



CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Committee Report

Public

Date of Meeting: 24th January 2002

Title: COMMUNICATIONS REVISED BEST VALUE ACTION PLAN

Report of: Town Clerk & Chief Executive

Report reference: TC 17/02

Summary: The Best Value Action Plan for Communications which has been revised in light of the Best Value Inspectors report published November 2001.

Recommendations: to approve the recommendations and action the Head of Communications to undertake the actions detailed in the plan.

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Note: in compliance with section 100d of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 the report has been prepared in part from the following papers: None

1. Background

Following the Best Value Fundamental Performance Review carried out in February 2001, communications underwent a Best Value Inspection in August 2001 with a report finalised in November. This full report is attached as appendix 1. The committee received information about the original action plan in December when it was highlighted that this revised action plan would be complete in January.

1.1 The Best Value Inspection report recognises that considerable progress is being made and rates the service a fair one star service which will probably improve. It makes a number of recommendations for further action in the following areas:

- Achieving top quartile performance and demonstrating a competitive advantage with others;
- Improving policy outcomes;
- Improving customer outcomes;
- Developing cost effectiveness;
- Policy development.

These issues are addressed in the action plan below which aims to ensure the continuous improvement of external and internal communications of the Council.

2. Communications Best Value Action Plan

Area for improvement	Action	Target
Corporate identity <i>The inspectors found that lack of application of identity was causing confusion for customers. Action so far – a committee approved corporate identity guideline manual was distributed widely within the council in July 2001 and</i>	Head of Communications to hold regular meetings with all marketing officers or those mainly responsible for printed material – publications, advertising, promotional material - within departments to take ownership of monitoring and enforcing corporate identity within their department.	First meeting – Feb 2002

<p><i>reminder memos have been sent out when necessary.</i></p> <p>Publications <i>The Best Value Inspection found a lack of consistent and appropriate design, effective targeting, distribution and monitoring of all council print and recommended that the Communications Unit's role be strengthened in overseeing all publications.</i></p>	<p>Revise guidelines to include details of any penalties which may be incurred if corporate identity is not adhered to.</p> <p>Ensure all design/ print companies used by the council have a quality useable format of the logo and a copy of the corporate identity guidelines.</p> <p>Review the identity in light of City Vision, the Council's objectives and the organisational assessment findings.</p> <p>Implement a proforma to be completed and sent to the communications unit by any officer producing publications before the material is published. Ensure the communications unit receives a copy of the material once published.</p> <p>Gain regular feedback of a selection of printed material from focus groups of users, members and officers.</p> <p>Collate focus groups feedback and proformas into quarterly reports to go back to marketing groups (set up above) who will be responsible for ensuring any improvements are made. These reports should also go to CMT.</p>	<p>To be circulated in March 2002</p> <p>All identified companies to have by March 2002</p> <p>Report September 2002</p> <p>Feb 2002 (through the marketing group – above).</p> <p>Quarterly starting March 2002</p> <p>Quarterly starting May 2002</p>
<p>Media service <i>The Best Value Inspection found that media evaluation and cuttings service were not adequately developed and that a media policy</i></p>	<p>Implement a new cuttings system which is electronic and can be accessed by all on the council's outlook system.</p>	<p>March 2002</p>

<p><i>should be approved, monitored and enforced.</i></p>	<p>Develop an evaluation process with regular quarterly reports.</p> <p>Develop and implement a media protocols policy based on the new political system.</p>	<p>First report June 2002.</p> <p>February 2002.</p>
<p>Image library <i>The BV Inspection found a need for development of a digitised slide library to ensure quality promotion of Carlisle</i></p>	<p>A potential system is currently being investigated which can be trialled and assessed.</p> <p>Copyright and permission documents are being developed with appropriate legal advice</p> <p>Commission of up to date photography and scanning.</p>	<p>Feb 2002</p> <p>Feb 2002</p> <p>ongoing</p>
<p>Internal staff communications <i>The BV Inspection found that there are considerable variations in how well information is communicated up and down and that the results of the staff internal communications survey should be acted on.</i></p>	<p>Survey findings communicated to staff</p> <p>Internal communications staff group set up</p> <p>Action plan for internal communications developed</p> <p>Action plan implemented</p> <p>Internal communications survey carried out</p>	<p>Jan 2002</p> <p>Feb 2002</p> <p>May 2002</p> <p>July 2002 onward</p> <p>Sept 2002 and annually</p>
<p>Website <i>The BV Inspection found that a web site policy needs to be approved, the current site is not interactive or encouraging repeat visitors, navigation of the site is difficult, and updating adhoc.</i></p>	<p>A representative group is set up to take ownership of departmental content.</p> <p>Web site policy updated and implemented setting out corporate guidelines</p> <p>Proforma developed for updating information for services use.</p>	<p>March 2002</p> <p>March 2002</p> <p>Feb 2002</p>

	Redesign of website to become more interactive and user friendly.	(currently awaiting funding decision)
Performance measurement <i>The BV Inspection found that while there are currently no BVPI comparison data available and no trends or comparison possible, the county PR network should be used to establish local PIs</i>	Membership of national best value group developing benchmarking. Input into regional response on developing national indicators Revise current Pis County PR group development of local Pis Investigate and compare to best practice locally and nationally Revise and deliver service plan.	Ongoing March 2002 April 2002 April 2002 Ongoing Annually

2.2 It is also recommended that a Communications 'toolkit' be developed by the Communications Unit for use throughout the authority covering guidance on PR, marketing, publications, corporate identity and internal communications. It is aimed to have this developed by April 2002 and then made available to staff.

3. Conclusion

The above action plan aims to address the issues highlighted in the inspectors' report, build on the existing improvement work of the communications unit and ensure that the whole authority benefits from robust and high quality internal and external communications. It is envisaged that this action plan will be regularly reviewed and revised in light of actions carried out and any further arising issues.

Carlisle City Council

Communications

November 2001

Best Value Inspection



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Best value

The Government has placed a duty of best value on local authorities to deliver services to clear standards – of cost and quality – by the most economic, efficient and effective means available. Best value is a challenging new performance framework that requires authorities to publish annual best value performance plans and review all of their services every five years.

Authorities must show that they have applied the four Cs of best value to every review:

- ♦ **challenging** why and how a service is being provided;
- ♦ **comparing** their performance with others' (including organisations in the private and voluntary sectors);
- ♦ embracing fair **competition** as a means of securing efficient and effective services; and
- ♦ **consulting** with local taxpayers, customers and the wider business community.

Authorities must demonstrate to local people that they are achieving continuous improvement in all of their services. The Government has decided that each council should be scrutinised by an independent Inspectorate, so that the public will know whether best value is being achieved. The purpose of the inspection and of this report is to:

- ♦ enable the public to see whether best value is being delivered;
- ♦ enable the Council to see how well it is doing;
- ♦ enable the Government to see how well its policies are working on the ground;
- ♦ identify failing services where remedial action may be necessary; and
- ♦ identify and disseminate best practice.

This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission ('the Commission') following an inspection under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

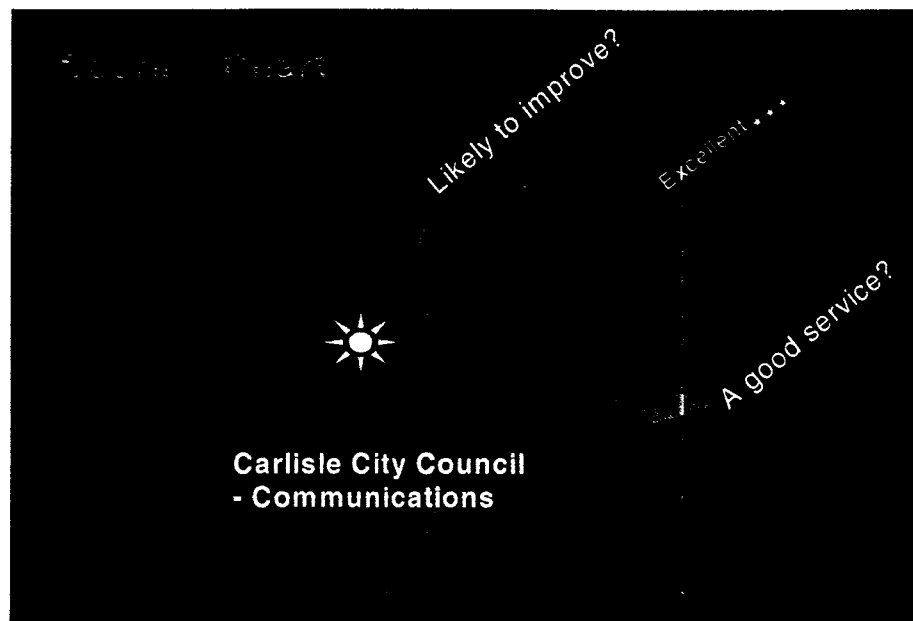
1 Summary and recommendations

Summary

- 1 Carlisle is the regional centre for Cumbria. The District has a population of 103,000 with 70,000 living in the City. Carlisle is situated in the sparsely populated area of Northern Cumbria and the Scottish border country and despite its remoteness, is well-served by road and rail links, being close to the M6 and with A74 access to Scotland.
- 2 The economy has a high dependence on public sector employment, for its size there is a high concentration of media companies in the area.
- 3 The Council is controlled by the Conservative group, which has been in power since May 1999, following over 20 years of Labour control. The Council has a budget of £66 million gross and £17.8 million net. A new political structure is being introduced in September, consisting of a cabinet and executive committee.
- 4 The Communications unit is within the Chief Executives Directorate and employs eight staff, equivalent to 7.5 full time posts. Its cost of the service is £232,000.

Scoring the service

- 5 We have assessed the Council as providing a **'fair' one star service which will probably improve**. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the Inspection and are outlined below.
- 6 The scoring chart overleaf displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.



7 The service is **'fair'** for the following reasons:

- ♦ the aims of the Council and the service objectives are clear and ambitious, but there is still work to be done to link these aims directly to the service plan.

The standard of service delivery is variable.

- ♦ Media relations are improving and proactive, but there needs to be more clarity between Council and political stories.
- ♦ Activities are being undertaken to increase Carlisle's profile such as participation in national campaigns and publicity events but measurement of the impact needs to be developed.
- ♦ New corporate publications are being introduced, but the application of corporate image, effectiveness of internal communications and the development and operation of the website is not as effective.
- ♦ Comparison data is limited, but media relations and civic newspaper performance statistics suggest that Carlisle is performing around the average of those authorities who are part of the benchmarking group.

- 8 On balance the service **will probably improve**, for the following reasons:
- ♦ An independent and honest review was undertaken, which highlights the importance of this service to Carlisle City Council's future development. However, the review missed the opportunity to bring together all the Council functions which have a communication aspect to them.
 - ♦ The improvement plan was based on the review and has picked up important actions from consultation and comparison such as the development of the Council's newspaper. The service was challenged and one service area has been externalised, but insufficient consideration was given to alternative ways of delivery.
 - ♦ The Council has a track record of managing change but needs to consolidate its work on performance management and ensuring that attention is paid to both the significant and large scale aspects and day to day underpinning aspects of service delivery.

Recommendations

Achieving top quartile of performance and demonstrating a competitive advantage with others

- 9 Develop an action plan which will take the work of the Communications unit into the top quartile, using comparable PIs, where possible and 'best practice comparison' where not.
- 10 Utilise the County PR network to establish local performance indicators to measure the impact of media releases. In particular determine how you will measure if Carlisle is becoming a regional capital.

Improve policy outcomes

- 11 Reinforce the Media Policy and the methods of communicating with the media by seeking Committee approval for the policy and ensuring adequate monitoring and enforcement of the policy where necessary.

Improve customer outcomes

- 12 Ensure that the people of Carlisle receive a consistent corporate message by strengthening the role of the Communications Unit to oversee all publications initiated from corporate and service departments. Develop consistent application of the corporate message, use of logo and strap lines throughout the City Council.
- 13 Ensure that communications are timely and accurate.
- 14 Improve the effectiveness of communications amongst the staff by proactively utilising the Managers' Conference, staff briefings and the public folders to develop two way communications for staff and members, especially in relation to the modernisation agenda. Make a determination of which managers are part of the Managers Conference and ensure they understand their role in respect of the communications network.

Develop cost effectiveness

- 15 Provide a more effective service to customers requiring images of Carlisle for promotional purposes by developing a digitised slide library.
- 16 Analyse the results of the communications staff survey and act on the findings.

Policy development

- 17 Reinforce the need for rigorous performance management which links the Council's aims and City Vision to service delivery through a Communications Service plan with SMART objectives.
- 18 Utilise project management to address all aspects of a project, in particular ensure that the large scale aspect of a project, eg financial planning is supported by a solid policy base, good communications and a champion who can act outside/across departmental structures. The forthcoming departmental restructure is a typical example.
- 19 Determine clear responsibilities for IEG implementation especially website development, to enable the website to move from an information site to an interactive, educational and business site.
- 20 Utilise the work of the consultation of City Vision to inform the image and development of your regional and national positioning.

We would like to thank the staff of Carlisle City Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

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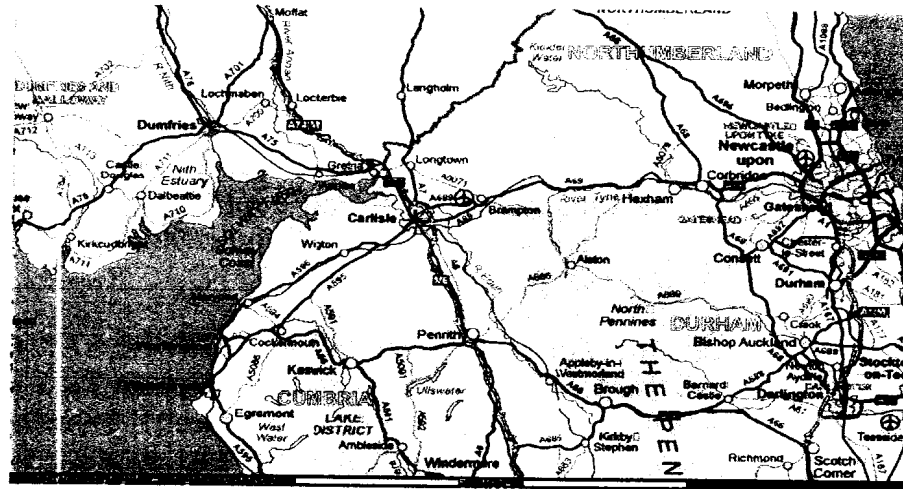
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2 Report

The locality

- 21 Carlisle is situated on the English/Scottish border, at the northern edge of the Pennines and at the edge of the Lake District National Park. It is remote from other urban areas with Glasgow 96 miles to the North and Newcastle 58 miles to the East.
- 22 Carlisle is the administrative centre for Cumbria County Council. It has a population of 103,000 within the District, and 70,000 in the City of Carlisle, with a low birth rate.
- 23 Carlisle is well served by the M6 and A74: the A7 and the A69 connects the area to Newcastle. Carlisle is on the West Coast rail line and there is a small airport that was until recently under Council ownership. However road links to the rural areas, especially in the East of the District, are sparse and public transport is limited.
- 24 The District includes the city of Carlisle and the towns of Brampton and Longtown, with a large rural hinterland of 500 square miles.
- 25 The main employment sectors are public administration, distribution, manufacturing, tourism and finance. The unemployment rate is 3.8 per cent compared to a regional rate of 3.7 per cent Public sector finances have been used to encourage private sector investment in the District.

- 26 For its size the City has a high concentration of media organisations including Cumberland News group, BBC Radio Cumbria, Border television and Cumbria FM.



Location of Carlisle

- 27 The area has been at the heart of the foot and mouth outbreak which has had an impact on the rural economy and tourism. A recent study by Nottingham University Business School estimates that Cumbria will lose 31 per cent of its tourism revenues in 2001.

The Council

- 28 Carlisle City Council is controlled by the Conservative Group who have been in power since May 2000 following over 20 years of labour control. Under modernisation a new structure of an executive and leader model is being introduced in September 2001.
- 29 The annual budget is approximately £66 million gross (£17.8 million net) in 2001/2002. The Council has large reserves and charges above average council tax.
- 30 The Council has 1100 employees (800 full-time and 300 part-time). Most services remain in-house, with current consideration being given to out-sourcing the Leisure facilities.

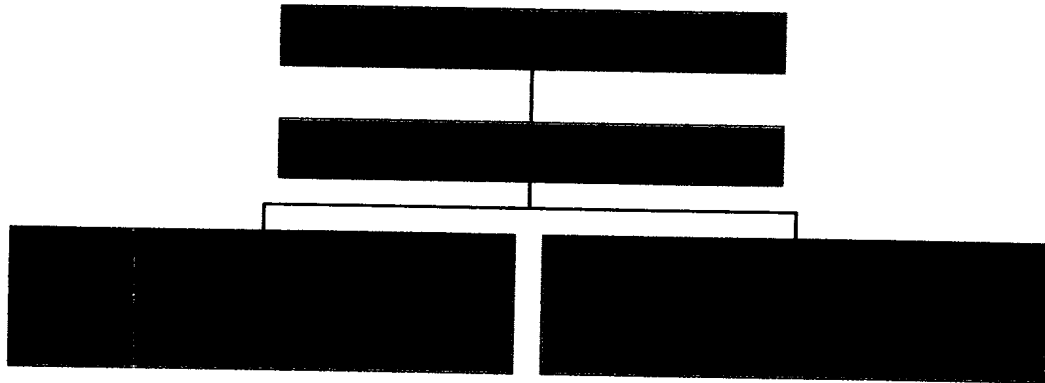
- 31 The Community Plan is subject to the major consultation exercise to create 'Carlisle City Vision'. It is envisaged that the outcomes of this will drive service delivery and the positioning of Carlisle as a regional and cultural capital.
- 32 The City Council has five aspirations:
- ♦ to enhance the social, economic and environmental quality of life for Carlisle residents now and in the future;
 - ♦ to make Carlisle a centre of excellence by pursuing the highest standards of public and private sector services and amenities at a cost local citizens can afford;
 - ♦ to develop equality of opportunity and access to services;
 - ♦ to encourage the involvement of the community and listen to Carlisle residents; and
 - ♦ to ensure that Carlisle's motto, 'Be Just and Fear Not' is one which all citizens can share.
- 33 These aspirations are underpinned by nine values which include:
- ♦ put customers first;
 - ♦ consult and listen;
 - ♦ be open and accountable; and
 - ♦ encourage participation.
- 34 The Council has acknowledged that its structure has supported the development of silo working and it is currently reviewing it with a plan to adopt a structure which reflects the thematic areas of: corporate resources, infrastructure and community.

The best value review

- 35 This inspection covered the communications service best value review of the Council which includes:
- ♦ media relations;
 - ♦ corporate publications including the civic newspaper;
 - ♦ graphic design;
 - ♦ marketing and promotional campaigns;

- ♦ web-site development and management;
- ♦ internal communications;
- ♦ corporate identity; and
- ♦ customer relations activities.

36 The Communications Unit is within the Chief Executive's Directorate and the head of the unit reports directly to the Chief Executive. In May 2000 the unit transferred from the Economic Development Department following a management review and best value review of economic development in the Council.



37 The unit employs eight full and part-time staff (7.5 FTE) split between media (3.0), marketing (2.5) and graphic/web design (1.0). It has a budget of £232,000 (2001/2002) which represents 0.35 per cent of the Council's gross budget and a spend per head of population of 2.25p. This is broken down into £182,000 staffing and £50,000 supplies and services.

3 Findings: How good is the service?

Are the Council's aims clear and challenging?

38 Inspectors look to see how a council has agreed the key aims for the service being inspected, how clear these aims are to the people that receive the service and whether these reflect the corporate aims of the organisation as a whole.

39 The Council has clear corporate objectives and values. Within these it has identified the need for good communications. In addition the aims and objectives are translated down to the work of the Communications Unit.

40 The Communications Unit has a clear aim:

'to enable the City Council to communicate with its residents and partners easily, effectively, and efficiently to help us achieve our objectives and vision'.

To support this aim, the Council has seven objectives.

These are:

- ♦ develop constructive media relations and proactively increase positive media coverage;
- ♦ develop and maintain a positive high profile for Carlisle City Council and the city, locally, regionally and nationally;
- ♦ raise awareness and increase understanding of citizenship and increase participation of residents and partners in activities;
- ♦ develop a range of publications to inform residents, partners and other organisations about the Council and issues within the District;
- ♦ develop internal communications to inform and involve staff in decisions and ensure two way communications;
- ♦ develop and maintain the Council's corporate identity; and
- ♦ develop an accessible, informative and interactive website in accordance with national best practice and e-government strategy.

- 41 We found that these ambitious strategies and policies determine the role and delivery methodology of communications in Carlisle City Council. However the unit Service Plan has not yet been developed to translate these strategies into working plans for the staff of the Communications Unit. The Council has not yet approved some of these strategies and policies, including the Media Policy, Website Policy and the Communications Strategy.

Does the service meet these aims?

- 42 Having considered the aims the Council has set for the service, Inspectors make an assessment of how well the Council is performing in meeting these aims. This includes an assessment of performance against specific standards and targets and the Council's approach to measuring whether it is actually delivering what it sets out to do.
- 43 In this report we have taken each of the seven objectives and used the evidence we gathered to judge the service delivery.

Develop constructive media relations and proactively increase positive media coverage

44 We found that:

- ♦ From our discussions with the public we found that the people of Carlisle will have a more informed view of the work of the City Council as a result of the work of the Communications Unit.
- ♦ The communications unit has developed a media policy which has been communicated within the Council, but this has not yet agreed by committee.
- ♦ The unit has established frequent and proactive contact with media and all contacts are now handled within media deadlines. Media enquiries now generate a response rather than 'no comment' as was previously the case.
- ♦ The number of media calls handled over past three months since the best value review has increased by almost 100 per cent compared to data from the previous year. The Council made a forecast estimate for a full year of 483 media enquiries based on the previous year's work, but 225 were actually handled in the quarter April to June since the review. This represents a 100 per cent increase in coverage. The number of press releases issued has increased by a third in same period.

- ♦ Rural and city areas are now receiving press attention eg the provision of the Foot and Mouth Disease advice and support centres in rural areas. In addition the Carlisle 'Open for Business' campaign has supported the tourism industry in the City area.
- ♦ Staff from the Communications unit are active on the county-wide PR group.

However,

Whilst we recognise the distinction between Council and political stories, the media in Carlisle feel that they are able to exploit differences in the views that members have on particular stories. We are concerned that this may diminish the impact and clarity of key messages that the Council are trying to deliver.

Develop and maintain a positive high profile for Carlisle City Council and the city, locally, regionally and nationally

45 We found that:

- ♦ opportunities to promote the City through events in the City are utilised. For example, the website coverage of BBC's 'One Big Sunday'; and
- ♦ the Council makes good use of regional and national campaigns that Carlisle can add value to, for example Great British Markets Week.

However,

- ♦ The criteria for media evaluation and the regional/national cuttings service is not adequately developed, resulting in a lack of measurement about how the unit will know if Carlisle is being advanced as a regional and national capital.
- ♦ Images of Carlisle are not stored in digital format this means that retrieval is slow and not consistent with modern technology.

Raise awareness and increase understanding of citizenship and increase participation of residents and partners in activities

46 We found that:

- ♦ Complimentary comments were received from District Audit, DETR and the County Council regarding formal consultation through the media about the new council structures which were proposed under the modernisation agenda.

- ♦ In their survey responses, the citizens panel judge that in response to the question does the Council keep you informed; 25 per cent say good or very good, 45 per cent adequate and 30 per cent poor or very poor.
- ♦ The Council works with the Carlisle Accessibility group to explore how its communications should be formatted in order to meet all sectors of the community. Having taken their advice no publications are available in alternative forms such as Braille or on tape due to the limited number of residents who use these format, but if a resident requests an alternative means of publication, the Council can and does respond to the request. Likewise no information is available in a foreign language as the ethnic population is minimal, (0.6 per cent of the population). The Council were unaware of 'Language Line' to help with translations and conversations with ethnic groups.

The Council has been proactive in developing with its partners a forum to consult the people of Carlisle on their views about the City Vision. This has been a considerable consultative exercise which the Council now needs to utilise to inform its image and development of its regional and national positioning.

Develop a range of publications to inform residents, partners and other organisations about the Council and issues within the District

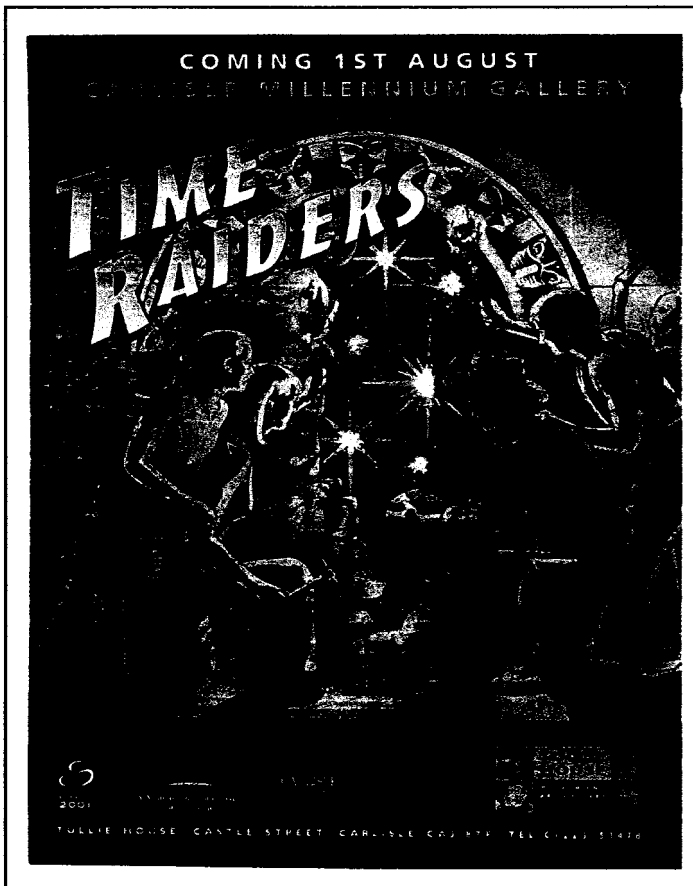
47 We found that:

The Council has introduced a new civic magazine, an externally produced Civic Guide publication and a Pocket Guide. These are aimed at different sectors of the community and will reliably inform them of the services undertaken by both the City and County Council and current news stories covering the work of the City Council.

However,

- ♦ The Departmental group to police corporateness of publications from different departments is still to be set up.

- ♦ There is no evidence of plans to issue publications policy/guidelines to ensure:
 - ♦ consistent and appropriate design/quality;
 - ♦ effective targeting, distribution and monitoring of all council print; and
 - ♦ the Council missed opportunities for consistent media coverage and misled the public with the publications relating to the opening of the Millennium Gallery.



Millennium Gallery Opening A Case Study

Early opening consistent with Carlisle 'Open for Business' campaign

Advance press preview arranged

Press conference held with comprehensive press releases

Good resulting coverage with positive messages in all media

However,

Confusion over pre-opening events

Inconsistent message between gallery exhibits, press releases and publicity leaflets

Tullie House marketing resource used rather than corporate marketing team

No coverage of opening, gallery details or relaunch of Tullie card on website

Develop internal communications to inform and involve staff in decisions and ensure two way communications

48 We found that:

- ♦ Emails are widely used by staff as a means of two way communications.
- ♦ The Communications Unit have developed new staff briefings circulated in paper and electronic format. These were welcomed by staff and form a reliable means of information transfer.
- ♦ The Managers' conference, which has been introduced this year, is a valuable means of passing out information to managers, but clarification of who is a manager and therefore who attends these sessions is needed.
- ♦ The introduction this year of the Essential Guide, draft Constitution and Public Folders provide sources of information for staff and councillors. These are internal documents designed to ensure that officers and members have access to policy and practices of the Council and therefore a consistency of use.
- ♦ The Communications Unit have started a staff survey of internal communications to determine which communication means staff use and how effective they find the method of communications.

However,

- ♦ The Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) statement, whilst it has been completed, does not have its implementation and responsibilities determined.
- ♦ There are considerable variations in how well information is communicated 'up and down'. There seems to be a reliance on commitment of individuals rather than established systems.
- ♦ The Public Folders are under-developed and their benefits not maximised. Responsibilities for maintaining this communication source are unclear.
- ♦ Communications with staff about the modernisation changes have not been timely or adequately targeted. Many staff were unaware that the political structure was due to change and what changes were going to be made.

Develop and maintain the Council's corporate identity

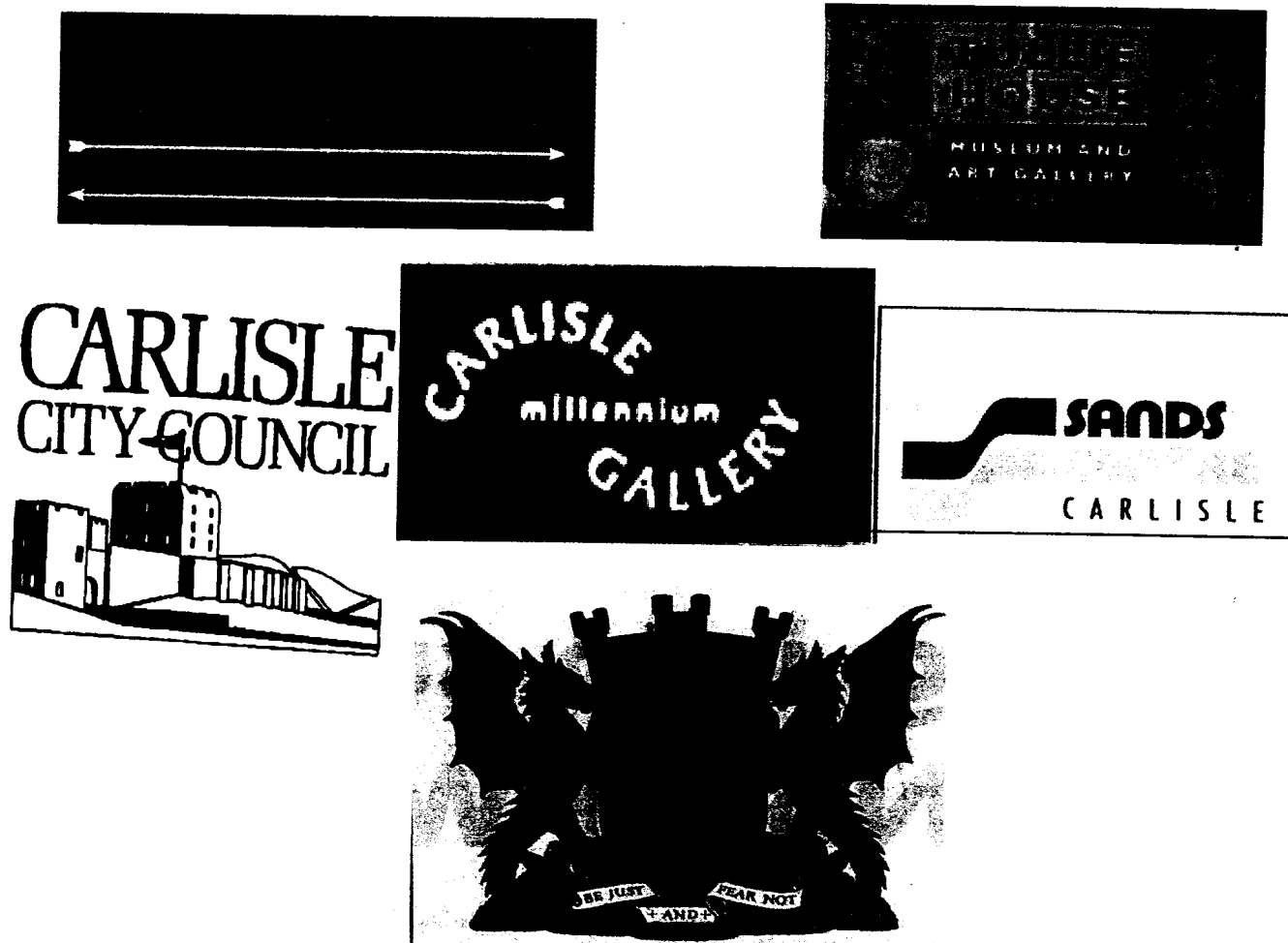
49 The use of a corporate identity is a shorthand method of visually notifying local customers about the organisation. It should be clearly recognised and always used to reinforce its purpose. We found that:

- ♦ The Council's corporate identity has been identified and its use determined. The Corporate Identity Policy was approved by Corporate Strategy and Performance Review Sub-Committee on 30 July 2000.
- ♦ The City Vision consultation and development process aims to identify new values and culture which will feed into a review of corporate identity in the future. In the meantime, the new policy is intended to clarify and strengthen existing applications.

However, the customers of Carlisle are confused because:

- ♦ The Council is applying two corporate logos, a number of 'departmental' identities and a range of straplines.
- ♦ The stated/intended use of identities is not consistent. We were told that the crest is to be used on Mayoral and civic communications, whilst the Castle logo is used on all other applications. We found the civic crest is not only applied to civic communications but is used on vehicles, bins and CCTV street signage, whilst the Castle logo is used on the Mayoral page on the Council website.
- ♦ We also found evidence that Council establishments are not applying the corporate identity appropriately. This is leading to mixed messages about responsibility for service delivery. For example, The Sands Centre and Tullie House Museum produce literature that carries their own logos, but frequently do not feature the Castle logo or credit the Council with management of the facility. Sometimes the size of the Council logo is reduced to an insignificant level.

Range of identities used by Carlisle City Council



50 In addition the Council utilises a range of straplines (slogans) at the base of its images. These include:

- ♦ 'Be Just and Fear Not'
- ♦ 'Perfectly Placed'
- ♦ 'The Place to Be'
- ♦ 'The Great Border city'
- ♦ 'A Jewel in the Heart of the Great Border City'
- ♦ 'Historic-Carlisle'
- ♦ 'Carlisle Works'

From the public's perception this results in confusing messages and an unclear corporate image of the Council.

Develop an accessible, informative and interactive website in accordance with national best practice and e-government strategy

51 Electronic communications are an effective and universally accessible means of communicating to the public. In Carlisle City Council we found that:

- ♦ www.carlisle.gov.uk is a recently developed website. It is clear and factual with an attractive design, but this site exists alongside www.historic-carlisle.org.uk which was established for some years ago as a tourism site.

However,

- ♦ the Council has not yet approved the Website policy;
- ♦ the existence of two sites diminishes the power of either within the search engines;
- ♦ neither site is interactive, so the public easily lose interest in the material;
- ♦ the content on www.carlisle.gov.uk does not encourage repeat visits or use by educational or youth segments;
- ♦ navigation within www.carlisle.gov.uk is difficult and relies on the user having a knowledge of the Council structures;
- ♦ initial user choices in bullets at the side of the site are unclear and limited. This makes it difficult to link to www.historic-carlisle.org.uk; and
- ♦ the updating and currency of content on the www.carlisle.gov.uk site is patchy for example, press releases do not get put on the site immediately.

52 The service is therefore making positive steps to develop the impact of its communications on the public of Carlisle.

How does the performance compare?

53 In order to judge the quality of a service it is important to compare the performance of that service against other suppliers across a range of sectors.

- 54 We found it impossible to make comparisons with national data on how well Carlisle informs residents as different judgement criteria have been used in the Citizens Panel questions to those used in the MORI/DTLR Beacon Council studies.
- 55 There are currently no BVPI comparison data available for the areas of service covered by this Communications review and local PIs are at an early stage of collection, so no trends are available or comparison possible.
- 56 In comparison with similar councils, Carlisle's performance since the best value review now matches the average annual number of media contacts handled (an average of 909 by a sample of 26 authorities against Carlisle's current performance of 900 pro rata for a full year). Carlisle slightly exceeds the average number of press releases issued.
- 57 The drafted civic magazine will be produced four times a year at a cost of £40,000. This is approaching the average annual frequency (5.38) and spend (£56,197) on civic newspapers of the 63 comparison authorities.
- 58 In conclusion we found that performance has improved and the Council is developing methods of measuring how it compares.

4 Findings: How likely is the service to improve?

Does the best value review drive improvement?

- 59 The best value review is the mechanism for ensuring authorities deliver continuous improvement in the services they provide.
- 60 Whilst the scope of the communications review is clear, it focused on the existing activities and responsibilities of the unit and missed opportunities are highlighted by senior politicians who stated that priorities of good communication are:
- ♦ consultation-formal and informal;
 - ♦ first impressions-receptions/front-of-house; and
 - ♦ clear and consistent complaints procedure.

None of which were part of this review.

- 61 The review excluded information management (For example, audit of customer databases, customer profiling/segmentation, integration of data, Data Protection issues). Opportunities were therefore missed to maximise existing knowledge of Carlisle customers and opportunities to communicate with them more effectively.

There is evidence of the four Cs driving improvement.

Challenge

- 62 The Council undertook an early challenge of the role and importance of communications to Carlisle City Council and concluded that the service was key to the Council's future development and modernisation. There is no statutory obligation to have a Communications unit, but there is a duty to consult with the public.
- 63 An external Public Relations consultant facilitated the best value review. We felt that an open and honest, independent approach had challenged existing systems and procedures, staffing structures and responsibilities, training needs and requirement for baselines/targets.

Consult

- 64 The public were consulted through the use of the Citizens Panel and consultation undertaken through the development of a City Vision.

- 65 A good range of stakeholders were consulted, including managers, staff, councillors, media and other partners through the use of interviews, workshops and focus groups.
- 66 The consultation findings have driven significant changes in the use of graphic design services, production of the civic newspaper and media relations.
- 67 However, some issues have not been picked up as strongly. For example, feedback about the quality and effectiveness of departmental publications and the relevance of website content.

Compare

- 68 There are no national BVPI's for this service area. Local and BVPP indicators have only recently been set, so no trends have emerged.
- 69 The Council used comparative performance on costs of the graphics unit, frequency of contact with the media and cost and frequency of civic newspapers to drive changes.
- 70 However, there are no measurement criteria for corporate identity, content and use of the website, departmental publications or internal relations.
- 71 There is no evidence of process benchmarking with similar authorities to identify best practice and compare on 'soft' issues such as the application of corporate identity.

Compete

- 72 The Council undertook immediate action taken to cease operation of the in-house graphics unit as a direct result of the review.
- 73 They considered externalisation of the PR function by examining the experience of other authorities but concluded that it was important to keep control of this function.
- 74 However the Council did not consider alternative provision of other service currently provided in-house including website design and development, photography, media evaluation, digitising/storage/management of image library.

How good is the Improvement Plan?

- 75 A best value review should produce an improvement plan that sets out what needs to improve, why, and how that improvement will be delivered. It should contain targets which are not only challenging but also designed to demonstrate and ensure the continuous improvement necessary to put the service amongst the top 25 per cent of councils within five years.
- 76 There is no single, identified improvement plan, but the improvement actions listed for each service area in the review have been taken and combined in the draft Communications Strategy and reflected in the individual policy documents that support the strategy.
- 77 The resulting actions and improvements are wide-ranging and substantial, and include:
- ♦ restructuring the unit to improved consultation mechanisms;
 - ♦ training;
 - ♦ new publications and marketing initiatives;
 - ♦ cross-departmental initiatives; and
 - ♦ reinforcement of corporate identity.
- 78 The Council is developing best value review Action Plan templates, which are designed to draw together the actions and ensure that they are properly monitored. These templates have not yet been applied to Communications and the Service Plan for Communications has also not yet been produced.
- 79 As the design and content of the website is separated from the wider IT/ICT strategy and the management and development of the site this may hinder Carlisle's obligations to deliver the e.govt agenda effectively by failing to ensure a co-ordinated approach.
- 80 The outputs and targets are timed and specific in quantity eg number of marketing campaigns.

But,

Specific responsibilities for implementation, costs and measurable/comparable targets are generally unclear. Some media activity has measurable targets but other targets are vague for example; work with partners to raise the profile of the city regionally and nationally through joint campaigns and messages.

Will the Council Deliver the Improvements?

- 81 Inspectors look for evidence that a council will deliver what it has set out in the improvement plan. We look for a track record of managing change within the Council and, ideally, within the service itself. The plan should also have sufficient support from councillors, management, staff, service users and other stakeholders, particularly those responsible for delivering it.
- 82 The Council's commitment to improve communications is evidenced by carrying out the best value review in year one. Also, they have taken immediate action in key areas and secured Committee approval for some of the improvements and policies.
- 83 Our reality checks confirmed that councillors, senior officers and staff see best value as a driver for improvement.
- 84 The Council has a recent track record of undergoing major change and initiating development. Major changes in the last two years and major changes to come include:
- ♦ coping with the effects of the continuing outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease;
 - ♦ large Scale Voluntary Transfer of the housing stock;
 - ♦ externalisation of Leisure; and
 - ♦ Local Government modernisation.
- 85 The Council is developing a structure to support communications which include:
- ♦ a draft Constitution;
 - ♦ the Essential Managers' Guide to services and personnel issues; and
 - ♦ use of public folders for information transfer of developing issues and updates on the work of the Council.
- 86 The new political structure is progressing and the proposed staffing structure will reflect priorities established by the City Vision and the new political framework.
- 87 The Council's performance management framework is improving and becoming more corporate.
- 88 Personal Development Interviews and Team Improvement Reviews seem effective in 'driving up' communications.

- 89 City Vision and Corporate Management Team 'drive down' information.
- 90 Service Plans, which are in the middle of the communications structure, are the weakest area, but are being addressed.
- 91 However, whilst our interviews lead us to conclude that there is widespread agreement with the proposition that Carlisle is good at initiating/responding to major change, departmental silos and lack of single project champions lead to a lack of attention to detail.
- 92 We found evidence of low staff morale, which suggests that change has not always been accompanied by reassurance, clear information and encouragement of the ownership of change.

Appendix – What did the Inspectors do?

The purpose of best value inspection is make two judgements. The first is, how good is the service being inspected? The second is, how likely is it to improve? We carried out a range of different activities to enable us to reach our judgements.

Documents examined

Before going on site we reviewed a range of documents which had been provided in advance by the Council for us. This included:

Best Value review of Communications

Best Value Performance Plan

Best Value review Handbook

Best Value review background documents

Supporting Committee reports

Draft Communications Strategy

Draft Communications Policies

Staff briefings

Draft Constitution

Press releases

Council brochures and leaflets

District Audit Management Letter

We also looked at the Council websites and visited Tullie House Museum and Millennium Gallery.

Reality checks undertaken

When we went on site we carried out a number of different checks building on the work described above in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on site 'reality checks' were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and see how well it works on the ground. We also followed up on issues relating to the management of the review and the improvements flowing from it.

Interviews conducted

We also met with a range of different people involved with the service.

Peter Stybelski	Town Clerk and Chief Executive
Cllr Mike Mitchelson	Leader of the Council
Sharon Mckee	Head of Communications
Sarah Irving	PR Officer
Brian Hough	Head of Communications, Cumbria County Council
Cllr Ed Firth	Deputy Leader and Chair of Parent Committee
Karen Hook	Best value officer
Lorna Dobson	Policy Officer
Stephen Vertigans	Performance Officer
Richard McGahon	District Audit, Audit Manager
John Mallinson	Head of Policy and Strategy
David Ottewell	Reporter, Cumberland News
Julie Clayton	Reporter, Radio Cumbria
Kathy Connelly	Communications Officer, Eden District Council
Cllr Heather Bradley	Labour party leader
Cllr John Guest	Liberal Democrat party leader
John Nulty	Head of IT services
Rob Burns	Head of Community Support Unit
John Bell	Head of Tourism
Don Taylor	Business Development Officer

Bernadette Langley

The Sands Centre

Rachel Rooney

Town Clerks Department

Margaret Easton

Access Officer