

### COUNTY COUNCIL COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY 2006-08

#### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The County Council's first major communications strategy was agreed at the end of 2003 for implementation over a 2 year period, starting in early 2004. As a result, there have been significant improvements to the way we deliver our communications right across the organisation.

Aims of the strategy included:

- An emphasis on evidence based, resident/customer-focused communications
  - a more strategic and co-ordinated 'one council' approach to the Council's communications
  - promotion of the Council's key priorities and policy steers through all our communications activity
  - improving our forward planning of communications and consultation to ensure we are proactive
  - ensuring greater flexibility in the formats we use – especially focusing on the use e-government technology to provide information and seek feedback
  - Placing communications resources together, at the heart of the organisation
- 1.2 An action plan was drawn up outlining a range of initiatives to strengthen the Council's reputation with its communities. The plan focused on four key areas:
- Media Relations
  - PR and Marketing
  - Community Consultation
  - Web Services

#### 2. Successes

The newly structured Communications Team has won or been short listed for a number of awards during this period, including:

- 2.1 Website:
- Achieved a place in SOCITM's 'Top Twenty' list of nearly 470 local authority websites
  - Voted one of the best county council websites in the country, in a recent ODPM report
  - Plain English Award for the website
  - Passed the RNIB's stringent test to use the 'See It Right' logo, one of the few websites in the country to have this accreditation for accessibility
  - Two internal excellence awards (2004 and 2005) for customer service and diversity respectively.

## 2.2 Other promotional initiatives:

- Plain English crystal mark for ‘Your County’, the Council’s residents’ magazine
- Plain English crystal mark for the Council’s council tax leaflet
- ‘Your County’ was a runner up in the national Institute of Public Relations/Local Government Awards for one of the best council residents’ newsletters in the country
- 2<sup>nd</sup> prize for one of the best stands (out of over 600) at the South of England Show (2004)
- A Silver regional Institute of Public Relations Award for the Council’s stand at the South of England Show 2005 (best use of design and photography)

## 3. Pooling communications resources

Dedicated departmental communications managers, based in departments, are now delivering more effective communications, using agreed communications plans for each department, but reporting to the Communications Team. The managers have a good understanding of departmental issues and priorities and are able to deliver the ‘one council’ approach, one of the key aims of the strategy.

More recently, graphics staff, previously working separately in departments, have been brought together within Communications to further strengthen the ‘one council’ approach in relation to council publications, exhibitions and the Council’s visual identity.

## 4. Taking the Communications Strategy forward

Senior Members and Officers, led by the Leader of the Council with his specific responsibility for communications, have fully supported the drive to improve our external communications and the need for a more strategic approach. There are now further opportunities to strengthen this with the appointment of new Directors for Children’s Services and Adult Social Care

The objectives and principles of the original strategy remain relevant (see Appendix 3) and no change is proposed.

### 4.1 Key Drivers:

The starting point for all our communications is the overarching County Council commitments:

“We will be a modern, efficient, accountable authority leading work with partners to deliver to all our customers and communities:

- increased prosperity and security for East Sussex
- affordable, quality core services at lowest possible council tax

We will make a positive difference to local people's lives by making best use of resources, being clear about the choices involved and encouraging local communities to thrive."

4.1.2 In addition, the 2006/07 policy steers relating to reputation and communications are important:

- Improve the County Council's reputation by explaining our policies and decisions clearly and ensuring consistent information and messages using the full range of communications methods
- Involve local communities by ensuring residents have well informed expectations and their views about services, policies and priorities are taken into account.

Together, these will act as the overarching drivers for our communications work over the next 2 years (2006/08).

Other important, specific drivers are:

- The Council's continuous push to improve its performance and become a truly customer focused organisation
- Maximising efficiency, productivity and income generation
- Possible local government reorganisation
- The 2006 BVPI Residents' Satisfaction Survey results
- The continuing need to explain the Council's financial position to the public, against a backdrop of ever tightening resources from central government
- The CPA's focus on community involvement
- The IDeA's Connecting with Communities project (which promotes better communication in local government) and the LGA's Reputation Project, which East Sussex is supporting
- The Council's E-Government targets and related BVPI 157 target
- Commitment to equalities

4.2 Focus for the renewed strategy

The new, broader Strategy will play a major part in contributing to improving the Council's two way communications with ALL its audiences.

It is proposed that the Council should build on the good work already underway on external communications with residents through the four areas mentioned above: media relations, PR and marketing, community consultation and web services.

In addition, the new Strategy needs to focus on:

- Helping County Councillors in their democratic role, by improving Member communications

- Addressing the gaps in our employee communications
- Identifying the key areas on which the Council would wish to lobby Members of Parliament and civil servants
- A more co-ordinated approach to partner communications.

All of this activity will, together, further strengthen the Council's strategic approach to all its communications, ensuring a proactive and planned approach throughout.

## **5. Strategy – underpinning themes**

### **5.1 Meeting Equalities Standards**

The Council is committed to meeting equalities standards. Inclusive communications, both for residents and staff alike, play a key role in ensuring that everyone can access services easily and give their views. The Communications Team has a key role to play in this and is working closely with Personnel colleagues to improve Council information and ensure that consistent standards are applied across the organisation. Work will continue to establish clear communications (letters, reports, publications, e-mails, web information) as part of this Strategy – including the use of Plain English, large print and alternative formats, increased point size for the Council's letterhead, reports and other documents and new visual standards guidelines. Raising awareness amongst staff will be vital to the success of inclusive communications and training in Plain English and new equalities standards for communications are underway or planned.

### **5.2 Customer Focus**

The communications plan outlined here dovetails into the Council's work on customer focus, led by the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Policy Management and Communications. In particular, community consultation, delivering services on line, promotion of the new contact centres/information points and improving our internal communications are all part of the wider customer focus agenda in which the Communications Team will play a leading role.

### **5.3 Key Messages**

In terms of the Council's message, there will continue to be a focus on the Council's outward facing policy steers in the Council's communications work, particularly media coverage, marketing and promotion, consultation and web activity. Improving staff awareness of the policy steers will also be a priority in future communications work, to increase understanding of how an individual and team role fits within the Council's business plan.

#### 5.4 **Cost**

Many of the recommendations will be delivered through existing resources and changing working practices. However, where action involves new resources, this is highlighted together with an indication of how this might be achieved.

#### 5.5 **Income Generation and Efficiencies**

In the coming year (2006/07), with the backdrop of continuing tight Government financial settlements, the Communications Team will be contributing to the overall effort to generate income by charging for creating/advising on websites for partner organisations and selling advertising space in 'Your County', our residents' magazine.

However, with an increasingly strategic approach to communications, there are some major efficiency savings to be made for the organisation as a whole that will be driven by the Communications Team.

In particular, fundamentally changing the way the council delivers services and moving away from paper and payment through the post, to e-forms and payments on line, is transforming the experience for the customer and reaping significant cost savings. The Web Team has estimated that £24,000 has already been saved in 2005 as e-forms were introduced, but the figure in 2006/07 could rise to over £70,000 as more forms are put on line.

There are also longer term savings to be made in relation to the number of publications the Council produces. The Communications Team is reviewing best methods for communicating information to the public, including whether all publications are necessary and looking at alternatives. Between £30,000 and £60,000 could be saved in 2006/07 by putting more information online and reducing the need for so many publications.

### 6. **Revised Strategy**

The revised strategy is presented by audience rather than, as previously, by area of work. The audiences covered are:

- All audiences (corporate communications and reputation)
- Residents
- Media
- Members
- Staff
- Partners

For each audience, some background, recommendations and outcomes are detailed.

## 6.1 Corporate Communications and Reputation

This section covers:

- Branding and visual identity
- Plain English
- Internet
- Awards

### 6.1.1 Branding and visual identity

The Council wants to be perceived as a professional, customer focused organisation delivering efficient services to local people. Yet its visual image on printed information, vehicles, signage etc is poor, unco-ordinated and looks unprofessional. The new graphics team within Communications will play a key role in developing a 'one council visual image'. Specific service standards will be developed for the team and how they work with departments. Consistency on branding documents and publications across the Council will be reviewed (see section on Communicating with Residents) to ensure a strategic 'one council' approach. It is proposed that visual identity guidelines are produced and are available on the intranet.

Simple guidelines will be produced for all staff to follow in relation to day to day business communications - letters, e-mails, powerpoint presentations and reports that follow plain English standards, and including use of 12 point (a larger type face than is often currently used. This will help staff and members of the public with vision impairments, dyslexia and literacy issues

### 6.1.2 Plain English

The Communications Team has already produced a plain English house style for staff to follow and trained over 100 staff in plain English. PAT also offer a number of plain English courses. All this activity needs to be co-ordinated with wider training to include visual identity guidelines and other issues.

In addition, it is recommended that all major external facing publications receive a Plain English crystal mark and are written in the house style. The Departmental Communications Managers will act as the first point of contact to advise on publications in departments. However, there will be an expectation that managers who draft publications will themselves use the Plain English Guide now available.

### 6.1.3 Internet

Developing a customer focused website has been a priority for the web team over the last two years and this work will continue. The Council's website, which has won several awards for accessibility is also now ranked by the ODPM as top of all county councils for availability and third for download

speed. The Web Team will work with departments to help transform working practices so that e-enabled services can deliver big efficiency savings. Already over 120 e-forms are available on the website and this will be increased over the next 2 years by 50%. The Team also expect take up of public facing e-forms to increase by 200% in 2006/7. Residents can now register a birth, apply for a blue disabled parking badge, renew their library books, apply for a job at the County Council or apply for a school place for their child. With national data suggesting that 56% of adults over 16 now have a computer at home, this is just the start of a revolution in how services can be accessed by the public.

The website will be restructured with a focus on local relevance for residents. Residents will be able to type in their postcode and access a localised home page with locally relevant links.

Other activities will include consultation with residents on e-services quality and usability, a key element in ensuring that our website remains customer focused. There will be a major drive to promote the website and on line services in coming months, building on recent publicity initiatives. Increased promotion will influence the Council Plan target to increase uptake by 25% each year.

#### 6.1.4 Awards

The Council is gaining a reputation for winning awards. More recently, these have included a National Training Award, two Green Apple Awards, finalist in the Health and Social Care Awards, highly commended for two South East Renewable Energy Awards, second place in the Local Government Challenge as well as awards for the Broadband Team, the Council's website and other communications awards (see above) The Council has also entered for the Public Finance and MJ Awards, amongst others.

Clearly, this is a powerful tool in improving staff morale but it is also important in terms of the Council's reputation with the public and with other authorities. Opportunities will continue to be taken to promote the Council's work and the quality of its staff in this way.

6.1.5 Recommendations:

- Implement the 19 recommendations of the Graphics Review
- Develop service standards for the graphics team
- Refresh the visual identity guidelines for staff
- Develop an internal training programme on visual identity
- All major external publications to receive a Plain English crystal mark and written in house style
- Simple guidelines for staff developed for day to day business communications
- Increase the volume of e-forms on the website, working with departments, and identify efficiency savings

Work with the Distributed Hubs project (contact centres) to put in place successful content management system, ensure relevant website content for customers and promote the website via this route  
Restructure the website to increase local relevance of services for residents  
Publish information online first  
Increase take up of the website  
Increase consultations on the web about services, but also usability of the website  
Increase usage of the e-newsletter on the website  
Continue entries for national awards

#### 6.1.6 Outcomes:

- ✓ Clear and consistent branding on publications, signage, vehicles and buildings
- ✓ Inclusive communications for residents that are in Plain English, easy to read and use and highlight the Council's services and priorities
- ✓ Improved transactional capability on the Council's website, transforming the way services are delivered
- ✓ Better use of the website for consultation with the public and gaining their views on services and usability of the website itself

## 6.2 **Communications with Residents**

This section covers:

- Publications
- Your County (residents' magazine)
- A-Z of Services
- Campaigns and Issue Communications Plans
- Contact Centres and Community Information Points
- Reception Areas
- Working with partner communications teams
- Community Consultation
- Parents and schools information on-line

### 6.2.1 Publications

With the new graphics team now established within Communications, it will be possible to get a better picture of the number and type of publications being produced right across the Council. An annual publications plan will be drawn up as part of the graphics team work plan. A system of putting publications 'on line first' will be developed that will ensure a Plain English approach via the web and enable a review of whether a printed version should be available

as well. We will also be able to ensure that as many publications as possible are clearly linked to the Council's priorities.

#### 6.2.2 Your County (residents' magazine)

Three issues of Your County are produced per year (one including a summary of the Council Plan). This publication is one of the main vehicles for getting information out to residents and is widely seen not only by residents, but also the Council's own employees. Further improvements are needed to ensure it remains customer focused and gives residents the information they need, as well as asking for views. High profile and controversial issues will be tackled (e.g. waste) to ensure that this publication is not seen as a 'puff' or self-congratulatory publication for the Council. Equally, we need to ensure that the majority of residents who read it believe it to be good value for money. A Council magazine/newspaper for residents and the following A-Z of Services are highlighted by the LGA's Reputation Project as two of the most effective methods for keeping the public informed about local government services.

#### 6.2.3 A-Z of Services

It is proposed that the Communications Team should review the feasibility of reintroducing a printed version of the A-Z of Services working with borough and district colleagues. An A-Z is known to be one of the most popular publications amongst the public for all councils. Although the Council's website has a good A-Z, a publication that households can keep by the phone would be helpful for the public and raise the Council's profile. Resourcing would be an issue but sources of income will be investigated.

#### 6.2.4 Campaigns and Issue Communications Plans

The Council, to date, has not developed this kind of promotional opportunity at a corporate level, although there have been some initiatives in departments.

A 'campaign' would run for a specific period and use all the communications tools available (media/website/displays/publications etc), co-ordinated by the Communications Team, working with Departments. For instance, a campaign later in 2006/07 to encourage more library users and promote the many services that modern libraries now offer. It is proposed that two high profile campaigns are started in 2006/07. Communications Team members would give their time but any funding would need to be found by Departments.

The Team will continue to develop communications plans on key issues for the Council (see media section).

### 6.2.5 Contact Centres and Community Information Points

Many people will not be aware that the Council's website is the key information tool for providing information about services via the telephone through the new contact centres. Ensuring that information is up to date on the website is vital. In addition, there is a major piece of work to be done to promote improved access to services through contact centres and customer service standards. The Council's Residents' Panel could also be used to test residents' awareness of contact centres.

### 6.2.6 Reception Areas

Information screens have been introduced (for public and staff) which has helped to give the reception area a more up to the minute feel, but there is much more to be done to improve how our publications are presented at reception. This will further ensure that our own council publications are prominently promoted and that we have a consistent look and feel to any displays in this public area.

### 6.2.7 Working with partner communications teams

Improving links with colleagues in other authorities and the public sector are important in delivering more joined up information and consultation about services. The Communications Team already has regular contact with health communication colleagues and South East County heads of communications. However, it is proposed that a county-wide communications group is re-established involving districts and boroughs, police, Onyx for waste issues, fire etc. Better joined up working on publications such as an A-Z of services (mentioned above) and joint council tax leaflet will be investigated.

### 6.2.8 Community Consultation

There are two key aims for community consultation over the next two years – making further improvement to co-ordinate consultation and ensuring that consultation follow up is audited and reviewed. The latter will enable the Council to demonstrate better how the views of residents have informed policy making.

The internal consultation group now established, with departmental representatives, will be maintained and strengthened, with outcomes actioned and demonstrated. Major consultation work is now listed in an annual consultation diary but further work needs to be carried out to ensure that the e-database of consultation going on across the Council is easy for departments to work with. This enables information to be shared, upcoming consultations flagged up and opportunities to share and pool resources relating to community consultation. Existing consultation guidelines for staff (setting out best practice), will be reviewed and redone in a user friendly format.

Other responsibilities for the Communications Team in relation to consultation over the next two years include bringing management of the Residents' Panel back in house (to improve efficiency and help reduce costs), working with web staff to further develop the e-citizens' panel, and co-ordination of the BVPI User Satisfaction Survey in autumn 2006.

#### 6.2.9 Parents and schools information on-line

Web staff in the Communications Team will work with Children's Services to redevelop Ezone to ensure consistency with the standards already established for the website on usability, accessibility, design and plain English. Work will also be undertaken to improve schools and children's service information on the Council's website.

#### 6.2.10 Recommendations:

Annual Publications Plan established (a forward look at all ESCC publications for the public)

Publications linked to Council priorities

Ensure 'Your County' magazine remains customer focused, addresses issues residents want to read about and remains in the public's view, good value for money

Investigate a printed A-Z of services with the boroughs and districts

Run two major 'campaigns' per year (dependent on Departmental resources)

Promote improved access to services through contact centres (see reputation section for website and contact centres/distributed hubs)

Improve 'front of house' information for the public (and staff) at County Hall reception

Re-establish county-wide communications group and improve partnership working

Develop internal consultation group, consultation database and diary

Rewrite consultation guidelines for staff

Bring management of the Council's Residents' Panel back in house

Co-ordinate the BVPI User Satisfaction Survey 2006

Work with Children's Services to redevelop Ezone

Improve schools and children's services information on the Council's website

#### 6.2.11 Outcomes:

- ✓ Improved public understanding of the Council's priorities, services and decision making processes, helping improve public satisfaction levels
- ✓ Improved joint communications with key partners
- ✓ Better focused and streamlined publications linked to Council priorities
- ✓ Better information for parents and schools about Council services

- ✓ A more streamlined and co-ordinated approach to consultation across the organisation, making best use of resources
- ✓ Consultation linked to the organisation's objectives and priorities
- ✓ Evidence of consultation, its impact and results, are demonstrated and more easily accessible

### 6.3 **Communications with the Media**

This section covers:

- Media activity and policy steers
- Press release style
- Planning media relations
- News on-line
- Local media and professional journals
- Proactive and reactive
- Crisis communications
- Monitoring

#### 6.3.1 Media activity and policy steers

Media activity needs to continue the focus on the Council's main policy steers (those that are outward facing with a strong resident focus), so that the public understand where the Council's priorities lie. Wherever possible and at every opportunity, press releases and media briefings will underline those priorities. The Media and Communications Manager will lead on developing communications plans for key policy steers, including media relations, and working with the departmental communications managers. (This includes plans for instance, for Adult Social Care and Waste)

The Head of Communications will continue to work with the Deputy Leader, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Policy Management and Communications on reconciling policy and resources communications.

#### 6.3.2 Press release style

Press releases will continue in the more punchy and easy to read style that has been developed and, again, with a focus on how the news will benefit/affect local residents. The media protocol sets out advice for staff and highlights that the style for press releases must remain the responsibility of the Communications Team.

#### 6.3.3 Planning media relations

There will be an increasing focus on advanced planning for media relations so that as many issues as possible are flagged up in advance. The Departmental

Communications Managers are key in alerting the Communications Team to departmental news. Key messages about some of the more high profile issues will be drawn up and Cabinet Members and Chief Officers briefed to ensure a consistent message. 'Newsflash', a software package that supports media management is being used to measure performance on media relations

#### 6.3.4 News on-line

Research shows that website users want easy access to news and, in response to this, the news section highlighting press releases on our website now has a much higher profile. Web staff and communications managers work together to keep this current and highlight the key stories.

#### 6.3.5 Local media and professional journals

The recent focus has been on improving our local media relations. Face to face briefings by Cabinet Members/senior officers with editors are vital and have shown that this helps develop a good relationship and ensures balanced coverage. However, more needs to be done to identify opportunities to promote the Council in the trade and professional media, through journals.

High profile appointments at national level for senior Members and chief officers can make a real difference in gaining publicity for East Sussex and putting us 'on the map' at national level.

#### 6.3.6 Proactive and reactive

Despite the media's lack of interest in 'good news', there are opportunities, particularly in the local press.

Although the departmental communications managers will be seeking out good news stories and successes, everyone in the organisation has a part to play in letting the Communications Team know, well in advance, of any ideas for publicity.

The Communications Team will focus on improving targeting publicity to hard to reach groups through publications that are read by, for instance, ethnic minority groups and people with disabilities. .

The Team will minimise negative coverage, where it can and ensure a balance. This will be a particular challenge over the next two years, with a difficult financial settlement for the next 2 years and the need for cuts to services identified for 2006/07 and beyond.

Planning in advance is the key, particularly where coverage is likely to be difficult on controversial issues.

### 6.3.7 Crisis communications

The Civil Contingencies Act requires local authorities to take on the role of providing information to the public during an emergency. The Council's Communications Team will have a key role to play not only in keeping the media informed in a major incident, working alongside other agencies, but also providing public information. The Head of Communications is part of a Sussex-wide information group (Sussex Warning and Informing Group), with other communications professionals including Sussex Police, West Sussex, Health, Fire, the boroughs and districts.

East Sussex County Council, as well as developing its business continuity plans, needs to have in place a more in depth communications plan for emergencies, based on the new legislation. The Communications Team are currently reviewing this.

### 6.3.8 Monitoring

Local media monitoring takes place on a daily basis and a press cutting service is now targeted to all councillors, chief officers and others on a need to know basis. At present, this is still paper based. Members are being asked to express a view on any future press cuttings service as part of a Members survey (see Members section)

The Communications Team will monitor areas of concern (strongly held opinions in the media) and report to chief officers and leading Members.. A proactive approach will be taken to balance any negative coverage

### 6.3.9 Recommendations:

- Develop communications plans for key policy steers and key issues
- Press releases and media briefings will have a policy steer focus whenever possible
- All press releases to be easy to read and in a 'punchy' style
- Establish monthly action plan to identify predictable events
- Establish contacts with professional/trade press and identify coverage opportunities
- Continue to identify 'good news' stories for the Council
- Target news at publications with 'hard to reach' audiences
- Counterbalance 'negative' coverage by tackling media with a bias and/or looking for alternative methods
- Continue the practice of "top messages" for key issues and ensure these are communicating within the organisation
- Develop a Crisis Communications Plan for emergencies (including addressing business continuity issues)
- Establish a system to track trends in public opinion (via the media) and feed back to Cabinet Members/Chief Officers for review
- Target press cuttings service to those who need to know

#### 6.3.10 Outcomes:

- ✓ Improving understanding of the Council's priorities, services and decision making processes, helping improve public satisfaction levels
- ✓ Improve quality, consistency and accessibility of our information
- ✓ Improved service for all media, including planned and targeted media coverage at local, regional and national level
- ✓ Improved media relations service to the Council as a whole, Cabinet and departments through a planned approach to promoting the Council's policy steers and priorities
- ✓ Ability to measure accurately the Council's media performance by results.

#### 6.4 **Communications with Members**

This section covers:

- Feedback from Councillors
- Staff knowledge of Councillors/the democratic process
- Member contact points in departments
- Improve Councillor contact details
- Members' Briefings
- Clearer reports
- Improving Councillor websites

##### 6.4.1 Feedback from Councillors

All Councillors were invited to get involved in giving their views through a consultation exercise about:

- How officers and Councillors could work together more effectively to help councillors in their democratic role
- What Councillors might wish to do to improve their contacts and consultation with local residents

Two workshops were held during November 2005, involving 15 County Councillors.

Some of the ideas and suggestions from these workshops are currently being tested through a survey for all County Councillors. The results of the survey will inform future plans to improve communications for Councillors but will need to be achieved against a difficult financial backdrop, and within existing resources. This has been stressed to Members.

The following is a summary of the feedback from the workshops.

#### 6.4.2 Staff knowledge of Councillors/the democratic process

Councillors felt that the role of Councillors, Cabinet and the County Council was not well understood. Members at the workshops felt that greater awareness was needed amongst staff below senior management level about Councillors needs and what drives their agendas.

#### 6.4.3 Member contact points in departments

Several Members expressed frustration at not knowing who to go to in departments to get the information they needed. A contact point in each department who could guide Councillors to the person they needed quickly or provide them with the information they wanted was felt to be a very useful step forward.

#### 6.4.4 Members' briefings

A range of views emerged on Members briefings currently provided by every department. However, it is clear from this group of Members that the majority would like one Members' Briefing covering all services which really is "brief", with headlines and links to further information. Some Members expressed the view that the current Members' briefings are being used by officers as "self promotion" which they did not find helpful.

#### 6.4.5 Clearer reports

There was a strong view that some Council reports (for Cabinet, Scrutiny and other committees) are unclear and difficult to understand. More effort should be made, they felt, to keep reports clear and in Plain English. Members felt it would be "wrong to assume" that because they were Councillors, they would find it easy to understand jargon and very complex reports.

#### 6.4.6 Improved Councillor contact details:

Several Members asked for better information about their contact details to be available for the public, particularly via libraries. A simple poster with photographs and details of local County Councillors and, if possible, relevant District and Borough Councillors was also felt to be helpful for the future

#### 6.4.7 Improving Councillor websites

The new individual websites for Councillors was of strong interest to the Members at the workshops, particularly as a tool in improving information to and feedback from their local electorate

This has already been recognised as an issue for Councillors. As part of this strategy, web staff will be increasing the interactivity of Councillors websites

by enabling members to access and edit their websites themselves, if they wish to. New tools will be provided, including local surveys, forums on local issues that can be added to councillors websites, along with links to blogs and advice on blog maintenance. Those councillors who do not wish to go down this self service route can continue to have their websites maintained by the web team as they are now.

Funding via the Council's ICT development for improved Councillor websites is already identified.

#### 6.4.8 Recommendations:

Improve e-tools for councillors enabling councillors to access and edit their own websites  
Other recommendations to follow once the results of the Members Survey are available

#### 6.4.9 Outcomes:

- ✓ Increased awareness amongst staff of the role of Councillors and the democratic process
- ✓ Easier access to information for Councillors from Departments
- ✓ Improved councillor information for the public, enabling improved two way communication with residents

### 6.5 **Communications with Staff**

This section covers:

- Intranet
- Feedback from staff workshops
- Taking internal communications forward
- Staffing and resources

#### 6.5.1 Intranet

To date, the focus of the web team has been on the outward facing website. Over the next two years the team will redevelop the Council's intranet, improving information on core staff services such as personnel and ICT information. Bespoke tools will be provided for collaborative working in teams, Project communications, workflow and document handling will be improved via the intranet. The intranet will become a major tool in improving

the Council's internal communications, delivering key messages and information to staff and Members and providing a route for feedback.

#### 6.5.2 Feedback from staff workshops

It is well documented that organisations with well informed staff, who are consulted about their views and feel valued, will:

- Deliver a better performance
- Have higher motivation
- Are likely to be proud of the organisation they work for
- Understand the role they personally play in contributing to achieving corporate objectives

Following the recent staff survey results, over 100 staff took part in workshops about internal communications.

Staff were asked about the negative results in the staff survey relating to communications across departments, communications within teams and communications about issues that affect them, and what could be done to improve the situation.

While there are some specific issues relating to departments, most of the key themes emerging were common to all. Chief Officers will be reviewing the feedback, including:

- ✓ Need to improve staff knowledge of the Council's vision and priorities
- ✓ Increase visibility of Cabinet Members, COMT and senior managers
- ✓ Improve communication within teams through improved management skills, effective meetings and better information
- ✓ Improve induction, both departmentally and corporately. Strong support for face to face induction, with an e-induction package as backup
- ✓ Better information/engagement for staff with no access to e-mail and/or employees working away from County Hall
- ✓ Improve information for staff about any new standards for customer care and communications, eg. use of plain English across publications, reports and letters
- ✓ Review e-mail usage, revise e-mail policy and promote to staff
- ✓ Revamp the intranet so that it is transactional, collaborative and informative
- ✓ Continue departmental newsletters but improve.
- ✓ Opinion divided about an overarching newsletter, but keeping costs down was felt to be important. Some staff would prefer an e-newsletter, others a printed version or insert in their own departmental staff publication
- ✓ Revamp of staff policy and guidelines booklet.
- ✓ Cascaded information, along the principles of the current Team Brief, but more focused, user friendly and in Plain English, should be introduced as part of an overall drive to improve team meetings (and not just an e-mail document)
- ✓ Support for a more active social and sports scene

### 6.5.3 Taking internal communications forward

Addressing our internal communications will become increasingly important as the Council becomes more customer focused and increasingly needs to deliver greater productivity and efficiency savings. As well as taking on board what staff are saying, we need to create better corporate and departmental approaches to delivering key messages and information that employees need to do their job. Communications requirements may vary from department to department. But initiatives will need to be put in place to help change the culture of the organisation and better two way internal communications is key to this. Demonstrating that the Council has improved in this area will also be key to retaining IIP accreditation. It is essential that this work is integrated in a focused way.

One of the findings of the recent research is that there is scepticism amongst staff as to whether any improvements will be made as a result of the workshops, based on their previous experience/perceptions of 'lack of action'. It is, therefore, important that staff do see results and changes following on from the survey and workshops.

### 6.5.4 Staffing and resources

Various attempts to improve our internal communications have not got off the ground in the past because of lack of resources. Good internal communications can only be achieved if there are corporate resources and support to deliver a planned programme.

Best practice authorities have a dedicated 'internal communication' post that can co-ordinate overarching communications and create a more coherent approach. It is hoped that a bid to the Strategic Management Capacity one-off Fund will result in some capacity, including a fixed term internal communications post. within the Communications Team to devise and co-ordinate the new approach.

Once in post, the new Internal Communications post would need to review funding (including funds currently available for the annual staff conference).

### 6.5.5 Recommendations:

Two early actions should be taken forward immediately:

Departments and Cabinet Members to address visibility issues of senior officers and Lead Cabinet Members (if this is not already happening)

Work to raise awareness of the Council's vision and priorities amongst staff (including through the performance appraisal system)

These two early actions will ensure we are ready for IIP reassessment and demonstrate to staff that management is listening to their views and taking action.

Create an 'internal communications' post within the Communications Team to develop a staff communications plan based on the findings at 6.5.1 above

Web team to improve intranet

#### 6.5.7 Outcomes:

- ✓ Increased understanding by staff of the Council's vision and priorities and the role of staff in achieving them
- ✓ Better, general information for staff and feedback mechanisms, via a variety of methods
- ✓ Better understanding amongst staff of the role of Members, Cabinet and the democratic process
- ✓ Improved staff morale

### 6.6 **Communications with Partners**

This section covers:

- New infrastructure
- Objectives
- Issues

#### 6.6.1 New infrastructure

Action to establish an improved lobbying infrastructure was completed in December 2005 following a detailed review. This will improve and co-ordinate the Council's lobbying activities. Although the Council has historically lobbied successfully on a number of issues (e.g. the Bexhill-Hastings Link Road, the South East Plan etc) much of the activity has been reactive and issue based. The new infrastructure will help create a healthy dialogue with MPs/MEPs, partner organisations and Government. It will give the Council greater opportunity to brief all the key contacts on major issues in a more planned way. This will position the Council as a source of expertise and improve its ability to protect and enhance the interests of East Sussex.

The lobbying infrastructure currently being developed focuses on two specific areas of activity:

Monitoring the legislative and political environment – ensuring the County Council is aware early enough of policy initiatives and legislative proposals to allow the organisation and its partners to articulate an East Sussex perspective and, where possible, make a positive contribution to policy development. This will involve regular political monitoring, tailored monitoring reports on particular policy areas, issue tracking and early warning of relevant events.

This activity includes:

- Regular parliamentary monitoring
- A log of media coverage involving or originating from MPs
- A log of key meetings to identify ESCC's representatives and to highlight key issues arising from these meetings, and
- A lobbying log to identify any planned or potential lobbying activity (proactive and reactive)

Effective profile-raising – ensuring key contacts are identified and briefed on the key issues affecting East Sussex. This will position the County Council as a source of expertise and authority and improve its ability to protect and enhance the interests of the County. This activity includes:

- Creation and ongoing maintenance of a corporate database of key contacts
- Seminar on key issues (e.g. the seminar on working with parishes due to take place in April 2006)
- Production and distribution of a regular partners' newsletter (2 per year – March and November), and
- Improved communication flow to MPs and MEPs and other key, influential groups/individuals through the provision of press releases (targeted to their specific areas of interest), briefing papers about key issues, and presentations by County Council officers and members.

## 6.6.2 Objectives

The main objectives of the approach are to:

- Send the right message to the right audience, using the right messenger
- Give coherence to our lobbying work within the Council and ensure consistency in dealing with external stakeholders
- Provide early (or earlier) notice of relevant issues which will increase the possibility of influencing outcomes
- Ensure any lobbying activity is closely linked with this communications strategy, avoiding duplication and ensuring value is added to existing communications activity
- Better equip the Council to identify lobbying successes and learn from experience to improve future effectiveness
- Ensure that all publicity and lobbying activities continue to comply with the law.

It will be important to bring this work within the remit of the new Communications Strategy and ensure that all our communications activity is lined up in terms of timing and methods on particular issues (e.g. lobbying,

briefing County Councillors, Ambassadors and other partners, media releases, web information, internal staff information etc).

### 6.6.3 Issues

Some potential lobbying issues arise on an annual basis (e.g. the financial settlement or inspection) while others are one-offs. It is proposed that the annual “State of the County” report in July that begins the Reconciling Policy and Resources process should be used as the opportunity to formally identify the key issues for lobbying focus in the coming year. The priority issues would then be linked to both the communications programme and departmental business plans.

In the interim, the following are identified as the current key lobbying issues:

Health restructuring  
Unsustainability of the financial settlement, including Adult Social Care  
Bexhill/Hastings Link Road  
Housing/infrastructure issues  
Local government reorganisation  
Future of CPA.

### 6.6.4 Recommendations:

Adopt immediate lobbying issues list set out above  
Implement new, proactive lobbying strategy and identify issues/topics as part of the ‘State of the County’ report  
Launch partners' newsletter, going to all partners, including MPs  
Partners communications audit to be carried out, analysed, fed back to partners and then implemented (this will help improve information to and feedback from partners)

### 6.6.5 Outcomes:

- ✓ Raise the profile of East Sussex in Westminster
- ✓ Position East Sussex County Council as a source of expertise on key issues
- ✓ Improve the County Council’s ability to protect and enhance the interests of the County
- ✓ All partners are better informed about key issues

## 7. A more detailed action plan is attached with timescales (Appendix 4)