

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM COMMUNICATIONS GROUP UPDATE

Agenda Item: 7

Summary: This paper provides a summary of the issues discussed at the first meeting of the Local Government Reform Communications Group.

Action Required: To note for information.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

BACKGROUND

1. The first meeting of the Local Government Reform Communications Group was held on 16 June 2009.
2. This was attended by communications personnel representing the council clusters, representatives from transferring departments, trade unions and the Local Government Staff Commission.

KEY ISSUES AND OUTCOMES

An update was provided on local government reform followed by a question and answer session that identified some of the key issues:

3. Funding and resources – clarity on funding was considered essential for taking forward the vital communications work.
4. Corporate identity and branding was raised as an important emerging resource issue.
5. The importance of PSC Guiding Principle 1 – the need to engage with Trade Unions before communication issues to staff was reiterated.
6. It was agreed that a partnership between communications, HR personnel and the unions was essential.

7. The additional work expected from communications personnel whilst still carrying out existing work was expressed as a concern.
8. The importance of prioritising communications and making early appointments due to the essential role of communication in the change process was raised. It was felt that communications appointments should be given the same priority as finance and HR appointments in terms of Statutory Transition Committees.
9. It was agreed that it may be too early for transferring function departments to attend Communications Group meetings but it would be useful to keep all departments included in correspondence. This would enable departments to select the most beneficial sessions to attend.

PURPOSE AND DIRECTION OF THE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

Attendees discussed issues around the expectations and future direction of the Local Government Reform Communications Group. The feedback is outlined below.

10. The Communications Group should:
 - look at models of best practice
 - act as the link between the Group and the attendee's respective cluster / department / organisation
 - identify communication issues that require lobbying and ensure a two-way flow of communication
 - ensure local and central strategies are developed and aligned together
 - develop consistent, clear, understandable messages
 - act as an early warning system to identify if things are not working well

11. The role of attendees should be to:

- provide each cluster / department with a voice
- share information and best practice
- provide feedback to and from council cluster groups, departments and respective organisations
- implement best practice discussed in the Group

12. The role of the Joint Secretariat should be to:

- provide a central pool of information such as tool kits that can be easily accessed either on a website or through an identified contact person
- provide top line information and sign posting to the Group on key dates, issues and contacts
- ensure that information is appropriately disseminated to communications personnel in a timely manner
- facilitate a two-way communications flow between SLB, RTCG and the Communications Group

COMMUNICATION PRIORITIES AND FUTURE MEETINGS

Attendees also discussed what they saw as the immediate communication priorities and from this identified the most beneficial agenda items for future meetings of the Communications Group.

13. Communications priorities:

- development of a communication template for council clusters
- clarity on resources. It was reiterated that it needs to be established as soon as possible what resources are available for local government communications. It was felt that the capacity currently does not exist in the councils to take on the additional communication workload and that it was impractical to ask people to take on more responsibilities

- development of simple, easy to understand messages which can be used consistently across the sector to promote the change process
- best practice workshops and information sharing

14. Future meetings should cover the following topics:

- communication strategies – drawing together a template from the Group's expertise that can be used by local government representatives as a guide when drawing up the communications strategy for their respective Transition Committee
- messaging workshop – key messages to aid consistent and targeted communication
- communication structures and relationships – ensuring that communications are linked to programme management
- corporate identity and branding
- communications impact on local government with the transfer of functions from central government, for example, the advertising and press work required with the transfer of Planning Service; the need for council websites to be developed cost effectively to provide online services to the citizen such as tracking planning applications online
- procurement - achieving efficiencies across the council clusters when creating communication materials, new corporate identities, branding and developing websites
- internal communications through the change process - from a best practice perspective it was agreed to invite Eileen Beamish (SRC) to a future meeting to share the learning from the Health transfer

NEXT STEPS

15. The next meeting is due to take place at the end of July/ early August.

16. This meeting will focus on agreeing a communications strategy template. This should provide guidance for Transition Committees formulating their respective strategies.

RECOMMENDATION

17. It is recommended that members note the information provided in this update.

JOINT SECRETARIAT