Talk Back
Local Authority Communication with Citizens
The Audit Commission

... promotes proper stewardship of public finances and helps those responsible for public services to achieve economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
1 In the wake of events: 
the evolution of public communication

2 Into uncharted waters: 
familiar and unfamiliar demands on PR professionals

3 Hazards in the offing: 
further challenges facing local government PR

4 A course for the future: 
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Summary

Communication with the public is important to local authorities ...

♦ the democratic tradition rests on it
♦ the use of professional public relations teams is widespread
♦ over £60m is known to be spent through PR units, but total public communications expenditure is much greater.

... but past achievements are insufficient for new needs.

♦ there is an ever greater emphasis on accountability, transparency and quality in public services
♦ public relations is more than press relations
♦ communications systems must bring information into the council, as well as broadcasting it out.

So public relations units must move from familiar into uncharted waters ...

♦ they are good at media relations, although maintaining a corporate approach is not always easy
♦ but many are less well equipped to capture public views and channel them back into the council.
... where they lack navigational aids.

- the costs of communication are frequently unknown
- and the objectives of councils are often opaque or
  ambivalent, particularly on the emerging agenda of
  community governance
- new technology will require new skills
- client-contractor splits are changing internal
  relationships.

So each council needs to

- examine its different audiences and their needs
- agree on a framework of objectives and policy for its
  communications activities
- decide who does what, including the role of the PR
  unit
- measure performance and expenditure
- learn to listen, as well as to speak
- and the Government needs to clarify the definition of
  publicity expenditure.

... starting from an audit of where it is now.

- what activity takes place?
- how does it support the council's objectives?
- what does the public think?
Preface

The Commission has given a high priority to the promotion of better communication in local government. In its first Management Paper I, the Commission identified effective communication as one of eight key success factors that would mark out the competitive council. More recently, in Putting Quality on the Map II, the Commission identified a quality service as one which would 'provide effective communication with the user and reflect an understanding of the user's needs and wants'. And in Read All About It III the Commission encouraged local authorities to present their Citizen's Charter performance indicators 'in ways which will reach a wide audience and attract the public's attention'.

The issues involved in internal communication – communication between those directly involved in the planning and delivery of local authority services – are addressed in a separate Commission report IV. This paper is concerned primarily with external communication – communication between local authorities and the communities they serve. It is based on research carried out in 1993 and 1994, including:

- a questionnaire addressed to the 'head of press and PR' in all authorities, seeking to establish the staffing, management profile, cost and range of activities carried out under the heading of Public Relations;
- follow-up discussions with 69 authorities, including site visits to 29;
- a questionnaire sent to 900 specialist local government journalists in national and local print and
electronic media, followed by a more detailed telephone survey of 10 per cent of respondents; and

- a questionnaire sent to all local authority treasurers concerning their accounting for publicity expenditure under Section 5 of the Local Government Act 1986.

All exhibits, other than Exhibit 12, are based on returns to these questionnaires.

As well as focus group meetings with local authority Public Relations Officers, a number of relevant
professional and local government bodies were consulted including:

Institute of Public Relations (Local Government Group)
National Union of Journalists
Association of County Councils
Association of District Councils
Association of Metropolitan Authorities
Society of Regional and District PROs
Greater London PROs Group

The research was undertaken by Tim Williams of the Commission's staff, informed by an advisory panel drawn from local government PR practitioners and PR specialists from the private sector. Particular assistance in producing this paper was given by Martin McNeill, a consultant to the Commission. The Commission welcomes all the assistance and advice it received, but responsibility for the views in this paper rests with it alone.

The use of advisors and the process of consultation is common to all Commission publications. Usually these processes generate shared conclusions which the Commission is able to endorse. In the case of this report, the views of consultees remained divided throughout, perhaps indicating the recent arrival of the PR function in local government. This situation underlines the need for continuing debate. Many will object to this paper, but for contradictory reasons. But perhaps, in triggering that debate, a growing convergence of view will emerge.
1. Local authorities have been in the communication business for a long time. Indeed, the sharing of information creates the basis of knowledge and understanding upon which democracy depends. The provision of accurate and timely information to the communities they serve has therefore been a core function of local government, irrespective of whether messages have been delivered through the town crier, the printed page or broadcasting and other electronic media. Clear communication has been particularly valued at times of change and crisis, not least when local government has been under attack in the media and has felt the need not only to defend itself but positively to promote its value and its successes.

2. But public expectations forever rise. Developments in local government over the years have made increasing demands on those involved, including a recognition that all share a responsibility for effective public communication. Progressively, members, chief executives, public relations professionals and service managers have all come to play a part (Exhibit 1, overleaf).

3. The member role is the longest established and the most fundamental. Its character evolved early in the century with the growth of local democracy and the widening of the franchise, which made it necessary for councils to explain to larger electorates the decisions that were being taken in their names. The post-war growth in service provision also brought a need to inform both
As local government has developed, communication has involved new groups.

4. With the increasing complexity of council business came a demand for corporate management and for the public presentation of the council as a corporate body. This task often fell to chief executives. The chief executive became the person who put across information, often using editors and journalists on local newspapers with whom close relationships were in many
In the wake of events, cases developed. But on the most controversial issues, leading members continue to dominate the public stage, as indeed they should. Consequently, a two-tier situation prevails in many councils, with the chief executive and other staff delivering information on council decisions and initiatives, alongside members who take centre stage when strong political differences appear. Difficulties arise when these two levels become entangled. And, journalists sometimes have difficulty distinguishing the political messages of individual members from statements on official policy issued on behalf of a council by its Public Relations Officer (PRO).

5. In shire districts, it is still normal for the chief executive to be the principal officer spokesman, giving around 10 per cent of his or her time to this function – fewer than half of these authorities have professional public relations (PR) units. But in larger authorities, the 1970s and 1980s saw a move to place the PR function increasingly in professional hands, with large numbers of PR units created (Exhibit 2, overleaf).

6. Local government reorganisation – implemented in the mid 1970s and threatened in the early 1990s – stimulated much of this activity. Additionally, in the 1980s, 'enabling' councils saw a need to develop the PR function as a means of influencing other local organisations. And further impetus to appoint PR professionals stemmed from the decline in the coverage of local government matters by a local press which faced a combination of lower sales and fragmentation; and from the increased demands placed on chief executives, particularly of the larger authorities, by growth in the range and complexity of council services. Those with units, established originally to deal with the press,
Local government reorganisation provided much of the impetus to professionalise the communications function.
progressively broadened the role to embrace a richer concept of public relations.

7. Virtually all counties, metropolitan districts and London boroughs have at least one dedicated PRO. The largest PR units number 20 or more staff, although there is an imprecise relationship between the size of the authority and its PR unit (Exhibit 3, overleaf).

8. The late 1980s and early 1990s have seen a new set of communicators playing a more important role, as service departments have, in many cases, taken responsibility for their own PR, usually with the Head of Department acting as public spokesperson. It has become common for publicity material to be prepared within departments – with or without the help of a central design or publications team – and in 9 per cent of authorities, PROs are employed at departmental level. This development is challenging the established role of the corporate PRO, while at the same time a new communications agenda is emerging.

9. The trends to professionalisation and to the devolution of responsibility for local authority communications are likely to be reinforced by the growing concern with communication in general. The themes of accountability, transparency and quality of service, which seem set to dominate local government over the second half of the 1990s, underline the need for effective communication, as does the trend to single issue protest movements. Indeed, the situation has now been reached whereby it can be reasonably asserted that good communication with the public is the responsibility of everyone in local government.

10. Some of the impetus comes from the Citizen's
The largest authorities do not always have the largest PR units.

* The inter-quartile range describes the middle 50% of the spread of sizes, ignoring the greatest 25% and the smallest 25% of PR units.

Charter. The Charter means more than simply reporting performance indicators on an annual basis. It starts from the premise that authorities will tell customers what services are available, the standard of service and performance they can expect, and how to complain or seek redress if service delivery is unsatisfactory. Openness and information are two of the Charter's key principles. Additionally, it is possible that the conclusions of the Nolan Committee will give further momentum to the growth of open accountability by
In the wake of events

Public bodies. In parallel, the Local Authority Associations have produced a Code of Open Government. These changes require all local authorities to raise the quality of the information they provide up to the standard set by the best. Otherwise, their services will continue to be under-valued – and possibly under used.

But the new concern with communication is not confined to outward communication – what a local authority tells its customers, electors and taxpayers: it also focuses attention on inward communication – the messages the council hears from those it serves. The communicating council needs to receive as well as to publish information, to ensure that services change and develop in response to fast-changing needs. It needs to learn to listen. The focus of this paper is on the role of the Public Relations Unit in a council's communication with the public. But that is only a starting point. By itself, it would be too narrow. Public Relations Units can be a catalyst, but not a substitute for an authority-wide recognition that communication, in its broadest sense, is the life-blood of effective local government.
2 Into uncharted waters:
familiar and unfamiliar demands on PR professionals

12. Authorities will find themselves at different stages in the evolution of the communications function. Some are still dependent chiefly on action by elected members, others rely on the chief executive, while some have gone a long way towards devolving responsibility to service managers and service delivery staff.

13. But for most authorities the work of the professional PR team is at the heart of good communications. PROs go under a wide variety of names (Exhibit 4). Most would, however, recognise public relations – defined as 'the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics' (Ref. 1) – as the management process they perform. They would also subscribe to two additional definitions of Public Relations, recently approved by the Council of the Institute of Public Relations:-

♦ 'Public Relations is about reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you.'

♦ 'Public Relations practice is the discipline concerned with the reputation of organisations (or products, services or individuals) with the aim of earning understanding and support.'

For councils, these are critically important themes.
Exhibit 4
What local authorities call their PROs

Local authority officers responsible for external communication go under many different names.

14. How this brief is interpreted varies according to the culture and the priorities of the authority and the background of the individuals involved. PR can include a wide range of activities, from corporate hospitality and international links to commissioning translations and placing recruitment advertisements. But with a large number of PROs having backgrounds in journalism or design (Exhibit 5, overleaf) it is not surprising that the majority of PROs have in the past been closely and, in some cases, exclusively involved both with media relations and with the writing, editing or design of publications. Whilst this will continue, their future role should include other communication functions, for which they may need further training.
15. Most PR units were set up initially to handle media relations, and two thirds of PROs say that this is still the most important aspect of their role. Typically, it occupies 30 to 40 per cent of the time of chief PROs - rather more in shire districts.

16. The great majority of local newspapers and news broadcasters (87 per cent of those replying to the Commission's survey) have regular contact with council PROs, with a roughly equal number of contacts initiated on each side. Journalists generally express a high level of satisfaction with the service provided (Exhibit 6), but
The Commission’s survey of PROs also revealed scepticism as to the competence of some journalists to make appropriate use of available sources of information – including PROs’ home or mobile telephone numbers. Nor were respondents overly impressed with the calibre of some spokespeople on radio and TV. This observation suggests that spokespersons should receive training in media presentation; and, when possible, spokespersons should be selected for their abilities, not because they fill a relevant executive post. Given that the opportunity of a local radio interview is far more likely than a TV interview, training for most individuals should concentrate on radio techniques.

17. Journalists were also favourably impressed by the quality, availability and accuracy of the information they were given, although some were critical of its...
comprehensiveness and objectivity (Exhibit 7). This is hardly surprising, because councils expect their PR officers to place the most attractive angle on stories, or to explain the council’s problems in a sympathetic light. It may indicate that, on some occasions, political considerations have distorted the message – but as the survey shows, journalists are rarely fooled. To build a good relationship with the press, one needs to tell the truth.

18. PROs respond to, and stimulate, local media interest by producing press releases or statements – more than fifteen a week in some cases. The number of press releases issued bears no obvious relation to the size of the authority (Exhibit 8). But volume alone is not a good measure of performance. The great majority of press releases are initiated by the authority, or by one of its departments, with only 10 per cent issued in response...
to stories implicating the authority. There is a risk in some councils that the pace and urgency of press management could crowd out good planning. Some stories require careful pre-planning, with rehearsed co-ordination across a number of council spokespersons. Where the story lends itself to such good management, the opportunity should be grasped. Additionally, PR units can, very valuably, act as a buffer to aggressive media probing, buying a little time for the service department to assemble facts and consider its response.

19. This pro-active approach – described by one PRO as 'a systematic drip-feed of good news' – reflects a concern to ensure that unavoidable coverage is, so far as possible, sympathetic and well-informed and to enhance local appreciation of the council. But the local media are often more interested in 'scandal'. Convincing papers to

Exhibit 8

Annual press releases

(in descending order of population)

Press release activity is unrelated to population size.
use 'good news' requires persuasion, but this can be swept aside by 'damage-limitation' exercises. Balancing a problem story with a good news angle requires especial skill, which is not always present, resulting in defensive responses which often serve only to amplify a negative story rather than manage it.

**Interaction with the public**

20. As well as preparing press releases, most PROs play some part in their authority's direct communication with its customers, electors and taxpayers. This, most commonly, means leading or participating in the writing, editing, design and/or production of a council newspaper (involving 57 per cent of PROs) or the annual report (47 per cent). The quality of these and other local authority publications has improved considerably in recent years, with plainer English, better design and improved targeting (including versions in languages other than English), and the best now meet a very high standard. But others remain unbalanced or obscure, lack impact or are simply very costly.

21. In some authorities, PROs have more direct dealings with the public through attendance at consultative and other meetings, events and exhibitions, often in support of a service department. A few are responsible for the information services provided to the public by telephone or through public information points. But less than half of the PROs surveyed claimed to have any contact with the public other than through newspapers.

**Corporate strategies and standards**

22. In authorities which have a PR unit, PROs co-ordinate communication; although members and chief executives, increasingly joined by departmental chief officers and other senior management, are often the main spokespersons; and departments may be responsible for much of their own publicity material.
2 Into uncharted waters

With such a variety of communicators, it is essential that some corporate standards be set and compliance with them monitored if the authority is to speak with a consistent voice. There should be a protocol between members and officers setting out the appropriate roles which each will play in the public presentation of the council.

23. The task of initiating appropriate standards and protocols and monitoring compliance often falls to the PR unit, and, where a PR unit exists, seven out of eight authorities require departments to use its services. In a few authorities, PROs manage an in-house print shop for all publicity or act as sole buyer of externally sourced printing.

24. These arrangements are not always wholly satisfactory, especially where PROs are accustomed to dealing directly with media enquiries and focusing their attention on tomorrow's press release rather than the development of high quality corporate communication. And service departments do not always share the concerns of their PRO: extracting information to pass on to the media or the public can often take a long time. It will help if mechanisms are established to enable service departments to negotiate the services, costs and standards provided by the PR function as well as to enable the PR unit to set out reasonable expectations of the assistance which departments will afford it. Thirteen per cent of authorities have developed service level agreements between the PR unit and user departments, specifying what each can expect of the other.
25. Some PROs have taken a further step into a corporate support role. Where PR responsibility has been devolved to departments within an overall framework of strategy and standards, there is a need for someone to act as trainer and advisor to other officers and members who are then able to control their own communications more successfully. This may involve media training, the co-ordination of information services for members or the development of a customer care programme for front-line staff. In the most mature settings, PROs feel able to give constructive criticism to members and senior staff on their public performances.

26. This new role may not come easily to some PROs who set much store by their present exclusive responsibility for, and control over, media relations or design. But in a number of authorities where a corporate communications strategy and an appropriate structure to implement it have been or are being developed, the role of the PRO has become increasingly that of a facilitator rather than a doer.

27. These PR roles have developed in response to the changing demands on local authorities. But – with some exceptions – authorities have generally provided little overall guidance to tell their PROs what they are expected to achieve. It is notable that, while 40 per cent of PROs have responsibility for PR strategy, only 28 per cent of authorities have a written strategy in place.

28. Given this background of haphazard growth and absence of a strategic framework, it is not surprising that many PROs feel undervalued and ill-used (Box 1). They operate in the tense territory between the officer machine and the members and between the council and the public. The risk is that they become simply reactive,
Box 1
The views of PROs

'I have great difficulty in making other officers see PR as integral and not bolted on to providing quality customer services.'

'Some officers wouldn't know what a story was even if they were in it.'

'Our work is made more difficult by variable political direction and a fundamental ambivalence about the role and desirability of PR in local government.'

'Our members thought the survival of the authority was far too important to be left to their own professionals.'

or that they concentrate on the activities, such as media relations and design/publication work, with which they are most comfortable.

29. The general absence of strategy is paralleled by an absence of generally accepted measures of effectiveness. Such measures as are in use tend to focus on the media relations aspect of the PRO role, and some of these are rather crude – such as the number of press releases produced per year. Little use appears to have been made of user surveys. Only 10 per cent of PROs have asked journalists what they think of the service they provide.

30. And there is great uncertainty as to what PR actually costs. The evidence provided to the Commission implies total spending by PR units of some £60 million. But there are surprising variations in reported expenditure between authorities of similar size (Exhibit 9, overleaf) and some PROs – particularly in shire districts – simply do not appear to have a clear idea of how much their units spend. Differences in spending will arise because
of the nature of the authority, e.g. a seaside town will spend significantly on tourism promotion. Similarly, differences in the structure of the council and the role of the PR unit will lead to significant differences in expenditure. One would expect a council with a proactive, listening approach to its communities to spend more than one with a primarily reactive stance, focused on council minutes, but the pattern of recorded spending does not support such an explanation.

31. Estimates of authority-wide spending on PR, including the PR spending of service departments, are even less reliable. Such information as is available suggests that the level of additional council spending may be in excess of £80 million, bringing the total cost of PR to more than £140 million.

Exhibit 9
PR unit expenditure in 16 London boroughs

There is no clear pattern of spending
32. This lack of clarity is at first sight surprising in view of the emphasis placed by the 1986 Local Government Act on accounting for expenditure on 'publicity'. Section 5 of that Act aimed to address the observation of the Widdicombe Committee that many authorities had no idea of their spending in this area (Ref. 2). Introduced against a background of high-profile campaigns by the Greater London Council and other authorities facing abolition, it requires authorities to keep a separate account of their publicity expenditure, which is to be available for inspection by members of the public.

33. The problem is that the definition of publicity is not restricted to what is controversial but includes 'any communication, in whatever form, addressed to the public at large or to a section of the public' (Ref. 3). That is a very wide definition, which could capture such items as recruitment advertising and the publication of statutory notices, and in the absence of further clarification it is not surprising that authorities are uncertain how the requirement should be interpreted (Box 2, overleaf).

34. As a result, aggregated Section 5 expenditure includes very high figures from some authorities and negligible amounts reported by others. The Commission's survey¹ showed Section 5 expenditure in 1992-93 of around £160 million (14 per cent below the peak figure reached in 1990-91, probably because of the sharp reduction in recruitment advertising). But this figure, which in any case bears no relation to the expenditure incurred by PR units, is likely to understate the true position.

¹ Estimate based on returns from 174 authorities
Box 2  
Cameo responses to the Commission’s survey of Section 5 spending

9 September 1993  ‘I am writing to inform you that this council has not incurred any expenditure on publicity as defined by the Act.’

20 October 1993  ‘Further to our telephone conversation, I enclose a copy of the statement prepared for inclusion in this Authority’s Statement of Accounts for 1992/93 regarding expenditure incurred on Publicity as defined by the Local Government Act (1986).’  (Treasurer, West Country District)

(The year's expenditure is now recognised as over £138,000, of which £25,746 related to the cost of campaigning around the Local Government Review.)

‘Following last week's meeting I met with our Chief Accountant who tells me that the numbers that they put into the Section 5 declaration have traditionally been costs of the Press Office, plus the staff advertising budget. In the future they will use the cost of the Press Office, plus the turnover of the Ad shop, plus a great deal of the publicity material for departments.’  (Head of Press and PR, London Borough)
'Prior to 1990/91 the Authority were unable to compile a definitive Statement of Publicity Expenditure. The Statement of Accounts were therefore published without meeting the requirements of Section 5, a matter which was commented on in the qualification of the accounts by the Council's External Auditor at the time.

Figures for 1990/91, 1991/92 and 1992/93 have not yet been formally agreed with the external auditor.' (Treasurer, London Borough)

'As a result of being asked a specific question by you, I have given further consideration as to my interpretation of the requirements.

I am no longer confident that the interpretation I have used since the reporting requirement was introduced is correct as the legislation refers to publicity addressed to the public at large or to a section of the public.' (Treasurer, Midland District)

35. Indeed, declared publicity expenditure may be only a small part of communications (Exhibit 10, overleaf). Research at one metropolitan borough in the course of the Commission's survey revealed total spending on communication in all its forms of £32 million, or £35 per citizen per annum. This may well represent the upper end of the spending range. So, direct spending by PR units represents no more than the tip of the pyramid. For their own purposes, councils should be able to pinpoint their expenditure on different functions. The vagueness of Section 5 does not help. The Government should introduce a clearer definition of the expenditure to be reported under this requirement.
Communications expenditure is defined in many different ways.
3 Hazards in the offing: further challenges facing local government PR

36. These aspects of the current management of local government PR already suggest a substantial agenda for change both in the role of the PRO and in the ways in which directions are set and progress monitored. But the very nature of PR is being challenged by changes in the external environment, some on the horizon and others already facing many local authorities. Four developments in particular are setting a new communications agenda for the second half of the 1990s:

♦ Technological change
♦ Separation of client and contractor roles
♦ A focus on 'listening'
♦ Local government reorganisation.

The seeds of these developments can be detected in the current situation, but their full flowering has yet to be experienced.

37. The changes that have taken place within the newspaper industry over the last two decades have required local authorities to adopt a much more positive approach to communicating with their communities. The production of press releases has become a major activity of all PROs and, for some, the apparent reason for existence. So long as local newspapers continue to be the main source from which the public gain information about their local authority, the local press will be an important focus for the PRO. But if their
sales go on falling, as they have in recent years, replaced by 'free' newspapers with a high proportion of advertising, and the number of dedicated local government journalists prepared to read agendas or attend council or committee meetings continues to shrink, the emphasis may need to change.

38. The decline of the local press – especially the paid-for newspaper with its relatively high editorial content – and the growth of local broadcasting, with its apparently insatiable appetite for 'rolling news' have already altered the traditional role of the PRO as intermediary between those who make the news and those who report it. Written press releases will remain important, but the decreasing number of local journalists may mean that fewer are used; and of those which are used, a greater proportion are reproduced verbatim. This argues for a more focused approach than prevailed in the past. And, faced with local radio, the emphasis will be on a more general management of communication between councillors and officers and their constituents and customers. A few authorities have gone so far as to allow local TV or radio stations to set up studios in the town or county hall to facilitate this process.

39. And other aspects of the PRO's role will increasingly be affected by developments in information technology. If citizens can receive information, ask questions, request services and pay their bills electronically, the relative importance of paper communications, designed and edited by the PR unit, will decrease. The civic newspaper, which has become an important means of conveying information about council activities, may have to take new forms or be supplemented by other parallel information systems. A number of councils have
introduced touch screen displays or computer terminals in libraries and information offices to give access to community information. Their impact should be evaluated by analysing the frequency and type of enquiry. Additionally, such systems should enable the public to record whether the facility met their needs.

40. The increasing separation of client and contractor roles has been one of the most notable features of local government in the first half of the 1990s. It has had two important consequences for local authority communications. First, it has led many authorities to take a critical look at the work of the PR unit, and to ask what its job is, who its clients are and what sort of services are required. Compulsory competitive tendering has focused the attention of DSOs on overheads, and led them to seek greater control over central corporate expenditure.

41. Second, the devolution of responsibility for service delivery, away from a controlling centre to staff who are closer to the customer, has highlighted the difficulties both of projecting a consistent image of the authority and its purposes and values and of channelling customer feedback into the forward planning process. These difficulties will become greater as authorities increasingly
focus on a client role, which is far from simple to project to citizens, who have historically seen the local authority as principally a provider of services. And as it becomes more difficult to separate communication about services from service delivery itself, PROs may find themselves becoming increasingly involved in considering the style and tone of departmental service delivery.

**Listening to customers**

42. The conventional PR role is also challenged by the drive towards consumer empowerment, reflected in such initiatives as the Citizen's Charter. The emphasis is increasingly on the provision of information that will enable citizens to demand and receive good quality public services.

43. Services are now being reviewed from the consumer perspective. Publicity about what the authority is doing will need to respond to customer values – all too often in the past it has given the impression of being producer-led. The clear communication of comparative information, as well as advocacy or persuasion, is becoming a dominant tone.

44. And listening processes will need to be developed to ensure that feedback is encouraged and acted on. Leading councils have adopted a number of different methods of improving inward communication (Ref4). As well as empowering the individual consumer, many are exploring a 'community governance' agenda, seeking new ways of engaging with collective interests. So some have undertaken surveys to establish service preferences; some have set up deliberative panels to help plan services or citizen juries to give their verdicts on the services delivered; and some have sponsored neighbourhood forums and committees. Others still have to find ways of
3 Hazards in the offing

ensuring that they remain in touch with the needs of their communities. The PR function has a major agenda in innovating, supporting and monitoring these developments across the council.

Reorganisation

45. The local government review has already been an important factor in causing many authorities to reconsider how they are perceived by their local communities. The effects have not all been beneficial. In some authorities, significant resources have been spent, not simply on the provision of information and opinion testing, but on high-profile campaigns of persuasion aimed at self-preservation. Auditors have, in a few cases, had to call for leaflets to be withdrawn and opinion polls suspended. These instances – though few in number – are thought by some in local government to have overshadowed the work done by those authorities who have set out to explain in a balanced way the arguments for and against structural change and the local options under consideration.

46. But the review has served to focus the attention of authorities on how they present themselves to those they are supposed to serve. It has led to a questioning of long-held assumptions about the purposes of local government and in many cases to a re-thinking of corporate goals. Following reorganisation, there will be a major task, not only for new authorities but also for those which continue, to ensure that they understand, and are understood by, their local communities. Many have made promises of a revitalised agenda of community governance which they will need to achieve. This will require communication skills of a very high order.
4 A course for the future: moving into corporate communications

47. The previous sections have illustrated the inherited problems of PR – unclear roles amongst officers and between officers and members, inability to identify expenditure, and journalist suspicion of distorted messages; along with new challenges – becoming a listening council, engaging with electronic media as well as print, devolving responsibility around the council etc. These require fundamental responses.

48. The challenge for all authorities is to respond to these pressures by addressing the need for corporate communications – defined as 'the planned management of productive, two-way communications between an organisation and a variety of audiences' (Ref. 5). In doing so, they will want to build on the best practice developed in some councils. This will require the participation of all the authority's communicators – responsibility cannot be abrogated to PROs on their own. The commitment of members and of the chief executive will be crucial. Many PROs feel on the fringe of decision making, unable to make the contribution of which they are capable. They could contribute more powerfully if the leadership in councils, both officer and member, was prepared to support the improvement of communication skills for service managers. Communication is central to good government; it cannot be an after-thought.
49. PROs have a vital role in driving the process. Councils will improve their chances of achieving a satisfactory outcome if they focus on four aspects:

♦ identifying the audiences with which they need to communicate;

♦ agreeing a framework of objectives and policy;

♦ deciding who does what; and

♦ measuring performance.

Identifying audiences 50. Councils need to decide which audiences they seek to reach with what messages. This will influence the means they adopt. Some messages may be personal to every resident; others may be advocacy messages on behalf of the whole area to the outside world; many will be focused on particular groups, interests or activities within the authority. Good PROs will consider not only what the council wants to say to each audience, but will research what each audience wants to hear about and what messages it may have for the council (Exhibit 11, overleaf).

Objectives and policy 51. Once the council has scoped the audiences it wishes to engage, it needs to organise its response into a strategy. A communications strategy provides an essential framework of objectives and policy within which appropriate management structures and action plans can be developed. In the absence of a strategy, much of the effort put into communications, both by PROs and by service providers, can be wasted, as a number of authorities have come to recognise (Box 3, overleaf).
Exhibit 11
Audiences and their needs

Different audiences have different questions – and different messages – for the council.
Box 3
The case for a strategy

'We already do much on public relations, even if we do not always call it that. But there has been no written strategy to bring the various strands together to make a coherent whole. A strategy should create a better focus for effort.' (County Council)

The council spends significant amounts of time and money in communicating with its residents, service users, other organisations and its own staff. These efforts are spread across all departments, and all levels. Except on major projects, the council has rarely identified or costed the resources which go into getting its message across. To ensure that these efforts are not wasted in peripheral issues, the council should aim to focus these efforts in line with stated business objectives. This means that the communications process needs to be properly planned and managed, and supported with clear guidelines and efficient systems. This report represents the first step in bringing together existing and proposed arrangements under the umbrella of a corporate communications strategy.' (Letter from London borough accompanying its first paper on corporate communications)

52. A strategy does not have to be compendious or complex. But it should be rooted in the identified purposes of the authority (Exhibit 12, overleaf). Whether these are called 'stated business objectives' or 'mission statements', they are where the communications strategy – for a public body as much as a private company – begins.

53. While different authorities will develop their own strategies which reflect their distinctive cultures, every communications strategy should:

- define the audiences which are to be reached;
- define the aims of communication, and relate them to
A communications strategy must be rooted in the identified purposes of the authority.

Source: London Borough of Bromley
the authority’s wider objectives and the principles of public service;

♦ identify the resources which will be applied to the job;

♦ explicitly consider internal communication and its relationship with external communication;

♦ identify the specific roles of key communicators: members, chief executive, chief officers and departmental staff as well as PROs;

♦ make a commitment to training for all important communicators within the authority; and

♦ provide for review and assessment of how well the strategy is working and whether communications activities are effective.

Who does what

54. Implementation of a communications strategy needs to involve people at all levels in the authority. As a first step, all the communicators should be identified and their roles understood.

55. Members are key communicators. In their representative role, they provide vital feedback on the range and quality of council services. They also have many opportunities to put across information about the authority and its policies through contacts with the media, public meetings, ward surgeries, election campaigns and lobbying at national and international level. The key to the effective use of members as communicators is to distinguish clearly between the occasions when a member speaks on behalf of the authority and those when a personal or party view is being put forward. Where statements or materials are issued by a political party, rather than by the council as a
whole, they should be identified as such. Particular rules apply on the occasion of a local election.

56. In the absence of a strategy and of clear rules governing member-officer relations, there is a danger that pressure will be placed on PROs and others to breach the Code of Practice of the Local Government Act 1986. This explicitly forbids 'the use of public funds to mount publicity campaigns whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy'. Some authorities came very close to breaching the Code of Practice in the course of debates about the work of the Local Government Commission. Guidelines on managing member relations have been published by the Local Government Information Unit (Ref. 6) and the Institute of Public Relations (Ref. 7). Councils should absorb such advice into locally agreed protocols to avoid internal confusion and conflict.

57. The chief executive is responsible for ensuring that communications are effectively organised throughout the authority. In small authorities, the chief executive may be the principal spokesman for the authority, and may have direct responsibility for media relations. In both large and small authorities he or she provides leadership and promotes the values of the authority both internally and externally.

58. Chief officers are both channels of internal communication and managers of services directly touching the authority's customers. They should take the lead in commissioning customer surveys on their services and will often be the focus of enquiries and complaints. Their approach to communication will influence the quality of service provided by their departments.
59. **Front-line people** are the most important and least acknowledged corporate communicators. The response of the refuse collector to a resident angry about rubbish spilled on the garden path has more immediate impact on the council's reputation with that resident than the most carefully-worded press release or keenly-debated committee decision. The attitudes of those who provide, by telephone, in writing, or face-to-face, the contact points with council services are crucial. And with a growing number of services out-sourced to private contractors, councils need to consider what expectations its contracts place on contractors for the maintenance of corporate public contact standards.

60. Being close to the customer – as well as often being customers themselves – **staff** are a valuable channel of inward communications and the listening local authority will set up mechanisms to tap this source of information. But the effectiveness of staff as both the mouthpieces and the ears of the authority will depend heavily on the establishment of good communication processes
between senior and junior staff and on training in communications skills.

61. **Communications professionals** have a continuing and vital part to play in all of this. Effective internal and external communication in service departments needs to be planned and encouraged. Communicators need advice, training and specialist services. Standards need to be monitored. If existing PR units are to play this wider role in corporate communications, some of them will need to strengthen their managerial and coaching capabilities to supplement the media relations and design skills most already have.

62. Increasingly, in larger councils, the PRO role is being split, with a small team at the centre giving advice to the chief executive and council corporately, while departments manage their own routine press enquiries and publicity. Services may then be provided either by the PR unit as contractor or (less frequently) by external contractors with the PRO acting as client-side manager.

63. A small but growing number of authorities have begun to establish trading accounts for press and PR services, as useful disciplines in themselves and by way of preparation for the extension of compulsory competitive tendering to support services. Although some difficulties have been encountered in working out appropriate charge-out rates, the disciplines involved in trading arrangements and menus of charges have helped to focus attention on value for money in communications.

64. A service level agreement (SLA) represents a further development of the client/contractor relationship. While trading accounts and menus address costs, SLAs
Advice on client side management in general can be found in the Commission publication *Realising the Benefits of Competition* (Ref. 8) and the particular issues for support services are addressed in *Behind Closed Doors* (Ref. 9).

**Measuring performance**

link costs to service provision and to quality of service. A typical SLA, which need not be long or complicated, will specify:

- period of agreement
- services to be provided (quantity and quality)
- charging arrangements, where the budget is devolved
- client obligations
- monitoring and review arrangements
- complaints process and penalty conditions.

65. Performance measurement is very difficult. As local government's resources are increasingly constrained, functions which are not a legal duty come under especial scrutiny. PR units find it hard to demonstrate what value their activities have added. But given the scale of expenditure on communications, and the difference good communications can make to an authority's effectiveness, they should find it worthwhile to try to capture information which will be indicative of the council's public image and their contribution to it.

66. The Citizen's Charter requires authorities to publish performance indicators (PIs) on two aspects of communications – the answering of letters and telephone calls. This is a start. A wider variety of indicators are used by some local authorities to measure the success of their PR or corporate communications units in terms of the level of activity, the efficiency with which resources are used and the effectiveness of the initiatives undertaken. Box 4, overleaf, gives some examples of PIs currently in use, including several which, while potentially valuable, need to be interpreted with care.
### Examples of PIs that measure performance against targets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guidelines for departments</th>
<th>➤ Establish by agreed date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civic newsletter</td>
<td>➤ Produce three issues a year within budget</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual report</td>
<td>➤ Produce within budget by given date</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Examples of PIs that measure efficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use of external consultancy</th>
<th>➤ Benefits achieved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publicity spending</td>
<td>➤ Cost per activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovering expenditure through charges</td>
<td>➤ Percentage compared to estimate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Examples of PIs that measure effectiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Press releases issued</th>
<th>➤ Percentage used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Special events publicised</td>
<td>➤ Attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member support services</td>
<td>➤ Number of councillors using</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations to departments</td>
<td>➤ Advice accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsorship</td>
<td>➤ Level achieved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relocation advertising</td>
<td>➤ Response</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Often, monitoring such indicators over several years gives more insight than a 'snapshot' of their readings at a point in time. But it is clear that there is considerable scope to improve the specification of what 'performance' means for council communications. Unless the profession itself promotes convincing indicators, it is at risk of less sensitive indicators being imposed upon it. The Institute of Public Relations could take the lead in promoting better indicators, not least to demonstrate the added value which professionals bring to the theme.

67. Indicators of quality are even more difficult to devise, and local government is not alone in recognising this: private sector PR units experience the same difficulties. One possible approach – followed by a number of authorities – is to survey customer experience, understanding and satisfaction on a regular basis.

68. Performance measurements are of limited value if they fail to take into account the cost of delivering that performance. There is a need to identify communications expenditure, if only to enable councils to comply with Section 5 of the 1986 Local Government Act. Central government should review the practical implications of Section 5 in order to provide a clear and readily measured definition of the expenditure which should be included in Section 5 statements. But the identification of expenditure would be worthwhile even if aggregate figures were not required by law. Councils need to weigh communications expenditure against other priorities. And openness about communications expenditure and the benefits it buys can be an effective way of dispelling fears that taxpayers' money is being used improperly to produce self-serving propaganda.
5  Fixing a position: 
where are you starting from?

69. Local authorities do a great deal that is newsworthy. Indeed, much of their activity is made valuable by people knowing about it. But getting the message across is increasingly difficult as the range of media widens and as customers’ expectations become less predictable. Active listening to customers and other stakeholders – distinguishing vital feedback from the surrounding noise – presents an ever greater challenge. For some departments, in some authorities, it requires learning a whole new set of skills.

70. Authorities which fail to manage communications effectively are unlikely to succeed in meeting the changes with which they are faced. Without a planned approach to inward and outward communications going across all the authority’s activities, they will find that events take control. The task must be shared between the PR specialists at the centre and the service experts in the field if the former are not to waste their efforts, or to spend much of their time fighting fires that need never have taken light. A good starting point for authorities wishing to improve their approach to communications is to carry out a communications audit. A communications audit tests whether the authority is communicating effectively. It compares strategy with reality, and identifies problems that need to be dealt with.

71. A typical communications audit will start by taking stock with questions like:

- What do the public, local business and the media know and think about the council and its services?
What impression is made on someone who goes to council offices or facilities?

How do individual residents feel about getting information or access to services? What is their experience of contact with the council by letter, telephone, face-to-face? What happens when they complain?

How well does communications work support the council's objectives? Is it contributing as well as it could to customer information, access, and delivery of services?

What communications activity is actually undertaken? What materials are produced? How good is it, and what does it cost? What are the gaps?

Do elected members get proper communications support to play their democratic role, corporately and at ward level?

Are chief officers reflecting the core values of the organisation? Are they getting these values across to staff at all levels?

This analysis will lead to forward-looking questions like:

Why do we have PR professionals?

What are their objectives and tasks?

Are their relationships and roles clear?

How do we decide their budget?

How do we measure their effectiveness and the council's overall success?
73. A communications audit can be carried out by the council's own staff, or by outside consultants. While staff have the advantage of close knowledge of the organisation, consultants can contribute independence and knowledge of practice in other organisations. Both approaches have produced good results (Box 5); to try to implement a strategy without a clear understanding of what is already being done can be a recipe for disaster (Box 6, overleaf).

**Box 5: Communications auditing – two approaches**

**Authority A: southern city council**

City Council A used outside consultants, on a three month contract, to recommend improvements to all its communications policies and practices.

**The audit process included:**

- individual interviews with leading members, all chief officers, and other members of staff who deal with the authority's customers (leisure centre managers, local tax collection staff, advice centre personnel, receptionists, telephonists etc.);
- review of press office activities;
- interviews with staff groups to identify internal communications problems;
- qualitative opinion research with groups of residents;
- a review of open government and public consultation procedures;
- discussions with local business representatives and voluntary organisations;
- a trawl of opinions from the local press and broadcast media;
5 Fixing a position

- a desk survey of all publicity items, standard letters, local materials, council and committee agendas and reports for appearance, content and information gaps;
- visits to all points of contact with the public (from civic centre reception to housing offices) to assess friendliness, lay-out, customer facilities, information display, quality of reception, etc.;
- a photographic survey of everywhere the council is visible (from the front entrance of the civic centre, to park notices and vehicle livery); and
- a review of how planned communications are organised and delivered both corporately and departmentally.

The audit resulted in:

- the setting up of a new unit to pull together corporate communications;
- a new visual identity for the borough (logo) now used on everything from buses to refuse sacks;
- re-naming of council’s departments to clarify to the customer what their functions are – and new job titles for many officers, for the same reason;
- improved signposting in the city;
- internal standards for answering letters (response times, style, presentation);
- improved reception and interview facilities for the public in each department at the civic centre and at other offices;
- improved systems for dealing with the press and broadcast media;

continued overleaf
publication of a regular tabloid newspaper to keep residents informed, plus a series of co-ordinated factsheets covering specific service areas;

♦ positive use of advertising, including recruitment, to project the council's values;

♦ regular training in PR and media for council spokespeople and in customer care for front-line staff;

♦ improved internal communications through newsletters and management information cascade;

♦ new guidelines for public consultation to make it more effective;

♦ simplified presentation of papers to people attending council and committee meetings and the introduction of public question time at full council meetings; and

♦ identification of total costs of council's communications activities and of potential value for money savings.

Authorities B and C: two market towns

These two towns wished to reduce the time and cost of a full consultancy contract. Each therefore put its existing marketing and PR resources at the disposal of the consultancy to arrange meetings, sift publicity materials, summarise existing practice and carry out the branding survey, using a local photographer.

As a result the consultants were able to complete each project within three months but at half the cost. They were able to concentrate on the objectives and best practice criteria. While the outcome in these cases was less wide-ranging than in Authority A, it resulted in an improvement in the authorities' communications. One of the towns has been acknowledged as a source of inspiration for the Government's Citizen's Charter initiatives.
Box 6
No communications audit – a recipe for disaster

Authority D: major city

The authority had decided to centralise all its authority’s communications activities in one department. No communications audit had been carried out before this decision.

Two years after this decision, a consultant reported that ‘there is a huge communications resource in the departments of which the centre has been unaware, and has therefore never co-ordinated’. As a result ‘one would be hard pressed to find an area of D’s activities where the citizens of D get less value for money’. The consultant felt that without an audit, ‘two years had been wasted in the quest for a coherent communications strategy’.

74. This report points to some of the ways in which forward-thinking authorities have addressed the issues which a communications audit will raise. For them, much of the good practice referred to will not be news. Others still have the opportunity to give communications – the life-blood of good local government – the vital management attention it deserves.
## Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Action by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Highlight the importance of good communication with the public in everything the council does.</td>
<td>Everyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Become a 'listening' council with the public relations unit acting as a catalyst.</td>
<td>Everyone/PRO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Undertake a local communications audit.</td>
<td>PRO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Survey local journalists (hard copy and electronic) to assess their experience of the council's public relations.</td>
<td>PRO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. 'Meet the Public'.</td>
<td>PRO/Everyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Develop a strategy – decide on the audiences to be reached and the messages to be exchanged.</td>
<td>Everyone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recommendations

7. Establish and monitor corporate standards for the authority's public relations approach.

Establish a protocol setting out the appropriate roles of members and officers on public relations issues.

Define the relationship between the PRO and other departments, possibly in a Service Level Agreement.

Clarify and report the authority's expenditure on publicity by category and department.

Commission surveys of the public experience of services.

Provide media spokespeople with training and offer feedback on their performance.

Improve the communication skills of front-line staff.
14 Review the volume and quality of press releases, targeting effort on key messages. PRO

15 A clear definition of expenditure to be reported under Section 5 is needed. Government

16 Where electronic public information systems have been installed, review their use and public satisfaction with their service. PRO

17 Consider the extent to which contractors delivering public services should be obliged to meet the council's public communication standards. PRO/Service Departments

18 Measure performance with existing tools. PRO

19 Devise better performance measures. IPPR

20 Support the growing agenda of 'community governance'. Everyone
References

1. Definition used by Institute of Public Relations


4. Audit Commission, Calling the Tune: Performance Management in Local Government, HMSO, 1995

5. Definition recently advanced by The Institute of Public Relations


7. Institute of Public Relations (Local Government Group), PR in Local Government, 1993


10. Audit Commission, Reaching the Peak? Getting Value for Money from Management Consultants, HMSO, 1994
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