learning Sets. It is proposed to continue with these on a demand led basis.
- 2.1.3 The council's engagement and partnerships team and the communications team have been working to ensure better publicity for our grant programmes through press releases, website information and presentations at events such as the annual Rural Parish Conference.
- 2.1.4 The communications team is making council press releases available to third party publications such as parish magazines and residents' magazines.
- 2.1.5 The development of the council's approach to new media has taken place within the context of the communications strategy as presented in paragraphs 2.2 below. Plans for a new design for the council's website and Hertford Theatre's website are at advanced stages of development.
- 2.1.6 Following review as recommended by the Task and Finish group, LINK has remained a four-times a year publication and has retained its title name rather than being rebranded as 'Your Council Matters'. The new smaller (A5) format has been well received and there are no plans to change this.
- 2.1.7 In relation to surveys, members are advised that the main biennial residents' survey is due to be undertaken later this year. Members

will be consulted on its form and content and the results will be widely published.

2.1.8 A new toolkit for engagement has not been developed, because existing standard, classic methodologies have not changed significantly and a view has been taken that engagement is more nuanced than can be provided for by a toolkit and that therefore learning is better done through such activities as the current series of Action Learning Sets. However, a new engagement check list has been circulated to councillors for use should they wish (attached at **Essential Reference Paper C**).

2.2 Highlights of progress delivered as a result of the new communications strategy is presented as follows:

2.2.1 There has been a step change in the council's use of social media in line with the new communications strategy. A social media training session has been delivered for members and individual 'tuition' on the basics of twitter and facebook use is available for members on request from our communications team. A number of councillors have already taken up this offer and are positively using social media to share council messages.

2.2.2 The council started to tweet systematically mid-way through 2012. At the time of writing, the council's twitter account had 1,850 followers. As anticipated in the strategy, tweeting has enabled the council to develop a more accessible style of communication, characterised by greater informality and immediacy; creating a different relationship with our residents, service users and other stakeholders. Hertford Theatre has also recently started to use twitter systematically as a marketing tool and this is supported by and linked to the council's account. Facebook has been less well developed and maybe this reflects current trends and the limited added value from the use of facebook to local authorities that already have well established websites. Nevertheless members are invited to consider that the introduction of facebook is more appropriate to our business than the previous use of myspace – which was deleted following introduction of facebook.

2.2.3 Whilst the communications team drives the corporate social media accounts, Officers in customer services have also been trained on the use of twitter to generate certain service request responses.

2.2.4 The new communications strategy sought to introduce a proactive and systematic approach to communication and one of the

mechanisms introduced to ensure delivery of that aim has been to embed regular monitoring at senior management level. The Corporate Management Team is presented with a monthly communication report that provides a) an analysis of last months output and impact measured both quantitatively and qualitatively, b) planned activity for the coming month and c) a scan of up and coming issues.

3.0 Implications/Consultations

3.1 Information on any corporate issues and consultation associated with this report can be found within **Essential Reference Paper 'A'**.

Background Papers

Communications Strategy (Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee – 29 May 2012 and Minutes of the Executive 10 – July 2012).

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