Reputation of Local Government

Decisions

1. To note the results of the MORI research shows that councils’ reputation and standing will be enhanced through taking a small number of core actions around:
   i. communicating with local people,
   ii. liveability and streetscene – local environment being one of the issues that local people most care about.

2. To agree the core actions in paragraphs 10 and 11 (subject to oral updating at the meeting) as ones to be promoted to all authorities as requiring implementation by all.

3. To agree that the Reputation project, and the core actions, be launched at the LGA Conference, with follow-through in the planned Autumn regional roadshows, and – for the liveability actions – in the “Environment campaign” being developed by that Board.

4. To note a full communications strategy for the Reputation project will be developed and owned by the new Programme Director Media and Campaigns on arrival.

Actions Required

5. Members of LGA Executive to sign up their own authority to delivering the core actions, so that this can be publicised at LGA Conference.

6. Project team to take forward next key steps in the project plan

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Reputation of Local Government

Summary
1. Updates members on progress to date, seeks agreement to the key actions the MORI research indicates all authorities should take, and sets out the next steps starting with a launch at the LGA Conference, including announcing that all authorities represented by the LGA Executive have or will implement the core actions.

Background
2. At the meeting of the LGA Executive on 24 February, members received a report from Ben Page outlining the proposed activities to take forward the reputation of local government project. At that meeting members agreed that core local actions be identified in two areas – communications and liveability. Members further agreed that the LGA annual conference be used to launch the project and core actions, with a series of regional events in the second half of 2005.

3. Oona Muirhead has now taken responsibility for the Reputation project, which will also be a key focus for the new Programme Director Media and Campaigns on arrival. This will allow better integration of the Reputation project with other campaigns work, including the Local Democracy Campaign.

4. The LGA Reputation Task Group of Members met on 7 June with Ben Page, were briefed on the project including the core actions on communications and liveability, and reviewed the proposed next steps.

Progress Report

Research
5. Following the LGA Executive’s approval of the research proposal and the proposed expenditure, two key pieces of research have been undertaken.

6. First, in-depth qualitative research to establish if there is a distinction between ‘local councils’ generally and ‘my’ council’ in the public’s mind. The rationale behind this research was to see if part of local government’s reputation problem is caused not by perceptions of one’s own council, but rather by a more negative image of “other” local councils elsewhere. Once we understand this we can have a better idea of the key factors behind the reputation of the sector at a national level. The full report is available from Oona Muirhead, but conclusions are:

- The research highlights the fact that despite official measures of rising performance via BVPIs etc, the overall public reputation of local government remains decidedly patchy. It is a salutary reminder of how ‘invisible’ much of the core work of
authorities is, and of how much more the sector can do to improve its performance on communications and on demonstrating its efficiency to residents.

- This research highlights a submerged, latent, appetite, for not just the usual negative stories, but for local government to market what it does much more effectively, rather than simply reacting to enquiries and using PR alone.

- At the same time, it casts doubt on the idea that public criticism of local government is based on high-profile national failures. Instead it is about what one’s own council does – this provides both a challenge and an opportunity for the sector to fill a communications gap.

- The work confirms that it is environment issues that local people care most about, and that they will judge their local council against cleanliness and streetscene.

- Above all it reminds us that local government remains very low profile. It attracts relatively little national media coverage, eg compared to the NHS. It confirms that perceptions of value for money and efficiency are key, as well as demonstrating what is being done and provided. It reinforces the need for all councils to focus on the key issues raised by this research and to adopt a set of specific local actions that respond to what this is telling us.

7. MORI’s recommendations to the LGA Executive are:

- That it proceeds with work to encourage all authorities to sign up to the agreed core communications and liveability actions, to be launched at the Annual Conference in Harrogate, and prior to this to share the key findings from the Reputation project with leading Members and Officers, and authorities generally

- That at this stage there is no need to proceed with proposed large scale quantitative research to investigate the national versus local perception gap among the public: this research suggests the gap does not exist because there is such low awareness of local government outside one’s own area

- Proceed with work to understand the views of senior politicians and national opinion formers generally in the media and elsewhere, to understand their perceptions and whether the same attitudes and understanding are as prevalent. Initial discussions suggest that among these groups there is a stronger negative perception, more based on specific problems.

8. The second piece of research that is now underway is a detailed assessment of media coverage of local government to understand which stories and issues have the most impact – either positive or negative, to refine campaigning and communications by all local authorities and the LGA. Some preliminary results are available, and the main findings will be available for the launch of the Reputation Project at the Annual Conference.
Developing a local agenda

9. The Executive agreed in February that two groups of officers be set up, to look at communications and liveability, and to agree a set of core actions to be promoted to authorities as actions every council should carry out. This places a premium on the core actions being simple, very specific, and deliverable.

10. The Communications group led by Jennifer Tankard IDeA has worked up a set of 5 core actions that all local authorities should take. These actions are being worked up into one-page guidance notes by Alex Aiken, Westminster City Council on behalf of the group, for launch at the LGA Conference. The actions are:

- Production of A-Z of Council services
- Regular council newsletter (probably monthly or quarterly, to be decided by the council)
- Effective media management – essentially this means active engagement of stakeholders in the media
- Effective and consistent linkage of council signage to council community services
- Good internal communications

11. A group of Heads of Environment from across local government was set up to identify a similar set of core actions in this key area. These have in addition been reviewed against the work of the Environment Board and the developing “Environment campaign” to ensure consistency, and as part of that, tested out on some of the Environment Board’s officer advisers. They are being reviewed with the Heads of Environment group at a meeting on 9 June. The final core actions to be proposed are likely to be around:

- Nationalising cleaning contracts to ensure there are no gaps in coverage in any area
- Ensuring visible cleaning and clear branding of staff and vehicles
- Rapid effective action on fly-tipping and abandoned cars (under the Clean Neighbourhoods Act)
- Keeping the same sweepers in the same local area
- Having a Green Flag award for at least one park
- Telling local people what you’ve done, when you’ve done it.

An update will be provided at the Executive.

Next Steps

12. Now that we have some concrete actions that the MORI research has demonstrated are linked to improving the reputation and standing of local authorities, we need to launch them, and follow through with our member authorities. The LGA Annual Conference in Harrogate on 5-8 July will be used to launch the project and core actions. Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockart will launch in his speech to the Assembly, and Ben Page will follow with a short presentation on the findings of the research commissioned by the LGA. There will be a ‘Reputation and Local Democracy’ stand, to market the core actions, and demonstrate the link between reputation and engagement with local people. It will be important, at the Conference, to be able to say that the leading politicians of the LGA have accepted these core actions for their own authorities. For the liveability actions, we
will be working to ensure that Reputation work continues to sit well with the “Environment Campaign” being developed by that Board, and would wish to demonstrate that linkage at the Conference.

13. Following on from the Conference, it is proposed there be a series of regional events in the second half of 2005 led by our senior Members. These would be part of the LGA’s reaching out to and engaging with member authorities. Reputation would be one key agenda item – with others being potentially LAAs, the neighbourhoods agenda, and self-regulation/customer intelligence. Detailed plans will be put to LGA Executive separately. A full communications strategy will be developed by the new Programme Director, Media and Campaigns.

14. In view of the cross-cutting aspects of the Reputation project, it is proposed that the project should continue to report to the Executive. The Members Task Group has agreed to continue to act as sounding board and champions, including championing the core actions during the LGA conference. The Task Group members are also aiming to sign up their authorities to the core actions in advance of conference.

Implications for Wales

15. The reputation of local government project requires the commitment of all local authorities. The LGA will be seeking to engage WLGA and the other UK local authority associations in this project. Ben Page has, for example, been invited to present to the WLGA Conference in October.

Financial/Resource Implications

16. Expenditure on the research elements of the project has been met from the 2004/5 budget allocation for this campaign. Any further expenditure agreed would fall to the campaign budget agreed by the LGAX and Resources panel to be managed by Oona Muirhead.

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