

SCRUTINY PANEL B

**Meeting held in the Committee Room, Council Offices, Urban Road,
Kirkby-in-Ashfield,**

on Thursday, 19th November, 2015 at 6.30 p.m.

Present: Councillor A. Brown, in the Chair;
Councillors L. Anderson, H.J. Hollis, R.E. Madden and
J.B. Zadrozny.

Apologies for Absence: Councillors C.J. Baron and L.A. Mitchell.

Officers Present: M. Joy, J. Robinson and C. Turner-Jones.

In Attendance: Councillor P. Roberts.

SB.7 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary and Non Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

SB.8 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 3rd September, 2015 be received and approved as a correct record.

SB.9 Scrutiny Review of Communications

The Chairman informed the Panel that following the scoping meeting held by the Panel in September this report provides Members with a draft terms of reference and further information requested relating to communications and best practice.

As part of the information gathering process the Scrutiny Manager had held initial meetings with the Corporate Communications Manager, Corporate Performance Manager and the Web Development Officer. In addition to this the Scrutiny Manager had undertaken some initial fact finding with regard to some issues raised at the last meeting including, Facebook and Twitter statistics and costings for the production and distribution of the "All About Ashfield" newsletter. In order to take this review forward a number of Working Group sessions would be scheduled over the coming weeks to enable Members to speak to expert witnesses about communications and its impact both internally and externally.

The Chairman added that communications plays a key role for the Council and Councillors in getting information out to communities and to also find out what was happening in the community. Following the series of Working Group meetings and further gathering of the relevant information it was anticipated that the Panel would be in a position to formulate some recommendations to be submitted to Cabinet for consideration.

The Scrutiny Manager then proceeded to brief the Panel with regard to the work undertaken following the last meeting which had included meeting with key officers and the Portfolio Holder and carrying out research on best practice.

At the last meeting Members had raised the issue of the Council's relationship with the local media and the lack of representation by the media at formal meetings of the Council (the Council meeting is now audio recorded and published on the website which could be a factor). The Scrutiny Manager reported that the Council does have an approved Media Protocol which ensures that all media contact is channelled via the Communications Unit. However, there have been some recent changes within the industry with regard to advancing technology and a shift to digital/on-line content which has created a number of challenges including:-

- Less emphasis on paper based news;
- 24 hour industry with no established deadlines;
- Social media – journalists increasingly have their own feeds on Facebook and Twitter as well as their own web pages;
- Public now use social media to 'break' stories;
- Journalist resources are dwindling.

The Scrutiny Manager also referred to the advance of Social Media in recent years which has required Local Authorities to review how they communicate with their residents. The Scrutiny Manager had met with the Councils newly appointed Website Development Officer to discuss the Councils website, how often it is visited and ways to improve the service and the relationship the Council has with the community. Other Social Media trends were also being considered such as YouTube which is the 2nd most used site in the world.

As part of this research the Scrutiny Manager asked Members to note the Case Study 'Walsall 24'. In 2011 Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council undertook a social media project which saw the Council using Twitter to highlight a series of routine duties carried out over a 24 hour period. The project was run alongside Walsall 24 on the local radio station whereby listeners heard pre-recorded interview teams from across the Council with the DJ reading out various tweets throughout the day.

The Chairman then welcomed to the meeting Carys Turner-Jones, the Corporate Communications Manager, who had been invited to the meeting to give an update on where we currently are with communications, local and national developments and consideration of issues affecting communications.

The Corporate Communications Manager explained that the Communications Team works closely with local, regional and national media and the press to ensure coverage of its activities. She informed the Panel that one of the biggest challenges facing her area of work was the fact that the news is constantly changing and social media enables anybody to become a 'journalist'. The Communications Unit were evolving to be able to adapt to these changes and thus be more strategic and reactive to situations/issues.

The Corporate Communications Manager reported that media enquiries were given priority status with more than 95% of media calls being resolved with 24 hours. All media contact was conducted through the Communications Unit as officers were instructed that they should not take unsolicited calls from the media.

The Corporate Communications Manager then expanded on the various forms of media currently used to engage with the public which includes press releases, Facebook and Twitter (the Council currently has approximately 2000 followers on Facebook and 1310 on Twitter). She added that the authority is looking at the introduction of the YouTube channel which is fast becoming more popular than Facebook and also Pinterest and Flickr as tools to share photos, comments and ideas.

Members were also advised that the Council has recently approved a Commercial Strategy Enterprise which sets out the Council's plans for considering ways it can become more commercial and make money.

To conclude, the Corporate Communications Manager discussed the key elements of Corporate Communications Team whose overall purpose was to promote the Council's activities and protect and enhance its reputation. In doing so she highlighted the issue of whether the Communications Unit should be more specialist, which is currently a wide debate nationally, or continue with a more general approach.

The Chairman thanked the Corporate Communications Manager for her informative presentation and the Panel Members took the opportunity to discuss and ask questions in respect of the following:-

- Social media is currently under resourced and needs to be expanded at Ashfield District Council;
- The need to establish a dedicated officer to focus on social media to improve interaction with the public;
- Is the budget for "All About Ashfield" justified or could this funding be allocated to other areas?
- Introduction of YouTube for educational and informative purposes;
- Procedures to deal with negative comments on social media and the development of a co-ordinated approach to ensure service areas communicate in an effective manner;
- Development of an "opt-in" email process ensuring faster more effective communication and an opportunity to reduce costs;
- The use of digital screens to replace notice boards at appropriate venues;
- Review of media protocols;
- Research on how residents would prefer to be contacted;
- Role of the Web Development Officer;
- Benefits of introducing YouTube for the promotion of services and advertisements.

The Chairman expressed her thanks to the Panel for their contributions and commented that this review was particularly useful given the changing landscape of communications in terms of technology. She added that as part of the process it would also be beneficial to try and capture the views of the general public with regard to the Council's communication practises.

To conclude, the Scrutiny Manager informed the Panel that he would arrange a number of informal Working Groups and prepare some key points and questions to be considered as part of the information gathering process.

RESOLVED that

- (a) the Scrutiny Manager be requested to arrange a series of informal meetings to enable Panel Members to meet with the Corporate Communications Manager, Corporate Performance Manager, Website Development Officer and the Portfolio Holder with the remit for corporate communications, to discuss the following issues:-
- Media Protocols;
 - Resources;
 - Website development;
 - Development of an "opt-in" email process.
- (b) in readiness for the next meeting the Scrutiny Manager be requested to investigate the current public consultation processes and identify any potential areas for improvement.

The meeting closed at 7.38 p.m.

Chairman.