

## **Scrutiny Panel Value for Money (vfm) Assessment – The Communications Unit**

### **Summary**

#### **1. Who We Are**

The communications unit is responsible for developing and delivering a broad range of communications activity, plans and strategies for Walsall Council, its services and the wider Borough via the Walsall Partnership. We are a central resource for use by the whole Council and should be a first port-of-call for advice and support on Council marketing and communication activity.

The team is made up of seven full time staff and one part time officer:

#### **Darren Caveney – Head of Communications**

A graduate in Public Relations with 13-years experience in marketing and PR across both the private and public sector, including roles at Euro 96 and Severn Trent Water Plc. Previous local authority experience includes head of communications and marketing manager roles at Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council and previously held the post of executive member of the national Local Government Communications Group.

#### **Kim Neville – Press & PR Manager**

A former journalist with more than 20 years' experience in Public Relations in both the public and private sectors. The last 16 years have been spent as a local government Press & PR officer with Black Country metropolitan boroughs. Before that, a local newspaper journalist on various titles around the Midlands. In 2005 decided to underpin journalism qualifications by studying and gaining the Chartered Institute of Public Relations Diploma, at the then University of Central England (now called Birmingham City University)

#### **Dan Slee – Senior Press & PR Officer**

An English and History graduate with an NVQ in Journalism. Has 13 years experience in newspapers in Staffordshire and the Black Country. For eight years worked for the daily regional newspaper, the Express & Star, becoming assistant chief reporter in the Sandwell office. Worked as a Press and PR officer at Walsall Council for the past four years.

#### **Becky Robinson – Public Information Officer**

Holding a degree in psychology and family studies. Previously worked in the voluntary sector doing volunteer development and recruitment. Has worked for Walsall Council for 8 years – 2 years as a strategic planning officer that

was a joint post with social services and health services and 6 years as public information officer dealing with publications and web information, strategies and procedures for publishing information for children's services, adult's services and housing services.

#### **Natalie Greenway – Press & PR Officer**

An NVQ in Journalism and six years experience in journalism at the Shropshire Star daily newspaper. Worked as a reporter, then Chief Reporter of the Bridgnorth office, then feature writer at the head office. Then moved to a PR agency in Wolverhampton where worked as a PR account manager – handling a range of business to business clients including Birmingham Midshires, Johnstone's, HiQ and Bentley. For the last 18 months worked as press and publicity officer at Walsall Council.

#### **Richard Bolton – Press & PR Officer (part time)**

Eight years public sector experience in public relations: NHS, local authority (B'ham & Walsall) and Police. Was seconded as Communications Manager at Birmingham & The Black Country Strategic Health Authority. Ad-hoc work at two PR agencies; College education and in-house PR training too. List of employers including NHS Direct, SHA, South Warwickshire PCT, West Midlands Police and Birmingham City Council. For the last 18 months worked as press and publicity officer at Walsall Council.

#### **Tina Faulkner – Press & PR Officer (Temporary)**

An NCTJ-trained journalist with 20 years' experience in weekly, daily and evening newspapers. Has worked in various senior reporter roles, the last being News Editor on the Express & Star where responsible for developing story ideas, managing a team of staff and liaising with senior managers. Now a freelance writer working as a Press and PR Officer in Walsall Council's press office.

#### **Helen Burrows – Communications Assistant**

A member of the team for two years and responsible for activity such as the weekly staff email bulletin, intranet development, web editing, budget management and administration.

## **2. What We Do**

Our role is to promote the council's vision, priorities, services and events to all relevant residents and customers. This involves managing and delivering all internal and external communications, including media relations activity (press releases, enquiries, briefings, media conferences), and has developed a range of guidelines and protocols to ensure that the council's brand and reputation is safeguarded at all times. These include a comprehensive set of

media relations protocols, a crisis management plan and internal communication channel protocols.

The team also develops and delivers communications plans across a broad range of services and works closely with the Council's marketing team in promoting their key leisure events and services.

The Communications Unit is currently leading on the development of a new corporate MarComms strategy, encompassing key activity such as reviewing/re-launching the Council's brand/visual identity guidelines in 2009 plus developing our new media and social networking presence and profile. This new strategy will deliver a more consistent and coordinated approach to all of the council's marketing and communications activity.

In addition, the unit delivers: a range of corporate publications (including Team Spirit, our staff newspaper, which moves to an electronic format from April 2009); a wide variety of publications for partners and citizens (including Walsall Pride, our quarterly resident magazine); and the development and implementation of guidelines and standards for both written and visual communications across the council in order to promote good practice.

Other roles include advising members and officers of media issues and opportunities, news gathering and other reputation management activity.

### **3. Our Resources**

Walsall has one of the smallest local government communications units, both in the West Midlands and across Metropolitan Borough Councils in general, with 7.5 members of staff.

By comparison, Dudley Council has 19.5 staff and Sandwell Council has 17 staff in their central teams.

See **Appendix 1** from the recent Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) Communications Peer Review Report for the full benchmarking statistics of our nearest 15 comparator authorities.

### **4. Key Achievements 2008**

#### **Walsall Pride**

Our residents' magazine, Walsall Pride, has gone from strength to strength, following a redesign in March 2008.

The result is a much improved, more modern consumer magazine which, from March 2008 onwards, will be delivered as a stand-alone item to all 109,000 homes in the borough. Resident responses to competitions and offers grow edition by edition.

Distribution continues to be greatly improved too, following the switch to Royal Mail.

The outcomes of these improvements are important because it is clear from research by Ipsos MORI, on behalf of the Local Government Association's

'Reputation' project, that the more informed residents are on the range of services available to them, and aware of how to access them, then the more satisfied they will be with their local authority.

This will have an impact on customer satisfaction surveys and, looking forward, on areas such as the bi-annual place survey which focuses on many resident 'perception' measures.

### **National Recognition – Inspectorate Programmes**

It is recognised across Comprehensive Performance Assessments (CPA) and other inspectorate programmes that good communications is vital. Effective internal and external communications has played a key part in Walsall's improvement journey over the past few years and which has seen it rise from a zero star Authority to an 'improving well', three star one.

The internal 'A Chance to Shine' campaign that ran Jan-March 2008 certainly helped raise awareness internally of the CPA inspection and regular linked staff briefings ensured that employees were told in simple, timely ways all about the CPA inspection, what scores were needed to achieve star ratings and demystified issues such as weightings and inspectorate terminology.

These consistent messages were also rolled out at leadership and managers forums, performance boards, across team meetings via News & Views and in publications such as Team Spirit.

Several items of external communications were delivered around CPA, from press releases to features in Walsall Pride, but there isn't anything directly built in to the CPA framework in regards to assessing communications.

Certainly within the Corporate Assessment element there are clear linkages with community engagement and involvement, where communications plays a major role. With this in mind the Council's consultation officer, Anna Sansom, has been approached to look at ways in which we can integrate the Council's consultation strategy into the new, wider Council marketing and communications strategy – a key recommendation coming out of the IDeA Peer Communications Review.

Effective communications will be even more important in terms of the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) where some of the satisfaction levels that link to communications include website design and accessibility. The web team are moving into the Communications Unit from 1 April 2009 which gives an opportunity to specifically target this opportunity through a fully joined-up approach to communications and web site development and promotion.

### **Communications Industry Recognition - Award Nominations**

Walsall Pride gained external endorsement for its high quality when, in November 2008, it was shortlisted to the final three in the CorpComms Awards 2008 in the 'Best Publication' category having faced competition from both private and public sector organisations.

A social services DVD managed by the team was also short listed for an Association of Social Care Communicators communications award in October 2008.

## **Media Spotlight**

Here are the key highlights:

### Press Releases

A press release takes varying lengths of time to write and distribute dependent upon the nature of the content, the work required to source accurate information and on the nature of the approval process involving elected members and relevant officers. Some can take one to two hours, others considerably longer.

The statistics below do not capture the work that has gone into press releases ultimately not distributed to the media, which does happen routinely.

- Press releases issued in 2008 – **982** in total (up from 929 in 2007)

The internal demand for media releases is growing month on month (possibly as a result of cost efficiencies in relation to other 'paid for' communications channels)

The number of press releases distributed in November and December 2008 alone was almost 400.

The high level breakdown of releases written and distributed in 2008 is:

- 39% of all releases were for Leisure (383 releases)
- 12% of all releases were for Regeneration (119 releases)
- 5% of all releases were for Corporate Services (46 releases)
- 5% of all releases were for the Illuminations (46 releases)

### Media Enquiries

The length of time taken to effectively manage and respond to a media enquiry differs even more greatly than the time taken to generate a press release.

Media enquiries are often complicated, can carry sensitivities, and accuracy and speed of response are vital. They almost always require other officers to source and supply information and, as with press releases, they require sign off from cabinet members and relevant officers on both the response and quotes that the communications team draft.

Multiple versions of responses are often generated before an agreed version is distributed. Again, these can take anything from a couple of hours to days to turn around, particularly those that are as complicated as some Freedom of Information requests.

Media demand is increasing noticeably, possibly due to staff cutbacks at

media organisations. As a result, the media is becoming steadily more dependant upon the Communications Team.

The number of media enquiries received in 2008 was **1,955** (up 20% from 1566 in 2007) The high level breakdown of these 2008 enquiries is as follows:

- 15% of enquiries related to Leisure (311 enquiries)
- 11% of enquiries related to Corporate Services (219 enquiries)
- 10% of enquiries related to Regeneration (199 enquiries)
- 8% of enquiries related to Environment (163 enquiries)
- 8% of enquiries related to Highways (160 enquiries)

### Media Monitoring

Following a small investment in new, improved media management software, we began monitoring our coverage in a more sophisticated way from June 2008. Since June, the following coverage and outcomes have been achieved by the team:

- A total of **3,438** articles/TV and radio coverage was achieved from June to December 2008.
- A minimum of **860** of those news items were generated from press releases issued by the communications unit.
- 55% of all articles in the press were positive (target level 50% or above\*)
- 30% were neutral
- Just 15% were negative (target level – no more than 20%\*)

Industry standards tell us that to achieve over 50% positive coverage and less than 20% negative coverage demonstrates effective media management.

This information is tracked and reported back quarterly to the Transformation & Performance Service performance boards and bespoke scorecards and targets\* developed to capture and monitor this information – see **Appendix 2**.

The team has worked hard to foster good working relationships with broadcast media in the area and this has resulted in an increase in both media coverage and interviews. The large growth in positive coverage on BBC Radio WM is a good example of this.

### **Campaigns – 2008/09**

The team's work is much more than press releases and media enquiries and increasingly the unit works with service areas and cabinet members to develop tailored campaigns to support key priorities and key services.

Some of the campaigns delivered in 2008/09 have included:

- Travel to work differently (delivered broadcast media coverage and national profile for a campaign that cost less than £4k)
- Christmas Crime Campaign – 12 days of Christmas generated significant local media coverage
- Mayor's Civic reception for Ellie Simmonds received wide media coverage locally
- TCTP – despite major problems with the project, less than 15% of media coverage was negative
- Suspension of care agency – Shaw – the team received positive testimonials from the Directorate leads as a result
- Maximised opportunities around photography e.g. Brownhills miner where front page and page leads have been delivered across the Express & Star and Walsall's weekly newspapers
- Walsall Partnership support and delivery against their key priorities has created free media coverage
- National Year of Reading – helped to deliver over 1 million visitors to Walsall libraries in 2008
- Walsall Illuminations – proactive, strategic planning and joint working between the unit and Marketing resulted in over £80k-worth of positive media coverage
- Delivered a DVD targeted at older people and BME communities, available in alternative language formats has been very well received and was industry award nominated
- Extensive support to Leisure events and initiatives
- Support and draft communications strategy for Building Schools for the Future
- Communications planning around pay and grading and the senior management restructure

### **Web & Intranet**

- Improvements to the flow of new items and stories on both sites – this has contributed the Council's web site being placed in the top 20 best local authority web sites, as announced in March 2009 (Society for IT Managers – SOCITM – annual survey of local authority web sites)
- Improved communications unit intranet pages with regular monthly updates taking place for staff to access

### **Guidelines & Protocols**

- Delivered new media and publicity guidelines – approved by Cabinet and Corporate Management Team
- Delivered draft emergency planning media protocols

### **Delivering Against Priorities**

- Development dedicated team member portfolio areas to support the Directorates and promote key services and corporate priorities

# Scrutiny Panel Value for Money (vfm) Assessment

## Reason for considering / assessing this service

In order to demonstrate the value for money the council obtains from the central communications unit and associated resource.

## How does this service support the priorities of the council?

The unit supports all council priorities across all directorates and service areas.

In order to ensure this approach is effective the team has a portfolio map that aligns key council priorities to individual staff portfolios – **see Appendix 3**. These will be reviewed annually.

## COSTS

What does this service cost us? Gross revenue budget Capital Budget ( If applicable)	<b>£493,636 (08/09)</b>	<b>£416,369 (09/10)</b>
How this is distributed:		
<b>Employee related expenses</b> (Salary costs, Internal/External training etc)	<b>£304,338 (08/09)</b>	<b>£330,563 (09/10)</b>
<b>Premises related expenses</b> (Energy/Water/Accommodation recharges)		
<b>Transport related expenses</b> (Vehicle, fuel, public transport, car allowances etc.)	<b>£51 (08/09)</b>	<b>£52 (09/10)</b>
<b>Supplies and Services</b> (Furniture, Professional Fees, Insurances, Advertising)	<b>£108,571 (08/09)</b>	<b>£3,629 (09/10)</b> This reduction is largely made up of an £80k savings target against marketing and communications activity for the whole council, but set against the communications unit's budget, plus other savings such as an £8k cut in Team Spirit in 2009/10.
<b>Other</b> (link into AES / Gershon)	<b>£80,676 (08/09)</b>	<b>£82,125 (09/10)</b>
<b>Income – Fees and Charges</b>	<b>£40,000 (08/09)</b>	<b>£40,000 (09/10)</b>
<b>- Other Income</b> (Include Grant income, CSS Income)	<b>£500,191 (08/09)</b>	<b>£500,191 (09/10)</b>

## How does this compare to other authorities?

### 1.Comparison with our Nearest Local Authorities

Walsall invests less in communications than most if not all local authorities in the West Midlands and its nearest 15 comparative Authorities – see **Appendix 1** for more details.

As mentioned, Walsall has one of the smallest local government communications units, both in the West Midlands and across Mets, with 7.5 members of staff.

By comparison, Wolverhampton has 27 staff, Dudley Council has 19.5 staff and Sandwell Council has 17 staff in their central teams.

This hasn't, however, affected the level of outputs on items such as press releases and media enquiries handled. In fact, the following table shows that locally only Sandwell have distributed more press releases and only Birmingham have managed more media enquiries.

### Resource & Output Comparisons – West Midlands Local Authorities

Authority	Staff in Central Comms	Comms Staff in Services	Central Comms Budget	Full Comms Spend for Authority	Informed Residents 2006/07*	No. of press releases distributed in 2008	No. of media enquiries managed in 2008
Walsall	7.5	7 in marketing team, other broadly related officers in services	£416k (includes salaries)	-	33.4%*	982	1955

**Please note that information provided by other local authorities was provided in confidence and so has been removed from the public version of this document. No information relating to Walsall Council has been removed.**

\* Score for 'percentage of residents who feel informed about the Council's services and benefits', BVPI survey 2006/07. Research by Ipsos MORI on behalf of the Local Government Association's 'Reputation' project demonstrates the link between those authorities who invest most in communications are those that have the most informed, hence satisfied, residents.

See **Appendix 1** for additional budget benchmarking statistics

Walsall Council's communications unit will cost the council £416k in 2009/10.

It will bring in £20k income from the Walsall Partnership and a further £20k is set as an income target against advertising in Walsall Pride.

It is estimated that 70% of the unit's time is taken up with media relations management, press releases and responding to media enquiries, therefore costing the council approximately £287k.

The remaining 30% is taken up with activities including planning, campaign development, meetings, development work and administration. It is estimated that these elements will cost the council £129k in 2009/10.

Costs for procuring these services externally can be supplied if required.

## PERFORMANCE DATA

What is the CPA rating of this service and how has it changed over the last 3 years?  
(if applicable)

No CPA rating exists for this service but the effective communication of the Council's priorities, services and events contributes the council's overall CPA rating on a number of levels, as referenced on **pages 4-5**.

What BVPI/LPI does this service have to demonstrate vfm?

- Informed resident BVPI as at 2007/07 – 33.4%

National research indicates that those council's with the most informed residents are those who deliver a comprehensive A-Z guide to council services to every home each year. Walsall does not. An investment bid was put in to deliver this activity for 2009/10 but the bid was unsuccessful.

- A local set has been developed and is measured quarterly via Directorate Performance Boards - see **Appendix 2**

### **Hard outputs for 2008**

- Press releases generated/delivered – **982**

- Media enquiries managed - **1,955**

- **This puts the unit in the top 5% of local government communications units**

(source – Liza Greaves local government best practice benchmarking group 2008, sample size 51 local authorities)

- **This has been delivered with one of the smallest central teams across metropolitan authorities in the UK. The team is the smallest in the West Midlands\***

(\*source IDeA Peer Communications Review Nov 2008 - see **Appendix 1** for benchmarking statistics with our nearest 15 comparative Authorities)

What is in the Beacon Index?

N/A

Is this service on target to deliver efficiencies identified in their service plan? (If not, what corrective action has been taken?)

Yes – in the 2008/09 financial year the unit was set a £20k income target against partnership support, this was achieved.

Additionally, a £20k income target was set against securing advertising fees in Walsall Pride's four annual editions. This was on target with over £15k being secured after three editions but the fourth and final edition was pulled due to in-year budget pressures making it impossible to hit this target.

What control measures are in place?

- Directorate Performance Boards review unit's scorecards and other key corporate financial and staff performance measures.
- Individual targets are set for all team members (using a portfolio model of Council priority areas. These are reviewed and evaluated at individual IPM's every 6-months.
- The unit is currently undergoing a review by Audit that will also see these measures reviewed.
- Our control measures were also assessed as a part of the IDeA Peer Communications Review in November 2008. A copy of the full report is available.

**QUESTION?**  
**How does this compare to other authorities?**

See performance data above for detail of the comparison.

## QUALITY OF SERVICE

How does this service identify and evidence the quality of service provided:-

### **1. IDeA Peer Communications Review – November 2008**

*“The council can identify that communications-activity has good outcomes – evidenced by performance information and recognised by the public through surveys. There are positive achievements and success stories to tell. In addition, we were told by a number of interviewees that public consultation is excellent with little negative feedback from residents around engagement. The council needs to ensure that it recognises and celebrates all these achievements.”*

### **2. West Midlands Local Government Heads of Communications Group – undertakes regular benchmarking activity**

A range of performance measures and service deliverables and outcomes are reviewed and measured at these bi-monthly groups.

This intelligence gathering opportunity has delivered some of the comparative data in this document.

Other added benefits of membership and active involvement in this group have been shared training and development sessions generating efficiencies for Walsall and neighbouring authorities, skills sharing and agreements for ‘loaning’ staff in the event of major emergencies.

### **3. National Benchmarking Group**

Walsall, as a member authority, are able to access contacts, benchmarking statistics, service quality comparisons and ask/respond to questions raised by peers across over 250 local government communications units.

This channel and resource allows us to review and improve our own activity and processes in order to ensure ongoing best practice communications by understanding and learning lessons from other authorities

### **4. LGComms Group Membership**

Another information sharing pool and network that allows us to monitor and adapt our performance, activities and processes against research based best practice.

Additional benefits include Walsall's Head of Communications being invited to talk about corporate communications at a national conference to be held in Coventry in March 2009. This delivers profile and reputation building opportunities for Walsall across national local authorities. Walsall's work in this area has been recognised by our peers and that has led to the invitation.

### **5. Award Nominations**

Walsall Pride gained external endorsement for its high quality when, in November 2008, it was shortlisted to the final three in the CorpComms Awards 2008 in the ‘Best Publication’ category having faced competition from both private and public sector organisations.

A social services DVD managed by the team was also short listed for an Association of Social Care Communicators communications award in October 2008.

These award nominations are external endorsements from peers of excellence in some areas of our work.

It is worth pointing out that more award entries would have been submitted in 2008/09 but the unit's budget constraints have prevented this.

#### PI / comparable data:-

- The Best Value Performance Indicator for 'informed residents' stood at 33.4% in 2006/07
- See the comparable data table on **page 10** for benchmarking statistics on press release and media enquiry activity

#### Achievement of recognised standards:-

*"Walsall has a relatively small communications team located at the corporate centre which is adequately resourced to undertake the media management work. The conclusion of the peer team, from the onsite review and data we have studied, is that the role of media management is performed to a good standard. In addition, we discovered a real consensus and enthusiasm to make change and improve communications."*

IDeA Peer Communications Review Team – Nov 2008

#### Employee & Customer Satisfaction:

##### - IDeA Peer Communications Review (Nov 2008)

Obtained favourable views from some employees, the local media, our partners and elected members from cross party

##### - Internal Communications – Staff Survey

An internal communications staff survey will be conducted in 2009, working alongside the Council's consultation officer (Anna Sansom) – plans exist to look for resources to fund an internal communications officers who would conduct this activity

##### Walsall Pride - Readers Survey (Summer 2008)

The results were very encouraging, especially given that this was the first of the new-look editions and that some residents were seeing it for the first time, due to historic distribution problems in some parts of the borough.

- Overall, 72% of respondents rated the magazine between 'eight' and '10' out of 10
- 92% rated the appearance of the magazine as 'very good' or 'good'
- 89% rated the content as either 'very good' or 'good'.

Only 28% of residents stated that they received Walsall Pride every time, and 6% said that the March edition was the first that they had ever seen.

A switch to a new, Royal Mail distribution system from Spring 2008 has remedied this issue.

Much of the feedback from residents said that they enjoyed the publication and now looked forward to future editions. Some reader suggestions were incorporated into future editions.

Additionally, an impact equality assessment of Walsall Pride is planned in 2009.

How does the service plan to engage with the public / customers in the future?

The Council's proposed new marketing and communications strategy will align with, and incorporate, the Council's new consultation strategy to ensure synergy, joined-up activity and decisions on communications that are based on what our residents want.

How does the service effect the 6 strands of equality (Age; Disability; Gender; Race; Religion or Belief; Sexual Orientation)

### **1. Press Releases**

Regular press releases are generated by the Communications Unit in support of equalities work, and have included:

- Walsall Disabled Council (DIAL) – November 2008
- Check & send system at libraries for concessionary travel – November 2008
- Illuminations accessibility arrangements – July 2008
- Shop-mobility – February 2008

**2. Team Spirit** (bi-monthly staff magazine, 6,500 hard copies distributed via pay slips)  
Each edition now carries an equalities update.

### **3. All Staff Weekly Email Bulletin**

Regularly carries equalities information and news on training and events

**4. Walsall Pride** (quarterly resident magazine, distributed to 105,000 homes via Royal Mail)  
Carries equalities information targeted at residents. Additionally, we have a list of residents who have requested the publication in alternative formats and we service these requests.

### **5. Other Media**

Emailed Walsall Society for the Blind (who organise a weekly talking newspaper) asking whether they'd like to go on our distribution list – they agreed and now carry our content.

Additionally, the 'read aloud' software on the Council web site, provides wider access.

### **6. Events & Other Communication Channels**

A consultation event for elders from various ethnic groups in late 2007 revealed that many did not know about social services or did not know how to access help from social services. It was suggested by the group that we produce a DVD in various languages about the help available from social services and details of how to get in touch with us.

The DVD was produced using a range of local volunteers from various ethnic groups and social care and health staff. The DVD has been widely distributed and publicised to various local venues and was well received by the elders themselves when we showed it to them at a follow up consultation event in summer 2008.

It was also nominated for an Association of Social Care Communicators communications award in October 2008. (supported by a press release)

### **7. Translation Services**

In response to a review of older people's services by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) that we were not doing enough to communicate with people who did not speak English as a first language or as their preferred language, we joined up with a translation agency to have our key social care leaflets translated into 5 different Asian languages. The leaflets have been

produced and checked by both the translation agency and local volunteers who speak the various languages. The leaflets are now being distributed widely to various local organisations.

There is a very robust system in Social Care and Inclusion for translating information for service users on request. This includes information in various languages (printed and audio on cassette tape or CD), Braille, large print, audio cassette tape or CD in English and we are also in the process of putting information into British Sign Language on DVD and web link for our website and the Walsall Deaf People's Centre website and their video screens in their bar and social centre.

### **8. Reader's Group**

The reader's group is a group of service users and members of the public who volunteer to read and comment on drafts of our social care leaflets before they are distributed to the public. The group comments on whether the leaflets are in plain English, whether they communicate our key messages clearly and whether the design and materials used are suitable. They also advise on distribution and how we can make the leaflets more accessible. Membership of the group is constantly being reviewed to ensure we are including a wide range of people – with a range of abilities and from a range of ethnic groups.

Additionally, the team have attended meetings of the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) Group.

Is there a higher or lower participation in take up of the service from any of the six groups?

No obvious conclusions to draw. Further work will be delivered as a part of our equalities activity in 2009/10.

Does the service have any negative or positive impacts on any of the six groups?

Yes. By the very nature of our role in identifying specific audiences in the communications plans that we develop we seek to ensure that all groups of all ages, ability, gender, beliefs or sexual orientation are fully communicated with and we make every attempt to identify channels to do so.

### **QUESTION?**

**How does this compare to other authorities / service providers?**

No direct performance indicators exist in order to accurately measure this activity.

## OFFICERS TO COMPLETE FINDINGS OF THE ASSESSMENT BASED ON EVIDENCE GATHERED:

### *(Brief statement summarising the view of the members conducting the assessment)*

Walsall has a small central communications team delivering more and more, year on year, with decreasing budgets each year.

The team have less resource than our peers - see **Appendix 1** for the resources available at other local authorities deemed our 'next nearest comparators'. Despite this the team achieves some excellent outcomes in terms of positive media coverage, planned campaigns, levels of service and turnaround of projects through a range of good quality communications channels, some gaining national recognition through industry award nominations.

The team delivers significant outputs – the level of press releases generated places the team in the top 5% of a 2008 Best practice survey of 51 local authorities.

The team believes that they deliver value for money in terms of the delivered outputs and outcomes evidenced earlier. This view was endorsed by the IDeA:

*“The peer team was impressed by the communications team, recognising a high level of ambition and wide range of skills and competencies. Stakeholders reported a variety of successful outcomes achieved by the team.”*

The challenge for the team will be to continue delivering these outputs and outcomes against a backdrop of a reduced budget but rising expectations and challenging priorities.

*“The team found many positives during the review, not least the competence of the current communications and marketing teams, excellent community/partner consultation and a real desire to improve. These need to be harnessed to take communications within the council to the next level and to meet the future challenges, such as Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA), head on with confidence.”*

IDeA Communications Peer Review Team – Nov 2008

### It is our view that this service, in terms of vfm is:-



**Delivering services in an efficient and effective manner and demonstrating vfm in all areas**

**X**



**Generally delivering an efficient and effective service and demonstrating vfm but needs to address the following issues:**

1.

2.

3.

4.



**In the majority of areas examined is not able to evidence that service delivery is efficient and effective or that vfm is being delivered. Our recommendation is that....**



# Scrutiny Panel Value for Money (vfm) Assessment – The Communications Unit

## Forward Looking Statement

### 1. The 'Positives'

Walsall has a small central communications team punching above its weight.

*"The team found many positives during the review, not least the competence of the current communications and marketing teams, excellent community/partner consultation and a real desire to improve. These need to be harnessed to take communications within the council to the next level and to meet the future challenges, such as Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA), head on with confidence."*

IDeA Communications Peer Review Team – Nov 2008

### 2. The importance of Perceptions

Both the new Comprehensive Area Assessment framework and the bi-annual place survey bring even greater opportunities and challenges for our communications with 'perceptions' being measured and key to overall outcomes.

Details of the new national performance framework [Comprehensive Area Assessment \(CAA\)](#) effective from 1 April 2009 were confirmed on 10 February 2009. It places great emphasis on the importance of 'The views and expressions of local people are key sources of evidence for CAA.' Para 112

CAA recognises that *'..councils have a duty to involve local people and the organisations that represent them in decision making. By considering how well local partners engage local people, CAA will assess how well these duties are carried out. It also seeks to encourage communities to take opportunities to influence local decisions and thus help enhance local democracy. In reviewing the evidence, we will be looking at how effective engagement is, by understanding:*

- how well councils and their partners know and engage with their communities,*
- the extent to which the priority outcomes for the area have been defined with the involvement of communities;*
- how well communities have been involved in assessing whether priority outcomes have been delivered; and*
- the effectiveness of local partners in coordinating community engagement and communicating the impact on their decisions.*

*Paras 48-49 (extract)*

- have sustainable arrangements, mechanisms and tools to engage local people, set priorities and improve the area and people's lives;*

- *encourage empowerment, giving people a greater sense of influence over local decisions;*
- *are sensitive to the particular communication or other needs which minority or marginalised groups have;*
- *feedback and make changes as a result of engagement and inform people of these.*

*Para 51*

So CAA will review the communication, engagement and feedback mechanisms available locally to residents and other key stakeholders in the borough and use it to judge how successfully the council and its partners are tackling identified key priorities and hence delivering improved outcomes. Key evidence will include the new Place Survey, the survey of Third Sector organisations, Business surveys, Citizens Panel, local meetings, focus groups, and the councils many other communication and engagement channels.

Therefore the role and importance of the council as a good communicator and listener is exemplified by the ever increasing emphasis on perception based evidence. Bearing in mind that, as national research shows, there is a very strong correlation between those Councils who are good at keeping their communities informed about their services and service improvements and those Councils whose reputation is perceived positively by their communities.

A number of the Council's key priorities are based on perception indicators and are targeted within the Local Area Agreement; notably perceptions of NI 1 community cohesion, NI 4 influencing decision making, NI 5 local area satisfaction, NI 7 positive influence on Third Sector success and NI 17, perceptions of Anti-social behaviour. These in addition to many other LAA priorities have actions within their delivery plans that rely heavily on communication actions to improve performance. In addition across the whole National Indicator Set (NIS) there are another fourteen Place survey measures; as well as a number of other NIS measures that measure perceptions; for example business perception of trading standards (NI 182), the Childrens 'Tell Us' survey measures (NI 50, 69, 110, 115, and 199) to name but a few of a wide range of measures whose performance will be directly or indirectly influenced through communication initiatives.

### **Managing Reputation**

The Local Government Association's 'reputation' project outlines the key drivers for improving resident perceptions, based upon national research by Ipsos MORI. Five key areas need to be delivered against effectively in order to inform and satisfy residents – they are:

- Effective media management
- Publish a regular council resident magazine
- Brand management (ensure the council brand is always linked to services)
- Good internal communications
- Provide an A-Z guide to council services

### **3. A New Marketing & Communications Strategy for the Council**

The new draft marketing & communications (MarComms) strategy for the

council will help to deliver even greater value for money. Its proposals (due to go to CMT in March 2009) include a virtual MarComms team, structure and delivery process, as a part of a broader strategy, to ensure that all communications resource across the Council is geared toward delivering outcomes aligned to the Council's priorities and ensure continued value for money.

#### **4. Internal Communications**

It is imperative that the Council secures a full time, experienced internal communications professional to ensure that all staff are informed, knowledgeable and satisfied with the flow of the information that is important for them.

They would develop and deliver an internal communications strategy that would see improvements to all channels, including the intranet, and other activity as highlighted an internal communications staff survey they would deliver annually. This view is endorsed by the IDeA:

*"Walsall would benefit from a dedicated officer to support internal communication. This officer will need to work with the Head of Human Resources to identify key challenges, messages and develop a communication plan for the next 6-12 months. This plan should cover such issues as single status, recruitment, and sickness absence. The internal communications plan should be linked to external communications on those issues and others, through the communications strategy and campaigns. This will help deliver more effective messaging and value for money."*

IDeA Communications Review Team – Nov 2008

Our staff are our greatest assets and can be our communications ambassadors if internal communications are effectively managed.

#### **5. Partner-wide Communications**

There is recognition in the team for the need to fully exploit the opportunities offered by more joined-up activity with our partners.

This already happens with the Walsall Partnership – the team provides a marketing & PR service for the Partnership, ensuring positive profile in each edition of Walsall Pride, delivering targeted media activity and developing and delivering proactive campaigns such as Travel to Work Differently.

This activity will be expanded across the borough when the Council's head of communications leads for both the Council and the Partnership at regular Walsall Partners Communications Boards commencing in March 2009.

Additionally, the communications teams from council's, police, fire and ambulance across the Black Country are currently exploring reciprocal cover in the event of a major emergency.

## 6. New Media & Social Networking

Social networking has created new ways to communicate and share information plus consult with a range of groups. Social networking websites are being used regularly by millions of people, and it now seems that social networking will be an enduring part of everyday life. The main types of social networking services are those which contain directories of some categories (such as former classmates), means to connect with friends (usually with self-description pages), and recommender systems linked to trust.

Popular social media sites are:

[MySpace](#), [Facebook](#), YouTube, Bebo, Twitter, Flickr (photo sharing), [Tagged](#) and Wordpress (blogging platform)

### The Growth of Social Media in the UK

- 17.8 million social web users
- 5.8 million of them upload videos
- 8% of those upload videos every day
- 7.4 million say they listen to podcasts

but

- 36% of adults lack computer access
- 42% lack web access
- 80% have no interest in publishing information on the web

(Source - Universal McCann, April 2008)

Our work to date in this area includes:

- Identifying the opportunity within the new marketing & communications strategy for the council
- Running internal social media workshops – a joint cabinet/CMT session is also being planned
- Birmingham City University - We are also underway with a three-month project with four 3<sup>rd</sup> year marketing students from Birmingham City University and we have tasked them with developing and delivering social marketing opportunities around BSF, as we see it as a key channel for engaging in effective two way communications with key stakeholders such as young people.
- Protocols will be required to manage the growth of this medium and a Cabinet champion will be sought
- Registered the Council on micro blogging website, Twitter

## **7. External Communications**

Ongoing investment in communications is vital if the council is to manage its reputation as effectively as it can.

Those local authorities who invest most in communications are also the highest performing authorities. Their residents are better informed and as a consequence they are more satisfied.

Insufficient investment in communications will have the opposite effect.

**Finally, the following, statistics underline why continued and enhanced investment in communications is necessary in order for effective delivery against our key campaigns:**

- Nationally one in four people rated their local council as they worst agency at providing information, compared to the other local public and private sector communicators
- Only 5% of residents know a great deal about what their council does.
- Just 1% of people would talk highly of their council unprompted

Source: Ipsos MORI 2007

## MEMBERS TO COMPLETE FINDINGS OF THE ASSESSMENT BASED ON EVIDENCE GATHERED:

*(Brief statement summarising the view of the members conducting the assessment)*

This is a comprehensive assessment of the communications unit that enables, as far as practically possible, comparison to similar local authorities.

The assessment is underpinned by a very recent I&DeA peer review that supports the conclusions that the Communications Team deliver a value for money service. The only comparison that is not made in this assessment is a VFM assessment against the cost of externalising the service; while this would be useful information to assess, it would be necessary to assess the benefit of local knowledge that is inherent with an internal team.

It is our view that this service, in terms of vfm is:-



Delivering services in an efficient and effective manner and demonstrating vfm in all areas

X



Generally delivering an efficient and effective service and demonstrating vfm but needs to address the following issues:

1.

2.

3.

4.



In the majority of areas examined is not able to evidence that service delivery is efficient and effective or that vfm is being delivered. Our recommendation is that....

## APPENDIX 1: IDeA Communications Peer Review - Nearest Neighbour Comparison

Please note that information provided by other local authorities was given in confidence and so has been removed from the public record of this document. The list of comparator boroughs was generated using CiPFA Nearest Neighbour tool, October 2008 and responses were received from 14 local authorities. The information was compared against the column headings in the table below, which shows Walsall's response. No information relating to Walsall Council has been removed.

Nearest Neighbour ranking*	Authority	CPA rating	Informed residents 06/07**	Comms structure	Staff in central comms (FTEs)	Comms staff in services (FTEs)	Central comms budget	Full comms spend for authority
-	Walsall	3*	33.4%	Hybrid	7.5	Separate marketing team, plus other broadly related 'comms' staff in services	£452k (£148k exc salaries)	-

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\*\* Score for 'percentage of residents who feel informed about the council's services and benefits', BVPI survey 2006/07. LGA research across all authorities has found a strong correlation between 'perceived value for money' with residents overall satisfaction with the council. The strongest driver of 'perceived value for money' is effective information about council services – ie residents who feel informed by their council tend to appreciate how it offers value for money – and thus are more satisfied with the council overall

## APPENDIX 2: Locally Generated Performance Scorecard for the Communications Unit

PI	Owner	Data Provider(s)	Reporting Frequency	2007/08 out-turn	Q1 2008/09 Profile Target	Q1 2008/09 intervention	Q1 2008/09 Actual	2008/09 Annual target	Q1 RAG
COM 001 - Number of local media releases	Darren Caveney	Newsflash media monitoring	Qtr.	900	200	150	271	800	G
COM 002 - Number of trade and specialist media releases	Darren Caveney	„	Qtr.	15	40	Less than 20	TBC	220	TBC
COM 003 - % Media enquiries responded to within 7 working days	Darren Caveney	„	Qtr.	100%	100%	less than 90%	100% (403 enquiries)	100%	G
COM 004 - £ Advertising income generated by Walsall Pride	Darren Caveney	in-house financials	Qtr.	£8,000	£5,000	£3,500	£3,680	£20,000	
COM 005 - % total press coverage that is positive	Darren Caveney	Newsflash media monitoring	Qtr.	n/a	More than 60%	50%	73.00%	More than 60%	G
COM 006 - % total press coverage that is neutral	Darren Caveney	„	Qtr.	n/a	Less than 20%	30%	15%	Less than 20%	G
COM 007 - % total press coverage that is negative	Darren Caveney	„	Qtr.	n/a	Less than 20%	30%	12%	Less than 20%	G
COM 008 - Average score for "overall rating" of Walsall Pride from the annual readers survey	Darren Caveney		Annual - Mar	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a		n/a

## APPENDIX 3: Communications Individual Team Member Portfolio Map

### Communications Unit - Portfolio Areas

