



Communications And Participation Audit & Strategy

July 2003



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1. Executive Summary

The Audit Commission recently ranked the Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames as 'excellent' in its Comprehensive Performance Assessment, but made improving communications one of its seven recommendations.

A two-year communication and participation strategy and action plan was commissioned from communication consultants MPC covering communications with residents, partners, the media, national opinion formers and staff. It also includes an audit of the council's image, reputation and branding.

Using desktop research as well as interviews with staff, members, partners and the local media and a visual audit of the council's printed publications, website and signage, the communications audit found:

1. Despite being one of only 22 'excellent' councils, RBK has a low national profile. This could hinder the council's ability to campaign for further competitive funding on the community's behalf. Improving media profile in the national and specialist press, entering and winning national awards, encouraging managers to speak at national conferences and proactively inviting national opinion formers to visit the council will help to increase this profile.
2. Residents' satisfaction with the area as a place to live and with council services is very high but this is not being translated into overall satisfaction with the council. MORI research suggests this is because residents do not feel well informed about the council. A quarterly residents' magazine, a welcome pack for new residents and further improvements to the website should improve this.
3. The council's six strategic aims have been translated into simple key messages (which are excellent) but these key messages are not being used to communicate what the council stands for internally and externally. The messages need to be incorporated into all communications.
4. Although a style guide is improving the consistency of council publications, signage and livery is often out of date and tatty, undermining the council's overall brand. The production of leaflets needs to be better co-ordinated to ensure key leaflets are available from receptions and design templates used to maintain consistency.
5. Service-based consultation could be improved by developing 'consultation champions' across departments, who others can call on for help. They should be supported by guidelines on how to consult users and through consultation workshops to improve their skills.
6. While the communications team was highly praised by the local press, news stories and features are generally confined to this media. Service managers require media

awareness training, while lead members and officers should be offered TV and radio interview training. A programme of placing features in the national, regional and specialist press should be undertaken, linked to the council's strategic aims.

7. Strategic partners are highly complimentary about both the political leadership and senior management of the council, saying they had built good two-way communications. However, some partners felt middle managers had not yet embraced partnership working, which created obstacles to getting things done. A partnership working module could be included on the Middle Managers' Programme and the induction course to overcome this. Email groups, based on issues, and regular networking lunches could further strengthen this area of work.
8. RBK is one of only five London boroughs to achieve corporate Investor in People accreditation. Despite this, internal communications is mixed, with just half of all staff saying they were satisfied with the way they were informed about matters of importance to them while managers and front line staff attending two focus groups felt communications was largely siloed. A cascade team briefing system, expanded staff newsletter, annual roadshows, a knowledge management strategy and improved forms of consultation should improve this. An internal communication officer post should be considered.
9. With just three people, the communications team is one of the smallest in London. To implement the actions in this strategy and ensure RBK is able to improve its communications with the community, further investment is required. The team should be expanded to become a Communications and Information services group within Strategic Services. Its responsibilities to include media, communications, public access programme, consultation, information, website editorship, and tourism and marketing. New posts of communications & information services manager, two communication officer posts and an administrator should also be established. The information officer post should be deleted and replaced with another communication officer post and the current temporary communications post be fully funded.
10. The Media Management Group and Consultation Network Group should be merged into a communications and consultation group to help action this strategy throughout departments. Communications and consultation should become standing items on all directorate management team agendas, with the relevant group member sitting on the DMT.
11. In order to make the improvements and to action the proposals set out in this report, RBK will need to make a significant investment in its future communications and consultation with residents. The report has identified potential costs of over £300k if all the actions were implemented. Clearly the Council will need to consider its priorities and may need to take an incremental approach - not all things can be done at once! However a quantum leap in investment is needed, especially in people capacity and in the areas of informing residents. RBK should therefore be looking in 2004/5 at a minimum investment of circa £200k.

2. Introduction

This communications audit and strategy has been commissioned by the Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames (RBK) to look at ways the council can improve communications and participation with its key stakeholders.

It follows the Comprehensive Performance Assessment by the Audit Commission which ranked the council as 'excellent' but made improving communications one of its seven recommendations.

The report contains the results of an audit with stakeholders ranging from residents to the media, partners, opinion formers and staff, and makes recommendations on how two-way communications and participation can be improved.

It is divided into sections, by stakeholder group, with each containing analysis of current perceptions by those stakeholders and making recommendations for improvement.

The council is not starting from a low base. As well as its 'excellent' rating, RBK has put in place some good methods for communicating with stakeholders – some of which are best practice. However, RBK acknowledges that further improvements are required across the board to ensure residents fully engage with the council.

While some of our recommendations are standard good practice, we have also recommended the council pilot new, innovative methods of communications to crack age-old problems and to develop best practice which can be shared with the local government community.

The recommendations will require extra resources for the small communications team. Given the council's limited finances, we have proposed a structure which pulls together existing resources wherever possible. It is important to emphasise that this is the minimum amount of resources we believe the council will need to implement this strategy.

We would like to thank Gerry Sevenoaks, Susan Pease, the corporate communications team and all of the internal and external stakeholders who gave their time freely to help with this report.

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3. Methodology

Information for this audit was gathered using a variety of research methods including interviews with a small number of stakeholders, a visual audit of the council's brand and desktop research of existing documents and surveys.

Interviews

The following interviews with stakeholders were conducted:

	Number of interviews
Face to face interviews with members	3
Face to face interviews with officers	16
Telephone interviews with key partner organisations	7
Telephone interviews with local media	2

A full list of interviewees is provided in *appendix i*.

Visual audit

A visual audit was undertaken of over 60 leaflets and other printed publications, including the *Kingston Reporter*, to assess the quality and accessibility of information for the public. This material, along with an audit of signage, vehicles and street furniture was used to assess the visual side of the council's brand. A sample of the photographs taken is provided in *appendix ii*.

Workshops and Focus Groups

Two focus groups were undertaken with front line staff and managers to consolidate our research on internal communications. We also held a workshop with the communications team to gain their views of the actions required in the communication strategy.

Desktop research

The desktop research included analysis of key council documents, including the Council Policy Programme, the CPA report and self-assessment, the LGIP follow-up report, press releases, media evaluation and the website.

It also encompassed surveys relating to communications, included the residents' survey and staff survey.

4. Council Image, Reputation and Branding

Whether it is consciously or unconsciously developed, every council has a brand. While the visual side of the brand – the corporate identity – is usually understood, research for Connecting with Communities found most local authorities were failing to grapple with the less tangible aspects of their brand: their corporate ‘personality’.

A range of factors sum up a council's personality – from its corporate values to the way it is portrayed in the media and, crucially, to the behaviour of staff whenever they come into contact with a resident, whether by phone, by letter or face to face. When residents think about their council, they are making judgements based on the whole picture.

Image and Reputation

Nationally, RBK has kept a relatively low profile. Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, once famously described the area as “leafy” and the council has been trying to shed the connotations associated with this – that the high quality of life enjoyed by Kingston residents is down to luck rather than the hard work of the council and its partners – ever since.

The council's reputation has recently been raised nationally by its ‘excellent’ CPA rating – making it one of only 22 councils to achieve this – and there is a new willingness on the part of central government to listen to the council's views, in part because of its CPA rating but also because of the excellent cross-party working by the political groups on issues that will benefit the community.

Now, more than ever, the council has the opportunity to raise its profile nationally. This is essential given its successive poor settlements from central government and the improvements it and the Community Leadership Forum want to make which require agreement or funding from regional or national opinion formers. We have made recommendations to achieve this in Chapter 6: Partners and Opinion Formers.

On a local level, the 2002 MORI residents' survey shows residents are overwhelmingly positive about the area as a place to live, with 71% of respondents saying they were satisfied and just 8% saying they were dissatisfied (net rating + 63%).

When asked how satisfied they were with individual services, the council achieves generally high scores with around three quarters of respondents saying they were satisfied with education services, libraries, parks and open spaces, giving net satisfaction ratings of +63% and higher.

With the exception of housing services (net satisfaction +20%), all other council services (personal social services, environmental services, planning, museums and galleries, sports and leisure facilities and transport) score net satisfaction ratings of +38% or higher. Residents' perceptions of services is matched by the reality of

delivery, with the Audit Commission ranking RBK sixth out of the 33 London boroughs in terms of its overall performance in 2000/01.

However, these positive ratings about the borough as a place to live and individual council services are not always translated into overall satisfaction with the council. When asked how satisfied they were with the way the council runs things overall, just over two in five residents (42%) said they were satisfied, while one in five (21%) said they were dissatisfied (net satisfaction +21%).

Respondents' priorities for their area centred on 'liveability' issues, with almost four in five (79%) feeling more should be done to reduce crime and disorder, graffiti and vandalism – this, despite Kingston being one of the safest London boroughs. Three in five respondents (60%) wanted more emphasis on street cleaning and rubbish collection, while nearly half (45%) wanted more repairs to roads and pavements and 36% wanted more emphasis on protecting the local environment.

Vision and Key Messages

The council does not have an over-arching vision statement, although it has set out its corporate commitment in its policy programme, published in October 2002. This emphasises the council's commitment "to help create the best opportunities, services and environment for the people of the borough of Kingston".

Based around this commitment, the council has developed six strategic aims, which are supported by 23 key objectives. These strategic aims have been translated into simple key messages which are worth further promotion:

- Working in partnership: "a strategic and campaigning council"
- Caring for the environment: "putting the environment at the heart of everything we do"
- Developing education and lifelong learning: "top quality education"
- Enhancing quality of life: "improving the quality of life of our residents – whether or not the council runs the service"
- Putting people first: "we are proud of our diverse borough and value every resident"
- Providing best value: "quality services that offer best value for money".

The 2002 policy programme was introduced six months after the election of the new administration, following a period of no overall control.

Despite the change in administration, the council's commitment and its six strategic aims have remained consistent with previous policy programmes, first articulated in the

July 2000 booklet to staff “What we are going to do! Summary policy programme 2000-2002” and the 2001 booklet “Everyone counts: working together to achieve our strategic aims”. This has helped to give internal focus to the organisation – something which the Audit Commission inspectors noted in their CPA report.

The council has done an excellent job in translating its six strategic aims into simple key messages that can be communicated internally and externally. However, while all chief officers and members interviewed could highlight the six strategic aims in interviews, not everyone proactively mentioned them when asked to say what the council stands for.

Articulating what the council stands for could be made easier if the council translated its commitment “to help create the best opportunities, services and environment for the people of the borough of Kingston” into a succinct vision statement. This could then be underpinned by the six key messages, already developed. Developing the vision statement would require high level input and ownership from Lead Members and the Corporate Development Team. For example, using the current commitment as a starting point, it could be translated into: “We will create the best opportunities for everyone” or “We will build a borough in which everyone is proud to live and work”.

While the key messages are excellent, they are not always communicated externally. All stakeholders, including residents and partners, need to know what the council stands for and what it is trying to achieve. Every opportunity should be used to promote and reinforce the council’s key messages, both internally and externally. This means using all the communication tools available.

Externally, this could include through a residents’ magazine (a recommendation in this report), the council’s website, through straplines on publicity leaflets, the neighbourhood committees, partnership conferences for the voluntary sector and posters. Internally, the council should use existing and new communication channels (*Staff Update*, directorate newsletters, the intranet, cascade team briefing system, annual roadshows etc) to regularly update staff on progress against the policy programme.

The council’s six strategic aims and their associated key messages should form the basis of the communication team’s annual work programme for undertaking proactive media relations and communications with residents.

The council should also consider launching a long-running civic pride campaign to address residents’ twin concerns of the environment and community safety. This would support the two strategic aims “putting the environment at the heart of everything we do” and “improving the quality of life of our residents: whether or not the council runs the service”. The campaign should incorporate the community safety media strategy and should be led by the communications team and the Media Management Group with the active support of all directorates, including the lead officer for community safety. Partner agencies, such as the local police and environmental groups, should also be involved.

Given that residents' fear of crime is higher than the reality - burglary and street crime have both fallen in the last two years – it is essential that any PR campaign draws residents' attention to the successes achieved to bring down crime rates and to improve environmental problems which heighten the fear of crime (e.g. the council's award-winning graffiti removal scheme). Poster sites should be used more strategically to reinforce the civic pride messages, along with other communication tools at the council's disposal (residents' magazine, media relations, the website, presentations to voluntary groups etc). Likewise, the communication team's good relationship with the local press should be used to encourage journalists to include a quote from either the council or the police reinforcing the message that Kingston is still one of the safest London boroughs to live in, when they are covering crime stories.

The council could also capitalise on Kingston's vibrant youth population by introducing an element to the civic pride campaign aimed at improving perceptions of young people and encouraging them to get involved. The campaign could look to create positive images of young people (for example through a youth achievement award, targeted posters, a programme of young people visiting community groups etc) to balance some residents' impression of Kingston being a dangerous place to visit at night.

Before launch, the campaign messages and methodology should be tested out through focus groups.

To measure the impact of its success, the council should consider including new questions in future staff surveys to measure the percentage of employees who say they are aware of the council's vision and strategic aims and that they understand how they can contribute to this. Likewise, the council should consider asking residents their awareness of what the council is doing to improve the environment and to increase community safety.

Partner organisations generally hold the council in high regard, acknowledging the council's strengths in partnership working. Although not always clear what the council stands for, more than half of the partners we interviewed could quote the six themes in the proposed community plan. This is a good result.

Corporate Identity

Overall, Kingston has a consistent approach to the use of its corporate identity across printed publications, signage and livery. This has recently been consolidated by a new style guide, produced by the Media Management Group, to ensure publications have a consistent look and feel.

The guidelines cover the use of the corporate logo, the recommended typeface for text, the colour for corporate publications and the use of recycled paper. They also bar the use of departmental logos.

Most of the publications we viewed adhered to the new guidelines although there were a few exceptions:

- Kingston Early Years & Childcare Information Service includes its own logo, alongside the council logo, on all publications while Building Control Services includes its name below the corporate logo – service unit logos and names need to be scrapped
- A leaflet on allotments in Kingston includes the logo on an inside cover rather than on the front page
- A “Get your voice heard” booklet includes the corporate logo on the bottom left hand corner rather than the right hand corner
- A guide to venues and accommodation in the borough includes the logo on the back page rather than the front page.

The council needs to ensure all documents are vetted for adherence to the style guide before publication, either through the corporate communications team or through the Media Management Group.

The council is currently creating an approved list of designers and printers from whom it will obtain its design and print work. It is intended that they will be given a copy of the style guide to ensure the compliance of all departments. This is an excellent initiative and the council will need to ensure all managers are aware of the approved list and that they use it for external design.

However, a good deal of the leaflet designs we viewed were produced in-house by officers to save on costs. While some of the designs are of a good standard, some appear amateurish. Where a series of leaflets is being produced, we would recommend creating professionally-designed leaflet templates, where text can be flowed in by officers. This will maintain a high standard of design, while keeping costs down.

Signage is less consistent in the use of corporate identity. Our audit uncovered at least three styles of street sign, as well as signs to parks and open spaces that were covered in graffiti and clearly needed replacement (e.g. at Fairfield/Knights Park where a new conservation noticeboard has been erected but no-one has bothered to take down the old sign). These should be removed. A rolling programme needs to be put in place to replace the outdated – and often illegible - blue signs in parks and housing estates with signage using the corporate green.

In general, signage needs to remain uncluttered and avoidance of multiple logos is best. However, on a new build or major refurbishment, signage should clearly state what the project is and how the project is being funded. Likewise, temporary noticeboards should be erected alongside pavement and roadworks, giving details of the project, a contact number for the lead organisation and the timescale for completion. Wherever possible, livery and signage should include the relevant contact number and RBK's web address.

Partnership Branding

Branding of partnerships requires a pragmatic approach. While it could jeopardise the joint ownership of a project if the council, as lead partner, uses its logo exclusively on a publication, by excluding its logo it is also failing to tell council tax and business rate payers what their money is being spent on.

At present the council's style guide states that up to three logos, including the council's logo, can be included on the front page of documents. Where there are more partners involved, we would recommend that logos appear on the back page or, where this will feel cluttered, their names included in a paragraph saying how the project is funded instead.

At present, publications produced by organisations the council funds appear to be using the council's logo in an ad hoc way. For example, while the Kingston First publication *TheBiz* includes the council's logo, other publications produced by Kingston Town Centre Management do not. Two guides to shopping and entertainment do not make clear that they are part-funded by the council and, although they carry a council website address, (www.rbk.kingston.gov.uk), this is not the preferred one for public use. Partners should be given the main website address for their publicity at www.kingston.gov.uk.

Other organisations funded by the council often exclude this vital information from their publicity materials. For example, Kingston Voluntary Action's newsletter does not make it clear the organisation is financially supported by the council, although the council's logo does appear on its website. This is critical to ensuring residents know how their council tax is being spent.

Contracts for all voluntary organisations the council funds should be reviewed, with a clause inserted to ensure publicity materials make it clear the council funds them.

Customer Services

While a full review of customer services fell outside the scope of this audit, we have touched on customer contacts as they form an important part of a user's experience of the council brand.

In the 2002 residents' survey, almost seven in ten people (65%) said they had contacted the council in the last 12 months. Of these, 31% had contacted environmental services, 21% had contacted finance, 15% had contacted planning and 12% had contacted housing.

Respondents who had contacted the council had mixed views about the service they received. Around half said they found staff friendly, helpful and able to deal with their problem. However, only around two in five found staff efficient, interested and quick in dealing with their problem. Moreover, only 31% found it easy to get hold of the right person.

A mystery shopping exercise conducted for RBK by Morpace International in January 2002 – before the introduction of the local helpdesks – was far more positive. Enquirers found information desk staff were polite, friendly and interested and that there was a maximum of one referral per enquiry to either another department/building or to a telephone number.

A further mystery shopping exercise was undertaken by the Legal Services Commission in March 2003, as part of an audit to achieve the Quality Mark standard. This found the “organisation was excellent – the receptionist was very helpful and knew her way round the directory.”

However, not all the recommendations in the report Morpace produced have been followed up and we would recommend these are actioned as necessary.

When asked if they had contacted the council with a complaint in the last year, around a quarter (26%) of respondents to the 2002 survey said they had. Of these, 51% were directed to Environmental Services, 18% to Transportation and 13% to Housing.

However, when asked how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with the way their complaint was handled, just over a third (35%) said they were satisfied, while nearly half (48%) said they were dissatisfied.

Attitudes regarding the handling of complaints affects overall perceptions of the council. The survey found that those who are satisfied with the way their complaint is handled are significantly more likely to be satisfied with the council as a whole (53% versus 18%). The council has understood this link and is introducing measures to improve satisfaction in this area.

Given the disparity between the findings of the residents' survey and the Morpace mystery shopping exercise, we would also recommend customer comment cards (including a box to drop them in) are made available in every reception area to encourage more regular feedback from customers. The data should be collated and analysed quarterly.

Reception areas would also benefit from the installation of a PC, with access to the council's website, so that visitors can browse the site while waiting to speak to staff. Plasma screens in key receptions, with a rolling programme of messages, could positively promote the council to residents.

Kingston has made a high level commitment to improving customer services, through the joined up activities of its Public Access Programme, which is currently in its second phase.

Significant progress has been made in achieving phase one of the programme, including setting up two Helpdesks in New Malden and Chessington - the latter which opened in January this year. In the three months from December 2002, 563 enquiries were handled at Malden Helpdesk, 921 were handled at Chessington (since January), 4648 were handled at Guildhall and 6035 at Guildhall II. Given seasonal variations in use, we would recommend that the council monitors usage over a year-long period to assess staffing levels at each of the local helpdesks. Further publicity may be required to ensure residents are aware of the service.

In Spring this year, the council transferred the Tourist Information Centre from Special Events to Strategic Services to join up its activities with the Public Access Programme. Currently, 70% of enquiries to the TIC are from borough residents and the council is using the opportunity to establish a further local helpdesk at minimal cost.

The council also introduced four electronic Information Points in January this year, with further Information Points due to become available later this year. In their first month in operation, the information points attracted between 60 and 95 users per day, spending around 1.8 minutes each. In one other borough we have audited that has Information Points, the equipment has been poorly used. Given this, we would recommend usage is monitored to ensure the system is cost-effective and that the Information Points are widely publicised on a regular basis to encourage continued uptake.

Rather than moving to one contact centre, the council has introduced four local contact centres to handle specialist enquiries, including helpline information (switchboard), housing benefits and council tax advice, children and family services, housing repairs and environmental services. It is envisaged that the centres will also be able to provide a 'one stop' service in dealing with interrelated service issues.

However, information staff attending the front line staff focus group complained that they sometimes lacked the information they required to do their jobs. This was a particular problem *across* council departments, where information is not properly shared. The Public Access Programme is looking to undertake a fundamental review of local receptions and services in phase two of the programme and we would recommend that this includes looking at developing a knowledge management strategy to ensure all information staff have access to the information they need. For further information on this, see Chapter 7: Internal Communications.

The council also monitors telephone enquiries. In May 2003, the number of calls received to Helpline Information was 15,121, of which 14,208 were answered and 913 calls (6%) were abandoned either because the phone line was busy or the caller received no answer. Of all the calls answered, the average waiting time was 22 seconds.

Although a relatively small percentage of calls are abandoned, we consider that this is too high. If residents' only contact with the council is by telephone, and if that experience is negative, that will inform their lasting impression of the council. In other words, this will contribute to the council having a negative brand. We would recommend the public access group analyses telephone statistics across all publicised telephone numbers each month, with the aim of bringing down the number of calls abandoned and the call waiting time.

Recommendations

Vision & Key Messages

- Develop a succinct vision statement to help staff and partners articulate what the council stands for
- Communicate the council's vision and six strategic aims internally and externally using all communication channels available
- Realign the communications team's work programme to support the six strategic aims
- Consider annual roadshows for staff and interested external audiences to communicate the council's progress against the policy programme
- Publish an annual progress report, reviewing the council's achievements in fulfilling its policy programme over the past year, and setting the priorities for the forthcoming year. The document should be available on the intranet and internet
- Launch a long-running civic pride campaign, with support across directorates, to address residents' twin concerns of the environment and community safety. Ensure the campaign includes an element aimed at creating positive images of youth and use poster sites to reinforce the civic pride messages

Corporate Identity

- Ensure that consistent branding is used on all council material, with vetting for adherence to the style guide by the Media Management Group. Job adverts and recruitment packs should also include the council's key messages
- Action the approved list of designers and printers, ensuring all staff adhere to the new rules
- Revise the style guide to include signage on new developments, for roadworks and for partnership working
- Create design templates for a series of leaflets
- Ensure all signage uses the new corporate identity and a rolling programme is in place to replace outdated stock
- Take down out of date signs that are no longer needed (e.g. outside Fairfield/Knights Park) and replace or clean up those that are covered in graffiti.

Partnership Branding

- Ensure all partners and voluntary groups know the council's web address
- Ensure organisations funded by the council make it clear on all publicity materials that they are financially supported by the council, with a clause inserted in contracts as necessary.

Customer Services

- Consider what actions within the Morpace report need actioning and include in the Public Access Programme as appropriate
- Ensure regular service contact information is publicised widely (including website information and email addresses) on posters and in the proposed residents' magazine, service literature and in the local press to enable better access to services
- Identify best practice in complaints handling and use this to further reduce the number of complaints to the council
- Introduce customer comment cards and a drop box to reception areas to encourage more regular feedback from customers, with data analysed quarterly
- Install PCs in reception areas, with access to the council's website

- Install plasma screens in reception areas, with a rolling programme of messages/images to positively promote the council to residents
- Continue to monitor usage of Helpdesks to assess the staffing levels required
- Further publicise the Information Points and continue to assess the level of uptake to ensure the kiosks are providing value for money
- Develop a knowledge management strategy for the council, linked to the CRM system
- Analyse telephone statistics across all publicised telephone numbers each month, with the aim of bringing down the number of abandoned calls and call waiting times.

5. Communication with Residents

National research by MORI for Connecting with Communities has found that where there is generally good standards of service, there is a direct link between residents' satisfaction with the council and how well informed they feel.

In the 2002 Kingston residents' survey, residents' overall satisfaction with council services was high, with around three quarters satisfied with key services such as education and parks. However, when asked how well the council runs things overall, this dropped significantly with less than half (42%) saying they were satisfied.

When asked how well informed the council kept them, 47% of residents said they were kept very well or fairly well informed, while 40% said they were given only limited information and 7% said they were not told anything at all. This gives a net information rating of 0%. This result is slightly below average for MORI clients and, given the correlation between information and satisfaction ratings, is probably affecting residents' overall perception of the council.

A breakdown by age group shows younger residents tend to feel less well informed:

Age	net satisfaction rating
16-24	-28%
25-34	-7%
34-54	+2%
55 and over	+11%

Since the 2002 survey, the council has put resources into improving communications with young people; in particular through the younglavin' website and the young people's participation project. However, given the area's age profile, we believe more work needs to be done in this area, possibly in consultation with schools.

Focus groups of young people in the 16-24 age range would help to gauge how best to keep them informed and what issues they are interested in.

Sources of Information

Although RBK commissions a residents' survey, it asks limited questions about residents' communication and information needs. For instance, while the 2002 survey asks residents how well informed they feel about the council, it does not ask them how they currently receive their information about the council and how they prefer to receive information about the council. By asking these questions, the council would be better able to target its communication resources accordingly.

Our research for Connecting with Communities shows that the three main ways residents receive information about their local council and the ways they would prefer to receive this information is through:

- The local press
- Information delivered to their door
- A council magazine or newspaper.

The ordering for these three sources of information change depending on the local authority and the strength of its local media, but our national research shows that each of these sources is always in the top three.

Council Literature and Accessibility

Putting People First is one of the six strategic priorities set out in the council's Policy Programme. Key objectives relate to opening up the council and making services more accessible and responsive to all the local communities. The aim of becoming fully accessible, electronically enabled and responsive to people's needs, needs to underpin the production of all council literature.

The council has done a good deal to improve accessibility of council information. A Plain English guide was updated and circulated to all staff in August 2002 and a Better Letters Campaign was launched in September 2002. This campaign is exemplary and should be shared more widely with the local government community. The campaign includes a Better Letters statement "If this letter is not clear, please post it to: FREEPOST RBK BETTER LETTERS or ring 020 8547 5757.

The campaign is properly evaluated. In the six months from launch, the council received 609 phone calls or letters in response to the campaign – an average of 20 enquiries per week. Of these:

- 8% of respondents said the content of the letter was unclear or illegible
- 25% of respondents said the telephone number given was not answered or was permanently engaged. This fell to 18% following the introduction of call management, leading to a reduction in the number of council tax and benefits calls
- 4% of contacts said no contact number was given on the letter
- 25% contacted the Better Letters number in error as they had not noticed the directorate contact number
- 38% used the Better Letters contact number as a general helpline.

Figures by directorate show the majority of unclear or illegible letters were sent by Environmental Services (26 letters), while the bulk of the calls receiving no answer or the engaged tone related to Finance (73 calls), Community Services (37 calls) and Environmental Services (39 calls). Community Services also generated the highest number of calls (18) to Better Letters by failing to include the contact number on letters.

This information is being used to revise the style of letters, with contact information being made more prominent. Officers who have written unclear letters should be offered a plain English training course to ensure their writing style improves.

The council also needs a 'sign-off' system to ensure information which is produced *en mass* for residents and partner organisations meets the plain English standards it has set.

Literature Audit

MPC undertook an audit of council literature readily available from council reception areas. The audit looked at branding, design, content and accessibility issues across 60 publications and leaflets.

Overall, the display of publications and leaflets appears to be unco-ordinated, with key information that is available from some reception centres unavailable in others. For example, the 'have your say' comments and complaints form was spotted in just two of the reception areas we visited and that publication carried out of date 0181 telephone numbers. In some cases, we spotted leaflets that were out of date (for example, a 'book or bins?' leaflet asking residents how they would like to spend the council's budget which had a closing date for consultation of December 2001).

On the positive side, the display of leaflets is tidy and in some of the receptions there was at least an awareness of who the information was being targeted at. For example, in the community services reception area, leaflets clearly focused on social services issues.

Contact information on leaflets was inconsistent – this should be standardised giving as many different channels as possible including email and website addresses and minicom numbers.

The design of council leaflets also needs to be overhauled. Related leaflets need to adopt a similar design or colour-coding to give a consistent (and professional) look and feel to the information and to make them more easily identifiable to customers. Using template designs will also reduce design costs in the long term.

Despite the varied quality of council literature, there are some good examples which the council could use to disseminate best practice. For example, the community care services leaflets were clearly branded as part of a 'family', using the same general design but with different subject headings to identify different leaflets in the series. They

also carried a strapline on the front page making it clear that customers could obtain the information on audio-tape, on computer disc, in large print, in Braille and in other languages if they asked. The date the leaflet was published was carried on the back page (helping to gauge how old it was) and contact details – telephone, minicom, email and website, were also clearly carried on the back page.

Likewise, the four step by step guides to building control services were simple but well designed, achieving crystal mark accreditation from the Plain English Campaign. Again, contact details, including website and email addresses, were clearly carried on the back page, along with a map showing customers where to find the service.

Very few leaflets we saw carried translation panels in the main community languages or information saying the leaflet was available in other formats for people with a visual impairment. Minicom numbers were almost non-existent outside of social services. Given that one of the council's 23 corporate objectives is to increase the take-up of services from people from ethnic minority communities and people with disabilities, we would recommend that this is demonstrated in the council's publications.

Council literature should conform to the RNIB Clear Print Guidelines and, while the Crystal Mark endorsement from the Plain English Campaign would be prohibitively expensive to obtain for all documents, the council could use the endorsement strategically to ensure the quality of the top 20 most regularly requested council documents (e.g. housing benefit forms, council tax booklet etc) achieve best practice.

Access to alternative formats should include a minicom number and email address and text only versions of all documents should be made available from the council's website.

The Media Management Group should consider publishing a guide for staff producing council literature, covering communications for people with disabilities and for those whose first language is not English to disseminate best practice in these areas.

To make it easier to reorder stock, a leaflet reference number and a publication date should also be included on each leaflet.

Although nearly all leaflets we reviewed carried the corporate logo, some services included their logo alongside (e.g. Kingston Early Years & Childcare Information Service) or tried to incorporate their title into the corporate logo (e.g. Building Control Services in the Step by Step Guides). Given the recent introduction of the style guide, we would expect these inconsistencies to be ironed out when the leaflets are updated in future.

Working with the Public Access Group, the Media Management Group and the communications team should develop a hierarchy of council literature that will always be made available to customers. For example, at the top level, leaflets should always be available at reception centres and on the website on:

- What the council does and A-Z of Services (how the council spends tax payers' money and telephone, email and minicom numbers plus web-links to further information)
- Councillors, MPs and MEPs (who they are and what they do)
- The comments and complaints procedure
- An overview of all the leaflets available in a series.

At mid-level, the group should help each of the departments to scope out what information they need to provide at departmental and service unit level. To help gauge what information is most relevant, the council could undertake an analysis of requests for information from information desk staff and library information officers. A series of leaflets based on life episodes should also be considered.

At the bottom level the council should provide service-specific information which is only likely to be requested by a very small minority of people (e.g. a list of tree contractors). This information should be available on-line only and via information services staff who can download it on request.

While top level information should be compulsory at each reception centre, mid-level information should be tailored to the needs of each reception. By keeping a log of all requests for information over a set period, staff will be able to develop displays that contain the most relevant information for their reception.

All published information should also be made available from the council's website.

Residents' Magazine

The Royal Borough of Kingston does not produce a regular residents' magazine or newspaper, although it does produce a publication, called The Kingston Reporter, which is delivered to all homes in the borough once or twice a year. The last edition was produced in February 2003 and focused on the council's 'excellent' CPA rating and its priorities for the future. The four page colour newsletter was written in plain English and achieved a good mix of positive news stories, balanced by problem areas the council is planning to tackle.

However, while the newsletter included some useful web addresses to further information, contact details need to be further improved. Across all four pages, we spotted just one telephone number and no email addresses for readers who wanted to find out more about each story. Addresses for the council's information points at New Malden and Chessington, were also 'hidden' within one story instead of included at the end of the relevant story they related to.

Given the importance of a regular residents' magazine or newspaper in keeping residents informed and increasing satisfaction ratings, we would recommend the council introduces a new publication for residents and businesses four times a year. This could absorb the current Kingston Reporter, with further costs off-set through

advertising. Strategic partners should also be invited to contribute financially to the publication (e.g. the community safety partnership), either through advertising or through core funding. The latter approach would require the publication to be jointly branded with the partners.

Once the publication is up and running, the council should analyse its spend on recruitment advertising and statutory notices in the local press, to see whether this could be diverted to the magazine to off-set the costs of publishing more frequently. Three London boroughs are currently moving to a fortnightly publication, by diverting spend from the local press, and there is considerable scope for extending this further by encouraging strategic partners to participate and produce a borough magazine rather than a council one.

The content of the publication would be critical to its success. We know from Connecting with Communities that residents want clear, factual information rather than 'spin'. This includes:

- What services the council provides and how they can get access to them (including telephone, email and web contact points in stories wherever possible)
- News about local events and activities
- Reasons why decisions are made, ideally telling people how their views were taken into account in consultation exercises that were conducted
- Information on how the council spends its money
- How to get in touch, and who to get in touch with (an A-Z of key customer contact points should be included in every issue).

Once a residents' magazine is established, the council should evaluate its success by including questions on recognition, distribution, frequency and satisfaction with the content in a future residents' survey.

A-Z of Services

The council produces an A-Z of Services which is delivered to all households each year. This is an excellent publication, including telephone, fax and email addresses, as well as translation panels in the main community languages, asking people to contact the Guildhall Information Desk if they have problems reading the publication. The A-Z also includes the phone numbers for other organisations in the borough, as well as details about ward councillors and where to find key council offices. It has won a crystal mark for clarity from the Plain English Campaign.

The guide could be further improved by including addresses to further information on the council's website; in particular, where this allows residents to pay for services on-line (e.g. council tax bills) or to gain access to a service without having to contact the

council (e.g. a link to a list of parks and open spaces in the borough). The translation panels should also be amended to give the full address of the Guildhall Information Desk.

Kingston Live and What's On

The council part-funds two publications to events in the borough. Kingston Live is a high quality, full colour publication reflecting an image of the borough that is young, vibrant and a good place to do business. The monthly magazine is published by the Surrey Comet and Kingston Guardian (part of Newsquest), with funding of £1k per month from the council. In return for this, the council is given four pages of advertising. The magazine is distributed at point of sale with the newspapers and via drop boxes left in areas of a high through-put of people, including clubs, restaurants, the university, the railway station and council reception points.

By contrast, What's On is a newspaper format publication, with poor quality photographs. It is delivered to over 49,000 households with the Informer (approximately 88% penetration). The council pays £8,400k per annum for copies to be provided free in council reception areas, including leisure centres and libraries. All the copy is provided by the council's tourist and marketing officer and the newspaper carries the council's logo.

Funding for these publications needs to be reviewed in the light of proposals for a residents' magazine and to ensure they meet the council's strategic objectives.

Welcome Pack

Royal Borough of Kingston has a small but significant turnover of residents, with around 4,000 people joining the electoral register each year (approximately 346 per month).

A welcome pack would help to give new residents information about the borough and the services the council provides and should be posted to all new council tax payers within three weeks of registering for council tax. By integrating the Council's IT systems new residents could be identified through council tax registration. The pack should include a welcome letter, the A-Z of services and updated versions of the excellent Neighbourhood booklets which include information on the refuse collection day, recycling collection day, street cleaning arrangements and other environmental information.

Using the electoral register, the council should also be able to identify the majority of teenagers who have just turned 18. A specially tailored welcome pack aimed at this market, and building on the cards that are already sent out, would reinforce the council's youth participation projects, including special events, the younglavin' website and activities by partner organisations such as the Connexions service.

Noticeboard and Poster Sites

The council has access to a number of noticeboard and poster sites across the borough, including 27 JC Decaux sites. These are well used. Co-ordinated by the communications team, departments are asked to bid for a space on the noticeboards, with posters changing once a month. In addition, the council has its own noticeboards erected outside council premises, in public spaces and in neighbourhoods. The latter are kept up to date by neighbourhood services.

The council should carry out an audit of all noticeboard and poster sites around the borough and decide which ones it wishes to keep and which ones to take down. A rolling programme of posters, linked to the council's six priorities, should be produced and distributed to outstanding noticeboards and poster sites.

Electronic Communications

The council's website is of a high overall standard that reflects well on the council, with pockets of innovation and excellence. Its content and online services are citizen-centred and the design and navigation are user-friendly.

In Spring 2003, the council's website was redesigned following consultation with the public, the voluntary sector, members and council staff. This included an on-line survey encouraging website users to choose one of three potential designs and to feed back comments. This resulted in over 400 responses and led to the favored design being chosen.

The new design coincided with an upgrade of the content management software, intended to make it easier for the public to navigate to key areas of the site. The system also introduces new features such as on-line consultation and personalisation and includes further improvements to its in-house GIS system (called ISIS), which gives public information on property matters, planning applications and information about the location of services in the area and recently won a SOCITM IT Excellence Award.

Following a successful town centre poster campaign called "Your Council – Your Website" to improve awareness of the council's website, visits have increased from 46,000 per month in January 2002 to over 80,000 in January 2003.

The website was assessed as C+ in the 2003 SOCITM *Better Connected* survey of local authority websites. This is the second highest of four categories, and is given to sites that provide very useful content and offer some examples of more advanced self-service features. Only three London boroughs achieved a higher overall rating in the survey.

Overall, the website projects a positive, professional image of the council. Its content is centred on local citizens and service users and generally employs simple and straight forward language, particularly at top levels. A number of on-line services are available,

and in some instances these are examples of unique innovation in local government. However, more work is needed to improve the consistency of depth and quality of content across all areas, and to develop a wider range of on-line services and transactions.

Visually, the branding is strong and consistent throughout the site. Colour photographs are used judiciously, usually within the main central text area. Further use could be made of photographs to depict activities in youth centres, libraries, leisure centres and local attractions.

At the time of reviewing the website (June 2003), the council's six strategic aims were not evident from the home page although there were various mission statements for departments scattered throughout the site – and occasionally these were given too much prominence over core service information.

The site's major failing is the lack of a general search facility, although we understand plans are underway to rectify this. This is a basic tool that site users will expect to be provided. A good search facility will assist those who know exactly what they are looking for in finding the right page quickly. For compliance with the E-Envoy's Guidelines for UK Government Websites, the site should carry a search and a site directory in addition to its current navigation features.

Navigation is generally clear and consistent, although those using low resolution screens may find the navigation menus clutter the page too much.

In common with many local authorities, RBK falls down on its use of signposting links in the site. It is important to provide links to online facilities and encouragement to use them, and also to link to related content from individual pages.

The A-Z in particular usually offers phone numbers and a brief description, without letting people know that they can carry out a transaction or interaction on-line, and without linking to the facility. For example, a user who is familiar with the council's A-Z, is very likely to look up abandoned vehicles in the A-Z as opposed to clicking 'report a fault'. If they did, they would see the option to telephone or email the council but would not see guidance on what information to include and there is no link here to the abandoned vehicles page in the Environment section or to the online form. If they spotted this link on the home page, they would be able to access full information about the process of dealing with abandoned vehicles and also fill in a form online that would prompt them for all the relevant details.

The entry 'Access to Information' is worse. It tells you to phone or fax committee secretariat in order to find out how to access council documents. There is no mention of the facility to look up agendas and reports and minutes on-line. The 'Housing' entry tells you that you can pay your council tax using Girobank but does not indicate that you can do so on-line or link to the on-line payments. The A-Z entry for Recycling invites people to contact the recycling officer for a map showing current recycling facilities – yet this is instantly accessible elsewhere on the website.

The Guidelines for UK Government websites, published by the Office of the E-Envoy, require all government sites to conform to the most basic level 'A' of the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines. A test of the home page employing Bobby, the free on-line tool for making a quick automated assessment of single pages using the WAI guidelines, indicates that the site does not yet conform. This appears to be due to the lack of "alt" text for the 'contact us' image and is easily rectified. Some of the link phrases are meaningless when read out of context – notably the 'more' links in the left hand menu. This can present a problem for screen readers and is one of the requirements of the WAI guidelines. Testing the site using common screen readers would ascertain whether this poses a problem in practice.

The site was briefly assessed against the criteria assessed by Abilitynet to address the needs of those with cognitive/literacy difficulties. This found the content was exemplary in many respects, although there was no help page to help users link to a page explaining how to change colours, font sizes and styles.

Further comments on key functionality and core areas of the site are included in *Appendix III*.

The council should also look at developing targeted email groups, with an option for anyone to join a group by subscribing from the website. Each email group would need an account manager responsible for sending out emails on a regular (at least monthly) basis. For example, themed email groups could be set up for tenants in council-owned properties; by neighbourhood committee area or by area of interest (health, transport, education, information for parents of children aged under five etc).

The council has done a good deal to ensure residents without access to the internet at home are not excluded from accessing the website. Four public information kiosks are available on streets with a high throughput of people and another six more are planned.

Every library in the borough also has free access to the internet, with staff on-hand to help people who haven't used the system before. However, formal classes are charged for and the council would do well to consider if it should offer free basic classes to residents as a way of increasing uptake of the service.

To further inform this area of work, the council should include a question in its next residents' survey asking respondents if they have access to the internet either at home or at work. This will help the council to assess demand for web-based services and to target potential products and training to increase uptake accordingly.

Consultation and Community Involvement

Members have given a high priority to improving consultation with the community, recognising that two way communications and consultation is essential to improving services.

In the last MORI residents' survey, just 17% of residents said the council "listened to the views of local people" while 28% disagreed.

Although not directly comparable, the London-wide average for a similar question asked in the 2001 Association of London Government survey found 53% thought "the council listened to their concerns".

Whatever the reason for the disparity, members are clearly right to highlight this as an area for improvement.

As well as the residents' survey, conducted once every two years, the council has set up a citizens' panel to gain in-depth feedback on the community's views. Set up three years ago, the panel comprises 1,400 people and is administered by MORI, with a newsletter sent to participants two to three times a year.

In addition, the council has developed a consultation strategy and uses a network of people in directorates to work with the policy team to pull together an annual consultation programme. This ensures residents are not deluged with requests for information and encourages economies of scale.

The council has a number of examples of good practice, from consultation with young people to consultation on the community plan – the latter which led to the six themes in the community vision.

In addition, the council has put in place:

- Community Forums, often held in partnership with other groups, to crack specific issues (e.g. services for young people in the South of the Borough Neighbourhood). The outcome of the consultation is fed back to neighbourhood committee meetings.
- ISIS on-line consultation – this new initiative includes email notification directly to the public on planning applications being made in their area
- Annual budget consultation - this is a significant issue for Kingston, given the relatively small settlement it gets from central government and should be combined with an awareness raising campaign. Proposals by the government to allow residents to receive electronic information on the council tax is also due to be introduced next year and should be considered by the council.

While recognising that the council was good at corporate consultation, some members and officers felt consultation at a neighbourhood level – often on sensitive issues such as planning and traffic management – needed to be improved.

The council is already looking at ways to provide more support to officers involved in consultation. As part of this process, we would recommend it develops a consultation

database, made available on the intranet, to include a digest of all consultation to take place over the next year as well as best practice case studies which others can learn from.

The council should also develop its network of officers involved in consultation into 'consultation champions' – an expert resource for others who are undertaking a consultation to call on.

The council should also look at publishing guidelines on how to consult users, including templates on how to commission surveys and focus groups. This could be backed up by consultation workshops for those officers who either regularly undertake consultation (e.g. traffic management and planning) and those who will be undertaking it as part of a best value review. The workshops would include when to undertake a consultation, what methods to use and how to feed back results.

Results of all significant consultation should be fed back direct to consultees or, where this is unfeasible because of the cost, through the residents' magazine and RBK website. The council should look to capture its own best practice in this field and to share it across the organisation.

The four neighbourhood committees each have their own budgets and were seen to be working well by the councillors and officers interviewed. The one we attended was well-run but attracted very few members of the public, although we understand some attract up to 70 people. The council should look at increasing publicity for these committees, through regular pre-publicity news stories (to encourage people to attend their committee), an awareness-raising campaign with local voluntary and community groups and targeted leaflet drops or adverts to attract residents to attend on specific issues.

Committees could also experiment with the way their agendas are structured – perhaps with a presentation/discussion on one significant topic at the beginning of each meeting. The main business of the committee could then follow. This would help time-pressed residents who wanted to hear the main discussion but didn't want to stay for the whole meeting.

Recommendations

- Set up focus groups of young people (aged 16-24) to find out what issues they are interested in being kept informed about
- Include additional questions in the residents' survey asking respondents how they currently receive their information about the council and how they would like to receive council information
- Share the best practice developed in the Better Letters campaign with the local government community (e.g. through IDeA Knowledge or feature placing)

- Provide training in writing in plain English for officers who have been identified through the Better Letters campaign as needing to improve
- Develop a 'sign-off' system to ensure information which is sent en mass to residents meets the plain English standards the council has set
- Ensure that RBK continues to meet the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act

Literature Audit

- Ensure all leaflets on display are kept up to date and staff know who to contact for more copies
- Ensure that follow-up contact details are included on all publications, giving customers as many options as possible including phone and Minicom numbers, web and email addresses, and opening times. Text only versions should be supplied on the council's website
- Create design templates for 'families' of leaflets to make them easily identifiable to customers
- Ensure all council literature meets accessibility standards in line with RNIB Clear Print Guidelines, using plain language and carrying consistent alternative format information and that translation panels are included, where appropriate
- Have the top 10 – 20 most important publications and forms endorsed by the Plain English Campaign
- Ensure all material is reflective of the whole community or target audiences in terms of images used
- Publish a guide for staff on how best to communicate with people with disabilities and for those who speak little English
- Include a print date and reference number on all material so that it can be easily updated and restocked in council outlets
- Ensure stock control and distribution channels are effective
- Sign off all leaflets before publication to ensure the correct use of the corporate identity
- Agree top level information that should be made available from all council reception points and ensure staff know how to access copies when leaflets run out

- Undertake an analysis of requests to council reception areas to develop a list of mid-level information that should be made available from specific reception areas (information may be service specific or organised as life episodes)
- Ensure all published information is also made available from the council's website.

Residents' Magazine

- Create a quarterly residents' magazine, with clear contact details and links through to the web for more information
- Analyse spend on recruitment advertising and statutory notices and consider whether this could be diverted to a fortnightly magazine at no additional cost. Partners should also be invited to contribute, turning the magazine into a borough magazine rather than a council publication
- Gain more quantitative and qualitative feedback from residents through a readers' survey and by including questions on recognition, distribution, frequency and satisfaction with the content in the next residents' survey
- Ensure that distribution is monitored with independent checks and increasing the number of distribution outlets.
- Redesign the magazine paying particular attention to accessibility standards and branding.
- Ensure the information about alternative formats is carried prominently (eg on the contents page) and consistently.
- Ensure the magazine meets the needs and is reflective of the diverse community in terms of information, stories and images.
- Consider increasing the frequency of the magazine (in consultation with residents) with costs offset by increased internal and external advertising.

A-Z of Services

- Encourage residents to access further information highlighted in the A-Z by providing web links to specific services and amend the translation panel to include the full address of the Guildhall Information Desk

Kingston Live and What's On

- Review funding for Kingston Live and What's On in the light of proposals for a residents' magazine and to ensure they meet the council's strategic objectives

Welcome Pack

- Send a welcome pack of information to new residents identified through council tax registration. A revised version of the pack should be aimed at 18 year olds identified by electoral services.

Noticeboards and Poster Sites

- Undertake an audit of all noticeboard and poster sites in the borough and decide which ones to maintain and which ones to take down.

Electronic Communications

- Introduce a general site search as a matter of priority
- Consider providing more photographs to illustrate youth centres, libraries, local attractions and leisure centres
- Review and standardise links to PDF and Microsoft Word documents, providing file sizes and links to Acrobat Reader and Access Adobe
- Considerable work is needed to join up the A-Z to related content, revising all descriptions to ensure they reflect and link to site content and online services
- Expand the A-Z to ensure it covers more services listed in the APLAWS A-Z list and consider adding Frequently Asked Questions and Answers for main council services
- Rectify the error that prevents the home page from achieving Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) level 'A' accessibility and check the whole site for accessibility errors
- Introduce a help page for inexperienced users and guidance for those using access technology
- Review the Education pages to ensure that Plain English is consistently employed
- Change the 'Clubs' heading in the community organisation database to reflect the range of types of organisation it contains
- Remove the out of date crime news as a matter of urgency and review the content of the Crime, Youth Service and Sports and Recreation pages
- Develop further the content of the Business and Tourism sections
- Promote information kiosks generally and locally to increase awareness and usage.
- Promote the council's website address on all council publications, and include email addresses in contact information.

- Publish all new council documents on the site with text-only versions for the visually impaired.
- Publicise new service and transactions available on line in LBS and the local press.
- Consider setting up themed email groups which stakeholders can subscribe to (for example, a group for parents of children aged under five; a group for parents of primary school children etc). Each group would need an account manager who was responsible for sending out information fortnightly or monthly from across the council.

Consultation and Community Involvement

- Undertake an awareness raising campaign, linked to the budget consultation, to ensure residents are aware of the council's small government settlement
- Look to provide council tax information electronically, following the government go-ahead in April 2004. Best practice should then be shared with the local government community
- Develop a consultation database, made available on the intranet, to include a digest of all consultation to take place over the next year and best practice case studies others can learn from
- Develop the network of officers into consultation champions who others can call on for help
- Publish guidelines on how to consult users, including templates on how to commission surveys and focus groups
- Offer consultation workshops to improve the skills of officers who regularly undertake consultation and those who will be undertaking it as part of a best value review
- Feed back on the results of all consultation directly to consultees or, where is this not cost-effective, via the residents' magazine and RBK website
- Introduce pre-publicity and awareness raising for all neighbourhood committees to encourage more attendance
- Undertake a pilot with a main topic of discussion at the beginning of a committee meeting to encourage more residents to attend and have their say.

6. Media Relations

Given the size of its communications team, Royal Borough of Kingston provides a good media relations service to the local press, with one of the news editors commenting that it was “head and shoulders above” other press offices he has dealt with.

However, the council’s ability to promote its positive messages is hindered by the size of the team (three people), by an absence of media awareness across the organisation and by the lack of data available to inform the future direction of the media relations service.

In its residents’ survey, the council does not ask respondents how they currently obtain their information about the council or how they prefer to receive information about the council. These questions need to be added into future surveys to test how influential the media, and in particular the local media, are in determining the council’s image and reputation at a local level.

The findings of our national research for Connecting with Communities found the local press is residents’ most significant source of information on their council, with 76% saying they obtained most of their information this way and 63% saying they prefer to receive their information about the council this way.

The two other key sources of information are through leaflets delivered to the door (with 42% preferring to receive their information this way) and through a council magazine or newsletter, with 36% preferring to receive their information this way. Free newspapers, delivered to the door, generally have higher distribution rates and tend to be more widely known than paid-for newspapers.

Given this, it is reasonable to assume that the local press in Kingston will be a key influence on the council’s reputation in the local community at a borough-wide level.

The council has recognised that it needs to promote its services and achievements more widely and, in August 2002, set up a corporate Media Management Group to handle, among other things, the proactive management of the council’s news. The group recently oversaw the production of the council’s style guide and is now evaluating council-funded publications such as What’s On, Kingston Live and the Kingston Reporter.

Proactive and Reactive Media Relations

Members and officers we interviewed acknowledged that the council needed to raise its profile through more targeted media relations but felt that the communications team was too small to be anything more than reactive.

The team estimates that it receives around 15 media enquiries a week (around 780 a year), primarily from the local media. An analysis of press releases on the council's website shows that between February and June 2003, some 60 press releases were issued; or approximately 250 press releases are issued each year. This is far lower than many London boroughs MPC has reviewed. However, those boroughs also have significantly larger teams in place, putting out approximately 500 - 600 releases a year, with a hit rate between 80% - 95%.

The communications team has created an excel spreadsheet to monitor the take-up of press releases, which includes an attempt to analyse the coverage generated as either positive or negative (there is no recording of 'neutral'). An analysis of the spreadsheet for a two month period from February to March 2003, shows 22 out of the 30 releases issued were used by the media and six were not used. Two appear not to have been monitored.

However, given that the take-up of press releases is monitored manually and is rather cumbersome, we believe that more of the releases may have been used than the figures suggest. The usage line on the spreadsheet is not filled in and the story slant line has been filled in by hand, making it difficult to monitor uptake of releases from one week to another.

The two local newspaper journalists interviewed were very satisfied with the quality of the press releases, saying they were well written and often used.

However, the circulation of press releases needs to be improved. Releases we viewed were sent to a limited number of media – primarily the four local newspapers, Thames Radio, the Talking Newspaper, Eden Magazine and Sunrise Radio. On one occasion, a story had been sent to Sky News but we saw no evidence of releases being sent to key specialist press (e.g. LGC, MJ, Housing Today) or to regional TV, although some of the stories clearly warranted it.

While the overall standard of media releases appears to be good, very few focus on the council's six strategic aims and, where they do, they do not refer back to them. Releases need to include the council's key messages and to be linked to the overall priorities of the council and/or the Community Leadership Forum.

The council needs to better consider which of its key messages and strategic aims need to reach a regional or national audience or its local government peers and to target its media relations activity accordingly. Establishing regular contact with the forward planning desks of regional TV and radio stations and the news and feature

desks of the specialist press, and asking what kind of stories they might be interested in, will help Kingston to increase its success rates with these media.

In areas where the council wants to raise its profile nationally, it should establish targets to achieve coverage in the national and specialist media. These targets should be owned by the respective lead officer and representative on the Media Management Group.

The communications team has some good practice which it should build on to help raise the council's profile. For example, it has established a good relationship with the Evening Standard's education correspondent and is able to 'feed' him stories from time to time. A similar relationship needs to be built with the specialist journalists on the national press (in particular, education and social services correspondents) and the local government correspondents on the national and regional press. For example, the local government correspondent on the Evening Standard could be offered the chance to tour Kingston and to meet the leader and chief executive. Alternatively, specialist correspondents could be invited to lunch with the appropriate director and executive member of an 'excellent' service. By establishing good relationships with journalists here, the council should find itself more regularly used as a case study of good practice.

Forthcoming feature lists could be obtained from the specialist press, and freelance writers used to help ghost-write features. The communications team should also consider expanding its remit to cover web-based publications and digital TV, as appropriate.

A calendar of events has been established to co-ordinate activities across the council and to ensure events do not clash with each other. Although still in its infancy, the publicity planner is an excellent idea and should be put on the intranet and 'owned' by the Media Management Group. Directorate Management Teams should be encouraged to include communications as a standing item on their agendas, with managers feeding forthcoming events to the publicity planner.

Press enquiries are logged manually on paper forms, making it difficult to know how many are handled each week or how quickly the team responded to those enquiries. However, the team estimates that around 15 enquiries are handled each week and the two local journalists interviewed were happy with the response times, saying the team always came back within deadline and kept them informed of progress.

To improve media monitoring, we would recommend the council installs a database system which is capable of monitoring both the uptake of releases (by department, by key message, by media type and by impact) and responses to press enquiries. This should also save some administrative time (the current postholder who monitors the releases estimates it takes up to half a day a week of her time).

Press cuttings are collated but are not widely circulated as the council's NLA licence offers a limited amount of photocopying. However, the communications team alerts the

relevant officer if there is a story which needs responding to and will fax a copy on request. Consideration should be given to producing a weekly email bulletin, summarising each press cutting and circulating this to managers and members who want to 'subscribe' to it, as well as making it available on the intranet.

The council has recently put in place media awareness training sessions for senior managers which includes information on how the media works, the importance of responding to enquiries within deadline and how to identify a news story. This is an excellent initiative and we would recommend backing it up with a media guide to reinforce the course's messages. The training sessions should be extended to all service managers, perhaps with some training on how to write a basic press release to help reduce the amount of time spent by the communication officers on writing 'soft' stories.

The news section on the RBK website includes press releases issued by the council. Given that the council wants to raise its profile nationally, we would recommend that this is expanded into a 'media centre' for journalists including downloadable photographs of councillors, chief officers and important locations, direct line contact numbers, fact sheets and a forward events list.

These recommendations would help create the proactive media relations service RBK deserves. However, they cannot easily be actioned unless the size of the team and its budget is increased. This is outlined in more detail in Section 8: resourcing communications.

Recommendations

- Include a question in the next residents' survey to gauge which media residents get their council information from - so advertising spend and media relations activity can be better targeted.
- Introduce a media monitoring database system and set targets accordingly.
- Ensure the council's proactive media relations is based on the council's key objectives so that work and resources can be properly focused. All work should be benchmarked, with targets set and evaluation built in.
- Extend media awareness training to all service managers and consider including a session on how to write a press release.
- Provide media interview training for key members and officers.
- Conduct a full journalists' survey in autumn 2004 and include some regional media and national and specialist press as well as the local newspapers to see the impact of these changes and how the service can be further improved.

- Prepare general fact sheets and background information on the council, its priorities and its services, that are available from a 'media centre' from the council's website.
- Improve the circulation of releases to national correspondents, the specialist press and web-based publications.
- Ensure that all releases maximise the opportunities to reinforce the council's key messages and strategic aims.
- Set targets to increase the number of releases and features targeted at regional, national and specialist media. For example, six per year for each key message or strategic aim. Targets to be owned by the lead officer and respective representative on the Media Management Group.
- Develop a contacts list of freelance writers who can help ghost write features for the specialist press.
- Establish contacts with forward planning and newsdesks of the regional media and obtain feature lists from the specialist press and offer up case studies and features.
- Set up tours of Kingston for regional journalists and a programme of lunches for directors and executive members to meet specialist correspondents.
- Put the publicity planner on the intranet and ensure it is regularly updated by Directorate Management Teams and the Media Management Group.
- Produce a weekly email bulletin, summarising each press cutting and circulating this to managers who want to 'subscribe' to it, as well as making it available on the intranet.
- Expand the news section of the RBK website into a media centre for journalists, to include downloadable photographs, contact numbers, fact sheets and a forward events list.

7. Partners and Opinion Formers

Partners

The Royal Borough of Kingston has a strong commitment to partnership working, with one of its six strategic aims dedicated to this theme. This is underpinned by key objectives to create a community plan for the area and to develop a new voluntary sector unit to strengthen support for voluntary groups in the borough.

The community plan is being led by the Community Leadership Forum (CLF), a decision-making body with a steering group comprising senior representatives of community groups and chaired by an Executive Member of the Administration.

As part of the development of the community plan, the CLF commissioned research from MORI to find out local people's priorities for the area. These were: health and social care; education and lifelong learning; community safety; environment; transport and the local economy. Six working groups have now been set up to take these themes forward, with the aim of developing associated strategies by April 2004.

The MORI survey found that while 66% of respondents were very positive about living in Kingston at present, just half (33%) were positive about its future. Of the 46 stakeholders interviewed, 89% recognised that the council currently "works alongside other organisations (e.g. local businesses, police and health authority) to improve the quality of life for Kingston residents", although this fell to 67% in ten year's time.

The survey findings is backed up by the small sample of partners we interviewed as part of this strategy. The majority acknowledged the council's strong commitment to partnership working and said they enjoyed 'good', 'positive' or 'excellent' working relationships with the council.

Both the political leadership and the senior management of the council were highly praised, with partners saying they had built good two-way communications.

Nearly half of the partners interviewed felt there were very few obstacles to getting things done in their dealings with the council. These partners had all built strong relationships with high-level contacts at the council. Some had regular meetings with the Leader and/or Executive Member for their area of expertise as well as with directors. Two partners commended the Chief Executive and described him as being 'excellent', 'impressive', 'open' and 'accessible'. Another commented that it was through his vision and openness that partnership working was such a success.

Despite this high praise, half the partners interviewed said the organisation still had some middle managers who had not embraced this way of working, and this caused tension in their relationships with the council. Some middle managers had a tendency

to 're-silo themselves', to 'block new ways of working' and to stay in the 'comfort zone' of 'this is the way things have always been done'.

Some partners reported that there were a large amount of long-serving officers who 'found reasons not to do things', who will 'close doors' or 'say it didn't work last time'. This was felt to be one of the biggest obstacles to getting things done – slowing down the process, stifling innovation, impeding joined-up working and jeopardising delivery.

One partner went as far as to say that some managers were 'obstructive', and 'poor at facilitating, communicating with and empowering' community groups, and that they 'didn't value their contribution' and 'took credit' for some projects initiated by the groups.

Another partner commented that there was so much resistance that it was 'like fighting against jelly – you could be battling away for ages, then look back to see what impression you've made, and it still looks the same as it did before you started'.

We asked partners to use three words to sum up what they thought of the council. The majority of words and phrases used were positive including: committed, fair, professional, efficient, cost-effective, pragmatic, inclusive, excellent, positive, strategic, proactive and 'excellent working relationship'. The negative comments included: slow, arrogant and naïve. One used the mixed phrase: 'well-intentioned, but delivery fails'.

Partners' perceptions of the council were formed by their relationships and contacts with the council. This was certainly evident from the interviews. Those whose contacts were mainly at a strategic level (ie directors/executive members and above) were extremely satisfied and had a very positive attitude to the council, while those who dealt more on the operational side with middle managers, had more frustrations and negative comments.

The majority of partners interviewed were satisfied with communications with the council, both in terms of quantity and quality. They relied on a variety of methods including emails, phone calls, post and meetings and the combination of methods largely met their needs. Some of the partners also cited the website as a useful source of information.

Some felt the quality of written information had improved in recent years, with the 'council doing a lot of work' on both presentation and plain language. For example, many said that committee reports were easy to understand.

However, some partners who were responsible for dissemination, felt that information could be better provided by the council with the wider audiences in mind. For example, some partners produce their own newsletters and include council news and information – but often had to spend time translating documents into concise, digestible news stories.

The partner organisations had varying information needs according to the nature of their areas of work, but nearly all were satisfied with the information provided. Most partners said they had no real information gaps, and prefer to get too much information than too little – which they then prioritise.

One said it would be useful to have a single list of all the committee and neighbourhood meetings to help with diary-planning. Two partners felt that overarching budget information could be more transparent and budget decision-making better explained.

One partner felt that the onus was on them to find the information they needed. 'If you were not aware the information was available, you wouldn't look for it and might miss useful information'. Whilst there was good information on the website, 'it would be helpful if the council was more proactive'. Email bulletins alerting partners to news items and new reports (with links) when they were published on the web could be sent using themed email groups.

Meetings could also be arranged to discuss consultation documents, rather than relying on them all reading lengthy documents.

Nearly all said they had no problems in accessing the information they needed – usually via their key contacts at the council. Only one partner reported having difficulties – in obtaining information from the Environment department.

When asked how communications between the council and its partners could be improved, many said they were not dissatisfied and made no suggestions.

Suggestions made by other partners included:

- to improve the inter-agency system for referrals (a shared referrals network project is not progressing as fast as it should)
- email bulletin alerts with links to documents
- themed email groups
- more summaries of long reports and documents
- earlier drafts of reports in advance so that partners can make a real contribution
- more meaningful consultation (e.g. annual budget consultation with businesses should be publicised more openly and participation encouraged).

Regional and National Opinion Formers

Given the findings of the MORI community leadership survey, which found a large majority of residents were positive about the area as a place to live today but were more negative about its future, it is good to see the council is not resting on its laurels.

The Royal Borough of Kingston has recognised that its image as a 'leafy' borough, as Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott once described the borough, needs to be tackled if further improvements, requiring government funding, are to be achieved. For example:

- In 2002/3 the council was the third lowest spending London borough per head of population – despite being one of only 22 nationally to achieve an “excellent” rating in its Comprehensive Performance Assessment. By comparison, the council tax at band D was the second highest in London, with 41% of expenditure now met by council tax payers. The average for outer London was 28%. The proportion of council budget which was met by government grant has fallen from 67.6% in 1997 to just 59% this year. The council is working with its partners to make the case to government for a funding review.
- Kingston wants to become the first Business Improvement District in the country to maintain its position in a recent Experien survey as the top retail centre in London outside of the West End
- Improving the transport infrastructure (e.g. Crossrail and tramlinks) by lobbying for improvements at a sub-regional level.

Despite its many innovative services, RBK has maintained a relatively low profile outside of the borough it serves, preferring to focus on working with the community. However, there is a growing recognition among councillors, officers and partners that the external conditions are changing. If the council wants to influence the locality, it now needs to play an influential role with regional and national opinion formers.

More and more government funding is being made available through competitive funding regimes, either through regeneration funding (which is linked to levels of deprivation and so is not generally available to Kingston) and through a council’s ability to be seen as an exemplar to other local authorities (Pathfinder schemes, PSAs etc). This is where Kingston can, and should, concentrate its efforts.

The council should use its three key assets: its ‘excellent’ rating, it’s strong track record of working with partners and of working across political group boundaries to influence opinion formers’ decisions.

The council should use the best practice it has already developed in this area (for example, the recent successful campaign to ensure the local magistrates’ courts stayed open) to develop lobbying strategies for the key campaigns cited above.

Publicising Achievements

Despite its many achievements, RBK has a low profile and is not generally recognised by its peers or by opinion formers for providing quality, value for money and innovative services.

The council recognises that where its services are of high quality and could provide a learning opportunity for other local authorities, it needs to raise its profile. In the long term, this will help to influence opinion formers’ decisions (e.g. on the grant settlement),

to attract further funding to the borough to expand innovative services and to attract high calibre staff to the council.

Competitions such as the LGC Awards need to be entered more consistently to ensure RBK's achievements are nationally promoted. This will also help staff to feel their hard work is valued both by the council and on a national level.

In key areas where it would benefit the council to have a higher profile for its work or to publicise its key messages, the council should consider proactively offering up speakers to talk at national conferences. Targets could be set for directorates, with middle managers encouraged to make external presentations as part of their personal development. As well as promoting the achievements of the council and developing staff, RBK will be playing a critical role in sharing some of the best practice it has developed with its peers.

Similarly, the council should also promote its achievements more widely in the national, trade and specialist press. This could be achieved by setting targets for generating coverage by directorate or by setting targets for generating coverage against the six strategic aims. The council's work as part of the Innovation Forum should also be publicised widely, with showcase sessions offered to local authorities at the conclusion of the project.

Kingston's consensual style of working and strong partnerships are a good selling point for the organisation and this should be promoted to potential inward investors, national and regional opinion formers as a way of encouraging further funding to the area. The council should also consider raising its profile in this area with its peers, through channels such as the IDeA, conference speaking or the specialist press, as a way of sharing good practice nationally.

Ministers and shadow government spokespeople should also be invited to the borough to see the improvements the council and its partners are making for itself (e.g. new theatre, riverside development, pedestrianised shopping area etc).

Recommendations

Partners

- Introduce partners' networking breakfasts/lunches on the six key themes
- Introduce effective partnership working seminar for middle managers as part of the Middle Managers' Programme or introduce a separate series of presentations from partners about their work. A separate element of the induction programme could be development on partnership working for new managers.

- Build and maintain themed email groups (e.g. corresponding to the community plan's six key themes) and use to send regular email alerts to partners (and others who sign up). The information should include new reports with links to the website. Press releases or report summaries could also be included where relevant.
- Develop a list of partners' internal and external newsletters and supply regular short news stories on council activities. Ensure partner information is also carried in the council's internal and external publications, where relevant.
- Supply a list of committee and neighbourhood meetings to partners to help with diary planning.
- Ensure that where partner organisations are invited to contribute or comment on reports, that they have early drafts and adequate time to make a meaningful contribution.
- Continue to work with partners to find ways of engaging and communicating with minority communities in the borough.

Opinion Formers

- Develop and implement a public affairs strategy linked to the council's corporate and sub-regional agenda. This will identify campaigns and key audiences/organisations to influence (e.g. using both the Community Leadership Forum and its own contacts to lobby the ODPM, DTI, GOL, GLA, LDA, TfL and others).
- Introduce targets for directorates to encourage them to enter national awards. The work could be co-ordinated by the communications team and the Media Handling Group.
- Introduce targets for directorates to speak at national conferences to raise Kingston's profile. Template slides, including key messages, could be produced to support managers in this role
- Provide presentation training for managers who require it.
- Develop borough tours for regional and national opinion formers and specialist journalists to highlight the council and its partners' successes and the key challenges it faces.
- Consider developing a virtual tour of the borough (via website and CD Rom) to present to regional and national opinion formers who cannot make the borough tour. The CD Rom should also be sent to community groups to keep them up to date on the council and Community Leadership Forum's priorities for the future.

8. Internal Communications

Internal communications is not rocket science. Kingston's 2001 staff survey is backed up by national findings which show employees value face to face communications with their line manager above all else.

However, the consequences of not keeping staff informed and involved can be enormous. National research conducted for the Connecting with Communities project to improve communications in local government found a direct link between how well informed staff are, their motivation levels and their overall performance.

Given the EU information and consultation directive, which comes into force in 2005, the council should consider developing best practice in this area which it can share with the local government community. The directive will place an onus on companies to consult with staff about major changes and will force them to consider changes to their existing consultation arrangements if 10% of staff vote to do so.

The Royal Borough of Kingston has understood the link between staff information ratings and overall performance and has put in place some good, basic mechanisms of internal communications. However, not all of these are properly evaluated and some, at least, appear to be patchy across the organisation.

The council is the second smallest London borough, with just 3,700 employees, including 1,500 school staff. While the majority are housed in the Guildhall complex in Kingston town centre, staff also work from numerous locations ranging from schools to care homes and crematoria across the borough.

In April 2002, RBK won corporate Investors in People accreditation – one of only five London boroughs to achieve this. This followed an assessment which covered areas such as employees' understanding of the strategic objectives of the organisation and how they contribute to achieving these, satisfaction with internal communications and recognition for staff achievement.

The IiP accreditation followed the findings of the council's staff survey, conducted in 2001, which found 61% of staff were satisfied with their present jobs, while 22% were dissatisfied (net satisfaction +39%). The staff survey is relatively basic and includes no comparative benchmarking data to compare RBK's performance against other public sector organisations either locally or nationally.

Conducted in partnership with Kingston University, the survey asked limited questions about internal communications and we would recommend extending the range of questions in future staff surveys.

For example, these could include:

- whether staff believe the direction of the council is clearly communicated to them
- how much they feel they have the necessary information to do their job well
- how they would like to be communicated with
- how satisfied they are with the different channels of internal communications (intranet, corporate staff newsletter, cascade team briefing system, team meetings, email etc).

The results of the survey should also be analysed by directorate, by type of post (front line staff, administrator, line manager, senior manager etc), by gender, ethnicity and disability to assess potential trouble spots and areas for improvement. The council should also look at ways it can benchmark against external organisations - for example, neighbouring local authorities, other 'excellent' councils or other public sector agencies in the Kingston area.

The 2001 staff survey found that the overwhelming majority of staff (96%) felt it was important that they were kept informed about matters of importance to them, while just 0.3% disagreed.

Likewise, 95% of staff felt it was important for them to be "consulted about matters of importance to them", while just 0.4% disagreed. A similar number (93%) said it was important that they "know what is going on in the workplace", while 0.8% disagreed.

These were among the highest ratings in the survey – more important even than employees' opinions about "not to feel stressed", "not being under pressure" and being offered "opportunities to learn new skills". Given this, the council will need to build on its current internal communication mechanisms to ensure they meet employees' expectations.

The survey found just over half of staff (52%) were satisfied with their ability to find out what is going on in their workplace, while a quarter (26%) were dissatisfied (net rating +26%).

A similar number (56%) were satisfied with the way they were informed about matters of importance to them, while a quarter (24%) were dissatisfied (net rating +32%).

When asked how satisfied they were with arrangements for staff meetings, just over half (54%) said they were satisfied while one in five (19%) were not. Given the importance staff place on face to face communications with their line manager, we would recommend a regular audit is undertaken to ensure managers are holding regular team meetings and appraisals with their staff.

The council should also consider setting up a monthly cascade team briefing system to ensure corporate and directorate messages are properly communicated from the Corporate Development Team and Directorate Management Teams to all staff. The audit of team meetings could also be extended to include the cascade.

The system should also include a feedback loop, with questions answered within agreed timescales. Although this may require some managers realigning their team meetings to fit in with the cascade timescales, the system need not be resource intensive. Monthly corporate messages could be agreed at CDT, with additional news items added on by Directorate Management Teams. Line managers could then add on their own messages to the brief, cascading the information via their team meetings. Some flexibility of approach should be incorporated into the system to accommodate teams where it is not possible to hold monthly meetings because of the impact to service delivery.

According to a personnel survey conducted five years ago, 80% of employees live in the borough or within five miles of the borough boundary. In other words, the majority of staff are often not only the council's employees but also its residents. The challenge for the council is to make the best use of this dual relationship, turning staff into its ambassadors so that they begin to promote the organisation and its direction as part of their everyday lives.

On corporate issues, the council has made significant efforts to communicate. The most recent examples of this are the council's Policy Programme ("what we are going to do next"), with a booklet and briefings given to all staff within six months of the election of the new administration, the introduction of its Better Letters campaign and its excellent communications around the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

These have involved a mix of communication tools including a brochure for all staff (Policy Programme), posters on staff noticeboards, information cascaded via the corporate staff newsletter, *Staff Update*, and briefings via the Senior Managers' Group and by team meetings, an award for improved performance (Better Letters) and awarding staff an extra day's holiday to thank them for the council's 'excellent' CPA rating.

As well as using these existing channels, communications of the six strategic aims, the council's achievements over the last year and its priorities for the forthcoming year, would benefit from annual roadshows for staff involving the chief executive, the leader and the respective director and executive member.

While corporate information appears to be well communicated, with clear evidence of the Corporate Development Team taking responsibility for this, important information from directorates appears to be less well communicated across the organisation. In other words, the organisation is largely 'siloes' in its approach. This is a common finding in nearly all local authorities. However, given Kingston's 'excellent' rating and its ambition to improve further, this is an area it needs to concentrate on.

For example, in a focus group of front line staff conducted for this communication strategy, employees said their ability to serve customers was sometimes hampered by the lack of information provided by the directorates. This included basic information such as changes in personnel and accommodation moves through to changes to policies and procedures which may affect customers (e.g. the disposal of fridges). A knowledge management strategy needs to be developed alongside the council's plans for a CRM system to ensure important information is shared.

While internal communications is regarded as being good in some services, this is not consistent across the organisation. The council needs to use its staff survey and regular audits of its internal communication tools to assess where its strength and weaknesses lie. Where there are areas of strength, the council should learn from its own good practice to provide support to those services which are not meeting these high standards.

Newsletters

The council's personnel team produces a monthly newsletter for staff called *Staff Update*. Focused on corporate and personnel-related issues, the newsletter is limited to two sides of A4 and is stapled to payslips, ensuring all staff receive a copy.

In both focus groups we conducted, staff generally said they liked the newsletter's brevity and found it useful. However, both groups also said they needed to know more about what was happening within the directorates and would welcome some update as part of this newsletter. Directorates could be encouraged to come up with a bullet point round up of news from their area (what's coming up and what's been achieved) which could be circulated as part of the monthly brief. The information should be supplied by Directorate Management Teams or the representative on the Media Management Group. Other information from partners should also be included, where relevant. This may take *Staff Update* from two to four pages. The stories should include links to the intranet for staff wanting more details about specific projects.

As well as *Staff Update*, directorates and some services produce their own newsletters. For example, libraries has a good newsletter called Connections, while council tax and housing benefits produces a weekly round up of information which is sent to all its staff by email. These newsletters should be made available on the intranet and circulated to the proposed internal communications officer and communications team, who can consider stories for inclusion to *Staff Update* and the media.

Electronic communications

The intranet and email is well used across the organisation, although some managers attending the focus groups said information on the intranet needed to be updated more regularly. They also complained about 'information overload' and said they no longer bothered to look at the bulletin boards.

Improved guidelines on using email could help to reduce the number of unnecessary emails and email attachments being circulated.

Ad hoc emails from the chief executive are sent to everyone on the global email address list and some staff suggested that these could be made more regular. However, we felt that this could result in some duplication with *Staff Update*.

Noticeboards

The staff noticeboards we viewed in the Guildhall complex appeared to be well used and regularly maintained by reception desk staff. However, the noticeboards often looked cluttered and gave no feel for the council's priorities.

We would recommend a "message of the month" series of posters are produced by the Media Management Group to update staff on corporate issues and to celebrate success.

Consultation

The 2001 staff survey found a quarter of all staff (25%) were dissatisfied with the way they were consulted on matters of importance to them. While this level of dissatisfaction is not uncommon, it could pose something of a challenge for the council when the EU information and consultation directive comes into force in 2005.

With only a quarter of all staff represented by a union, the council has already put in place mechanisms to consult with staff. Directorate Consultative Groups (DCGs) have existed for a number of years and are used as an official channel to consult with staff.

The groups meet six to ten times a year and include the director and representatives from the management team and staff-side representatives from the services. Messages and feedback from these meetings is intended to cascade down to all staff.

The groups were recently praised in a Best Value inspection of the personnel service as being a "constructive process". However, this contrasts to the views expressed by staff in the two focus groups we conducted. None of the staff in the front line staff focus group said they had heard of the groups, despite some having worked for the council for a number of years. This suggests they are failing to engage with staff across the organisation or that the information is failing to cascade down.

Overall, front line staff felt consultation was largely "non-existent" (except for staff working in housing & revenues and benefits), and they also complained that feedback on suggestions was poor. This could be improved with a cascade team briefing system, which includes a feedback mechanism for staff queries and suggestions.

Although the managers' focus group knew of the DCGs, they also criticised them as being "talking shops", as being "unfocused", "not inclusive enough" and with the minutes of the meetings being issued too late to be of any use.

Given that the DCGs also reinforce the departmental silos, managers considered that the groups should be replaced with a representative staff panel for major consultation exercises and ad hoc cross-directorate working groups to crack specific issues. Other staff suggestions could be picked up as part of the cascade feedback mechanism.

Induction

The induction programme for new staff was revised over a year ago, with the Investor in People assessor finding the new corporate induction programme widely welcomed by both inductees and their line managers. This chimed with the views of staff in the focus groups who had attended a corporate induction recently. The induction includes a one day course, with a presentation from the chief executive, followed by a borough tour within the first three months.

However, the liP assessor found the high standard set by the corporate induction was not always replicated at department or team level and was largely dependent on the strengths of the middle manager involved.

Given this, we would recommend directorates undertake research (focus groups, survey or one to one meetings) on the views of new staff to the directorate induction programme to assess potential areas for improvement. This could be co-ordinated by the Media Management Group in consultation with the proposed internal communications officer.

Celebrating Success

Both in the one to one interviews we conducted with members and officers, and in the staff focus groups, interviewees said they were not always aware of the council's achievements or of what directorates were doing. The council recognised this issue in its CPA self assessment.

Achievements should be celebrated using all the communication tools available – from *Staff Update* to a cascade team brief, posters on staff noticeboards and the intranet.

The council currently has a number of award schemes in place to celebrate success, including the Mayor's Awards (where managers nominate staff and up to 15 people are recognised for their contribution to the council or for their personal achievement); a family friendly manager of the year award now in its tenth year (where staff nominate managers) and a long service award.

None of the staff in the staff focus groups mentioned these awards, suggesting they have a relatively low profile. If this is the case, we would recommend generating more

pre and post publicity around them and creating a formal nomination process to encourage more involvement – particularly for the Mayor’s Awards which would benefit from allowing nominations from staff and customers.

Communications with Front Line Staff

Given the lack of data available from the staff survey to assess the attitudes of customer-facing staff to internal communications, a focus group of front line staff across directorates was undertaken. Despite some evidence of good practice within services (e.g. housing was highly praised for its regular team meetings and team briefs on major issues such as stock transfers), the focus group found issues which need to be addressed. For example:

- Customer-facing staff were largely reliant on the intranet and email for their information
- Basic information staff required to do their jobs (e.g. staff moves, reorganisations and accommodation changes, changes to telephone numbers etc) was often missing or did not get to them quickly enough
- They were not informed about major press stories or events the council was organising which had been publicised in the local press
- There was a feeling of ‘email overload’
- Even where directorate communications was good, there was a failure to share the relevant information across the organisation. This has a significant impact on Information Services staff
- Not everyone had access to regular team meetings with their line manager (only four out of the nine reported having a regular team meeting)

The council should consider building on the CRM system it is putting in place for its call centres by developing a knowledge management strategy to ensure information flows *across* the organisation and, in particular, to customer facing staff.

Information Services staff also felt they would benefit from spending more time with their colleagues in other directorates. Given this and the council’s ambitious public access programme, we would recommend RBK considers setting up a one-day conference for all staff engaged in the public access programme (including those based in contact centres and on receptions) to tackle emerging issues and to promote and take forward the public access programme. The conference could be used to celebrate achievement over the previous year, set the priorities for the coming year and to gain staff feedback about how the service can be improved. This conference may need to

be held at the weekend, or be split into two sessions, to ensure customer service is not affected.

Other issues raised by staff and worth exploring were to:

- send a weekly email in bullet point format from directorate information services staff to their counterparts in the organisation to help them keep abreast of emerging issues
- put line managers on the information desks for a day
- set up week-long secondments for information services staff to visit their counterparts in other directorates to develop joined up working and a sharing of knowledge across directorates

Like all local authorities, RBK faces a significant challenge in communicating with non office-based staff. While some non office-based staff have access to email and the intranet (e.g. revenue and benefits inspectors pick up their emails from the office each morning while neighbourhood rangers pick up their messages once a week), a significant minority (e.g. home care workers and school staff) do not. Library assistants too, do not have their own email accounts, although they can access the intranet from the PCs available to library users.

Given a lack of good practice in this area within the local government field, we would recommend the council look to other public and private sector organisations to develop best practice in this field. This is an area where Kingston could demonstrate its ability to innovate and develop best practice which could be shared with the local government community.

For example, at British Gas 7,000 peripatetic gas engineers are given a laptop computer to provide instant access to the information they need to do their job. The company has also used text-messages to communicate with them, while sales agents receive regular emails and an electronic newsletter to keep them up to date.

The council should consider making a PC, with access to personalised email accounts and the intranet, available to all staff. This may require some training for staff who have never used a PC, email or the intranet.

Where this is not practical (e.g. for front line staff who no longer have a depot to go to), the council should consider introducing a pilot to give hand-held computers to staff who are scattered over a wide geographic area, with regular messages to keep them up to date. This would require the service manager to act as an 'account manager' to keep each group of workers informed.

Staff in both the front line staff and managers' focus groups also felt more use could be made of the intranet, with a pop-up 'message of the day' or 'newsflash' message appearing on screen to keep staff up to date.

Communications with Managers

Overall, managers attending the managers' focus group felt well supported by the council, with staff praising the Senior Managers Group, with quarterly meetings for the top 70 managers; the in-house manager development programme, as well as the comprehensive managers' handbook, the employee handbook and the health and safety handbook, which are all on the intranet.

In June, the council launched its middle manager development programme to improve the skills set of managers. This followed recommendations from the Investor in People assessor to focus more on the role of middle managers and the Corporate Development Team's emphasis on developing the middle manager cadre during a period of considerable change.

The new programme, for 250 managers, builds on the long-standing in-house programme, with external accreditation and validation built in. It includes a module on improving managers' communication skills to ensure they become better people managers.

Good practice developed in Community Services – where managers meet within the directorate once or twice a year – is now being extended to other directorates to ensure joined-up working.

Given the views of partners on their dealings with middle managers, we would recommend the programme includes regular networking sessions with external presentations from partners and others. The communications module could also be extended to incorporate the media awareness training sessions already begun by the communications team.

It could also be supported with its own pages on the intranet and an electronic newsletter for participants to keep them up to date. Progress on the six strands of the community plan should also be included here.

Suggestions from managers attending the focus group included:

- Develop breakfast sessions for middle managers on cross-council issues, such as handling complaints, equal opportunities and the outcomes of the 2001 census and its implications for Kingston. The programme should be supported by internal and external speakers and could be incorporated into the middle manager development programme
- Share good practice by creating a database of experts – or 'champions' – so managers know who to go to if they need advice on specific issues such as handling a public consultation or dealing with data protection issues

- Develop a programme of visits for managers to areas where joined up working is required to improve that service. For example, managers could be encouraged to find out more about the public access programme or to see a neighbourhood committee in action
- Circulate the minutes of all meetings (DMTs, DCGs etc) within a day of the meeting
- Issue advice to staff about how to use email, to avoid information overload.

Recommendations

- Extend the range of communication questions in the next staff survey
- Analyse the results of the next staff survey by directorate, by type of post, by ethnicity, gender and disability and benchmark against other public sector organisations to assess areas for improvement
- Undertake a regular audit of staff meetings, the cascade team briefing and appraisals to ensure meetings are taking place regularly
- Set up a monthly cascade team briefing system, with corporate messages agreed by CDT
- Set up annual roadshows for staff to communicate the council's achievements against its six strategic aims over the past year and its priorities for the forthcoming year
- Develop a knowledge management strategy, aligned to the CRM system, to ensure information is shared across the organisation
- Extend *Staff Update* from two to four pages, with a bullet point round up of news from the directorates and from partner organisations, where relevant
- Ensure service-based staff newsletters are circulated to the internal communications officer and communications team to consider stories for wider dissemination, and make available on the intranet
- Set up a system to ensure information on the intranet is kept up to date
- Consider setting up a 'message of the day' or 'newsflash' message on the intranet to alert staff of emerging issues
- Extend guidelines on using email to reduce the number of unnecessary emails sent and attachments circulated

- Develop 'message of the month' posters for noticeboards to update staff on corporate issues and to celebrate success
- Consider replacing the Directorate Consultative Groups with a representative staff panel to engage on major consultation exercises and ad hoc cross-directorate working groups to crack specific issues
- Directorates to undertake research on the views of staff towards their induction programme and to revise, as necessary
- Celebrate achievements widely using all the communication tools available, from *Staff Update* to the cascade team brief, posters on staff noticeboards and the intranet
- Increase pre and post publicity for the council's award schemes and create a formal nomination process for the Mayor's Awards to allow nominations from staff and customers
- Ensure information services staff have access to the local newspapers each week and that they are kept informed of events and major news stories by the communications team
- Set up a one day conference for all staff engaged in the public access programme – including information services and contact centre staff - to promote and take forward the programme
- Consider the issues raised by front line staff (weekly emails from directorate Information Services staff to keep each other updated; putting line managers on information desks for a day; setting up week-long secondments for information services staff to visit their colleagues in other directorates etc) and decide which ones to take forward after an initial pilot
- Develop best practice in the field of communications with non office-based staff (e.g. through a pilot to give hand-held computers to staff, with regular messages sent). Share any emerging best practice with the local government community
- Make access to PCs available to all staff, with personalised email accounts and access to the intranet and internet. This may require training for staff who have never used these systems before
- Set up regular cross-directorate networking sessions (possibly breakfast sessions), including presentations from external speakers to support the middle managers development programme
- Include the media awareness training sessions within the middle managers development programme

- Set up pages on the intranet to support the middle managers development programme and an electronic newsletter for participants to keep members' informed of both the programme and progress on the six strands of the community plan
- Share good practice by creating a database of champions on issues such as consultation and data protection to ensure managers know who to go to for advice
- Consider developing a programme of visits for managers to areas where joined up working is required to improve that service
- Ensure minutes of all CDT, DMT and DCGs are circulated speedily.

9. Resourcing Communications

Members and officers have given a commitment to improving communications and participation and several changes have already been made.

There is now a lead Executive Member for Communications and Participation, giving the function a corporate profile. This is to be welcomed.

The two-strong communications team (comprising a press & public relations manager and an information officer, reporting to the Head of Strategic Services) has recently been supplemented by a temporary communications officer (currently unfunded). It is recognised that this team is one of the smallest in London.

In interviews, both members and officers complained that the communications team was too small to achieve a corporate ethos or a proactive focus. Nor was it linked into the council's corporate policy programme. Indeed, this was also cited as a cause of frustration by members of the team themselves.

Given the high priority the council is placing on other communication-related activities – in particular, the public access programme, the website, information services and consultation - we believe there is an overwhelming argument for bringing all of these activities together under a new grouping, led by a new post of Communications and Information Services Manager, reporting to the Head of Strategic Services.

The new Group would include the website editor (currently based in ICT), the senior policy officer responsible for consultation (currently based in Strategy & Performance), the tourism and marketing staff (currently based in Democratic Services and Partnerships), as well as the Public Access team and the current communications team. The new Group would have responsibility for developing and implementing all the Council's communications, consultation and participation activities, providing a consistent and corporate approach working together with departments.

Actioning the recommendations in this report would also require, in addition to the post of Communications and Information Services Manager, at least three further posts, in addition to the existing three posts, in the Communications team: one to support the media relations activities and the production of the residents' magazine and one to handle communications with partners and opinion formers. A dedicated administrative post would also be required to support the team.

Existing Job descriptions would need to be reviewed to ensure work programmes support the actions in this strategy. For example, the tourism and marketing officer's work could be extended to include marketing for the council as a whole while we believe the activities currently undertaken by the existing information officer would be better sited elsewhere. For example:

- Compilation of the municipal year book – this should move to Democratic Services
- Co-ordination of the programme of posters for the JC Decaux noticeboard sites – this should pass to an administrator
- Production of the monthly posters advertising council and committee meetings, including Tenants Residents' Association meetings. This should move to Democratic Services or Neighbourhood Services
- Placing display advertising for some (but not all) departments in the local media – either devolve to all departments or centralise under Personnel, who also handle recruitment advertising. This could be included in the Residents' Magazine.

We would recommend the role of the existing information services post be reviewed to undertake a significantly higher level of communications activity.

While internal communications resides in Personnel, there is no post dedicated to this function. Our recommendations in this area were extensive and we believe a full time post should be created to take these actions forward. The council should decide where best this post should sit. Whatever option is agreed, the post-holder will need a solid background in internal communications/knowledge management and should liaise closely with personnel and the new communications and information services team.

The Media Management Group, made up of officers across directorates, was set up last year to help take forward some of the most pressing communication issues. This included developing a house style guide, media awareness training for officers, undertaking a Better Letters campaign and developing an approved list of designers and printers. This group is seen to be working well.

The senior policy officer leading on consultation also runs a similar network aimed at improving consultation across the council. We would recommend that these two groups are merged into a communications and consultation group responsible for setting the annual programme for these areas of activity, ensuring that a co-ordinated and consistent approach is undertaken with a corporate framework.

Communications and consultation should also be a standing item on all directorate management team agendas, with the relevant communications and consultation group representative sitting on the DMT.

The total staff cost of actioning this restructure is estimated at £170k (including on-costs). The cost of implementing individual actions is contained in the action plan.

Recommendations

- To create a new Communications and Information Services Group, including the current communications team, website editor, senior policy officer responsible for consultation, the tourism and marketing officer and the public access team
- To create the post of Communications and Information services manager, reporting to the Head of Strategic Services
- To create two additional communication officer posts to support media relations activities and the production of the residents' magazine, and communications with partners and opinion formers
- To replace the post of information officer and by a communications officer post instead
- To create the post of administrative officer to support the communications and Information Services Group's work
- To create an internal communications officer post and consider where this should sit
- To merge the Media Management Group and Consultation Network Group into a communications and consultation group to help action the communication and participation strategy across directorates
- To ensure communications and consultation is a standing item on all directorate management team agendas, with the relevant communications and consultation group representative sitting on the DMT.

10. Appendix I: Interviewees

Members and Officers

Andrew Bessant	Head of Democratic Services & Partnerships (not yet done)
Malcolm Cannon	Young Livin' Website Editor
Carole Comfort	Information Officer
Tim Darwen	Head of Neighbourhood Services
Cllr Kevin Davis	Conservative Group Leader
Rowena Davison	Communications Officer
Chris Field	Chief Policy Officer
Charlotte Fitzgerald	Head of Strategy & Performance, Community Services
Stuart Guffrey	Electoral Registration Officer
Scott Herbertson	Head of Leisure & Lifelong Learning
Tony Knights	Director of Finance and lead on community safety
Bruce McDonald	Chief Executive
Daniel Minmar	Website Editor
Cllr Derek Osbourne	Leader
Cllr Mary Reid	Lead Member for Communications & Participation
Gerry Sevenoaks	Head of Strategic Services
Shirley Stark	Information Services Supervisor
Jack Taylor	Press & PR Manager
Roy Taylor	Director of Community Services
Sheila West	Head of Personnel

Partners

John Azah	Kingston Racial Equality Council
Chris Butler	Kingston Primary Care Trust
Lisa Gagliani	Kingston Chamber of Commerce
Hilary Garner	Kingston Voluntary Action
Graham McNally	Kingston Town Centre Management Ltd
David Miles	Kingston University
Bernadette Vallely	Save the World Club

Local Journalists

Sean Duggan	News Editor, Surrey Comet & Kingston Guardian
Ian Griggs	Reporter, Informer (still awaiting his response)

11. Appendix II: Visual Audit

Appendix II runs to two pages and will only be included in the hard copies of the strategy as it includes a large number of photographs which make the file too large to download electronically.

12. Appendix III: Website Evaluation

Evaluation of Royal Borough of Kingston Website

Summary

The Royal Borough of Kingston website is of a high overall standard that reflects well on the Council with pockets of innovation and excellence. Its content and online services are citizen-centred and the design and navigation are user-friendly.

The site's major failing is the lack of a general search facility. Further development of content to offer truly comprehensive and in-depth information and more online transactions are needed to raise the site to the next level and to compete with the very best local authority sites.

Recommendations

- Introduce a general site search as a matter of priority
- Consider providing more photographs to illustrate youth centres, libraries, local attractions and leisure centres
- Review and standardise links to PDF and Microsoft Word documents, providing file sizes and links to Acrobat Reader and Access Adobe
- Considerable work is needed to join up the A-Z to related content, revising all descriptions to ensure they reflect and link to site content and online services
- Expand the A-Z to ensure it covers more services listed in the APLAWS¹ A-Z list and consider adding Frequently Asked Questions and Answers for main council services
- Rectify the error that prevents the home page from achieving Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) level 'A' accessibility and check the whole site for accessibility errors
- Introduce a help page for inexperienced users and guidance for those using access technology
- Review the Education pages to ensure that Plain English is consistently employed

¹ APLAWS stands for 'Accessible and Personalised Local Authority Websites' and is a Pathfinder project. See www.aplaws.org.uk. Its successor is a National Project, recently launched, called 'LAWS'.

- Change the 'Clubs' heading in the community organisation database to reflect the range of types of organisation it contains
- Remove the out of date crime news as a matter of urgency and review the content of the Crime, Youth Service and Sports and Recreation pages
- Develop further the content of the Business and Tourism sections

Introduction

The Royal Borough of Kingston website was assessed as C+ the 2003 SOCITM annual *Better Connected* survey of local authority websites. This is the second highest of four categories, and is given to sites that provide very useful content and offer some examples of more advanced self-service features. Only three London boroughs achieved a higher overall rating in the survey.

This evaluation broadly covers site design, usability, accessibility, content and functionality.

Design and Branding

The visual branding is strong and consistent throughout the site. The overall design and graphics look professional, cohesive and colourful. The logo appears consistently in the top right hand corner. Colour photographs are used judiciously, usually within the main central text area. Further use could be made of photographs to depict activities in youth centres, libraries, leisure centres and local attractions.

Usability

It was easy to get around the site – aided by the in-depth navigation menu on the left and the section links on the right. The full menus mitigate to some extent for the lack of a search. A helpful link to a printer friendly version is provided on every page. PDF and Word documents are usually flagged up although file sizes are not always indicated and links to the Adobe Acrobat download and accessibility information are missing. File sizes would be useful for those who wish to avoid downloading large documents.

Navigation

Navigation is clear and consistent. A site map, links to all major sections, home page and contact facilities can be accessed from every page. On the right hand side a menu system shows where the user is in the hierarchy of the site and links to other content within the current section.

The site has been influenced by the APLAWS model as it has major categories or headings such as 'Community, people and living' which are derived directly from the APLAWS category list. These top level categories appear on the left of every page

along with quick links to key content within them. The advantage to this system is that people who are not familiar with the site can get an idea of the content of each section, without having to try to guess from the titles. Those using low resolution screens may find the navigation menus clutter the page too much.

A major failing of the site is the total lack of a search facility. This is a basic tool that site users will expect to be provided. A good search facility will assist those who know exactly what they are looking for in finding the right page quickly.

For compliance with the E-Envoy's Guidelines for UK Government Websites, the site should carry a search and a site directory in addition to its current navigation features.

Signposting

In common with many local authorities, Kingston falls down on its use of signposting links in the site. It is important to provide links to online facilities and encouragement to use them, and also to link to related content from individual pages.

The A-Z in particular usually offers phone numbers and a brief description, without letting people know that they can carry out a transaction or interaction online, and without linking to the facility. For example, a user who is familiar with council A-Zs (since councils have long been publishing printed A-Zs of services) is very likely to look up abandoned vehicles in the A-Z as opposed to clicking 'Report a Fault'. If they did, they would see the option to telephone or e-mail the council but would not see guidance on what information to include, and there is no link here to the abandoned vehicles page in the Environment section or to the online form. If they spotted this link on the home page, they would be able to access full information about the process of dealing with abandoned vehicles and also fill in a form online that would prompt them for all the relevant details.

The entry 'Access to Information' is worse. It tells you to phone or fax committee secretariat in order to find out how to access council documents. There is no mention of the facility to look up agendas and reports and minutes online! The 'Housing' entry tells you that you can pay your council tax using Girobank but does not indicate that you can do so online or link to online payments. The A-Z entry for Recycling invites people to contact the recycling officer for a map showing current recycling facilities - yet this is instantly accessible elsewhere on the website!

Plain English

Generally the site conforms to Plain English guidelines, with exemplary use of common terms such as 'The Tip' alongside official titles such as 'Civic Amenity Centre'. The site is clearly targeted at residents, and focuses top level content accordingly. There are some exceptions, such as the Sports and Recreation Service home page, which reverts to council jargon (see below).

Accessibility

The Disability Discrimination Act requires service providers to consider making reasonable adjustments to the way that they deliver their services (including information and communication services) where disabled people find these impossible or unreasonably difficult to access. There is a logo on every page entitled 'Access Kingston' which has no explanation and does not link to anything - I had thought it might link to a page about accessibility.

The Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) provides the most generally accepted guidelines for constructing accessible websites, taking into account the needs not only of visually impaired but also blind and disabled users. See <http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/>

The Guidelines for UK Government websites, published by the Office of the E-Envoy, require all government sites to conform to the most basic level 'A' of the WAI guidelines. A test of the home page employing Bobby, the free on-line tool for making a quick automated assessment of single pages using the WAI guidelines, indicates that the site does not yet conform. This appears to be due to the lack of "alt" text for the 'contact us' image and is easily rectified. Some of the link phrases are meaningless when read out of context – notably the 'more' links in the left hand menu. This can present a problem for screen readers and is one of the requirements of the WAI guidelines. Testing the site using common screen readers would ascertain whether this poses a problem in practice.

Abilitynet offers a number of recommendations to address the needs of those with cognitive / literacy difficulties. A brief assessment against those criteria is provided below:

Recommendations	Does Kingston fulfill these criteria?
Have consistent navigation methods, employing a site map and breadcrumb trails	Yes - navigation highly consistent and a site map employed – equivalent of breadcrumb trail provided through section links
Ensure consistent and uncluttered page layout	Page layout highly consistent but large number of standard links may pose difficulties
Make text concise, easy to understand and jargon-free	Yes – exemplary on most pages
Use short paragraphs with sufficient white space	Yes - exemplary
Limit new points to one per paragraph	Yes - exemplary
Use a clear sans-serif font	Yes
Link to a page explaining how to change colours and font sizes and styles	No – I did not see a help page anywhere

Useful sources of reference are:

- The World Wide Web Consortium website: www.w3.org/
- The Web Accessibility Initiative: www.w3.org/WAI/
- Guidelines for UK Government websites: Illustrated Handbook for Web Management Teams (Chapter two, section four): http://www.e-envoy.gov.uk/Resources/WebHandbookIndex1Article/fs/en?CONTENT_ID=4000092&chk=XHiT3L
- “Accessible Web Design – A Practical and Strategic Guide” published by the Employers’ Forum for the Disabled: www.efd.org.uk
- A good basic overview of the different types of technologies available to people with disabilities is available on the Abilitynet website: <http://www.abilitynet.co.uk/content/home.htm>
- The BBC recently commissioned a report into accessibility of its websites which it has published for the benefit of others. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/commissioning/bbci/websites.shtml>
- The online accessibility checker Bobby is at <http://bobby.watchfire.com/>
- SiteMorse offers a free basic site check for errors against W3C specifications - <http://www.sitemorse.com/>
- Oldham Council is a good example of a site that uses Access Keys to assist those who prefer or need to navigate using the keyboard instead of a mouse: http://www.oldham.gov.uk/accessibility/access_keys.shtml

Translations

I saw no evidence of translated material on the site. Many local authorities opt not to provide translated material because the cost is prohibitive. Some that have a high proportion of residents for whom English is not their first language offer a single page in each of the main community languages explaining the purpose of the site and how to get hold of translated service information.

Comments on key functionality

ISIS is a leading edge innovation, and was more user-friendly than I remembered from previous visits. It may well be too difficult for someone who is new to the Internet to use, but it does provide an excellent service. I found the notes displayed on the lower right indicating what action I could take next very helpful.

After selecting to view the planning history I was told that no records were found for the property I selected. It would be useful to know whether that meant that no planning applications had ever been submitted, or whether the system does not carry all records.

The **contact and fault reporting forms** are sophisticated yet easy to use. The facility to pinpoint the location of a fault using a map is unique in local government websites as far as I am aware, but I was pleased to see that users are not forced in any way to use this if they would prefer to describe the location instead.

We found the **Bill Payments (or RBK Online) section** slightly confusing in that it was not clear what 'Albany Park' and 'Busy Bee Playschemes' were or why they were there. I think it is because they offer online bookings - it would be good to have an overview of what the section is about and plans for it on its home page.

The **Planning Online section** is also innovative and very useful. We were impressed with the facility to create your own ad hoc planning report. Ideally we would like to be able to use this system to register interest in receiving information about future planning applications and decisions by email, for selected areas of interest to the user.

Comments on core areas of the site

An excellent **contact us** page, well signposted, offers all appropriate information in a helpful manner. My one quibble is that the main council phone number (the helpline) is somewhat buried near the bottom of the page. It is repeated in a box on the right hand side but it would be useful to have the telephone details at the top of the page, along with a link to the A-Z to find direct numbers for services.

Council and Democracy

This section is straightforward, user-friendly and contains everything I would expect. The Campaigns area is innovative and a good example of an authority using its website to carry out its community leadership role. There are opportunities to submit comments and messages of support online, and I noticed that the results of a campaign were posted – something which many authorities appear to forget to do. A link to a similar facility for consultations would be useful.

Education

This area could benefit from a dedicated section for parents and a little work to ensure that it is as user-friendly as the best areas of the site. The acronym SACRE is not explained on the home page and the Education Plan summary turns out to be a PDF document that launches without warning when you click the link.

Community, People and Living

The Community Information Database is an excellent resource, and properly explained when accessed from this part of the site. When I accessed it via the A-Z section, however, I did not get the overview so I found the use of the word 'Clubs' as the header on every page misleading. 'Local organisations' or similar would be better.

The in-depth section on **crime** is useful and thorough. At first it was difficult to see how it could be improved – I was very impressed to find crime news but was wondering about the resource implication and wisdom of providing a news facility that is peripheral to council business, when I realised that the second news story is literally years out of date:

'The Metropolitan Commissioner of Police, Sir John Stevens QPM, will attend the next meeting of the Kingston Community & Police Consultative Group in Kingston Guildhall on Monday 15th January 2001 (7.30pm).'

This creates a very poor impression and the section should be dropped immediately – it is much better to link to news which is regularly updated on a police site – such as the Met Police. The Met Police site has a home page for Kingston, which carries an (incorrect) link to the crime pages on RB Kingston Council site. A link to online reporting of crime would be a useful addition:

<http://www.online.police.uk/english/default.asp>.

The Youth Service pages focus on staff rather than users. Some photographs would be great here, along with more prominent focus on services and activities, to promote the image of the service to young people and encourage them to participate where appropriate. I do not think that the staff profiles add value.

Advice, Benefits and Emergencies

These page are currently under-developed. They could link through to the relevant part of the A-Z for organisations offering advice. The Benefits area though is comprehensive and customer-focused.

Business

The Business section has little content at present. Trading Standards pages carry useful links to the Just Ask and Rip Off Tip Off sites, but also an unexplained one to the Investors in People site.

Social Care

The Social Care section is excellent, one of the most customer-centred sites I have come across.

Environment

I loved the fact that the home page is titled 'The issues affecting Kingston' and the first items are about graffiti and marketplace proposals – items of local importance and exactly what the home page should carry!

The Abandoned Vehicles page explains the process of the council dealing with an abandoned vehicle and carries a link to an on-line form, which looks excellent. It prompts the user for all the details that will help the council handle the vehicle, and even allows you to use a map to locate the fault. I tried using the map and found that I was looking at a blank white screen with the notice that I was viewing a map of the whole borough. It was only when I clicked a few times that I was able to access a visible, zoomed-in version.

Jobs & Careers

The first time I tried to look at current vacancies the site failed, but I was able to access it later on. Signing up for jobs by email is a useful service on offer here.

Transport and Streets

Everything I would expect to find was here including plenty of links to local transport services.

Leisure

The libraries information is comprehensive and well put together, but the rest of this section could be improved. The tourism section is very brief. There is very little information about attractions or other areas of interest for tourists, such as accommodation listings. The What's On is also under-developed. There is no monthly calendar – just some listings of special events in 2003 and some other listings by type of activity. For some reason there is a wholly separate listing of Arts and Cultural events, by month. The What's On could be revamped introducing a date and database driven facility.

The Sport and Recreation page lacks the customer focus of most other areas of the site. The home page begins with several paragraphs of council-speak:

'KSRS works within the context of the Kingston Council strategic aims, particularly those concerned with enhancing the quality of life and developing education and lifelong learning.

KSRS is responsible for developing and promoting the local strategic aims and objectives for sport and play and for working with national, regional and local sport and play organisations, the DCMS, voluntary and private sectors to develop and promote strategies and initiatives for sport and play in Kingston.

The emphasis of the work of KSRS is about enabling, working in partnership and identifying, creating and implementing opportunities that link to the Borough sport and play plans.

KSRS is also responsible for the contract management and client monitoring of the following leisure sites that are currently operating under private contractors:'

Housing

The Housing section is generally good, with helpful links on the home page. My main criticism is that the information could be more in-depth. A wider range of information for tenants could incorporate online repairs reporting and other services, information about

how to get on the housing register, what to expect regarding waiting lists, detailed information about the procedures for transfers and home swaps etc. The exception is the Benefits information which appears to be very thorough – the Council Tax Benefits ready reckoner stands out as an innovation.

Younglavin

This site aimed at young people is branded differently to appeal to a younger audience. It is colourful and appealing, and avoids the common tendency to patronise or resort to 'yoof' speak. The information looks useful and interesting. I was surprised that there was no link to this site from the Education home page.

Communication of the Council's Priorities and Achievements

Council priorities are not evident from the home page, although I would not necessarily expect them to be. The campaigns page carries information about current Council campaigns, in connection with its community leadership role. Crime information is sufficiently in-depth to suggest that community safety is a priority for the Council. On the other hand, the scarcity of tourism information implies that it is a low priority. There are various mission statements for departments scattered throughout the site – occasionally these are given too much prominence over core service information. Achievements are celebrated on the site - ISIS facility has a home page link to the awards it has won and the Council's excellent CPA result is also flagged up.

The site itself appears to focus squarely on citizens and service users. This is welcome, and means that top levels of the site provide prominent links to the most general useful information.

Conclusions

The Royal Borough of Kingston website projects a positive, professional image of the Council. Its content is centred on local citizens and service users, and generally employs simple and straightforward language, particularly at top levels. A number of online services are available, and in some instances these are examples of unique innovation in local government.

Overall, the site already demonstrates a state of development and quality that places it in the top tier of local authority sites and it has the potential to compete with the very best. To reach this level of excellence work is needed improve the consistency of depth and quality of content across all areas, and to develop a wider range of online services and transactions.

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