

Communications Strategy

2006 to 2009

**RUNNYMEDE
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

This report sets out a proposed external communications programme, following on from findings of the communications audit and survey with the new Residents' Panel. The programme takes into account the recent findings of the LGA and MORI's 'Reputation of Local Government' project.

1. Background information

2.1 Communications Strategy

The current Communications Strategy, approved in 2003, outlines of the council's external communications:

“To communicate the council’s services and objectives as widely as possible amongst external stakeholders and maintain democratic accountability.”

2.2 Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity

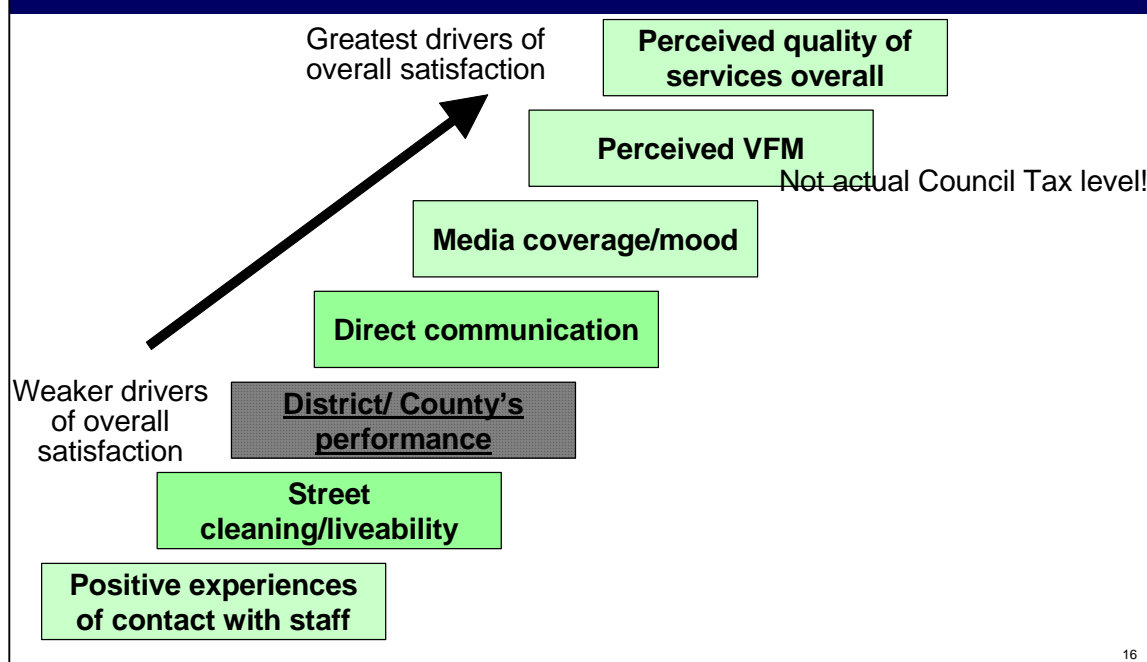
The code, produced by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, gives guidance to Local Government communications professionals on a range of communications issues. These include: subject matter, costs, content and style, dissemination, advertising, recruitment advertising, individual councillors, elections, referenda and petitions and assistance to others for publicity. The action plan and proposals are in accordance with this code. Copies of the code are available from the Communications Officer or can be downloaded at www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk.

2.3 'Reputation of Local Government' project

Last year, the LGA commissioned MORI to research into the factors that affect a local authority's reputation with its residents. MORI had previously found that there was a strong correlation between good communications and strong resident satisfaction.

MORI's research with the LGA found seven key drivers of public satisfaction with local authorities.

Most important drivers of reputation among local residents



Research suggests that if a council commits to doing the following **communications core actions** well, it will have a significant impact on its reputation and standing:

- effective media management;
- an A-Z guide to council services;
- a regular council magazine/newspaper;
- branding – effective and consistent linkage of council brand to community services; and
- good internal communications.

For the purpose of this report, direct communications mechanisms and branding will be covered in detail. An internal communications plan has been produced, which details actions for developing internal communications, and media guidelines detail the authority's approach to media relations.

2.4 Resident satisfaction

The Best Value General Survey exercise with residents in 2003/04 showed that 68% of residents were satisfied with the council's services. This was the highest in Surrey and the fifth highest of the 238 district councils in the country.

2.5 The council's principal stakeholders

The council's principal stakeholders, in addition to residents, are the PCT, Surrey Police, Surrey County Council, Runnymede Association of Voluntary Services, the Runnymede Business Partnership and neighbouring boroughs. Although the report focuses on improving communication with residents, the measures proposed will improve the council's communications with its other principal stakeholders.

2. Report

2.1 Audit of our communications

The IDeA has published criteria for an 'ideal' local authority. The basis for developing the benchmark was the Local Government Acts 1999 and 2000, the Strong Local Leadership: Quality Public Services and the CPA framework. This has been used to audit our current communications and helps to give targets to strive for through improved practices.

For democratic and community engagement: communication (with customers and citizens) the following definition is used:

"Informing and encouraging feedback from all sections of the community. Convincing and influencing, using a variety of media appropriately and sensitively and building and maintaining the networks through which to communicate."

Three levels have been identified for communications and are outlined in Appendix A, along with a synopsis of the council's current position.

The communications audit reviewed the quality, spend and distribution of current communications undertaken by the council. It provided a snapshot of publications, adverts and other communications activity undertaken last year.

The review included most aspects of external communications (excluding media relations and the website) in order to inform the council's Communications Strategy which will include an action plan for developing communications.

The review shows that there is good practice in some services' communications, however there is inconsistency in the quality and methods used to communicate with residents and other stakeholders.

The Council Tax Section offer a translation service for publications through RNIB and Woking Interpreting and Translating Service, and Leisure Services use email and text messages to engage with their typically younger audience. Business Partnership publications in particular are well written and designed in an eye-catching and professional way, and Housing's 'Streets Ahead' magazine is well-targeted and appropriate for the tenant and leaseholder audience it is produced for.

While these show good practice, they are not continued throughout the council; this could be through a lack of awareness as there is currently no forum for sharing good communications practice across services.

The review showed confusion about what the council's logo actually is, with some departments using the crest, others using an image of the Magna Carta or not using a corporate brand and developing an individual departmental or project brand. There were over 24 different variations of the crest and/or Runnymede Borough Council logo or brands used by the council in that period.

Over £73,000 was spent on publications including the Annual Report last year. Distribution of publications is a particular area for improvement as leaflets seem to be produced and distributed in various ways. The Councillors' leaflet, showing local councillors with contact details, is distributed through the council's facilities, libraries

and the Civic Offices. However this is something that all residents should receive, as part of any corporate publication.

Departmental spend on advertisements was £66,000 in the year, which included Public Notices and recruitment advertisements. Of this, £2,836 was spent on advertising in the 'Borough Guide', alone. Advertisements in the Guide were to promote services, information that could have been included within the text or used to advertise or promote the service in an additional method to the Borough Guide. Additional advertisements were also placed in highly targeted publications or venues, meaning less value for the advertising department.

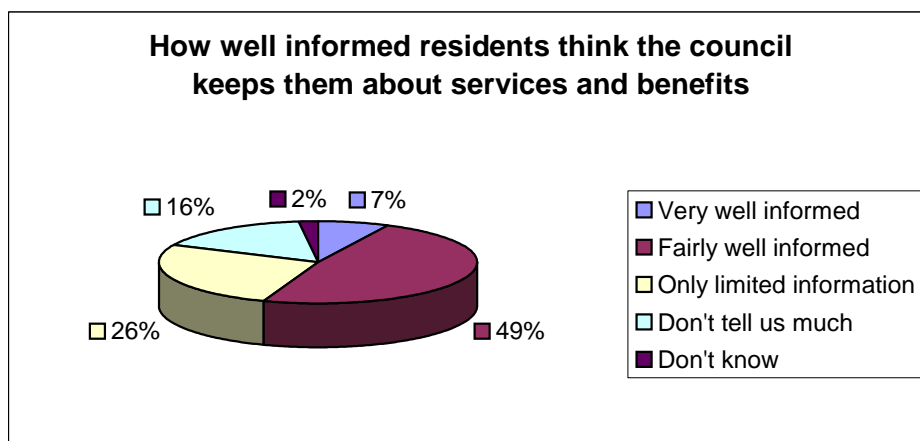
There is clearly a need to improve consistency and introduce some form of control in spending on communications. Better use of corporate publications would mean that services had the exposure they needed with residents and specific service users, so they could use their remaining budgets for communications in a more effective way.

2.2 Consultation with residents

In autumn 2005, officers conducted a postal survey with residents about the council's communications, as part of the process of refreshing the existing Residents' Panel. Residents were asked 20 questions about the council's communications, services and how they wish to be communicated with. The survey and percentages for each response are outlined in Appendix 2.

From 3,000 surveys, 1,001 responses were received. The most common characteristics of a responder was that they were a white female, aged 35-44 with English as their first language. They were most likely to live in Addlestone, Chertsey or Egham and the majority of respondents had lived in the borough for over ten years.

The survey asked how informed the council keeps them about the services and benefits it provides.

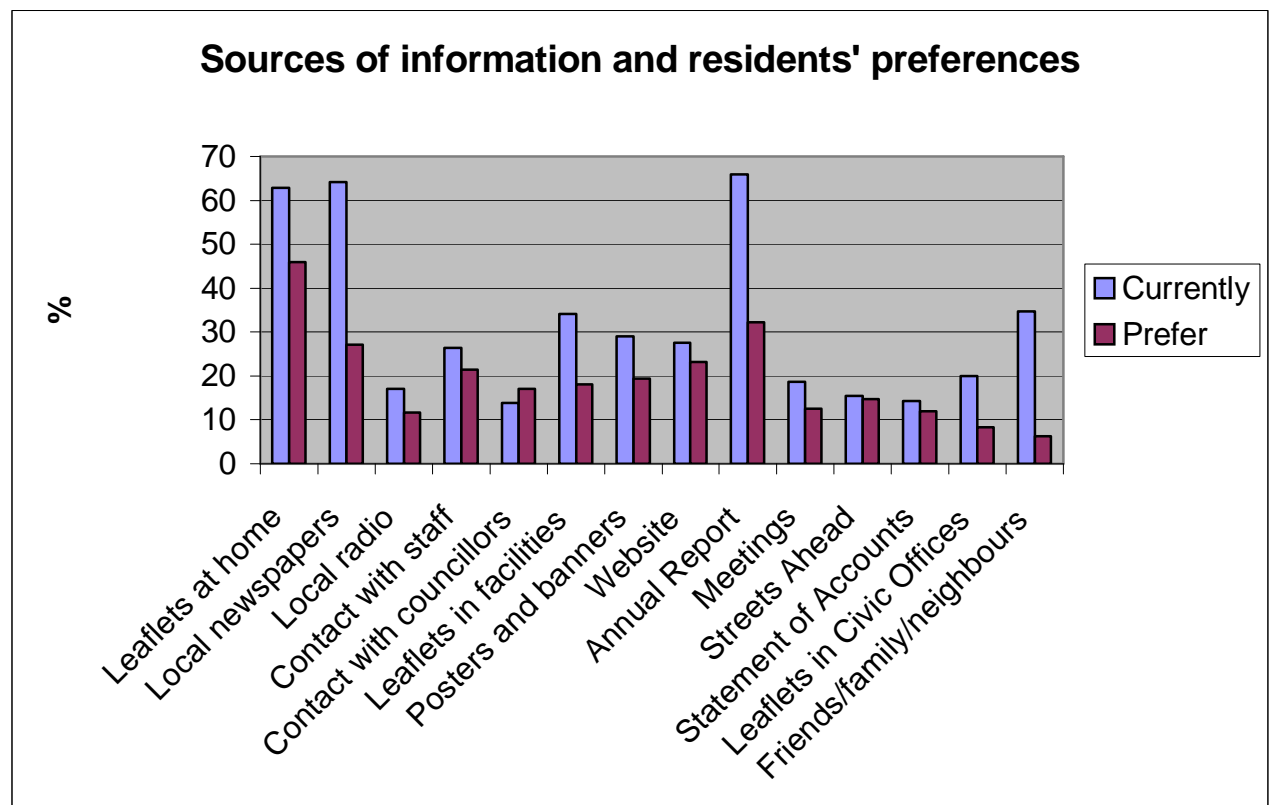


Over half (55.5%) felt that the council kept them very or fairly informed about the services and benefits we provide. When asked how well they were kept informed about local events/activities, performance, improvements and why decisions are made, the majority felt that they are given only limited information or that the council doesn't tell them much. When asked how interested they were in these categories,

over 85% said that they were either very or fairly interested in each category. Over half felt informed about how the council spends its money.

When asked to agree with six possible perceptions of the council, the results were positive. Service quality is perceived to be good, the council gives residents good value for money and they trust the council to make decisions that are in the best interest of residents. They also have confidence in the council's ability to deliver good quality services and facilities to meet their needs. There was some discrepancy in whether the council is viewed as remote and impersonal, with about the same percentage of respondents agreeing and disagreeing with the statement and residents seemed unsure of whether their views are taken into account about decisions that affect them.

Residents were asked how they currently find out about the council and its services and their preferences for communications.



Residents are most interested in environmental services, leisure services, community safety, planning and building control and the council's finances.

Nearly a quarter of residents have internet access and 69% are aware of our website: www.runnymede.gov.uk. Although awareness of the website is high, only 40.9% have accessed the website, and the majority access it less than once a year.

Residents were given a list of services provided by Runnymede and Surrey County Council and were asked to state by whom they were provided. There seemed to be a general confusion about the majority of services, however most respondents were aware that Runnymede are responsible for refuse collection, recycling collection, council tax collection and car parks.

The majority of residents stated that Runnymede disposes of refuse and most respondents believed that environmental health services are either provided by the county council, or the county council in conjunction with the borough council. Over a quarter of respondents believed that affordable housing is provided by the county council and one in five considered that the borough council provide social services.

Newspaper readership throughout the borough is varied, because of the geographical distribution of the local press, with the most popular publications understandably being the freesheets. Almost a third of residents read the Staines Leader, the Walton and Weybridge Informer, the Staines Informer and the Addlestone and Byfleet Review. A quarter of respondents regularly read the Surrey Herald (Addlestone and Chertsey edition), making it the most popular paid-for title. The Staines and Egham News is read by 18% of respondents.

Over 70% of respondents regularly listen to London-based radio stations, with the most popular being Capital. One in five regularly listen to 96.4 The Eagle, with County Sound, BBC Southern Counties, Radio Jackie and Star FM having a lower proportion of listeners in the borough.

The panel were asked to rate how the council could improve its communications. The most popular improvements, with over two thirds of respondents favouring them, were the introduction of a regular magazine and a list of services provided by the borough and county council, both delivered to every household. These findings are consistent with the findings of the MORI research for the LGA reputation project, where producing a regular council magazine and an A-Z of Services were two of the five suggestions given for improving the reputation of a local authority. Promoting community events and working closely with local newspapers and radio stations also scored highly.

3. Communications objectives

The underlying principles of the council's communications strategy should be to inform, to listen and to involve residents and other stakeholders with regard to its services.

Developing the Communications Strategy implemented in 2003, the council should be working to provide a 'best fit' of communications to the requirement and interest of residents, along with satisfying statutory requirements.

The programme outlined in this report will improve awareness of the range of services that the borough council provides, the performance of the council and the proportion of total council tax that funds its services.

These objectives will be measured through a repeat of the Residents' Panel survey after a three-year period, and in particular would be measured through responses to the following questions:

Q1. How well informed do you think the council keeps you about the services and benefits it provides?

Q3. How well informed does the council keep you about: how the council spends its money; local events and activities that affect residents; improvements planned for council services; how the council is performing; the reasons why the council makes the decisions it does.

- Q5.** Who do you believe is responsible for providing the services listed below?
(Possible answers are most county and borough council services)
- Q6.** How do you currently receive information about Runnymede Borough Council?
- Q11.** Were you aware that Runnymede Borough Council has a website?
- Q12.** Have you accessed the website, and if so, how often do you visit it on average?
- Q.16** What percentage of the council tax collected by Runnymede Borough Council do you believe is retained by the council for the services it provides?
- Q18.** Have you contacted Runnymede Borough Council with a complaint over the last 12 months? Generally speaking, were you satisfied with the way in which the complaint was handled?

4. Themes

There are five proposed themes to the communications programme:

- **Corporate identity and style**
 - To develop a strong and coherent brand for the council so that all communications are recognisably from Runnymede Borough Council.
 - To reinforce the council's priorities in its communications in a consistent manner.
- **Direct corporate communications**
 - To improve and develop the council's direct corporate communications with the residents of Runnymede, based on the council's statutory responsibilities and residents' needs and interests.
 - To improve awareness of and access to the council's services.
- **Quality and accessibility**
 - To improve the quality, consistency and accessibility of the council's communications
 - To communicate with residents through their preferred channels of communication
- **Customer care**
 - To review and communicate the council's customer care policy internally to ensure the highest standards of customer care.
 - To develop internal communications to increase awareness of the council's services and corporate priorities
- **Consultation**
 - To provide and encourage opportunities for feedback about services
 - To listen to feedback and use it to inform the council's future actions and to clearly communicate the reasons for these.

5. Communications work programme

5.1 Corporate identity and style

The Local Government Reputation project cites a strong council identity/brand as important because it can improve satisfaction with services. The communications research showed that residents were unsure about the division between county and borough council services, meaning that they can be unsatisfied with the way the borough council runs things because of a bad experience with a county council service, and vice versa.

Currently the council has a myriad of ways that the crest and the 'Runnymede Borough Council' logo are used. Many departments and projects have their own logos which can only lead to confusion for residents, especially in a two-tier structure. This means that the corporate brand is often only associated with negative experiences, while the individual service or project brands are associated with positive experiences.

Strong corporate identity guidelines will ensure that recognition of our services increases with the possibility of increased resident satisfaction.

It is therefore recommended that:

- **Branding and style guidelines are produced.** This will improve consistency of use of the council's logo and awareness of the range of services we provide.
- **All service/project logos are discontinued**, with the exception of Abbey Fit / Addlestone Leisure Centre, Egham Leisure Centre, Chertsey Museum and Safer Runnymede's partnership work. Community Safety work funded by the council should be branded Runnymede Borough Council.
- **A branding exercise is undertaken, to develop a new brand for the move to the new civic offices.** This will involve establishing the council's brand values in a consultation exercise with staff.
- **The council's priorities are communicated internally**, with all corporate communications reinforcing the priorities to residents.

5.2 Direct corporate communications

The council's current direct corporate communications with residents is the council tax booklet that accompanies the annual bill, the Annual Report, the Borough Guide and Borough Map.

This year's council tax booklet has been developed to include more information about services, plans and achievements and the council's priorities.

The Reputation of Local Government project cites direct communications as the fourth strongest driver of reputation among local residents. The research recommended two publications that can have a significant impact on satisfaction: an A-Z of services and a council/community magazine.

A-Z of services

This is cited by the reputation research as the single most important publication that any council can produce. A guide to services raises resident satisfaction with services because it helps them to understand the range of work undertaken by their local authority.

A guide to services has been proven to be the most used council publication. The 'Connecting with Communities' research conducted by the IdeA showed that this publication is used by 55% of respondents, 15% higher than any other council publication.

As the council's own research has shown, in a two-tier structure, residents can be confused about who provides what service. A guide to services can overcome some

of this confusion, and can also show that the council works in a joined up way with its partners by including some of their contact details.

Council magazine

A number of publications are currently produced and distributed to every household, targeted mailings or through council and partner facilities at a large cost to the council. Due to inconsistent branding or relying on tried and tested distribution methods, residents often wouldn't associate these publications with the council or information is only disseminated to a small group of residents, reducing awareness of these services with the majority of residents.

The information in several of these publications could be more effectively communicated to residents through a regular council magazine and the magazine could form part of a co-ordinated marketing campaign for specific service promotion, eg, play schemes and SPLASH.

The LGA and MORI research shows that producing a regular council magazine as part of a communications programme will lead to increased overall satisfaction with a council's services. Residents like to receive communications direct from their council, instead of through local newspapers and radio, and it provides a mechanism to put the council's key messages across and set the record straight. A magazine provides a mechanism for engaging with residents, encouraging feedback and dialogue and giving statutory information and it is also an effective internal communications tool, increasing awareness of how other services are performing and the range of services the council provides.

It is recommended that:

- **An A-Z of services is produced and delivered to every household every two years.** As the reputation project recommends updating this publication annually, the regularity of this should be assessed in the next communications survey.
 - **the current Annual Report is increased to three publication dates a year, based on the needs of key front-line services** and that the council's publications are rationalised to cover the print and production cost. (distribution cost to be found). As the reputation project recommends producing a magazine four or more times a year, the regularity of this should be assessed in the next communications survey.
 - **the purpose and distribution of the Borough Guide is reviewed.**
 - **An information pack for new residents is put together, to include key corporate documents.** This will be distributed with the council tax bill.

6.3 Quality and accessibility

Quality and accessibility of the council's communications varies by department. There are currently no corporate guidelines on producing publications, or guidance on communications with those whose spoken/written language is not English, who have a learning disability or those with a visual disability. Arrangements for translation services are arranged at a service or departmental level, with no corporate approach to buying in this service.

Many publications and other communications mechanisms are worded with some council-speak, with a need for clearer and more consistent language through the use of plain English.

The IDeA define plain English as: “communicating to people, in writing or speech, in a way that allows the intended audience to easily understand what is being said. That includes avoiding use of jargon and waffle, having clearly structured sentences setting out information people need to know, and making clear what action, if any, is required.”

It is recommended that:

- **Plain English and publications Guidelines are produced**
- **A cross-departmental communications group is established**
- **Current arrangements for translation are reviewed**, with recommendations if required, and arrangements are communicated to staff
- **The benefits to the organisation of becoming a corporate member of the Plain English Campaign** are reviewed, with training organised for staff responsible for communications in their service

6.4 Customer care

Good customer care is vital in building a good relationship with residents. The recent communications shows that of the 29% of residents that had contacted the council with a complaint, 70% were satisfied with the way the complaint was handled, leaving 30% dissatisfied. The Best Value General Survey, conducted in 2003, showed similar results across all Surrey districts. The council’s result has shown improvement since the 2003 survey, where 40% of respondents were dissatisfied with the way a complaint was handled.

A bad customer experience is one which will impact on how they view not only the particular service, but the council as a whole, affecting their satisfaction with the council’s services.

The customer care policy was reviewed in xxx following the results of the General Survey. The policy should be known by all staff, and as such should be re-communicated regularly to them, in particular those providing front-line services. Customer care training is arranged as part of the induction process for all new front-line staff, however the need for a refresher course should be reviewed.

It is recommended that:

- The Customer Care Policy and training are reviewed
- The key components of the policy are communicated regularly to all staff, and also to residents, showing that we are approachable and welcome feedback.

6.5 Consultation

The way the council consults with residents can have an impact on the way services are perceived. The consultation process should always involve feedback to residents about results of the consultation, actions and reasons for decisions. This can be in a non-targeted form, through the media or direct corporate communications, or can be direct to those who responded.

More co-ordination with consultation, in particular, having a corporate consultation database, could reduce the need to consult and an annual consultation calendar would help services to work together to minimise consultation costs.

The Residents' Panel is a valuable tool that can be used by departments wishing to consult with a cross-section of one thousand residents. The use of the panel should be promoted more widely internally and managed effectively to ensure that consultation on key strategic issues are prioritised.

It is recommended that:

Consistency in consultation is developed by undertaking a consultation audit, producing a database of past consultations, a diary of forthcoming consultations and guidelines on best practice for consultation.

The usage of the Residents' Panel is better focused on the council's priorities

6. Resource implications

Council magazine

The full cost of the production and distribution of the council magazine can be met from identified promotional budgets from approved estimates. The cost per edition is in the order of £13,000 per edition, or £39,000 for three editions each year.

A-Z of services

The cost of producing an A-Z of Services publication in 2006 can be met through underspent and carried over budgets from the current financial year. The cost is expected to be in the order of £15,000 per edition including distribution.

Branding

Improving consistency of usage of the current logos and branding will not incur a cost. A re-branding exercise, suggested to take place for the opening of the new civic offices, would incur a cost and options for this will be reported to committee at a later date.

LGA Reputation project

Signing up to the principles of the LGA reputation project will incur no additional cost.

7. Policy implications

The objective of the first Communications Strategy, approved in 2003, is:

- 'to communicate Runnymede Borough Council's services and objectives as widely as possible amongst external stakeholders, and maintain democratic accountability'.

The objective of this proposed strategy develops the role of the council's communications further:

- 'to inform, to listen and to involve residents and other stakeholders with regard to (the council's) services'

It is recommended that this new objective and strategy will replace the previous objective and strategy.

8. Summary

For ease of reference, the key recommendations are summarised as follows:

8.1 Corporate Identity and Style

To develop a strong and coherent brand for the council and to reinforce the council's priorities in its communications in a consistent manner

8.2 Direct corporate communications

To develop two new publications: an A-Z of Services and a council magazine, and to review the purpose and distribution of current corporate publications.

8.3 Quality, consistency and accessibility

To develop the quality, consistency and accessibility of the council's communications.

8.4 Customer care

To review and communicate the council's Customer Care Policy to ensure the highest standards of customer care.

- **It is also recommended that the council signs up to the LGA Reputation Project.** This involves committing to producing a regular magazine, an A-Z of Services, developing good internal communications, good relationships with the local media and consistent branding.

9.5 Consultation

To increase co-ordination and communication of consultation internally and improve communications to residents about consultation exercises and the reasons behind key decisions.

9.6 LGA 'Improving Reputation of Local Government' project

To sign up to the principles of the project. These include developing good internal communications, establishing good relationships with the local media, developing consistent and strong branding and producing two key corporate publications: a council magazine and an A-Z of Services.

10 Officers' recommendation that –

- the action plan and recommendations are approved.
- the financial arrangements for the council magazine and A-Z of Services are noted.
- the council signs up to the principles of the LGA 'Improving Local Government Reputation' project. The requirements of which are fulfilled in the action plan

