

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

**Public Engagement and Communications
Task and Finish Group**

Friday, 13 January 2006

Present:

Councillor Christopher Malpas (Chair)
Councillor Michael Hill
Councillor Anjona Roy
Councillor Andrew Simpson

Councillor Brendan Glynane (Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee)
Thomas Hall - Corporate Manager

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Brandon Eldred and Margaret Martin (Consortium).

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

3 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 December 2005 were agreed.

In response to Councillor Hill's comment that a Corporate Standard for Consultation was in existence, T Hall confirmed that the document did exist but it had not been widely disseminated.

4 FURTHER ANALYSIS OF BASELINE DATA

The Group was referred to the list of consultation processes currently carried out by the Council's departments and was asked to identify sub-sections for it to look at in more detail. The Internal Communications Plan was circulated which identified where activity was currently taking place. The Group asked that the data be produced in a different format.

T Hall advised that the biggest barrier had been that a Communications Manager had not been appointed through the Root and Branch process. The Post was currently being advertised internally, if this proved to be unsuccessful it would then go out to external advert. The Group suggested it would be beneficial to advertise the Post in journals and the press, such as UK Press Gazette and the Guardian. T Hall confirmed that he would be putting a proposal to the Improvement Board for funding for Project Management of the

implementation of the Communications Strategy and it was envisaged that the Authority might require specialists for certain areas of PR work. Funding shall be available from the Government in respect of Recovery for Citizens Engagement.

Councillor Roy then referred to the Group's original Scope, commenting that the Group's next task was to identify blockages and problems in the system through the use of case studies, interviews, witness and expert attendance at meetings. She then referred to the Audit Commission's document '*Key Lines of Enquiry for Corporate Governance Inspection – 2005*', adding that there were gaps that needed filling:

- Communication Skills Training
- Councillors communicating a positive image of the Council

The Group therefore suggested that it be recommended that Councillors receive Communication training.

AGREED: That it be recommended that Councillors receive Communications training.

The Group then discussed how it would gather and review external evidence. There was a need to consider whether the Council had good communication to interact with the community. There was a need to test the robustness of how the Council measured that more than 50% of residents felt that NBC was consulting and involving them by July 2006 and to increase to 55% of residents who were satisfied/very satisfied with NBC by April 2006. The Group needed to be confident that this was being measured correctly. Some data was measured annually and some tri-annually (In accordance to Government measures).

The Group agreed that its next stage would therefore be to gather and review external evidence. Internal witnesses would be asked to attend the next meeting on 2 February. Part of its role should also be about how it could best see the use of resources and effectiveness. Some types of consultation have been carried out differently this year, for example, the Budget Consultation Process. It was suggested to speak to a sample range of individuals with experience of the new Budget Consultation Process, the Citizens Panel and representatives from the Area Partnerships and Forums. The quality of the Budget Consultation Process could then be evaluated.

The Group suggested three areas that it would like to look in more depth at how NBC engages and, particularly, consults with the public in those three areas:

- Area Partnerships
- Budget
- Development Control

The key question that the Group would raise was 'how does NBC ensure high levels of satisfaction, particularly in how people are involved, and how does NBC know how satisfied they are?' For each of the above areas, the Group would look at the process of engagement or consultation, how many people were involved, how effective it was and how (if applicable) it had changed recently. Key Managers (Jennifer Chance (Planning), Sean Silver and Lindsey Ambrose (Area Partnerships) and Alison Betts (Budget)) would be asked to attend the next meeting on 2 February. The Group requested further information on the Engagement Process, such as a reasonable sample of how many Customer Satisfaction Surveys were sent out/returned/results etc.

The Group heard that a recent Councillor Development Session had been dedicated to the effectiveness of Area Partnerships and it was suggested that the Presenter of this training be invited to attend a future meeting. The Council was planning a general review of its Area Partnerships and Forums shortly and it was suggested that the Group's research and findings would aid this Review. It was further suggested that a Communications Student from the University of Northampton might be able to carry out some research for the Group.

Councillor Roy advised that the Protocol Working Group had devised a draft Witness Protocol and Guidance.

Councillor Glynane advised that the Planning Task and Finish Group was looking at the planning process, including public speaking. It was suggested that it might be beneficial for the Public Engagement Task and Finish Group to look at the User Satisfaction Forms.

Councillor Simpson volunteered to carry out desktop research, looking at good Councils (Beacon Status) in respect of their Communications Strategy and benchmark to ascertain what they have been doing well in particular in relation to how they consulted. T Hall undertook to provide advice of which Local Authorities should be looked at.

- AGREED:**
- (1) That T Hall provides details of Beacon Councils for Councillor Simpson to base his desktop research on. Findings to the next meeting.
 - (2) That Key Managers from the three areas:
 - Area Partnerships
 - Budget
 - Development Controlbe asked to attend the next meeting in order that the Group could ascertain the process of Engagement or consultation, how many people were involve, how effective it was and how (if applicable) it had changed recently.
 - (3) That the Presenter of the Effectiveness of Area Partnerships Training be invited to attend a future meeting of this Task and Finish Group.

5 SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS

The schedule of meetings was noted:

- Thursday 2 February – 6.15pm in the Holding Room
- Friday 17 February – 6.30pm in the Godwin Room
- Thursday 2 March - 6.15pm in the Holding Room
- Thursday 16 March – 6.15pm in the Holding Room

The meeting concluded at 7.20pm