



## Belfast District Council (Shadow)

<b>Report to:</b>	<b>Shadow Strategic Policy and Resources Committee</b>
<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Local Government reform – communications update</b>
<b>Date:</b>	<b>28 November 2014</b>
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Eamon Deeny
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	<b>Eamon Deeny (ext 6285)</b>

<b>1</b>	<b>Relevant Background Information</b>
	<p>The purpose of this report is to update members on communications activity in relation to local government reform (LGR). It provides information on the results of a survey undertaken by the Department of the Environment on LGR communications across all 11 new council areas, identifies the key communications challenges that lie ahead and details of activity already undertaken and planned in the run up to 1 April, 2015.</p> <p>The Council has been working to a communications plan, which was aligned to the regional communications strategy for LGR (refer to Appendix A for completed activity and Appendix B for planned activities). While delivery has been largely on track, there have been various regional dependencies that have impacted on our timescales for specific communication activities. For example, the rate relief convergence scheme has only been announced (20 November) by DFP which had originally been expected before the summer recess.</p> <p>Clearly, as we move into the 100 days countdown to the 1 April 2015, we need to review, refocus and intensify our communications activity around LGR.</p>
<b>2</b>	<b>Key Issues</b>
	<p><b>DOE research overview</b></p> <p>DOE carried out research in all council areas during July 2014. Main findings for the new Belfast City Council area were as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Preferred method of communication:</li></ul>

- Local media (58%)
- Council publications (City Matters) (36%)
- Level of awareness around main transferring powers:
  - Planning – 50% replied no or don't know ( to the question on whether or not they knew it would be transferring to councils)
  - Car parking – 43% replied no or don't know
  - Urban regeneration and community development – 45% replied no or don't know
  - Housing functions – 65% replied no or don't know
- When asked if the changes will make councils stronger:
  - 24% agreed
  - 18% disagreed
  - 49% neither agreed or disagreed

The main two issues for BCC in relation to the survey are that the local media remains the main source of information. The media however, cannot be expected to provide all the factual information we need to convey. It will legitimately be seeking news stories on the merits and effectiveness of the new local government arrangements with a focus around implementation, any political differences and value for money/financial issues.

It is therefore critical that the council ensures it communicates directly with ratepayers through all possible mechanisms including, for example, its website, social media and most importantly through City Matters, given that 35 per cent has stated that it is a preferred method of communication. This is in keeping with our own public surveys which continually reflect that the publication is a trusted source of information and is highly regarded by citizens, with 80-90 per cent of respondents stating that it improves their understanding of the work of the council. It is also recognised in the industry; winning yet another award at last month's PR industry awards (BCC collected seven awards in total).

Half of those surveyed by the DOE gave no opinions on whether or not new powers will make councils stronger; this coupled with the apparent lack of knowledge of transferring powers, suggests there is a need for public communications to centre on the benefits and details of transferring functions along with a need to increase awareness among incoming residents that they will be part of Belfast. At the same time we need to take into account the information the public needs and wants to receive, which appears to be in relation to services such as bin collections, location of facilities and, probably of most concern, what their rates will be.

While this report mostly focuses on external communications, a section is also included on internal communication to show how staff, existing and incoming, are also being kept informed on progress.

## **Summary of Communications Activity**

**(i) City Matters**

- A special edition of City Matters was been distributed to all households in the transferring areas (week commencing 17 November 2014) and including information in relation to:
- City/council overview
- Explanation as to why rates information was not available at this time (details of the scheme since released on 20/11/14)
- Priorities of council
- Pen pics and contact details of all 60 elected members
- Maps and info on transferring areas
- Info on transferring assets
- Info on how to keep up to date through web, social media and electronic updates

**January 2015 City Matters** - This is the first full edition that will be distributed to the new Belfast City Council area.

Four pages on LGR featuring:

- Current situation with rates
- Benefits of/reasons for reform
- Overview of transferring functions
- Transferring asset info
- How services will be adapted (waste and recycling collections)

This edition will be used to communicate focused messages around key decisions which may be taken by the Council in relation to, for example, information on the rates convergence scheme and what it means for the citizen.

**(ii) Website/social media**

In the run up to April 2015, the information held online focuses on informing ratepayers on how the changes will affect them. Currently, we provide information on:

- the reasons for and benefits of reform;
- transferring areas – including maps detailing the areas that will move into Belfast;
- Milestones of the reform process;
- ‘What does it mean for me?’ a page of FAQs addressing issues such as smooth service provision, rates issues, councillors, new assets
- ‘What does it mean for Belfast?’ – more joined-up working, greater community input
- ‘What does it mean for the council?’ – additional responsibilities

This information is supported by a short animated video which gives a clear

overview of the reasons behind the changes and what it means for Belfast. This has been very well received and has had a high number of views. Please note that an updated video is planned for early 2015.

There are also pages on our new planning powers and community planning responsibilities.

Additionally, as central government progresses issues such as rates convergence and non-domestic revaluation, we will work to update the relevant sections of our website to support this information, ensuring that appropriate linkages are made with the Reform section.

From 1 April 2015, we will integrate information on all transferring assets – both facilities and parks etc from local government and car parks from central government within our website. We will also reconfigure our site to ensure successful integration of information on our new Planning powers. This requires a significant amount of work behind the scenes and work is ongoing with the Council's planning team to gather all necessary information.

Social media is becoming increasingly significant not only in relation to providing information but also as an engagement channel and an effective way to deal with queries on LGR and any other matter. Use of Facebook, Twitter, posting videos on Youtube and utilising other emerging channels will therefore be part of our communications mix.

**(iii) Electronic updates**

The website and special edition of City Matters also contain information on how residents can receive regular e-shots on our preparations for April 2015. Depending on take up (this new facility will also be promoted on social media and the council website), it will be issued to keep people informed of engagement activity, such as door knocking around waste and recycling collections.

**(iv) Media activity**

Most of our communications activity at this stage has been deliberately aimed at those coming in to the new Belfast area and our approach has been to provide direct information through City Matters, the website and social media. The limited media interest there has been so far is not focused on Belfast but rather on wider LGR (e.g. the potential effect of rates increases). As a result most of the media activity has come from central government - making announcements on legislation, rates convergence schemes etc. It is likely that media interest will start to increase as 1 April approaches and we will continue to have regular conversations with journalists on these matters and will arrange some formal press briefings after the New Year and in the run up to 1 April when interest peaks. Following 1 April, there is likely to be a focus on how services that have transferred are performing and how the political and decision making processes are performing in the new councils compared to the previous regimes.

**(v) Internal communications**

Internal communication is clearly central to the implementation of LGR and our activity to date includes:

- Double page spread in our award winning staff magazine, intercom (which is issued every second month)
- News stories in our team brief - which is produced in a video and paper format and also issued every second month
- Dedicated information section on our staff intranet, interlink (which includes frequently asked questions).
- Stories about LGR featured on our intranet home page and published on 56 display screens that are located in all our staff canteen areas across the council
- A number of staff briefing events
- The production of a video to be shown at site visits where transferring staff from Lisburn and Castlereagh councils and central government come to meet BCC staff and view our facilities
- Monthly Members' e-shot updates

#### **Other key issues for communications**

##### **Delay in transferring functions**

Legislation around transferring housing and urban regeneration and community development functions has been delayed and communications preparations have therefore slowed down in these areas.

##### **Rates convergence**

The announcement of the rates convergence scheme on 20 November will enable us to pull together more detailed information on what this means for Belfast ratepayers to be included in the January edition of City Matters. This information will also be posted on our website and communicated through social media. Members will also be kept up to date.

##### **Planning**

The biggest single communications challenge will be in relation to planning. There is major media interest in this subject but the main challenges will be in relation to web and advertising. The planning portal will be transferring but it is mainly functional with regard to the planning application process - there is a large volume of other information that will have to be hosted on the Belfast City Council website.

In relation to advertising, this is currently placed in media outlets on a regional basis by DOE, and the Belfast, Castlereagh and Newtownabbey advertisements are combined. Consideration will have to be given as to how this is taken forward as dividing this function between 11 new councils may be inefficient. The process required to collate information and then place advertisements on a

	<p>weekly basis is likely to be demanding on current resources. Discussions are ongoing with DOE and the Planning Service on these matters and elected members will be updated accordingly. .</p> <p><b>Revaluation</b></p> <p>While revaluation of rateable property is a matter for the Land and Property Service, some media coverage has suggested disquiet among businesses who face increases (some will pay less) and there has been some evidence that councils are being wrongly blamed for these increases. Media briefings will take place to ensure understanding that changes in rates due to this process are the responsibility of LPS/DFP. In addition, we will need to ensure our members and staff deliver this message correctly and consistently to the business community and other ratepayers.</p>
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<b>3</b>	<b>Resource Implications</b>
	None

<b>4</b>	<b>Equality and Good Relations Implications</b>
	None

<b>5</b>	<b>Call In</b>

<b>5</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
	Members are asked to note communications activity being undertaken in relation to Local Government Reform.

<b>6</b>	<b>Decision Tracking</b>
	Eamon Deeny

<b>7</b>	<b>Abbreviations</b>
	LGR – Local Government Reform

<b>6</b>	<b>Documents Attached</b>
	Appendix one LGR Communications Activity Plan 2014/15