

Item no

Report to: **Community Services Scrutiny Committee**

Date: **29 January 2008**

Report of: **Communications and Marketing Manager**

Subject: **Service Unit Performance Reporting - Communications and Marketing**

Ward: **All**

1. Purpose of Report

1.1 To update Members on the performance of the communications and marketing unit.

2. Consultation

2.1 In preparing this report I have consulted with the Executive Member for Neighbourhood Engagement and Communication and with staff within the unit.

3. Background

3.1 The report provides an update on the progress of the unit which includes in its range of services:

- internal and external PR communications
- communication planning and support
- copywriting, design and photography services
- event management
- advertising
- website support

3.2 The unit operates across the council engaging with all services to support and publicise their activities and to promote the council's key corporate objectives.

4. Position statement and communications and marketing unit activities

4.1 The unit's 2007/08 plans continue to be significantly affected by the impact of the local government review.

4.2 Local government review

Following the announcement that there is to be a single unitary council for Durham, the unit is working with colleagues at Durham County and the District councils to develop a communications and stakeholder engagement strategy to:

- support the transition process from two-tier to unitary in line with the implementation order and unitary submission and to

- promote the benefits of unitary local government reorganisation (LGR) with internal and external audiences.

Initially this communications group will be involved in preparations for the forthcoming unitary council elections.

The council's communications unit will concentrate locally on publicising plans for unitary governance and increasing the understanding of staff, residents and other stakeholders about the transition process and about the impact of organisational change. In this we will be sensitive to the views of all stakeholders including those who voted overwhelmingly against the plan in the referendum.

4.3 District of Easington Transitional Plan for Local Government Reorganisation

The unit, in common with other service functions, is reviewing its service plans to reflect the support requirements for the key priorities outlined in the council's Transitional Plan for Local Government Reorganisation.

The plan is demanding and the priority areas identified for services are closely aligned to the unit's core activities, so the programme is likely to continue to require the full extent of support we provide.

Some areas like regeneration and democratic services are likely to be more demanding in the run up to April 2009.

4.4 Community engagement

As part of the council's community engagement strategy a Community Advisory Panel is being recruited so that local people can give their views on council services, issues affecting their daily lives and the neighbourhoods they live in.

Recruitment packs have been distributed to 7,500 residents to invite their involvement in the 1,000 strong panel of people of all ages from communities right across the whole district. Residents can also apply on-line.

4.5 Media relations

Creation of a corporate media policy offering clear guidance to Members, management and staff about the importance of good media relations and how these can be achieved was outlined at the last service review in October. This has been completed and will be introduced shortly.

Media skills training was arranged for 10 councillors in December. Funded by the Improvement Partnership for North East Local Government, the one day course provided training in the skills and techniques necessary to effectively communicate with citizens and communities, through the media. All participants benefitted from the experience and the council is better equipped to deal with media relations as a result.

4.6 Media activity

The number of news releases issued is up 33% on the same period last year. We have a stretching target but the number of releases being produced is on track.

There has been a 95% increase this year to date in the number of press enquiries the unit is dealing with. This reflects a significant growth in interest in council activities and the impact of a proactive stance on media relations.

Update on Local Performance Indicators for the unit

Local indicators	2006/7	Target 2007/8	To Dec '07
Volume of articles and positive tonality of media coverage of council activities	V 1,355 T 59%	V 1,550 T 55%	N/A N/A
Number of news releases produced annually <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council • East Durham Homes (actual up to June 2007) 	165 43	210 9	120 13
Media calls dealt with same day	95%	95%	95%

Analysis of the media coverage of council activities achieved is analysed at the year end so tonality of coverage is yet to be assessed. Coverage generally however remains buoyant and positive with minimal negative press.

There has been intense recent media interest in the district with national newspapers reporting on the new Centre for Creative Excellence film studio, the Darwin (“canoe man”) case and the Martin Abrahams (political cash donations) stories. A recent BBC Politics Show feature on empty homes in the district threatened very negative coverage. The programme addressed a national problem and we were able to balance the negative local imagery with clear explanations of the problem and steps being taken to tackle the issue here in Easington.

‘Pride in Easington’ activities continue to boost positive coverage of council environmental issues. ‘Pride’ has also stimulated increased positive coverage in other areas – arts, sport and East Durham Homes as well as the activities of partners, community enterprises and the achievements of individuals.

Media coverage of regeneration activities is also up year on year.

5. Service Plan slippage

- 5.1 Plans to review the council’s communications strategy and the council’s styleguide have been shelved in the light of LGR.

We continue to adhere to the key principles in the existing document that are still pertinent. We embrace new communication tasks and audiences as appropriate and apply equality and diversity principles to all of our work. We are for instance, providing support to the Polish Residents Support Group.

6. Budget

- 6.1 The unit has a 2007/08 budget of £56,750. Expenditure is on target.
- 6.2 The unit also has access to a special Earmarked Reserve drawdown facility of £100,000 set up in August 2004. This allows support for corporate promotions to raise people's perceptions of the council and improve its reputation and key service delivery projects. Expenditure to date and planned will reduce the balance to £39,400 at the year end.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial, Legal, Policy

There are no financial, legal or policy implications arising from this report.

7.2 Risk

Unit risks are detailed in the unit's Service Plan and on the Risk Register.

7.3 Communication

There are no communication implications arising from this report.

8. Corporate Implications

8.1 Corporate Plans and Priorities

Communication and marketing activities support all of the council's key corporate priorities. At a corporate level there are also overarching principle aims for the service i.e. protecting and enhancing the corporate reputation and improving perceptions of the District. These aims echo and contribute to meeting the communication core action requirements of the LGA Reputation Campaign that the council is signed up to.

8.2 Equality and Diversity Implications

All media material generated within the unit reflects the council's equality and diversity statement, policy and procedures recognising diversity in our existing and developing community.

8.3 E-Government Implications

There are no implications attached to the report.

8.4 Procurement Implications

There are no implications attached to the report.

9. Recommendation

Members are requested to note the work of the communications and marketing unit and note the progress made.

Background papers/documents referred to:

Unit files
Service Plan
Communication Plans