Cheltenham Borough Council

Cabinet - May 28th, 2002

Best Value Review of Effective Communications

Report of the Director (Economic and Business Improvement)

Report Author : Best Value Officer

1   Summary and recommendation

1.1   This report outlines the findings of the best value review of Effective Communications. It provides an overview of the activities of Cheltenham Borough Council in this area, a vision of what the Council needs to achieve in the future, and recommends a series of actions that are necessary in order to achieve this vision. If it is to be realised in full, there will be some costs attached and changes to current practices required. It should also be noted that the responsibility for actions within the improvement plan may alter with the new management structure and the plan will need to be updated accordingly.

1.2   I therefore recommend that the improvement plan set out in Appendix B of this report is approved.

2   Introduction

2.1   Effective communications are at the heart of modern local government. Indeed there can be little doubt that media handling, public relations, communications and marketing are vital to any organisation of the size and complexity of Cheltenham Borough Council. The Council must have credibility if it is to fulfil its role within the community. If people do not perceive the Council in a good light, they may be less receptive to changes in policies, strategies and services, and less inclined to become involved in partnership arrangements, consultation exercises and the like.

2.2   The review's brief was to focus on the issue of communications in its broadest sense, not just the operational activities of the communications team - though some consideration of these was obviously necessary.

2.3   The review sought to establish :
- how effective the Council is at communicating with its various audiences;
- how adept it is at media handling;
- how well it deals with communications and feedback at the point of delivery;
- how effective it is at consultation;
- what its communications standards are;
- how it deals with corporate branding;

- whether it provides training and support;
- how well it uses internal and external media;
- whether its communications activities support the modernising process; and
- how adequately the Council resources its communications.

But if the review was about any *one* thing, it was about how well the Council engages the public and maintains a mutually beneficial dialogue.

2.4   There is a strong link between communications and the Government's strategy for electronic government, which has the four guiding principles of :
- building services around citizens' choices;
- making government and its services more accessible;
- ensuring that new technology does not create a digital divide; and
- using information more effectively.

Consequently the Council's e-government strategy was used to inform the review and its resultant improvement plan.

2.5   The review commenced in February 2001, when the project brief was approved by the Best Value Management Team (see Appendix A). The intention was to complete the review by the end of December, when the results would have been reported to the Best Value Management Team and the Best Value Forum. During the intervening period the approval structures for Best Value changed, resulting in a slight delay in the reporting of this review. The delay did, however, allow the new Managing Director and Head of Human Resources to have input into the review and improvement plan.

2.6   The project team was made up of the Head of Tourism, the acting Head of E-government, the acting Communications Manager, the Head of Policy & Performance, the Policy & Research Officer and the Best Value Officer. The team was composed in such a way as to ensure sufficient input from those with a knowledge of and responsibility for :
- branding;
- communications;
- consultation;
- e-government;
- marketing; and
- modernisation.

3   Review Methodology

3.1   In accordance with the requirements of Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1999 and Circular 10/99, this review sought to compare and consult on the issue of Effective Communications, to challenge the activities currently being carried out and consider alternative delivery options.

3.2   The question of what should be compared proved difficult for the review team. While some comparison of expenditure was undertaken, it revealed little of note - other than to confirm the rather subjective, idiosyncratic approach taken to resourcing communications amongst the various comparator authorities. Some spend more because they consider good communications a strategic priority, others spend less because they don't. Consequently, it was in a comparison of communications *practices and performance* that most value was found - an approach approved by the Best Value Inspectorate.

3.3   Comparisons were made with a large group of authorities, composed of 80 boroughs and districts, 15 London boroughs, 18 county councils, 15 metropolitans and 32 unitary authorities. They covered subjects such as :
- team budgets and staffing numbers;
- media handling;
- corporate PR;
- research and consultation;
- e-government; and
- internal relations.

3.4   The review team also participated in the Local Government Association survey, 'Communications in Local Government'. This covered:
- corporate priorities and strategies;
- views on communications;
- resources;
- corporate identity;
- media relations;
- internal and external communications;
- assessment of the communications service in local authorities; and
- developing the communications capacity.

3.5   In addition to this, comparisons of practice were made with several of the leading local authorities in the field of local government communications - including the London Borough of Brent, which won the Local Government Chronicle Communications Team of the Year Award in 2001.

3.6   The review also took into account a study by Leeds University, entitled 'Internal Communications in Local Government'. This involved 220 local authorities and covered subjects such as :
- internal communications;
- internal communications resources;
- consulting and involving staff;
- internal strategic communications; and
- internal communications and organisational development.

3.7   The review team also referred to various sources of good practice in the field of communications, and in related fields. The main ones being :
- the IDeA's 'Ideal Local Authority' model (Democratic and Community Engagement criterion);
- information from the DTLR's 'Improving Communications in Local Government' project, involving MORI, communications consultancies Grant Riches and Marina Pirotta and local government specialists INLOGOV;
- the MORI publication, 'Frontiers of Performance in Local Government';
- the Local Government Information Unit's report, 'Benchmarking Civic Papers';
- the Kable report on an e-government service delivery in Cheltenham Borough Council;
- a Public PR report, 'Best Value in Communications'; and
- New Local Government Network guidance on council branding.

3.8   Other documents used as part of this review were :
- the 1999 Best Value review report, 'Complaints and Customer Services';
- the Council's e-government vision and strategy paper, 'Improving Customer Access';
- the results of the 1998 communications audit by JPB Associates Ltd; and
- the Council's current communications strategy.

3.9   The review team also drew upon the new Managing Director's experience. She has worked with a number of different types of organisations and with communications teams and the media at a local and national level. The review team were able to use her knowledge to inform the improvement plan.

3.10   As part of the consultation requirement, a series of 'visioning' exercises were undertaken - with the public, elected members, frontline staff, representatives from the local media and external communications professionals such as Telewest, Target PR and Icon.Net. The main subjects covered were :
- Council image;
- media handling;
- The Clarion;
- use of IT; and
- engaging the public.

3.11   Relevant data was also obtained from Viewpoint exercises undertaken in 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2001. The main subjects covered were :
- The Clarion;
- general communications issues; and
- e-government.

3.12   A questionnaire was sent to local media sources as part of this review. Views on the quality and frequency of the Council's communications were sought from :
- The Gloucestershire Echo;
- BBC Radio Gloucestershire;
- The Citizen;

- Gloucestershire County News Service;
- Severn Sound;
- Cat (now Star) FM;
- The Western Daily Press;
- The South West News Agency; and
- Cheltenham Independent.

3.13   The review team also made use of :
- a 2001 Insight questionnaire to staff, entitled 'Communications and Customer Access';
- the 2001 employee questionnaire, 'Valuing Your Thoughts On Changing The Council';
- feedback from the 'State of Cheltenham' debate; and
- the budget consultation results for 2002/2003.

3.14   To complete the consultation requirement, one-to-one interviews were carried out with elected members and senior officers, in order to build up a picture of the issues surrounding Effective Communications - past, present and future.

3.15   Using data obtained from the comparative and consultative exercises, the review team was able to fundamentally challenge the current method of managing communications corporately. Ideas for alternative means of doing so have been discussed and are outlined in the Improvement Plan (see Appendix B).

3.16   As regards competition, work in this area focused mainly on determining the extent to which the Council currently outsources its communications activities and establishing whether there is additional scope for doing so. Again, the conclusions of the review team on this subject are contained later in the report.
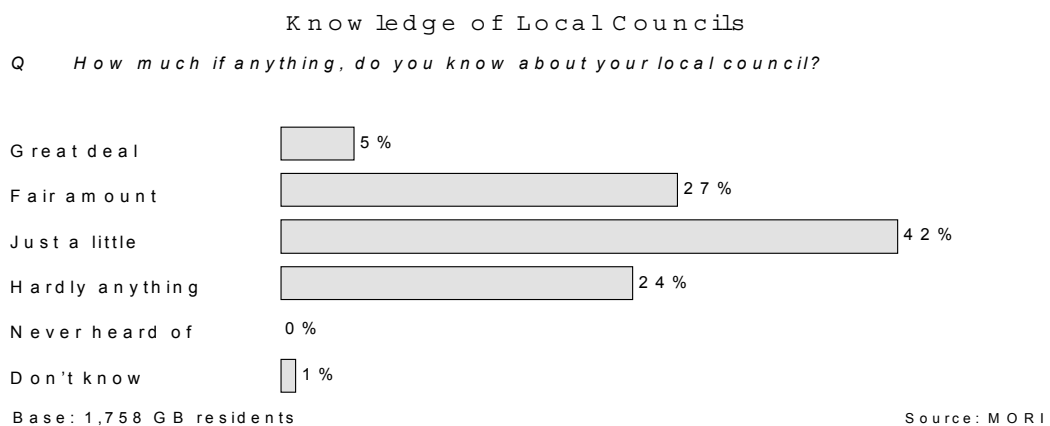
4   National Context

4.1   Before considering the results of the comparison and consultation exercises, it is essential to put Cheltenham Borough Council's performance into some kind of national context. Many studies have been undertaken recently, which show that the issues the Council is facing with its communications are by no means uncommon. A summary of the headline conclusions of those studies follows. It contains findings on :
- knowledge of local councils;
- image of local councils;
- the impact of awareness of service provision;
- perceived importance of local councils;
- preferred involvement with local councils;
- impact of communications;
- keeping residents informed;
- objectives for communications;
- resourcing the communications role;
- types of communications required;
- preferred presentation of information;

- perceptions and readership of council publications;
- internet usage;
- impact of local media coverage; and
- influence of staff on council image.

Cumulatively, these findings should enable the Council to learn from the best practice identified and inform its future approach to communications.

4.2   The chart below, showing findings from the MORI omnibus. It illustrates that the majority of people nationally know little about their local council. This is perhaps not surprising. While parents with children in school, those receiving social services and people living in council housing may tend to have more contact with local councils, others are likely to base perceptions only on "high visibility" environmental services such as street cleaning or refuse collection.

Knowledge of Local Councils

Q   How much if anything, do you know about your local council?

Knowledge	Percentage
Great deal	5 %
Fair amount	27 %
Just a little	42 %
Hardly anything	24 %
Never heard of	0 %
Don't know	1 %

Base: 1,758 GB residents   Source: MORI

4.3   This lack of awareness about local councils is likely to be a deep-rooted cause of poor satisfaction ratings. In most research conducted in this field, there is clear correlation between how familiar people are with a product or service and how favourable they are towards it - demonstrating that promotion and communication   of council services to raise awareness can improve public perceptions.
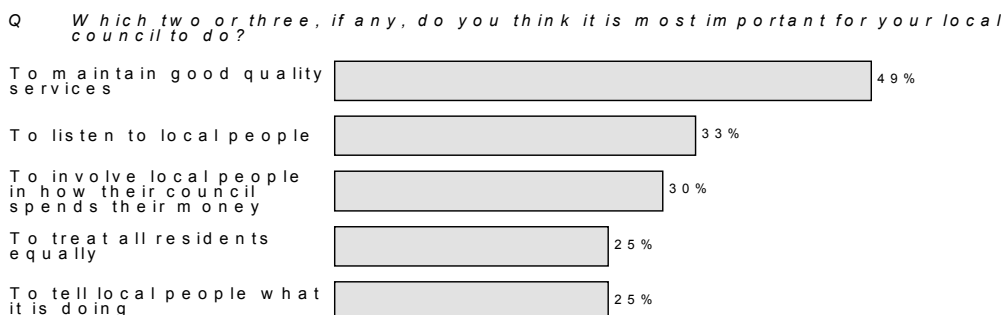
4.4   Information from the People's Panel, a national survey, shows that one in three perceive public services as "friendly" and hardworking", although the same number think of them as "bureaucratic". The words "openness" and "honesty" do not tend to be associated with public services (only 9% and 14% applying these words).

4.5   Generally, most of those surveyed agree that their council needs to make more effort to find out what local people want. It is no surprise then that more agree than disagree that their council is remote, impersonal and out of touch. When asked why they feel their local council is remote and impersonal, most say they are unsure who is responsible for service provision or accountable for their Council's performance. A lack of knowledge about council activities and difficulties in contacting the council are also put forward as reasons.
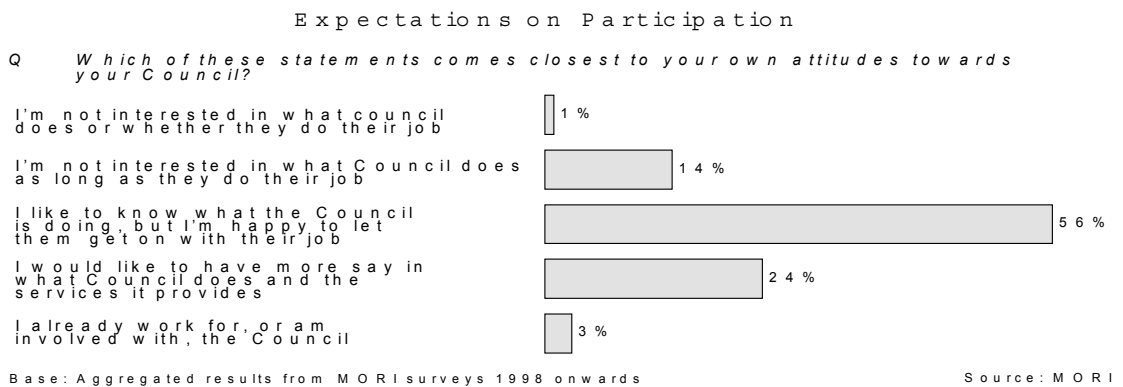
4.6   Findings nationally suggest that regard for council services is rather confused, because of a lack of distinction over who is responsible for providing specific services. This confusion is not only between different councils, but also between other local public service providers, such as the police and health authorities.

4.7 As stated previously, researchers often find a correlation between how familiar people are with a service or organisation and how favourable they are towards it. This lack of clarity over who provides local public services is likely to impact on levels of familiarity with local councils, leading to lower favourability. This is most pronounced in two-tier areas, such as Cheltenham.

4.8 The effect of raising awareness of which services are provided by local authorities generally leads to higher levels of satisfaction. For example, it has been found that placing the BVPI general satisfaction question on overall performance by local authorities, after questions on service delivery, produces significantly higher levels of satisfaction than asking the question "cold".

4.9 This was illustrated by a survey undertaken by Stockton-on-Tees Council. When residents were asked up front how satisfied they were with the way the council was running the Borough, there was a net satisfaction score of +33. When a similar question was asked at the end of the questionnaire, the net satisfaction score increased to +62.

4.10 This emphasises the point that local authorities are typically rated far better on service delivery than on overall image. Many studies show that, when prompted, most residents agree that the overall quality of council services is good, but they still do not hold their particular council in high esteem.

4.11 According to a recent report, one in ten people consider their local council as one of the four or five most important public services - far less than the number citing their GP (47%), NHS Hospitals (38%), Police (32%) and refuse collection (25%). The fact that refuse collection is more likely to be considered a public service, as well as a more important service than the local council, indicates the importance residents place on council's individual services - particularly the visible services.

4.12 In consequence, the most effective way of ensuring the council is perceived 'well' would be to focus our communication role on functions which the public value most highly. All the evidence nationally, both quantitative and qualitative, suggests that service provision is the key driver of people's opinions of local councils. Data from the People's Panel highlights also, how good quality services are prioritised over other council roles.

Expectations of Councils - Top 5

Q   Which two or three, if any, do you think it is most important for your local council to do?

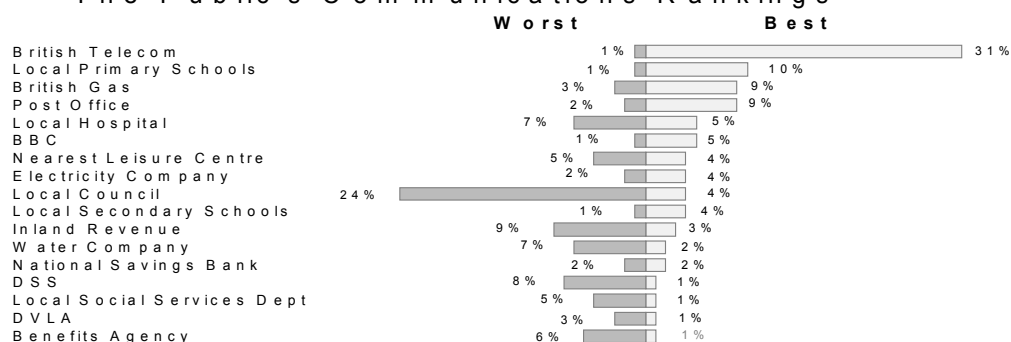|	
To maintain good quality services	49%
To listen to local people	33%
To involve local people in how their council spends their money	30%
To treat all residents equally	25%
To tell local people what it is doing	25%

4.13   However, findings from the Best Value Pilots indicate that councils are generally falling somewhat short of people's expectations on the critical issue of service provision. While 5% feel that the services provided by their local council generally exceed their expectations, over one in three think that they fall short. This may not be due solely to service deficiency, but in a failure to close the gap between operational performance and public perception through effective communications.

4.14   Another key finding is that any communications with local residents should reflect the levels of involvement people wish to have with their local authority. National research shows that most people are content to take a passive interest in the activities of their local council. The majority of local residents, in all local areas surveyed, indicate they like to know what their council is doing, but are happy to let it get on with the job. The chart below, showing aggregated data from MORI surveys for local authorities since 1998, indicates that over half prefer to continue taking a passive role, while only one in four want further involvement.

Expectations on Participation

Q   Which of these statements comes closest to your own attitudes towards your Council?

Statement	Percentage
I'm not interested in what council does or whether they do their job	1 %
I'm not interested in what Council does as long as they do their job	14 %
I like to know what the Council is doing, but I'm happy to let them get on with their job	56 %
I would like to have more say in what Council does and the services it provides	24 %
I already work for, or am involved with, the Council	3 %

Base: Aggregated results from MORI surveys 1998 onwards   Source: MORI

4.15   According to recent national research, half the population feel that there is a difference in the provision of useful information to users between public and private sector organisations. Over twice as many feel that the public sector is worse, rather than better than the private sector at providing information (30% compared to 14%).

4.16   Local councils are thought of as particularly poor information providers. A survey by the Post Office in 1997 showed that one in four people rated their local council as "worst at providing information" - reflecting both low awareness of the many different activities Councils are involved in and a need for authorities to work harder at keeping residents informed about what they do.
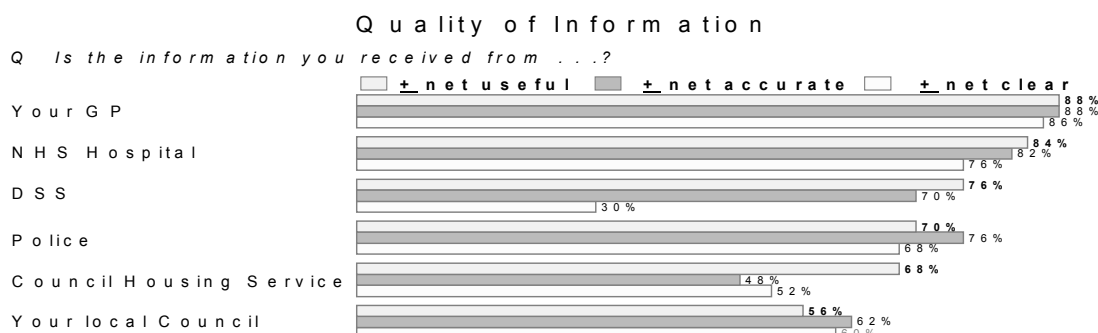
The Public's Communications Rankings

Worst — Best

	Worst	Best
British Telecom	1 %	31 %
Local Primary Schools	1 %	10 %
British Gas	3 %	9 %
Post Office	2 %	9 %
Local Hospital	7 %	5 %
BBC	1 %	5 %
Nearest Leisure Centre	5 %	4 %
Electricity Company	2 %	4 %
Local Council	24 %	4 %
Local Secondary Schools	1 %	4 %
Inland Revenue	9 %	3 %
Water Company	7 %	2 %
National Savings Bank	2 %	2 %
DSS	8 %	1 %
Local Social Services Dept	5 %	1 %
DVLA	3 %	1 %
Benefits Agency	6 %	1 %

4.17   This survey also showed a clear correlation between communications and various ratings of the organisation and the services it provides. Well informed users are more likely to think that the quality of service they receive is good, gives them genuine value for money and is less remote and impersonal. It follows that improving communications can have a positive impact on these specific image ratings and also on overall satisfaction levels. However, it should also be borne in mind that this survey was undertaken prior to the Best Value regime, which placed a statutory duty on councils to produce an annual performance plan, containing details of how their services perform against statutory and discretionary indicators and in comparison to services provided by other authorities.

4.18   Findings from the People's Panel research also raise questions about the quality of information produced by local councils. The chart below shows that the usefulness, accuracy and clarity of information received from local authorities tends to be rated lower than information from other public sector agencies.

Quality of Information

Q   Is the information you received from . . .?

± net useful   ± net accurate   ± net clear

|	net useful	net accurate	net clear
Your GP	88 %	88 %	86 %
NHS Hospital	84 %	82 %	76 %
DSS	76 %	70 %	30 %
Police	70 %	76 %	68 %
Council Housing Service	68 %	48 %	52 %
Your local Council	56 %	62 %	60 %

4.19   Historically, local government has been weak at communicating with the public. Indeed, when the communications performance of a wide range of public sector bodies was compared in 1997, local government was singled out as the worst performer by some margin. At a time when local government is seeking to re-invigorate itself and engage more with the people it serves, this is a key finding.

4.20   It has also been proven how specific council communications can impact upon local residents' perceptions. The chart overleaf shows how residents' perceptions of how well informed they felt and their overall satisfaction with their authority (in this case, Leicester) became more negative as expenditure on the circulation of the council's magazine 'Link' was cut.

Performance and Information Provision

Net score
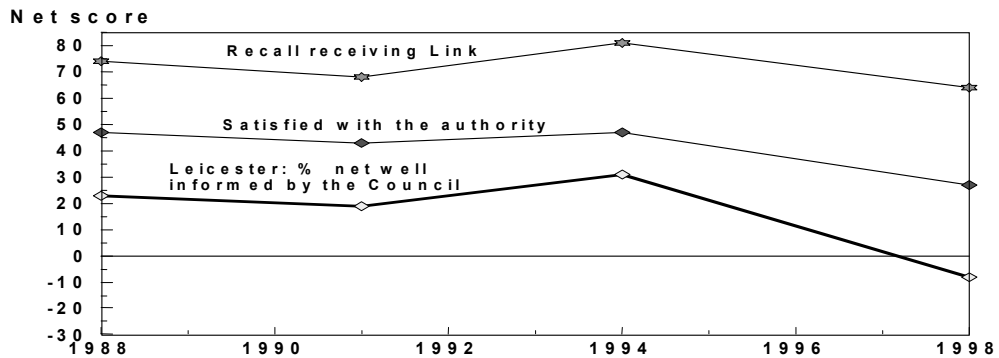
4.21   It has also been shown how Communications can play a vital role in correcting misconceptions that residents often have. For example, the fear of particular crimes (e.g. house burglary) far outweighs actual crime rates. Increasing the amount of accurate information that residents receive can help to alleviate those fears. Effective communications can also help to challenge inaccurate stereotypes of local councils, as well as improving residents' familiarity and engagement with their local council.

4.22   When surveyed, half the respondents on the People's Panel felt that their local council kept them either very or fairly well informed (50%). This is far lower than the numbers of users who felt informed by companies such as BT (89%), but is also lower than some council-run services such as local primary schools (89%), adult education (79%), refuse collection (64%) and council housing (63%) - again highlighting the lack of awareness over who provides the information. This may reflect a lack of corporate communications and a weak corporate image.

4.23   Residents nationally have generally felt more informed over the last few years, with District/Borough councils continuing to be better rated than other types of authority - reflecting the relative closeness residents feel there is with their District/Borough council, as opposed to their County in two-tier areas.

4.24   Research at MORI has shown that adequately resourcing the central communications function within an authority has a beneficial impact on how well local residents feel informed by that authority. This patterns seems to correlate well to a certain point, when there is a levelling out - after which increasing the number of staff does not have such a notable impact. The data shown is based on 30 District councils.
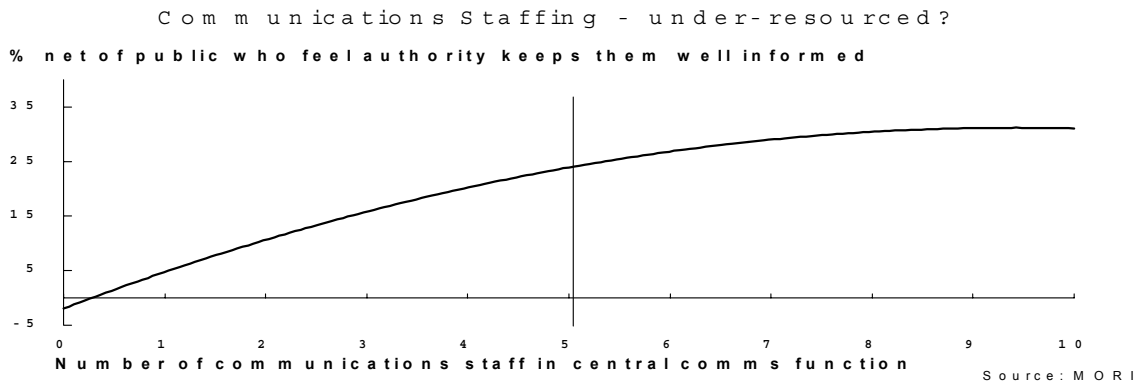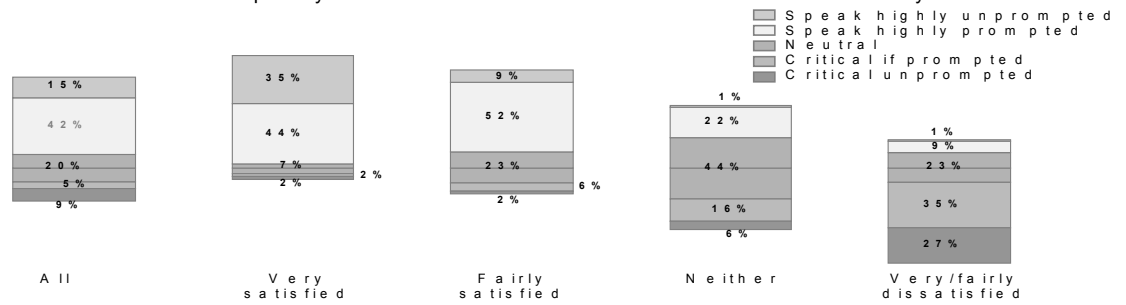
4.25   There are various demands and requirements for information from local councils.
        It has been found that, by focusing on these requirements, councils may achieve
        higher ratings of information provision in a more cost-effective way - and avoid any
        potentially negative perceptions created through the distribution of information of little,
        if any, interest to local residents.

4.26   National research shows that most local residents are likely to want more information
        on : reasons why decisions are made (ideally stating how local residents' views were
        accounted for); how the council spends its money (i.e. 'where does my Council Tax
        go?'); improvements planned for services (although councils should take care when
        raising expectations); tangible targets; and how to get in touch (particularly relevant
        to larger authorities). On the other hand, residents are less likely to be interested in : a
        council's standards of service, and how well the council is performing in Audit
        Commission terms (although people do like to see simple comparisons with national
        averages and neighbouring areas in some cases).

4.27   National research also suggests that local authorities should avoid thinking in 'silos'
        when planning communications activities. Targeting user groups rather than following
        a conventional service-based approach can lead to significant cost-savings, as well as
        improved perceptions among recipients of the information. For example, if targeting
        older people, then information needs may include housing, social services, local
        libraries, neighbourhood safety and fire safety. As well as avoiding the need for a
        number of different publications, a thematic approach could include various partner
        agencies (e.g. GPs, health authorities, hospitals, private sector providers, the police,
        neighbourhood watch, fire service, etc) to ensure information is precise, complete and
        cost-effective.

4.28   Findings both locally and nationally suggest that a common perception of council
        literature among the general public is that it is written in such a way that it is either
        nonsensical or boring. Most find council information difficult to understand - mainly
        because the language used is often formal and old-fashioned, or because too much
        jargon is used.

4.29   A common complaint is to criticise local council newspapers for 'trumpet blowing'
        (telling residents about things the council had done, rather than what is planned -
        thereby denying a dialogue with residents). Younger people tend to place more
        emphasis on sloppy presentation, with older people more content with conventional
        newspaper style coverage.

4.30   According to a MORI study, the channels through which residents receive most of
        their information about their local councils are generally in line with how they would
        prefer to receive such information. The most frequently cited sources (and also most
        preferred) tend to be council newspapers/newsletters, local newspapers, leaflets
        posted through the door, local television and radio and word-of-mouth.

4.31   Despite local papers and leaflet drops tending to dominate the channels of the
        councils' communications, these will not be the most cost-effective methods for
        communicating with specific groups of residents. Councils often have effective
        methods for targeting service users (e.g. through publicity in schools, libraries, leisure

centres, etc), although communicating with hard-to-reach groups is more problematic. New technology can have some major benefits in this area. The internet is most likely to be used by younger people - a group often disenfranchised by conventional council communications.

4.32   Internet access in the UK is growing very rapidly. MORI figures from January 2001 suggest that approximately 43% of the population are connected to the Internet at home, at work, or elsewhere - with 35% in total actively using it.

4.33   Although the profile of internet users is becoming more like the population as a whole, the young and professional classes remain significantly more likely to have access. This profile clearly has implications for councils wishing to communicate electronically with residents.

4.34   It has been found that between 40% and 50% of the UK population would be interested in accessing the Internet and on-line services through their television, particularly for voting, paying bills and for banking. Evidence suggests that the concept of electronic government is popular, with an expectation among the population that form filling will be easier and that errors will be reduced.

4.35   When a cross-section of council residents were asked about their preferences for using their local authority's website, in a recent national survey, finding out information about local issues affecting them personally and obtaining information about council services were the most popular reasons given.

4.36   Participants in a recent workshop agreed that new methods of informing and consulting council residents would become increasingly important in the future. Current users of the Internet tend to be strong advocates, while others show more wariness and feel that councils should try new technology, but rely on 'paper-based' means of information provision. Similarly, participants in recent discussion groups recognised the importance of new technology on communications, but felt that systems should be made as user-friendly as possible and that costs should be kept to a minimum - as people were only using them to contact the council once in a while.

4.37   Articles in the local press are often cited as reasons for some public perceptions - sometimes positive, although more often negative. This is not surprising given the known impact of the national press on the mood of the general public, coupled with the previous finding that local newspapers are people's most frequent source of information about their local council. National research has shown how journalists' relations with a council's press office can impact on the slant of their articles - generally the better the relationship, the more positive the slant. Source: MORI.

4.38   Aside from the local press, staff are often overlooked as an influence on local perceptions of councils. Involving and communicating with staff is essential if employees are to be advocates of their employers. A recent study on the impact of job satisfaction on advocacy among council staff showed some interesting results.

Employee Satisfaction and Advocacy

Legend:
- Speak highly unprompted
- Speak highly prompted
- Neutral
- Critical if prompted
- Critical unprompted

All	Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Neither	Very/fairly dissatisfied
15 %	35 %	9 %	1 %	
42 %	44 %	52 %	22 %	1 %
20 %	7 %	23 %	44 %	9 %
5 %	2 % 2 %	2 % 6 %	16 %	23 %
9 %			6 %	35 %
				27 %

5 Local Context

5.1 Before considering the results of comparison and consultation, it is essential to recognise the Council's achievements in communications over the last five years.

5.2 The council has come a long way to its present position. Five years ago there was no communications team, no communications strategy, a limited Council newspaper, branding was rudimentary, the website was embryonic, consultation was irregular and unsophisticated and media relations were fragile. However, since 1998, when the communications team was created as a result of an audit by JPB Associates Ltd, this situation has improved.

5.3 The Council's newspaper, The Clarion, produced in its present form since 1998, has been consistently well received. Its approval ratings, tested every year since its launch, have shown a continuous upward arc. The recall rate for The Clarion is also high. When compared with the results from a study of twenty other council newspapers, the recall rate for The Clarion was second highest in the group - only 1% behind that of the top-rated publication, which was that of Birmingham City Council.

5.4 One of the communications team's first tasks was to issue branding and livery guidance. This was a major step forward in ensuring that the Council presented a consistent, coherent and recognisable image to the residents of Cheltenham. Whilst standards of compliance are variable (as will be seen) and far more needs to be done, the team has recognised the importance of this issue and is making efforts to address it.

5.5 The central communications team has developed a reputation for innovative, provocative campaigning. In 2000, it won the Institute of Public Relations (local government branch) award for campaign of the year, for its poster campaign to attract more young people to vote (which received extensive coverage in the national press). For a small team on a limited budget, this was an outstanding achievement.

5.6 The Council's website, though still some way from being fully transactional, has improved immeasurably - both aesthetically and in the breadth and depth of its content. The system has also started accepting e-payments for the first time, a significant step forward in improving the accessibility and convenience of the Council's site and a major milestone in the Council's efforts to get all of its services on-line by 2005.

5.7 Press relations have also improved considerably. This is borne out by an exercise conducted as part of this review. A questionnaire was sent to representatives of the local media about the quality of the Council's media service. Feedback was sought from The Gloucestershire Echo, BBC Radio Gloucestershire, The Citizen, Gloucestershire County News Service, Severn Sound, Cat (now Star) FM, The Western Daily Press, The South West News Agency and Cheltenham Independent. Participants were asked to rate the overall media service provided by Cheltenham Borough Council on a scale of 1-10, with 1 representing the highest score possible and 10 the lowest. The average score given was 2, with the representative of The Gloucestershire Echo giving it a maximum score of 1.

5.8 Another key finding from this study was that, in the experience of *all* the respondents, the Council's reactive media handling service is considered more efficient than those of the local Police Authority, Health Authority, local PR Agencies and many other local authorities - and on a par with many major local businesses such as Dowtys and Smiths Industries. This is against the national trend, represents a significant step forward in press relations, and reflects extremely well upon the Council's communications staff.

5.9 The communications team has also been responsible for the production of three successive Best Value Performance Plan summaries, all of which received very positive feedback from the public. A stream of e-mails and telephone calls followed their publication, complimenting the documents themselves and enquiring about the range and quality of Council services mentioned in them. So if the purpose of such documents is to engage the public in Council business, they were an undoubted success.

5.10 The Council's consultation methods have also greatly improved. The Viewpoint Panel, a cross-section of 1,000 Cheltenham residents, was created in 1998. It has been used regularly, usually on a quarterly basis, to obtain feedback from the public on a range of different issues. This is then used to inform Council decision-making. Cheltenham was one of the first councils in the country to set up such a panel.

5.11 Improved communications played a part in the Council's recent Beacon status success. The Council was awarded this, for the quality of its local environment, in 2001 - and was short-listed again in 2002. The assessment process involved a consideration of corporate communications, which were found to be good.

5.12 The Council has made great advances in social inclusion. It engages 'hard to reach' groups through the neighbourhood projects - e.g. Lower High Street, Hesters Way, Whaddon - and tenants' forums. It also conforms to the principles of the Plain English Campaign, offers translations of corporate documents upon request, operates a language line for non English-speaking customers and ensures the Clarion is made available on audio tape. In addition to this, it has also persuaded over 400 local organisations to participate in the Local Strategic Partnership, with a view to creating a community plan that is as inclusive as possible.

5.13   The Council took the decision in 1999 that all its services should apply for the Charter Mark award within a five year period. One of the key requirements of the Charter Mark is effective communications. Since the Council made this commitment seven of its services have won the award - all at the first attempt. This emphasises the Council's commitment to improving its communications.

5.14   The Council has also set up area committees, which allow half an hour of public question time. These questions can be asked on the night and give the public an opportunity to raise issues of concern. Certain agenda items are also open for public debate.

5.15   Taken as a whole, these achievements say a great deal about how far the Council has come. However, the review was not concerned solely with how far the Council has come, but also how far it has to go. A series of consultation exercises with key stakeholders and comparison exercises with best practitioners helped to suggest an answer.

6.   Comparison : what did it tell us ?

6.1   As we have found, there is a clear correlation between how well informed residents feel themselves to be by their local council and how favourably they view the council. It follows then that by improving its communications a council should find its performance against BVPI3 (% of residents satisfied with the council as a whole) improving. The Council's satisfaction rating for 2000 was 68%, which was 4% above the average for district councils at the time. However, recent research by MORI ('Frontiers of Performance in Local Government') suggests that it could be higher, with a *probable* performance ceiling of about 75%.

6.2   Central communications costs are lower in Cheltenham than the average of its comparator group (of 80 boroughs and districts). According to a recent LGA survey, 81% of local authorities are either planning to increase their communications budget, or maintain it at its present level (50% increasing, 31% maintaining). As has been seen, recent research by MORI has shown that, within certain limits, there is a clear link between how well resourced the central communications function within an authority is and how well informed local residents feel by that authority - particularly within districts. The same research shows a clear link between how well informed residents feel and how well inclined they are towards their local council.

6.3   The Council has a communications strategy, but it was written some time ago and needs updating. This new strategy should be informed by the review team's findings and have clear and challenging aims for improving communications with the public, staff and other stakeholders, supported by effective performance management.

6.4   At present, the pace and urgency of reacting to press enquiries and the increasing demands of heads of service and members alike, leave the communications team too little time for dealing with strategic work. It should be noted that the Head of Communications was seconded to an equivalent e-government post for the duration of this review and still occupies that post. This has obviously had an impact upon the ability of the team to deal with strategic work.

6.5   Considering that it is small and modestly resourced, the Council's communications team deals with a disproportionately large number of media enquiries in comparison with other authorities within its group - 74% of which handled fewer, most far fewer. This has obvious resource implications.

6.6   Historically, there has been a lack of forward planning within the Council when it comes to news management. Positive stories have not been identified in advance for use in improving the Council's image and negative stories have not been not flagged up so that the Council could get its point of view across first and in full. However the communications staff have now started using the forward plan to address this issue. However, the new management structure should give clearer lines of accountability for thematic service portfolios. This will enable the communications team to have a closer relationship with fewer heads of service dealing with cross-cutting portfolios. The Board of Directors will also take a more active role in the review of the forward plan and the identification of communications issues.

6.7   In the past, while CBC monitored media coverage it did not really evaluate it and gauge its impact on the Council's image. This was reflected in its reporting approach to members, which was also based around monitoring, not evaluation. However, the Managing Director of the Council has requested more detailed information on media coverage and the acting Communications Manager is developing monthly reports to enable better evaluation of coverage.

6.8   The central communications team does not currently have responsibility for managing or policing the design and printing of key corporate documents, to ensure consistency of output. Within the Council's comparator group, 90% give advice to the rest of the organisation on branding issues, while 77% take managerial responsibility. This will be addressed in the forthcoming restructuring.

6.9   The Council does not currently have an internal communications strategy, containing a planned programme of internal communications - unlike nearly 50% of its comparator group. Nor, unlike 65% of the same group, does the Council conduct regular staff attitude surveys (it does so intermittently, but has only just resumed doing so). However, positive progress is being made. A new Managing Director has been appointed, who has made improving internal communications one of her personal priorities. She is holding informal meetings with employees to ascertain their views and is planning a series of focus groups in the near future to obtain more detailed feedback. A new Head of Human Resources has also been appointed and she will be working closely with the communications team to address the internal communications issues identified by this review. In addition to this, employees currently receive a fortnightly electronic newsletter and regular electronic briefing notes on matters of corporate importance.

6.10   The Council has a consultation strategy and directorates are expected to inform the centre of planned consultation. However compliance is variable and consequently there is a possibility of duplication and consultation fatigue. Officers do, however, work with their colleagues in the Council and the County, to share consultation results and plans, in an effort to minimise the risk of duplication.

6.11   Historically, the Council's relationship with the local media has been fragile. Though this has improved significantly of late, there is still some way to go. As we now know, research suggests that it will be worth the effort, as journalists' relations with a Council's press office can impact on their articles. Generally, the better the relationship, the more positive the coverage. More work has been carried out to improve this relationship recently, by the new Managing Director. One of her first acts was to meet with senior figures in the local media, to try to establish a more positive working relationship. The Managing Director has also met the editorial team of an influential local newspaper, since the publication of several incorrect adverse reports. It has been agreed that joint training sessions will be held to brief journalists and advise officers of media requirements. This should benefit both parties and serve the public interest better. Regular briefing sessions before Cabinet meetings have also improved the accuracy of recent press reports.

6.12   Strengthened central control is required to ensure that Council residents receive relevant, accurate and timely information (SMART communications). As we have seen, studies nationally have shown that Council residents are mainly interested in : reasons why decisions are made, how the council spends its money, improvements planned for services, tangible targets and how to get in touch. This is consistent   with findings locally and should be used to inform the Council's future approach communications. The issue of central control of communications will be addressed through the organisational re-structuring.

6.13   The Council's key strategic documents do not do not present a clear, consistent brand identity. Nor is any obvious hierarchy suggested by the visual impression each conveys. Documents of lesser importance appear to have had more money spent on their presentation than the overarching strategic document, 'Our Town Our Future'. Addressing this situation requires the strengthening of central control over branding and design, which will be addressed through the improvement plan.

7.   Consultation : what did it tell us ?

7.1   The following should not be taken as being *totally* representative. Contradictory opinions were expressed in relation to each conclusion drawn. But what follows does at least represent the majority opinion and should therefore be given due consideration. It should also be noted that though the following focuses on issues of concern, which is natural when trying to ascertain how the Council can improve, many positive comments were made as well - about The Clarion, about the quality of Council services and about the helpfulness of Council staff. So the overall picture is encouraging. It should also be borne in mind that much of this consultation was carried out before recent developments such as the 'State of Cheltenham Debate', improved staff consultation procedures and the introduction of the new political structures.

7.1.1   Like many authorities, CBC as a whole is sometimes perceived as being 'authoritarian' and 'bureaucratic'. Though this perception is consistent with national findings, it must be reversed to form the foundation of a strong, positive brand image. When asked, consultees said they would like to see the Council associated with words like 'honest', 'open', 'accountable' and 'responsible'.

7.1.2   Despite recent improvements, focus groups suggested that the Council needed to   do more to keep people informed. Recent studies show that the more well informed people are kept, the more positive they tend to be about their council across a range of issues and the less likely they are to see their council as remote, impersonal and out of touch. They are also more likely to feel that their authority offers good value for money and a good quality of service overall. Source : MORI.

7.1.3   CBC is perceived as being less than the sum of its parts - i.e. consistently high levels of satisfaction are expressed with individual officers, members and departments, yet the Council's overall image is not what it could be. However, comparisons show that this is a problem for authorities nationally.

7.1.4   There seems to be some confusion amongst local people as to what the Council is responsible for. Some consultees thought it was responsible for trains and buses, but didn't know it was responsible for the town's festivals programme. It is essential for the Council to communicate what it does clearly and consistently. As we have seen, raising awareness of which services a local authority provides can lead to increased levels of satisfaction. However it should be acknowledged that having two tiers of local government in Gloucestershire does not help residents understand who is responsible for what.

7.1.5   Focus groups felt that CBC could do more to find out what people want and explain its decision-making. As has been previously indicated, a recent national survey asked respondents to rank their information requirements of their council in order of importance. Reasons why decisions are made, ideally stating how residents' views were taken into account, topped the list. CBC has taken steps to address this. The budget consultation, for example, was used in the decision-making process and this was clearly communicated to stakeholders.

7.1.6   There is a perception that the Council allows external media to set the news agenda - i.e. that it is not proactive enough, or assertive enough about the good things that it does. The Council is, however, considered to offer an extremely high quality reactive media handling service, even in comparison to private sector bodies. A more proactive approach by the Board of Directors and a better working relationship between the Managing Director and the local media, should help to alter this view.

7.1.7   Overall, there is substantial support for the continuation of The Clarion, but in a more concise form, in colour and with greater frequency. It has also been suggested that it should include a 'right to reply' section, so that the public can be engaged as well as informed by it. People are more likely to be receptive to goods news stories if the Council gives people the opportunity to debate issues of concern - ideally in advance of decisions being made. There is a perception at present that the Council fails to report openly on its faults and this is one reason why it is sometimes viewed with scepticism. In light of the above, it is a factor that The Clarion is now published every four months, rather than quarterly. Research shows that residents' perceptions of how informed they feel and their overall satisfaction rating of their council, dip when expenditure on the council newspaper is cut. A regular, planned programme of council communications, of which a council newspaper or equivalent publication is an integral part, is considered essential.

7.1.8   There are ongoing problems with the distribution of The Clarion, with some people still not receiving it. Whilst extensive efforts have been made to resolve this issue with the Royal Mail, and other means of addressing it have also been explored, it remains partially unresolved, if much improved.

7.1.9   Focus group consultation identified the need for the Council to improve its feedback mechanisms. After consulting the public on issues of concern, it was claimed that the Council rarely explains how this has influenced the decision-making process - giving the erroneous impression that consultation is undertaken for the sake of appearances. Even members of the Viewpoint panel expressed surprise at the extent to which their views are taken into account by members and officers. The Council recognises this and proposals to address the issue have been incorporated into the improvement plan.

7.1.10   The Council must convey a consistent image to all its residents through all of the means available to it. Recent national research has shown that the majority of residents know little about their local council. Ratings of performance are typically based on incomplete or incorrect perceptions of the role of local authorities. This lack of knowledge about local councils is likely to be a cause of poor satisfaction ratings, as a consistent correlation has been found between how familiar people are with a service or organisation and how favourable they are towards it. Raising awareness of which services are provided by local authorities generally leads to higher levels of satisfaction.

7.1.11   People are divided in their perceptions as to how much impact the Council has on quality of life in the area - with as many saying that it does not play an important part in improving quality of life, as those saying that it does. This, along with other research findings, indicates an opportunity for increasing the importance people attach to Cheltenham Borough Council, through improved communications and better understanding. The Council's role within the Local Strategic Partnership and its contribution to the new community plan, should provide an opportunity to improve these perceptions

7.1.12   Many consultees said that, in their opinion, the Council is too centralist in its outlook and too reliant upon people coming to it. It was agreed that area committees would go some way towards addressing this issue. The consultation for the new political structures also showed an overwhelming preference for area committees, as a consequence of which the Council has established five.

7.1.13   At the first area committee meetings there were some teething problems : attendance was low, those members of the public that did turn up were given insufficient information before they arrived to make a meaningful contribution and what information they were given was not provided sufficiently far in advance for them to read and absorb it. However these issues were noted and marked improvements have already been made, as was evidenced by the most recent round of meetings, during which over a hundred people attended. Though there is still more to be done, the recent establishment of a Democratic Services Unit should assist this.

7.1.14   There is a majority of opinion in favour of developing new technologies and alternative media to supplement and support existing Council communications mechanisms - e.g. greater use of the internet and digital TV, more use of local radio, the positioning of electronic information booths around the town and establishing a network of service shops throughout the borough.

7.1.15   There is a view that the Council should take more of an open stance with the local media - e.g. by the Leader or his Deputies going on local radio regularly, to discuss matters of public interest, by giving regular press briefings, or by hosting topical, single-issue events at the Town Hall (e.g. the 'State of Cheltenham' debate). Such efforts would have the affect of bringing the Council to the people. In response to this finding and as part of the community planning process, it has been agreed that a series of roadshows will be held, which will give councillors and officers the chance to meet members of the public within their communities.

7.1.16   Consultation identified a need for the Council to review opening hours to ensure that they meet customer requirements across all services. It was felt by some consultees that Council opening hours have not changed in line with recent social developments - i.e. to accommodate late nights and weekend opening.

7.1.17   The Council has a corporate complaints system that is potentially very effective. Indeed it has been approved by the Ombudsman and is based on a system that has won the Charter Mark award. However, standards of compliance with it seem to vary across the Council, which can impact upon the customer experience. The new Managing Director and the Board of Directors will have a key role to play in ensuring compliance with the complaints system following Council re-structuring and they are committed to doing so.

7.1.18   The Council's website is well regarded and has recently been re-engineered to prepare for electronic government. It still has limitations, however, and is certainly not a campaigning, newsy site. It is also still some way from being fully transactional, though significant progress has been made towards this goal. Other developments have also taken place of late, with the introduction of a simplified page management and editing system, enabling information to be published more quickly. Agendas and minutes can now also be accessed.

7.1.19   There is a perception, both internally and externally, that improving communications with the media and the public is not a corporate priority for the Council. Though this overlooks the improvements that have taken place over the last five years, there is still some basis for this comment, as several of the issues brought to light by this review are historic. With the Council having a new Leader/Cabinet model of government and a new Managing Director, the Council's operational framework has changed, with a resultant change in culture and a greater emphasis upon communications.

7.1.20   Based on feedback received from consultees, CBC's corporate brand/image would appear to be weak. Building a brand is the way top organisations communicate their values and develop a positive relationship with their customers. This would mean CBC being clear about what it stands for and communicating this through every customer experience - e.g. the attitude of staff, the layout of buildings, the way letters are written, the design and print of documents. The key is to develop those values and make sure they are communicated consistently. To assist in this, the Managing Director has recently met with representatives from Gloucestershire University, who have a business school which includes media. They have agreed in principle to run a competition for final year students, to "rebrand" the Council. This is an exciting prospect which will give local people a say in the way the Council's image is portrayed in the future.

7.1.21   Internally, there appear to be issues regarding the quality and frequency of communications received by Council staff, from members and the board. A new system is being introduced by the Managing Director and Head of Human Resources, which should have a positive impact upon these issues.

7.1.22   It has been noted, as part of this review, that employees need more opportunities to : raise issues of concern, make suggestions, provide feedback and make a contribution to the development of the organisation. To address this, the new Managing Director has held 'awaydays' with managers and plans to follow up these with focus groups for staff.

7.1.23   It has been recognised that CBC needs to raise its profile in government circles.   Its present lack of self-promotion is surprising in an organisation that was awarded Beacon status in 2001, was short-listed for it again in 2002, is IiP accredited, has won numerous Charter Mark awards for excellence in the provision of public services (7 in the last year alone), has helped the Cabinet Office develop a Charter Mark award for support services and provides some nationally, even internationally, renowned services. Promoting the Council is essential, as raising its profile nationally will have an impact upon how it is perceived locally. Work on this has already commenced. The Council was featured on a recent Panorama programme, on the back of which it has decided to host a national ABSO (Anti-Social Behaviour Orders) conference, with the support of the Home Office. It is also working with the IDeA on the possibility of continuing its promotional work on the Beacon award for Quality of Environment. The new Managing Director has experience of working in the national arena and the Council hopes to draw upon this in seeking other ways of raising its profile.

7.1.24   The Council's main reception area is adequate, if a little outdated. It operates via a referral system, with visitors being passed on to ancillary receptions on other floors. This can be frustrating and time-consuming for Council customers. Maximising the number of people dealt with by a single point of contact, as with a one-stop shop, could benefit all concerned. The Council has begun preliminary work on developing this.

7.1.25   The Council's switchboard does not make use of recent advances in telephone technology - e.g. letting callers know where they are in a queue and how long they are likely to wait. This will be addressed if the Council's exploratory work on developing a call centre comes to fruition.

7.1.26   The Council does have satellite offices at Whaddon Lodge and Coronation Square, but these operate as housing offices rather than as one-stop shops for those wishing to transact a range of Council business. This practice should be re-considered, though the scope for doing so might be limited by the imminent creation of an 'arms length' housing company, to undertake the housing management function.

8.   Competition : what are the alternatives ?

8.1   As was mentioned earlier in the report, work in this area focused mainly on determining the extent of communications work that is currently outsourced and establishing whether there is additional scope for doing so. Balanced against this must be the need to retain in-house expertise in certain key areas. Finding 4.26 should also be borne in mind here, as it shows that adequately resourcing the central communications function within an authority appears to have a beneficial impact upon how well informed local residents feel by that authority. This in turn affects their level of satisfaction with it - a key indicator of corporate performance.

8.2   The Council's communications team is currently composed of four full-time members of staff. This is below both the average for authorities of a comparable size (4.5), and the ideal number suggested by MORI research (5-8, depending on the size of the authority in question). However, the range of activities currently undertaken by the team seems to be as wide, if not wider, than its comparators. Consequently there would seem to be little scope for, or sense in, staff reductions.

8.3   At present the team's core strategic communications skills focus on public relations and marketing. This includes copywriting and copy editing for print and electronic media, graphic design and desktop publishing for print and web development. However, given the limited resources available and comparatively small number of people in the communications team, certain work - document design, copy editing, printing and web design, etc - is outsourced to preferred suppliers, though not all of it, all the time. Though the team's work is wide-ranging and well-regarded, it is legitimate to question whether the current focus and skills mix is appropriate to address the main issues arising from the review. For example, if the team is to be more pro-active and strategic, if it is to police branding and presentation standards, if it is to deal with internal communications issues as well as external and if it is to give sufficient time and resource to web development, some investment and re-focussing will be necessary. This would have to be undertaken within the context of the overall organisational re-structuring that is underway at present. Consequently, the main review conclusions have been shared with the Leader, Managing Director and relevant Deputy, to inform their decision-making.

8.4   Traditionally, responsibility for budgets for design and print have been devolved to divisional level. Certain problems have arisen as a result of this, such as variable design quality, inappropriate presentation, branding anomalies and questionable value for money. As a result of this, there is a clear identified need for centralising the commissioning of all print, design and other communications materials. This function is best carried out by the communications team, and appropriate resources to undertake this work need to be identified and allocated. This issue has been addressed within the improvement plan.

8.5   Another means of achieving consistency and value for money would be for the Council to consider a single contract for all its design and print needs. This would enable it to achieve better value for money through economies of scale and ease the enforcement of corporate standards. This requirement has been incorporated into the improvement plan.

8.6   It should be noted that the Council is already seeking to achieve economies of scale through partnership working. Both its BVPP summary and Council Tax leaflet for 2002 were produced as part of joint working projects with the other Gloucestershire authorities. With the BVPP summary this resulted in a saving of £10,000 over last year. The Council Tax leaflet also achieved economies of scale and attracted substantial sponsorship, essentially paying for itself. The review team would recommend that future statutory publications are also co-ordinated in this way.

8.7   The Council's print unit was outsourced many years ago and is currently run by Kall-Kwik. The Council is presently reviewing its print contracts, including desk top publishing capability and photo-copying.

8.8   The Viewpoint Panel has been run in-house for three years. It has developed to a stage where it now requires professional assistance in question design and layout to ensure it provides unbiased results. Potential suppliers have been invited to tender for this work.

9.   Challenge : what did it tell us ?

9.1   As has been seen, the data gathering carried out as part of this exercise enabled the review team to challenge the Council's current corporate communications practices and performance. Though potential improvements have been identified, we should acknowledge the great progress that has been made over the last five years. What matters now, however, is the next five years and how the Council will use that time to improve its communications even more, by addressing the issues identified. This is the ideal opportunity to do so, as the organisation is about to enter an exciting new phase, with a new political structure, a new officer structure, a new Leader and a new Managing Director. What better time for it to take its communications to another level, by adopting a more dynamic, co-ordinated, focused and pro-active approach ? The benefits, as the findings have shown, would be considerable and would undoubtedly establish the Council as a leader of local government communications.

9.2   The starting point has to be in the development of the review findings into a coherent vision and using this to inform the improvement plan. In creating this, it has been the review team's intention to achieve a balance of interests between the Council and its many stakeholders. The three fundamentals of that vision, the main areas that the Council wishes to improve in the coming years, are as follows.

1. Improved customer satisfaction : to be achieved through an improved media profile, a more distinctive brand image and more focused consultation and clear feedback.

2. Improved customer service : to be achieved through the provision of more relevant

and timely information, more effective and consistent complaints handling and better access to services - both electronic and face-to-face - at hours that suit the customer.

3. Improved employee relations : through better internal communications and through raising the national profile of the Council.

9.3   Achieving this will involve a combination of improving existing means of communication and harnessing new technologies to make the Council more open and accessible. Both should have a positive impact upon the public's overall satisfaction rating of the Council, which will be measured through improvements to BVPI3. By approving the improvement plan the Council will be demonstrating its corporate commitment to communications.

9.4   On the basis of this analysis, the Board of Directors propose that the improvement plan outlined in Appendix B is approved. However it should again be noted that the management review may change some accountability and responsibility for implementing the plan. The Managing Director will ensure that the plan is updated accordingly once the new structures are finalised.

10. Implications

10.1 **Financial**

As was mentioned in the main body of the report, there are costs attached to the implementation of the improvement plan.   Not all costs need be allocated immediately, however, as some can be apportioned over the life-span of the plan - i.e. five years. It is also the case that some of the costs are one-offs, while others will recur annually. Total estimated costs are as follows :

one-off expenditure

- replacing vehicle livery and signage, *£10k*
- media enquiry management and monitoring systems, *£2k*

Total, £12k

recurring expenditure

- corporate membership of Plain English Campaign, *£2k pa*
- advertising costs for one-off council events (e.g. State of Cheltenham Debate), *£5k pa*
- packaging costs of welcome packs for new Cheltenham residents, *£5k pa*
- media awareness training *£5k pa* (dependent upon demand and capacity)
- production costs of hard copy News, *£2k* pa

Total, £19k

NB.

- Funds for e-government initiatives and consultation exercises are not referred to in this summary, as they have already been allocated.
- The costs attached to any re-focusing or strengthening of the communications team are impossible to quantify at this stage, until the outcome of the wider re-structuring is known. Whatever costs there may be will be reported at a later date.
- Until such time as a decision is made on the future development of the Clarion it is not possible to identify additional costs. A full costed report will be brought to Cabinet for approval in due course.

10.2 **Legal**

None.

10.3 **Personnel**

There are personnel implications inherent in any re-focusing of roles and responsibilities within the communications team. At this stage it is unclear exactly what form the future communications structure will take, but formal consultation with individual employees and recognised trade unions will need to take place prior to member approval of any final (revised) structure. A further report will be brought back to Cabinet following a period of proper consultation, or the changes will be outlined within the corporate restructure report.

10.4 **Equal opportunities, social justice and anti-poverty**

One of the objectives of the improvement plan is to make the council more open, accessible and responsive, through improved communications. This can only have a positive impact upon issues such as equal opportunities, social justice and anti-poverty.

10.5 **Environmental**

There is an obvious link between communications and the issue of environmental sustainability, as in communicating with the general public, and other key stakeholders, the council produces and distributes a mass of written material every year. Greater use of electronic means of communication, as set out in the improvement plan, should help to reduce this significantly.

Contact Officer

Paul Wilson, Best Value Officer, 01242-775036,

PaulWil@cheltenham.gov.uk

Appendix A :
Effective Communications Project Brief

Best Value Management Team Approval Date: 20th February 2001.
Estimated Time : 35 man-days for the Best Value Unit.

Review title   **Effective Communications.**
Year of review   **2001/2002.**
Project sponsor   **Ken Jennings.**
Service head   **John Steed.**
Timetable for the review

20th February 2001	Best Value Management Team considers the project brief. Trade unions' views requested.
14th March 2001	Report to Best Value Forum seeking approval for the project brief.
17th July 2001	Position statement presented to the Best Value Forum, outlining where the service is now.
November 2001	Findings discussed with staff and key service heads. Agreement sought on main issues arising.
December 2001	Findings discussed with unions. Findings discussed with Chief Executive. Review report and action plan produced.
January 2002	Review report presented to Project Services Board.
31st January 2002	Review report presented to Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
5th February 2002	Review report presented to Cabinet.

Monthly project team meetings will be held throughout the duration of the review, in order to monitor progress. These will usually be chaired by the project sponsor.
The Project Team
Ken Jennings   Project Sponsor.
John Steed   Acting Head of E-government.
Jane Grunert   Head of Policy and Performance.
Katherine Gunn   Acting Communications Manager.
Paul Wilson   Best Value Officer.

Outline Terms of Reference
- to consider the overall aim of communications in Cheltenham Borough Council;
- to consider the factors that may impinge upon the council's ability to deliver effective communications to its various publics;
- to assess the extent to which developing communications technology can be used to improve the council's communications;
- to formulate a vision for communications in Cheltenham Borough Council over the next five years;
- to ascertain whether this vision is consistent with the requirements of the residents of Cheltenham, statutory provisions, the views of central government - particularly on the issue of e-government - and good practice in the field;
- to identify the gap between the present position and future vision;
- to set performance targets that can be used to bridge the gap between the present position and future vision, and to develop key performance indicators which can be used to gauge progress towards meeting those targets.

Service Purpose
Communications involves all services and focuses on public relations, the publication of information, operational contact between the council and its customers, and customer feedback and consultation. *But it is fundamentally about engaging the public and maintaining a two-way dialogue.*

Consequently there is a strong link between communications and the Government's strategy for electronic government, which has the four guiding principles of :[1]building services around citizens' choices; making government and its services more accessible; ensuring that new technology does not create a digital divide between those with ready access to electronic media and those without; using information more effectively.

Organisational context
The council has clear objectives for customer-led public services in its five year strategic plan, 'Our town, our future', and a corporate strategy for electronic service delivery built on the principle that the council must change the way it does things if it is to respond to customer needs and demands now and in the future.

The council has a vision to deliver co-ordinated, accessible and customer-led public services in a cost-effective way. It is committed to making government and its services more accessible through provision at places and times which best meet the needs and expectations of service users. The council believes that the delivery of its vision will provide the following key benefits :
- access to services at more convenient times and locations;
- delivery of services to a higher standard;
- a faster and better response to customer enquiries and needs;
- an end to customers being passed from department to department;
- most enquiries dealt with during the first call or visit;
- an end to the confusion over which department delivers the service needed;
- greater proportion of council tax spent on front-line services and less on
- bureaucracy;
- equality of access for all citizens;
- a more informed local community and rising participation in local democracy;
- increased involvement of the community in council decision-making;
- increased job satisfaction and better working conditions for council
- employees.

As most of these benefits are inextricably linked with the issue of communications, it is vital that the council's e-government strategy is used to inform the effective communications review and resultant action plan.

Scope of Review

Though the review will consider communications in the broadest sense, focusing on the strategic direction of communications in Cheltenham Borough Council,

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[1] E-government, a strategic framework for public services in the information-age, April 2000

some consideration of the operational activities of the Communications team will also be required. Overall, the main issues for consideration are likely to include :

- statutory requirements;
- communications with the council's various publics;
- media handling;
- communications and feedback at the point of service delivery;
- consultation;
- communications standards;
- corporate branding;
- training and support;
- the use of internal and external media;
- supporting the modernising process;
- resourcing.

Consultation
Consultation will be undertaken with staff and members. The public, businesses and other local organisations - e.g. the media - will also have the opportunity to comment upon the future direction of communications in Cheltenham Borough Council.

Comparison
The review will need to consider the ways in which other local authorities communicate with their publics and the resources they devote to doing so.
This will be done via an exchange of information with a group of communications professionals in other local authorities. Issues such as budgets and staffing numbers, advertising and sponsorship, media handling, corporate PR, research and consultation, e-government, and internal relations will be explored.

Continuous Improvement
As part of the comparison exercise (see above) consideration will be given to the criteria upon which progress within Cheltenham Borough Council can be judged. This will assist in the development of performance targets and indicators that will form part of the action plan resulting from this review.

Expected Outputs / Issues
- to determine the range of, and need for, council communications;
- to consider the new channels available for communications and service delivery;
- to ensure that the council communicates effectively and appropriately with its various publics;
- to ensure that the vision for communications that results from this review is concordant with the council's e-government strategy;
- to ensure that the council adequately resources its agreed communications programme;
- to ensure that the council is structured in such a way as to maximise the potential success of its future communications.

APPENDIX B

<u>BEST VALUE REVIEW OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS</u>

IMPROVEMENT PLAN

IMPROVEMENT POINT 1.
PURPOSE IN RELATION TO THE VISION : IMPROVED CUSTOMER SATISFACTION (1).
RELEVANT REVIEW FINDING/S : 7.1.1, 7.1.3, 7.1.4, 7.1.10, 7.1.11 and 7.1.20

What needs to improve
The brand image of Cheltenham Borough Council.

Why the improvement is necessary and what will be the desired outcomes from the improvement
At present the public's understanding of the Council's core activities and values is weak. Research has shown the benefits for the organisation in developing a clear brand image and communicating this through every customer experience - i.e. there is a correlation between how familiar people are with an organisation and what it does and how favourable they are towards it. Communicating a clear image consistently will have a positive impact upon the Council's public satisfaction rating. The Council brand needs to reflect the fact that Cheltenham is a vibrant town that is developing rapidly. The Council has demonstrated that it can keep pace with the modernising agenda and now needs a new image to reflect this.

How it will be achieved	Responsible Officer	Target dates	Resources
• By launching a competition with Gloucestershire University, for final year graphic design and marketing students to devise a new Council branding strategy and logo type. The logo competition to be judged by the public through The Echo, the branding strategy to be judged internally and to include staff consultation. The winning entries to be used to inform logo design and draft strategy by the Comms team before approval by Cabinet.	BoD	April 2003	Resources required for staff time in liaison with the college, selection process and public relations. Reinforcement of the communications team to provide staff time essential for proactive public relations and media work (see IP15).
• By abolishing the kind of subsidiary branding, such as Cheltenham Leisure, that confuses the public and deprives CBC as a whole of credit.	BoD.	April 2003.	No additional financial implications. Should occur as a result of the re-structuring.
• By retaining the Council crest and current logo for civic functions only.	BoD.	April 2003.	No additional financial implications.
• By ensuring that this brand is reinforced through *every* customer experience - e.g. attitude of staff, layout of	BoD, Communications Manager, HR	April 2003 onwards.	The cost of re-branding the Council can be mitigated by phasing

buildings, livery of vehicles, the way letters are written, the design and print of documents, etc.	Manager, Relevant Section Heads.		during the implementation year, as old stocks of printed material are used up. However there will be a cost attached to replacing the vehicle livery and Council signage, of approximately £10k.
• By raising the profile of customer service training, possibly working in partnership with, or seeking secondment from, the private sector (particularly the banking sector). Also by ensuring this work is implemented in line with the Council's e-government strategy.	Customer Relations Officer, Head of HR, Communications Manager, Head of E-government.	April 2003 onwards.	Probable costs attached. Impossible to quantify at this stage.
• Though corporate membership of the Plain English Campaign, to ensure reduced cost of plain English training, document audits and Crystal Mark awards.	Communications Manager.	April 2003.	£2k per annum.

How will the improvements be monitored and how will successful outcomes be identified

The milestones to establish whether the above tasks have been completed on time will be monitored by the review officer. Changes to public perceptions in relation to these changes will be monitored annually through Viewpoint. The overall impact upon satisfaction levels will be measured annually through BVPI3.

What are the risks and what happens if the improvements are not achieved

The main risk is in the potential cost of re-branding the authority. If costs are kept to a minimum, through phasing, there shouldn't be a problem; but if they escalate, the press coverage and public reaction are likely to be negative (e.g. as with British Airways and Consignia). However, a failure to address the issue of branding will result in continuing confusion about what the Council does and what it stands for. This, as we now know, can impact adversely upon how favourably residents view the Council - which in turn could influence the Government's view of the Council. Re-branding can be phased in over an implementation period, of say one financial year, to avoid weakening the brand through public confusion. The potential for a negative reaction should also be mitigated by involving the public, Council employees and the local media in the design of the brand and logo.

IMPROVEMENT POINT 2.
PURPOSE IN RELATION TO THE VISION : IMPROVED CUSTOMER SATISFACTION (1) AND IMPROVED EMPLOYEE RELATIONS (3).
RELEVANT REVIEW FINDING/S : 7.1.23

What needs to improve
The Council's profile in Government circles.

Why the improvement is necessary and what will be the desired outcomes from the improvement
The Council is diffident about self-promotion. This is puzzling in an organisation that has achieved so much - Charter Mark, IiP, Beacon status, ISO 9000, Pathfinder status, etc. Modesty does not pay in the present political climate. If the Council is perceived by central government to be high-performing and is esteemed in local government circles, this will have a positive impact upon how it is seen by the citizens of Cheltenham - and possibly by the local media as well. Therefore the long-term benefits of raising the Council's profile nationally could be measured in their impact upon local satisfaction ratings and staff morale.

How it will be achieved	Responsible Officer	Target dates	Resources
• By publicising CBC's achievements in gaining Beacon status, Charter Mark, IiP and ISO 9000, etc, in relevant professional journals.	Communications Manager, Relevant Section Heads.	October 2002 onwards.	Reinforcement of the Comms team to provide staff time for essential proactive public relations and media work (see IP15).
• By building on CBC's close working relationship with the IDeA, and Service First Unit of the Cabinet Office, to get the Councils' name know in central Government circles.	MD, BoD, Relevant Section Heads, Communications Manager.	October 2002 onwards.	
• By participating in more high-profile national studies, where the benefit of doing so clearly outweighs the cost.	Relevant Section Heads, Communications Manager.	October 2002 onwards.	"
• By hosting regional or national conferences where the Council is seen as providing evidence of good practice.	MD, BoD, Relevant Section Heads, Communications Manager.	Ongoing.	Events to be self-financing through charges and sponsorship.

How will the improvements be monitored and how will successful outcomes be identified
The milestones to establish whether the above tasks have been completed on time will be monitored by the review officer. Impact upon Government's perception of the Council will be measured through the comprehensive performance assessment results - either biennially or triennially. Impact upon public perception of the Council will be measured annually against BVPI3.

What are the risks and what happens if the improvements are not achieved
The Council's profile will continue to be low, while the national profiles of less accomplished but more vocal authorities may be higher. The Council does not want to give the impression, through its diffidence, that it is 'coasting'.

IMPROVEMENT POINT 3.
PURPOSE IN RELATION TO THE VISION : IMPROVED CUSTOMER SATISFACTION (1).
RELEVANT REVIEW FINDING/S : 7.1.4, 7.1.10, 7.1.11 and 7.1.20.

What needs to improve
Residents' understanding of the services that the Council provides and their overall satisfaction with them.

Why the improvement is necessary and what will be the desired outcomes from the improvement
Improving residents' understanding of the range and quality of services that CBC provides, and making a clear distinction between those and the services that it does   not provide, should enable the Council to take credit for the good that it does, and avoid taking the blame for things which are beyond its control. Research suggests that this should have a positive impact upon public satisfaction levels.

How it will be achieved	Responsible Officer	Target dates	Resources
• By ensuring that the Council is closely associated with the services it provides and activities it funds, through improved communications and clear corporate branding.	BoD, Communications Manager.	October 2004.	Reinforcement of the Comms team to provide staff time for the necessary activities (see IP15).
• By providing an A-Z of services after re-structuring is complete and making it available through the full range of Council media.	Communications Manager.	April 2003.	No additional resource implications if published in annual CTX leaflet, BVPP summary, on corporate website and or in civic newspaper.
• By hosting annual single-issue events at the Town Hall, and other venues around the town, such as the 'State of Cheltenham' debate.	Cabinet, BoD, Relevant Section Heads.	April 2003 onwards.	Could entail advertising costs of up to £5k.
• By providing new residents with welcome packs when they move to Cheltenham, including invitations to events at The Everyman and Town Hall, etc.	Head of Tourism, Head of Exchequer Services, MD's office, Cheltenham Business Partnership.	April 2003 onwards.	Most of the necessary materials are published already, But packaging costs of say £1 per head for each of the 5,000 or so people that move to Cheltenham each year would be £5k, plus officer time.

• By developing a programme of visits to local institutions, such as schools, so that Council representatives can explain local government's role in the community and encourage active citizenship.	Youth Affairs Officer, Communications Manager.	April 2003 onwards.	No additional financial implications, other than officer time.
• By changing the emphasis of Council signage - e.g. for engineering works - so that it focuses on the long-term good that is being done, rather than the short-term inconvenience being caused.	Heads of Engineering Services and Regeneration, Highways Maintenance Agency.	October 2002 onwards.	No additional financial implications if phased in gradually.
• By providing joint information through the community planning process, to enable partnership working and assist the public to access a seamless service.	Communications Manager, Head of E-government, relevant Section Heads.	June 2003.	Shared costs with other agencies using existing media.

How will the improvements be monitored and how will successful outcomes be identified

The milestones to establish whether the above tasks have been completed on time will be monitored by the review officer. The success of each task will be measured by its impact upon BVPI3. A possible progress path could be :

	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06
% of respondents who are satisfied with the performance of the Council as a whole.	68%	69%	70%	71%	72%	73%

This will be a key indicator of performance when the Government comes to categorise councils. However in setting a target it should be noted that recent research by MORI ('Frontiers of Performance in Local Government') suggests a limit to the level of public satisfaction to which local authorities can aspire. This is influenced by factors such as deprivation levels and demands made upon council services. Taking this research into account, the maximum level of public satisfaction the Council can hope to achieve is somewhere in the region of 75%.

What are the risks and what happens if the improvements are not achieved

Improving residents' understanding of the services that the Council provides has been shown to have a positive impact upon how they perceive the Council. Failing to do so could have an adverse influence.

IMPROVEMENT POINT 4.
PURPOSE IN RELATION TO THE VISION : IMPROVED CUSTOMER SATISFACTION (1).
RELEVANT REVIEW FINDING/S : 7.1.1, 7.1.12 and 7.1.15.

What needs to improve
The Council's overall image.

Why the improvement is necessary and what will be the desired outcomes from the improvement
As we have seen, the Council is perceived as being less than the sum of its parts - i.e. high levels of satisfaction are expressed in relation to the performance of the Council's individual services, but the overall image is not what it could be. Though this is a common problem for local authorities, it still needs to be addressed. The Council also has elections this year, so it is particularly important that the public are made aware of the new councillors and how the new political systems work.

How it will be achieved	Responsible Officer	Target dates	Resources
• By raising the profile of members, particularly Cabinet members, with the public - through the full range of media.	Cabinet, Members, Communications Manager.	May 2002 onwards.	Reinforce Comms team to complete necessary tasks (IP15).
• By organising open days and customer tours of Council offices and facilities.	Communications Manager.	April 2003 onwards.	"
• By encouraging the Leader, Deputies and MD to go on to local radio and TV more, to get the Council's point of view across on topical issues and to get themselves known.	MD, Cabinet, Communications Manager.	May 2002 onwards.	"
• By encouraging staff to participate in more community-based events.	MD, Communications Manager, Head of HR.	October 2002 onwards.	"

How will the improvements be monitored and how will successful outcomes be identified
The milestones to establish whether the above tasks have been completed on time will also be monitored by the review officer. Residents' perceptions of the Council will be tested annually through the Viewpoint panel. The impact upon BVPI 3 will be measured annually.

What are the risks and what happens if the improvements are not achieved
The Council could be perceived by some as being an impersonal and bureaucratic entity, rather than as a collection of conscientious individuals - members and officers alike - working diligently to meet the diverse needs of the people of Cheltenham.

IMPROVEMENT POINT 5.
PURPOSE IN RELATION TO THE VISION : IMPROVED CUSTOMER SATISFACTION (1).
RELEVANT REVIEW FINDING/S : 6.10, 7.1.5 and 7.1.9.

What needs to improve
The Council's consultation mechanisms.

Why the improvement is necessary and what will be the desired outcomes from the improvement
Viewpoint has been a great success and an invaluable tool, but there is a strong feeling within the authority that corporate consultation needs to be more credible, co-ordinated and focused in future. Certainly making consultation more credible - i.e. impartial and statistically accurate - will give members and officers alike a sound basis upon which to found their decisions. Improved co-ordination will ensure that consultation is focused on priority issues, is cost-effective and mitigates the potential for duplication and consultation fatigue. Closing the feedback loop should ensure that consultees feel more engaged in the democratic process. They may be more likely to participate in future exercises as a result.

How it will be achieved	Responsible Officer	Target dates	Resources
• By outsourcing Viewpoint, so that its results are seen to be more statistically accurate and credible.	The Policy & Research Officer.	December 2002.	£3k per consultation exercise , already allocated out of revenue. This is less expensive than in-house provision.
• By ensuring that when consultation is completed the feedback loop is closed and consultees are informed of how their input informed Council decision-making.	Communications Manager, preferred Viewpoint contractor.	January 2003 onwards.	
• By exploring joint-working arrangements for future consultation, with other public bodies, as part of community planning and electronic government.	Head of Policy and Performance, Head of E-government.	June 2002 onwards.	No additional resource implications at this stage.

How will the improvements be monitored and how will successful outcomes be identified
The milestones to establish whether the above tasks have been completed on time will be monitored by the review officer. The efficacy of these developments will be measured by their impact upon public perceptions of Council decision-making. The decision-making should make explicit reference to consultation results. Any improvement is likely to have a positive impact upon BVPI3.

What are the risks and what happens if the improvements are not achieved
There is a danger that if Viewpoint continues in its present form its results will continue to be questioned. The could devalue consultation and undermine the decision-making process.

IMPROVEMENT POINT 6 .
PURPOSE IN RELATION TO THE VISION : IMPROVED CUSTOMER SATISFACTION (1).
RELEVANT REVIEW FINDING/S : 6.4, 6.5, 6.6, 7.1.6, 7.1.15 and 7.1.19.

What needs to improve
The Council's approach to media handling.

Why the improvement is necessary and what will be the desired outcomes from the improvement
The Council already provides a very high quality reactive media handling service. If this is to be improved upon a more proactive approach is called for. The Council has already seen the benefits of this in its handling of two recent issues. By getting its point of view across first on each occasion, the Council was able to generate positive, comprehensive media coverage. A consistent approach along these lines could do nothing but good for the Council's portrayal in the local media, which should have an impact upon how it is perceived by the public.

How it will be achieved	Responsible Officer	Target dates	Resources
• By strengthening the enforcement role of the central communications team, so that service heads are required to inform it of any good news/bad news stories in the offing.	BoD.	April 2002 onwards.	Reinforce Comms team to complete necessary tasks (see IP15).
• By using the forward plan to identify positive stories for use in improving the council's image and negative stories so that the Council can present its case.	Communications Manager.	October 2002 onwards.	"
• By developing a media programme based on the long term work programme agreed by the Cabinet, BoD and Scrutiny Chairs.	Cabinet, BoD, Scrutiny Chairs and Communications Manager.	June 2003 onwards.	"
• By the Leader, Deputies and MD undertaking regular press briefings, to meet the requirements of media sources and improve their understanding of the Council.	MD, Cabinet, Communications Manager.	May 2002 onwards.	"
• To supplement the existing media handling protocol, and planned media training, with a good practice guide for members and officers.	Communications Manager.	May 2004.	"
• By providing media-awareness training to members and officers, so that they are confident and capable when dealing with the media. This training should also enable them to identify potential news stories and alert the communications team.	Communications Manager, Head of HR.	May 2002 onwards.	Much will depend on demand and capacity, but approximately £5k.

	Communications Manager.	May 2003.	Within media training costs cited for previous item.
• By regularly reviewing the contact list to identify those who are most adept at dealing with different types of media, to train appropriately.			

How will the improvements be monitored and how will successful outcomes be identified
The milestones to establish whether the above tasks have been completed on time will be monitored by the review officer. The communications team will monitor and evaluate press/media coverage and report regularly to Board of Directors. The success of these tasks will be measured annually by their impact upon BVPI 3.
What are the risks and what happens if the improvements are not achieved
As has been found, the Council's reactive media handling service is effective and well regarded, but essentially defensive. By the time a reaction has been given the damage is often done. By adopting a proactive approach, the Council can offset identified issues and concerns.

IMPROVEMENT POINT 7.

PURPOSE IN RELATION TO THE VISION : IMPROVED CUSTOMER SATISFACTION (1).

RELEVANT REVIEW FINDING/S : 6.11.

What needs to improve
The Council's relationship with the local media.

Why the improvement is necessary and what will be the desired outcomes from the improvement
The Council's relationship with the local media has been weak in the past. Though it has improved of late, there is still more to be done. We have seen how a good relationship between a council's communications team and the local media can have an impact upon media reaction to issues. Generally, the better the relationship, the more positive the response.

How it will be achieved	Responsible Officer	Target dates	Resources
• Through regular meetings, as time permits, between the Leader, Deputies and MD, and representatives of the local media.	Communications Manager, Cabinet, MD.	April 2002 onwards.	No additional resource implications.
• By working with the local media on joint campaigns and promotions - e.g. Council re-branding.	MD, Communications Manager.	May 2002 onwards.	No additional resource implications.
• By regular joint training and briefing sessions between journalists and officers.	Communications Manager.	May 2002 onwards.	No additional resource implications at this stage. Should costs arise they are likely to be shared.

How will the improvements be monitored and how will successful outcomes be identified
The milestones to establish whether the above tasks have been completed on time will be monitored by the review officer. Whether this is successful or not will monitored through improved media coverage. If this transpires there should be a positive impact upon BVPI3 as well.

What are the risks and what happens if the improvements are not achieved
Adopting a fatalistic approach to media relations - by assuming that because some previous coverage has been poor it will always be poor - is likely to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Research has shown that through making an effort to work in partnership with the media, councils can get better coverage.

IMPROVEMENT POINT 8.
PURPOSE IN RELATION TO THE VISION : IMPROVED CUSTOMER SATISFACTION (1).
RELEVANT REVIEW FINDING/S : 6.3, 6.9, 6.10, 7.1.5, 7.1.20, 7.1.21 and 7.1.22.

What needs to improve			
The Council's communications strategy.			

Why the improvement is necessary and what will be the desired outcomes from the improvement			
The Council's current communications strategy, though fine for its time, lacks clear and challenging aims for improving communications with the public, staff and other stakeholders. Working at another level from this improvement plan, it should provide a vision and direction for communications in the coming years.			

How it will be achieved	Responsible Officer	Target dates	Resources
• By working with Gloucestershire University business school on a competition for third year media students to help develop a communications strategy for the Council.	Communications Manager.	October 2003.	Resources required for staff time in liaison with the college, selection process and public relations.
• By using this work to inform a new Council communications strategy covering : external and internal communications, media handling, consultation, corporate branding, design and print, and web development.	Communications Manager.	October 2003.	No additional resource implications.

How will the improvements be monitored and how will successful outcomes be identified			
The milestones to establish whether the above tasks have been completed on time will be monitored by the review officer. The new communications strategy should set meaningful targets which can be monitored and evaluated.			

What are the risks and what happens if the improvements are not achieved			
If this does not occur, the communications team will run the risk of operating in a strategic vacuum, lacking a sense of direction.			

IMPROVEMENT POINT 9.

PURPOSE IN RELATION TO THE VISION : IMPROVED CUSTOMER SATISFACTION (1).
RELEVANT REVIEW FINDING/S : 6.7.

What needs to improve
The monitoring and evaluation of Council communications.

Why the improvement is necessary and what will be the desired outcomes from the improvement
The purpose of this is not only to measure the impact of the activities of the communications team, but to measure the impact of all the Council's attempts to improve its satisfaction rating. Though research suggests that the proposed actions will prove effective, if in practice they do not then they will need to be re-appraised. Periodic monitoring will allow this.

How it will be achieved	Responsible Officer	Target dates	Resources
• Create a user forum to assess changes in satisfaction with the Council, and get more detailed feedback than that received through the results of BVPI3, to compliment the work being done with the Viewpoint panel.	Preferred Viewpoint bidder, Policy and Research Officer.	October 2003.	No additional resource implications
• Undertake a cost/benefit analysis on software designed to monitor and evaluate council communications, so that the job no longer has to be done manually. Include this in the 2003/04 budget.	Communications Manager.	September 2002.	Cost of media monitoring and evaluation packages to be identified by the cost/benefit analysis. Media enquiry management systems can cost anything up to £1,000 per user.
• Change current monitoring system to measure media coverage generated by press enquiries and releases.	Communications Manager.	December 2002.	No additional resource implication.

How will the improvements be monitored and how will successful outcomes be identified
The milestones to establish whether the above tasks have been completed on time will be monitored by the review officer.

What are the risks and what happens if the improvements are not achieved
The risk is that without monitoring the progress of the various initiatives the Council will not be able to assess whether they have been successful or not.

<u>**IMPROVEMENT POINT 10.**</u>

PURPOSE IN RELATION TO THE VISION : IMPROVED CUSTOMER SERVICE (2).
RELEVANT REVIEW FINDING/S : 7.1.2, 7.1.12, 7.1.13, 7.1.14 and 7.1.24.

What needs to improve
The Council's centralist approach to service provision.

Why the improvement is necessary and what will be the desired outcomes from the improvement
The Council's current approach causes inconvenience to some residents in outlying parts of the borough. While there are advantages to the Council in maintaining its town centre location, there are a number of steps it can take to make itself more accessible to those who do not live within easy commuting distance. As with the other measures suggested, these should have a positive impact upon the overall satisfaction rating.

How it will be achieved	Responsible Officer	Target dates	Resources
• By raising the profile of the newly-created area committees.	Communications Manager, Head of Democratic Services.	May 2002 onwards.	No additional financial implications.
• By ensuring that members of the public receive agendas, etc, well in advance - so that they can participate fully in Council and area committee meetings.	Head of Democratic Services.	May 2002 onwards.	No additional financial implications.
• By publicising Council meetings more, wherever they are held, and monitoring attendance.	Head of Democratic Services.	May 2002	No additional resource implications.
• By progressing work on call centre, one-stop shop and remote service points. Year 1.	Head of E-government.	May 2003.	£190k, already allocated.

How will the improvements be monitored and how will successful outcomes be identified
The milestones to establish whether the above tasks have been completed on time will be monitored by the review officer. Specific impact will be tested through further consultation. Numbers attending meetings will be monitored and it is expected that attendance should increase with increased publicity. The public are able to enter into discussions at area committee meetings. As this becomes more widely known it too should help increase attendance. The combined success of these measures will be ascertained through their impact upon BVPI 3.

What are the risks and what happens if the improvements are not achieved
The Council may continue to be perceived as a centralist organisation that is structured more for its own benefit than for the convenience of its customers. The Council needs to ensure that the local media are well briefed of any changes, which will help allay any public concerns there may be. An assessment of risk for the e-government initiatives will be done as part of a proper staged project plan.

IMPROVEMENT POINT 11.

PURPOSE IN RELATION TO THE VISION : IMPROVED CUSTOMER SERVICE (2).
RELEVANT REVIEW FINDING/S : 7.1.17.

What needs to improve
Compliance with the Council's complaints handling system.

Why the improvement is necessary and what will be the desired outcomes from the improvement
Ensuring consistent use of the corporate complaints system across the authority will both improve the customer experience and enable the Council to produce meaningful management information that will enable it to identify trends and take remedial action. Both should impact upon the public's satisfaction rating of the Council.

How it will be achieved	Responsible Officer	Target dates	Resources
• By enforcing consistent compliance from the top down.	BoD.	October 2003.	No additional resource implications.
• By raising the profile of Customer Relations Officer following the re-structure.	BoD.	October 2002.	No additional resource implications.
• By simplifying the system. At present it is thought by some to be too time-consuming to complete.	Customer Relations Officer.	April 2003.	No additional resource implications, other than officer time.
• By making the system accessible to all relevant staff, in line with the evolving 'First Time Fix' approach to service provision.	BoD.	October 2003.	No additional resource implications.
• By promoting compliments as well as complaints so that staff feel valued.	Communications Manager, Customer Relations Officer.	October 2002.	No additional resource implications.

How will the improvements be monitored and how will successful outcomes be identified
The milestones to establish whether the above tasks have been completed on time will be monitored by the review officer. Their success will be measured by their impact upon BVPI14, Satisfaction with Complaints Handling.

	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06
% of respondents who are either very or fairly satisfied with the Council's complaints handling.	49.6	55%	60%	65%	70%

Success could also be measured by the impact of improved complaints handling upon BVPI3.

What are the risks and what happens if the improvements are not achieved
Differing levels of compliance across the authority can lead to inconsistency in the treatment of complainants. It can also render management information produced by the system meaningless. If services are turned into ALMOs or Trusts, then complaints handling needs to be consistent.

IMPROVEMENT POINT 12.

PURPOSE IN RELATION TO THE VISION : IMPROVED CUSTOMER SERVICE (2).
RELEVANT REVIEW FINDING/S : 7.1.16.

What needs to improve
Public satisfaction with Council opening hours.

Why the improvement is necessary and what will be the desired outcomes from the improvement
The is a perception amongst the public that Council opening hours have not moved with the times. The Council reviewed its opening hours recently and made changes, so its scope for changing them again in the near future is limited. Also, any such step would have a huge impact upon the workforce so it would have to be taken with extreme care. However, at some point the Council will need to move away from its traditional Monday to Friday approach - at least in its key services. In fact, it already does so in some services - e.g. sports amenities, Art Gallery & Museum, Festivals & Entertainments, and the civic amenity site. But the public expectation seems to be that other services will also have more accessible opening hours.

How it will be achieved	Responsible Officer	Target dates	Resources
• Through a consideration of the likely impact of the Council's e-government strategy upon the accessibility of its services.	Head of e-government.	April 2003.	No additional resource implications.
• Through a review of opening hours for key services, to include possible Saturday working, Sunday working, and at least one late evening - to provide a more flexible service, in line with recent social changes and customer expectations. However, it must be acknowledged that the consequences of doing this, in consultation, planning and resourcing, would be immense - so it should remain a long-term goal, to be phased in over time if pursued.	BoD, Head of HR, Customer Relations Officer.	April 2003 for a review of current arrangements, with a view to be taken on possible change after that.	No additional resource implications as yet. Depending on the course of action taken, the resource implications could be considerable, but these are impossible to quantify at this time.

How will the improvements be monitored and how will successful outcomes be identified
The milestones to establish whether the above tasks have been completed on time will be monitored by the review officer. Should such changes be made they could be expected to have a positive impact upon public satisfaction ratings of the Council.

What are the risks and what happens if the improvements are not achieved
More consultation needs to be undertaken, to establish the likely level of customer demand before any steps are taken. It should also be borne in mind that Council staff were surveyed on this issue recently, and a substantial majority were against any major changes to existing working hours. However changes to opening hours should be linked to other changes - e.g. working practices such as flexible working and teleworking, which are being addressed through e-government.

IMPROVEMENT POINT 13.
PURPOSE IN RELATION TO THE VISION : IMPROVED CUSTOMER SERVICE (2).

RELEVANT REVIEW FINDING/S : 7.1.7.

What needs to improve
The style and distribution of The Clarion.

Why the improvement is necessary and what will be the desired outcomes from the improvement
The Clarion has been a great success overall and any changes should be implemented with care. Consultation carried out as part of this review indicates that changes would be advantageous. Public expectation seems to be for a more topical, colourful and concise publication, focused on key areas of concern and containing a 'right of reply' section, so that readers can be engaged as well as informed. It follows that in meeting this expectation satisfaction levels - with both services and the Council - should rise. There is also the ongoing issue of distribution to consider. Addressing this will help to ensure that the Council is informing its residents of all relevant matters - and as we have seen, well-informed residents generally think more favourably of their council.

How it will be achieved	Responsible Officer	Target dates	Resources
• Through a competition run in The Echo to rename The Clarion - which will be used to inform the detailed work done by the Comms team on the paper's re-launch - and through re-designing the paper in line with customer expectations, in a way that is consistent with the new branding policy.	Communications Manager.	April 2003.	Resources required for staff time in liaison with the Echo, selection process and public relations.
• Through the new publication serving the Council's needs first and foremost. However, if space permits, community groups should still be encouraged to contribute to the publication.	Communications Manager.	April 2003.	No additional financial implications.
• By ensuring that The Clarion's future content is informed by research. This revealed that Cheltenham residents want information on : ♦ why decisions are made; ♦ how money is spent; ♦ what improvements are planned; ♦ what headline targets are; and ♦ how to get in touch.	Communications Manager.	April 2003.	No additional financial implications.
• By working with Royal Mail to resolve distribution problems, or by finding alternative means of distribution if a permanent solution cannot be found.	Communications Manager.	April 2003.	No additional financial implications as yet, though there may be if the Door-to-Door service cannot be improved.

How will the improvements be monitored and how will successful outcomes be identified
The milestones to establish whether the above tasks have been completed on time will be monitored by the review officer. Feedback on the changes to The Clarion will be obtained through an annual

Viewpoint exercise. The success of these tasks will be measured annually against BVPI 3.

What are the risks and what happens if the improvements are not achieved
The community planning process may require a more community style, multi-sector publication. The Council will need to consider whether there is still a need for a Council only publication in light of this, or whether alternative means can be found.

IMPROVEMENT POINT 14.
PURPOSE IN RELATION TO THE VISION : IMPROVED CUSTOMER SERVICE (2).
RELEVANT REVIEW FINDING/S : 7.1.14, 7.1.16, 7.1.17, 7.1.18, 7.1.19, 7.1.20, 7.1.21, 7.1.22, 7.1.24 and 7.1.25.

What needs to improve
The Council's use of new technologies and alternative media.

Why the improvement is necessary and what will be the desired outcomes from the improvement
The Council has to be seen to harness new technology in order to make its services more accessible and meet its e-government targets. At the same time, it has to be sensitive to the possibility of moving too quickly and completely away from its paper-based communications, and creating a digital divide. If the Council manages to achieve a balance between the two extremes the impact upon its satisfaction ratings is likely to be positive.

How it will be achieved	Responsible Officer	Target dates	Resources
• Make website homepage more newsy and campaigning, featuring regular messages from the Leader and MD.	Communications Manager, Head of E-government.	October 2002.	No additional resource implications.
• Enable card payments, telephone payments and internet payments.	Head of E-government .	March 2002 onwards.	No additional Resource implications.
• Make all forms available electronically.	Head of E-government.	March 2003.	£50k, already allocated.
• Merge all reception areas, including the cash hall, into a pilot one-stop shop, based at the Municipal Offices.	Head of E-government.	March 2003.	£190k, already allocated.
• Establish a network of street kiosks around the town, to provide access to council information and services.	Head of E-government.	September 2005 onwards.	£35k per annum, already allocated.
• Assess merits of call centre management system.	Head of E-government.	April 2003.	£25k already allocated and built into 190k above.
• Tailor telephony to match requirements of e-government.	Head of E-government.	April 2004.	£5k, already allocated, for scoping study.

How will the improvements be monitored and how will successful outcomes be identified
The milestones to establish whether the above tasks have been completed on time will be monitored by the review officer. The success of these measures will be assessed against BVPI3. Each project goes through rigorous project planning, and each has its own targets and outcomes. These are monitored by the, Service Delivery Board, BoD and the relevant Deputy (Modernising).

What are the risks and what happens if the improvements are not achieved
If the Council fails to meet it e-government deadlines it risks censure from the government. The underlying risks of the Council's e-government implementation activities will be assessed through the e-government project plans. These are all currently monitored by Service Delivery Board.

IMPROVEMENT POINT 15.
PURPOSE IN RELATION TO THE VISION : IMPROVED EMPLOYEE RELATIONS (3).
RELEVANT REVIEW FINDING/S : 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, 6.6, 6.7, 6.10, 6.11, 6.12, 7.1.6, 7.1.7, 7.1.8, 7.1.11, 7.1.12, 7.1.18, 7.1.19, 7.1.20, 7.1.21, 7.1.22 and 7.1.23.

What needs to improve
The focus and skills mix of the communications team.

Why the improvement is necessary and what will be the desired outcomes from the improvement
If the communications team is to be more pro-active and strategic, if it is to police branding and presentation standards, if it is to deal with internal communications issues as well as external, and if it is to give sufficient time and resource to web development, then strengthening the team and re-focussing the roles and responsibilities within it is essential. This will be addressed as part of the wider re-structuring of the Council, which is ongoing.

How it will be achieved	Responsible Officer	Target dates	Resources
As part of the wider re-structuring of the Council.	MD, BoD, Head of HR.	October 2002.	The costs attached to any re-focusing or strengthening of the communications team are impossible to quantify at this stage, until the outcome of the wider re-structuring is known. Whatever costs there may be will be reported at a later date.

How will the improvements be monitored and how will successful outcomes be identified
The milestone to establish whether the above task has been completed on time will be monitored by the review officer. Again, the success of this improvement point will be measured by its affect upon BVPI3. There should also be greater satisfaction for managers in terms of the support they receive from the communications team. This will be tested periodically through questionnaires.

What are the risks and what happens if the improvements are not achieved
The communications team will be structured inappropriately to remedy the main issues arising from the review. Consequently the potential for improvement will be restricted.

IMPROVEMENT POINT 16.
PURPOSE IN RELATION TO THE VISION : IMPROVED EMPLOYEE RELATIONS (3).
RELEVANT REVIEW FINDING/S : 6.9, 7.1.21 and 7.1.22.

What needs to improve

The Council's internal communications.

Why the improvement is necessary and what will be the desired outcomes from the improvement

If employees are to act as PR ambassadors for the organisation they have to feel valued and know that their views are taken into account. They need to know where the organisation is going, how it is going to get there and what their contribution is. If they do not, this is likely to manifest itself in their behaviour and impact upon how the authority is perceived by its customers. However, if they do, the impression they give is likely to be a much more positive one, which is likely to impact upon the customer experience and result in greater levels of satisfaction.

How it will be achieved	Responsible Officer	Target dates	Resources
• By developing and implementing the winning Gloucestershire University communications strategy entry, which will include internal communications.	Communications Manager.	October 2003.	Resources required for staff time in liaison with the college, selection process and public relations.
• By exploring the options for redesigning and re-launching the employee newsletter as a vehicle for effective communication of both 'hard' and 'soft' news.	Communications Manager.	October 2002.	Assuming the team is reinforced and re-focused as per IP15, the cost of printing the newsletter in its original form would be £2k pa (with in-house DTP).
• By further developing the intranet as a vehicle for internal communications.	Communications Manager.	April 2002 onwards.	No additional resource implications at present.
• By organising regular staff briefings by the Leader, Deputies and MD.	Communications Manager, Head of HR, Cabinet, MD.	April 2002 onwards.	No additional resource implications.
• By the MD holding monthly networking meetings with a random selection of staff from across the Council, to break down	MD, Head of HR.	October 2003.	No additional resource implications.

departmental boundaries.			
• By the MD holding regular staff focus groups, to share ideas, receive feedback and act as a consultation mechanism.	MD, Communications Manager, HR Manager.	October 2003 onwards.	No additional resource implications at this time.
• By exploring the opportunity for creating a Council café, operated via a franchise agreement, to provide a venue for employees to network during lunch periods or after work.	MD, BoD, Head of HR.	October 2004.	The venture would be franchised so operating costs would be met by the supplier. Negotiations would need to occur regarding a potential re-furbishment.

How will the improvements be monitored and how will successful outcomes be identified

The milestones to establish whether the above tasks have been completed on time will be monitored by the review officer. Improvement will be measured by repeating the recent Insight survey on internal communications. Employees thoughts on the quality and frequency of communications received from members and the board will be sought annually and the results compared with previous exercises to see if any improvement has been made.

What are the risks and what happens if the improvements are not achieved

If these actions are not taken there is a risk that employees will continue to think of themselves as the poor relations when it comes to communications. This could have an impact upon morale, which could manifest itself in sickness rates and high staff turnover.