

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (INTERNAL)

11TH OCTOBER 2007

PRESENT	Councillor V. Shuttleworth (Chair) Councillors Bowser, Mrs. Jopling, Mrs. Todd and Des Wilson
APOLOGIES	Councillor Mrs. Lee
ADVISERS	R. Bowman, Scrutiny Manager and Councillor Neil Stonehouse, Leader, Wear Valley District Council

04. INTERVIEW WITH THE LEADER OF WEAR VALLEY DISTRICT COUNCIL

The Chair welcomed the Leader to the meeting.

Q1. How would you describe Wear Valley District Council's current approach to internal communication?

In recognition of its importance, the Council has a positive approach to internal communication. The Corporate Communication Strategy is the main document outlining the approach of the authority. Internal communication is seen as vital to the progress of the authority.

It was questioned whether the principles of good communication and their practical implementation apply to all Members. The Leader stated that they did.

The issue of whether there were any flaws in internal communication was raised. In response, the Leader stated that in any large organisation there would be times when internal communication was less than perfect. However a learning approach was the norm, meaning that where shortfalls were highlighted, the regular management meetings could enable work towards improvement.

Q2. How is this approach realised in practice?

There were three main areas of communication highlighted. Verbal communication was the first, which included staff briefings, team meetings and interviews with the Chief Executive. Electronic communications included access to policy, corporate documents and press releases through the IT network. Finally, printed communications include the staff circular Team Talk, which adopts a less formal approach. The notice boards also provide an important site for internal communication.

It was questioned whether a need to know attitude was ever adopted in the practice of internal communication. The Leader responded that to his knowledge, no such attitude prevailed.

Q3. In your view, what, if anything, is wrong with internal communication at Wear Valley District Council?

The Leader stated that there were some concerns, including the issue of IT access. Not every member of staff has access to a PC. This meant that team meetings were of fundamental importance to internal communication. Member access to IT was viewed as a big issue.

Q4. How do internal communications in and between the departments of Wear Valley District Council help to provide access to joined up services for local people?

The public's perception of communication with the Council was improving. People trying to contact the authority no longer get passed around on telephone systems. Complaints and issues can now be handled holistically given the level of communication within and between the departments. This in turn facilitates the work of Members. The Leader emphasised that small, relatively unapparent actions and communications often create a greater, positive effect.

Q5. What measures are necessary to improve officer to officer communication in Wear Valley District Council?

Currently the communication among senior officers is very good. Corporate Management Team meets on a weekly basis to discuss relevant issues. Regular team meetings are also meant to be held, although in some cases they were not held as often as they should be. The importance of feeding issues upwards from the team meetings to senior levels was emphasised. It was questioned whether Wear Valley District Council Officers could feel confident in contacting Durham County Council officers where issues fell within the latter's competency. The Leader replied that generally, yes, District Council officers and their County colleagues did enjoy a good working relationship on operational matters.

Q6. What is your perspective on the current state of Member – officer communication in the authority?

Member – officer communication is better than it has been in previous years. The Protocol on Member - Officer Relations has provided a framework for communication. It was stated that it is often hard for new Members to get through to the relevant department given the various different job titles. This meant that it was often difficult to establish to whom a concern should be addressed. The telephone directory was highlighted by Members of the Committee as a source of concern as it was rarely up to date. The Leader pointed out that there was considerable difficulty in keeping the phone book up to date in an organisation the size of Wear

Valley District Council, but also stated that greater efforts should be made. It was stated that press releases were circulated to those Members with email, and hard copies were available for those without. The Member newsletter was described by the Leader as an attempt at a dialogue with Members. It was intended as a two-way process, both engaging Members with its content and inviting their contribution.

Q7. How do you think that Member – officer communication could be improved in the authority?

The importance of internal communications had been recognised in ways that it hadn't in the past. There is a need to continue development in this regard. Continuing improvement of and engagement with the current communication procedures was highlighted as a means of improvement.

The Chair thanked the Leader for his contribution. The Leader left the meeting at 4:45pm.

05. VERBAL UPDATE ON THE CURRENT RESULTS OF THE MEMBER QUESTIONNAIRE ON INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

The Scrutiny Manager informed the Committee that the current response rate to the questionnaire stood at 11 (27.5% of Wear Valley District Council Members) after one week. His verbal report on the interim results highlighted the following:

Face-to-face communication and the telephone were usually the only methods utilised to communicate with officers. Speed, response and convenience were the principal reasons cited for using the methods. The majority of respondents found these methods of communication to be unproblematic.

A large majority of Members thought that face-to-face communication would be the better method and cited various reasons for not using it. The main reason was lack of time.

Officers mainly used the telephone to contact Members. The post and face-to-face communication were also used regularly. A large majority of Members found these methods to be unproblematic.

Overall, a large majority of Members thought that face-to-face communication was the most efficient way for Members and officers to communicate with each other.

Members noted the information and agreed that a final report on the results of the questionnaire should be produced. It was also agreed that a survey of officers should take place to ascertain their views on internal communication.

CHAIR

Meeting concluded at 5:25pm

DRAFT