

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

COMMUNICATION AND CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

A Report on Focus Groups with Residents, Staff and Members

Prepared for
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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The key findings from the research are these:

Residents

- 1.1 In thinking about the council the first things that came to respondents minds were refuse, recycling, council tax, the condition of roads, car park charges and environmental services/street cleaning.
- 1.2 In considering information they received directly from the council, respondents discussed Council Chat magazine, council tax demands, council tax leaflets and newsletters from councillors.
- 1.3 Whilst most residents received Council Chat magazine a smaller proportion claimed to read it. In all groups, some respondents classed the magazine as junk mail as it came inside the free paper.
- 1.4 Respondents were keen to receive information about the council tax and where the money had been spent although they may not actually read it.
- 1.5 Local papers were seen to contain some information about the council. Whilst there were some positive stories, a lot of references were to negative aspects and complaints. Some felt the council could use the papers more to advertise themselves and local events.
- 1.6 In considering the type of information they would like to see in the council magazine, respondents referred to contact information, telephone numbers, information on future events, road work plans and information about local councillors.
- 1.7 In all groups, respondents were keen to receive the information personally. Respondents would be encouraged to read the information if it was posted to them and either addressed personally or addressed to the householder.
- 1.8 A more regular publication would also be welcomed with respondents feeling once a month would be more appropriate.
- 1.9 The style of the magazine was liked by most respondents with positive comments made about the content, tone and image, although some felt it emphasised the positives too much.
- 1.10 In comparing Council Chat to publications from other local authorities both positive and negative comments were made. Some preferred the magazine format whilst others were impressed by the newspaper format of one of the other examples.
- 1.11 A council magazine was seen to be the best way to get information to and communicate with residents, with the content being more important than the style.

- 1.12 Radio was also discussed as a means of communicating with residents. Whilst some felt the council could advertise events etc on the radio others were concerned this information would not get to everyone.
- 1.13 Respondents who commented on the website were generally very positive and others said they would go there if they needed information.
- 1.14 Approximately half had contacted the council personally within the last year or so with issues including rubbish, wheelie bins and recycling, planning and new developments, road sweeping, street lighting, council tax and bonfires.
- 1.15 A variety of methods had been used to contact the council including telephone, writing letters, calling in at the council offices and new contact centre and emailing through the website.
- 1.16 Some respondents who had contacted them by telephone were satisfied whilst others were dissatisfied. Experiences of writing to the council were slightly less satisfactory whilst those who had called in or emailed were generally very satisfied with the response they received.
- 1.17 In terms of aspects that had the biggest influence on how they felt after their contact with the council, respondents felt the initial response and waiting time were most crucial. Getting a satisfactory answer was most important whatever it happened to be.
- 1.18 Whilst the amount of council tax residents pay, how well the council perform specific services and things such as the cleanliness of the area do influence peoples images of the council, the main influence agreed by all groups is seeing evidence of what the council have done.
- 1.19 Respondents in all groups would like to see more public consultation and opportunities to give their views. Local meetings and the opportunity to comment on things that were going to happen in the future would be welcomed.
- 1.20 It is important for respondents to see things happening and know what the money is being spent on. Overall, residents images of the council appear to be driven quite significantly by communication and being aware of what is happening and feeling that the council are listening to residents and taking into account their views.

Staff

- 1.21 Staff feel that morale within the Council is very low and that staff have been unsettled by the restructuring.
- 1.22 The main cause of discontent seems to be the failure of management to communicate exactly what is happening and to reassure people about their own jobs.

- 1.23 The restructure seems to have been imposed and people simply expected to adapt. Many find their jobs redefined and some do not even know who their manager is.
- 1.24 The most pressing communication need is for clarification to be given on these points.
- 1.25 Different departments seem to have different ways of providing information to staff.
- 1.26 'Grapevine' is familiar to all staff. It is seen as a fairly lightweight news or 'gossip' sheet. Most staff have a quick look and then discard it, but do see a role for something of this type. It was noted that it was smaller than in the past.
- 1.27 Core Briefing documents are not seen by everyone but those who understand the purpose, which is by no means all, see it as quite useful.
- 1.28 The Chief Executives Bulletin is again not widely recognised. It is seen as the 'strategic' equivalent to Grapevine.
- 1.29 'Briefly Bromsgrove' is seen as rather dull and heavy and not easy to read.
- 1.30 Respondents did not understand why there needed to be so many documents. They saw a role in the future for perhaps two, a briefing document and a staff magazine.
- 1.31 There was interest in information wider than that needed for their own job. Site specific information is of considerable interest and the majority would also be interested in key corporate information. Some clarification of the roles and responsibilities of the different teams and departments would also be very welcome, particularly since the restructure.
- 1.32 The ideal staff magazine would be expanded from the current Grapevine in size and content. It could incorporate some of the information currently in other documents.
- 1.33 Important information should be delivered verbally, by management. Too much reliance on email as a means of dissemination was seen to have a number of disadvantages.
- 1.34 Staff made it clear that they would like management to be more visible and to demonstrate an interest in their staff, rather than just the task of recovery.

Members

- 1.35 Members too feel that the general atmosphere is rather low within the Council and that everyone has been unsettled by all the changes. But they are hopeful that it will settle down and improve. They also acknowledge that staff are very busy and often stretched.
- 1.36 In terms of routine communications, Members feel that they receive 'too much'. Reluctantly, they do though conclude that they probably do need to see most of it.
- 1.37 It was felt that some of the paper generated could be reduced if Members had the option of receiving on line links and only choosing to print what they needed.
- 1.38 Everyone did, though, respect the right of colleagues to decline to participate in e governance and continue with their paper copies.
- 1.39 'Briefly Bromsgrove' was felt to be not very user friendly and opinion was divided on how useful it was. The Chief Executives Bulletin attracted little comment, it was simply one of many documents.
- 1.40 Most ad hoc information requirements arose as a result of queries from constituents. As such, they were often deemed to be 'urgent' because they were important to the resident.
- 1.41 Members are divided over whether they prefer to contact officers by email or telephone. The latter is first choice for many, particularly when the need is urgent. Some Members find it very frustrating when it is difficult to make contact with an officer by 'phone. A personal visit might be a last resort.
- 1.42 When contact was made, Members were very largely satisfied with the response they received from officers.
- 1.43 Members felt it reasonable to ask officers for anything they needed to solve a problem. They try to make value judgements over urgency as they acknowledge that officers are very busy.
- 1.44 The idea of a 'Members Desk' to handle queries was not well received – it was felt likely to introduce further delays and make direct contact even more problematic.
- 1.45 A 'Members Bulletin' was thought unnecessary at present but if other documents are rationalised in future, there may be a role for something which sets out key issues for Members.

2. BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

Bromsgrove District Council entered into voluntary engagement in June 2004 and since that date has been working closely with the Government and Audit Commission to drive its recovery plan and deliver improved service to the locality. A key part of the recovery plan is the delivery of improved financial governance and improved customer service. The Council believes that customer satisfaction is often driven by experience, i.e. how customers are dealt with, as much as the actual service or product received. Further understanding of this was required.

In addition, the Council is currently developing a Communications Strategy. This will concern itself not only with how the Council communicates with the public (by both direct and indirect means) but also with internal communications relating to staff and Members.

The Council commissioned CSR Survey Ltd. to consult with residents, staff and Members on these issues. Specific objectives were defined to include:

For residents:

- to identify factors which influence perceptions of the Council
- to determine the most significant influences on satisfaction levels
- to obtain views on current means of communication with the Council
- to establish the preferred means of communication with the Council
- to identify what information residents would like to receive or feel they should receive

For staff:

- to obtain views on current communication channels within the Council
- to identify the information that staff need or would like to have
- to determine the best means of delivering that information

For members:

- to obtain views on the information that is currently received and the process by which it is delivered
- to establish how priorities may be set for the urgency and importance of information requests
- to consider the preferred means of requesting and obtaining information

3. RESEARCH METHODS AND SAMPLE DETAIL

The method used was to conduct six focus groups. This was felt the most appropriate way to cover all the issues and allow a free exchange of ideas and opinions.

3.1 Residents

There were three groups of residents, each with a broad profile. All groups included:

- male and female respondents
- home owners and those in rented accommodation
- people with and without children living at home
- some people working and some not working and retired
- some who had had direct contact with the council in the last few years and some who had not.

There were three locations, each with a different age profile:

- Bromsgrove: 30-50 years
- Hagley: 45 years or over (to include some retired)
- Charford: 18-40 years

In total 28 respondents attended.

Each group lasted about 1 hour 30 minutes and was recorded. Two were moderated by Sarah Loney and one by Ros Grimes.

3.2 Staff

Two groups were held, one at the Depot and one at the Council House.

The Depot group included staff from the Depot, the Dolphin Centre and the Council House.

The groups at the Council House included staff from a number of departments, including Planning, Environmental Health, Culture and Community, Revenue and Human Resources.

In total 13 members of staff attended. Each group lasted around 2 hours and was recorded. The groups were facilitated by Ros Grimes.

3.3 Members

One group of Members was held, at the Council House. The Labour group were unable to send representatives due to a clash of dates, but all other parties were present.

The Labour group were given the opportunity to comment on the draft findings.

In total 11 Members attended. The group lasted just over 2 hours and was recorded. This group was facilitated by Ros Grimes.

All Fieldwork was conducted during February 2006. The discussion guides used are appended.

4. DETAILED FINDINGS FROM RESIDENTS' GROUPS

This section presents the findings from the three residents groups in detail. Where possible, all groups are included, to represent the views of residents in general. All of the groups were lively with respondents having plenty to say about both communication in general and experiences of direct contact with the council.

Inevitably, there was criticism of the council in all groups. We find this in any similar work that we conduct and it is not particular to Bromsgrove. Residents in any Local Authority area typically raise the negative aspects when given the opportunity, but a lot of the criticism could be interpreted in a constructive way.

One respondent in the Bromsgrove group concluded this by saying:

'People only moan about the council. No-one talks about things they do well. We're all guilty of that, we'll all have a moan about the council but won't necessarily contact them and do anything about it!'

(Male, Bromsgrove)

4.1 Introduction

To open the discussions each group were asked what first comes to mind when they think of 'the Council' and in what way the District Council influences their everyday lives. The following aspects were discussed:

- Refuse
- Recycling
- Council Tax
- Condition of the roads
- Car Park charges
- Environmental services/street cleaning

Issues discussed within each of these were as follows:

4.1.1 Refuse and recycling

The topics of refuse collection, wheelie bins and recycling were brought into discussion in all three groups. References here were both positive and negative. Whilst there were some negative comments including the collection now being every two weeks rather than every week, overall respondents were quite positive, determining the new scheme to be good but that it just takes some getting used to. One respondent in the Hagley group was particularly pleased with the garden refuse bin:

'I think the green wheelie bins are about the best thing since sliced bread – because when you're pruning or weeding you can wheel it down the garden and put stuff in straight away.'

(Female, Hagley)

However, one reference was also made (in Hagley) about back entrances now being full with too many bins.

4.1.2 Council Tax

This was brought up, as may be expected, as something that comes to mind when you think of 'the Council'. Whilst one group (Bromsgrove) seemed fairly happy with the level of Council Tax they paid, respondents in Charford were far less satisfied. Comments were made throughout the discussion regarding their area not getting value for money and them not being able to see what the money was being spent on.

4.1.3 Condition of the roads

This was referred to by several respondents in Charford specifically referring to the condition of Gilbert Road.

4.1.4 Car Park Charges

The level of car parking charges was raised spontaneously here in both the Bromsgrove and Charford groups. Respondents felt the charges were high and in a few cases would put them off going to Bromsgrove town centre. Charges being in place on Sundays and until 10 o'clock at night also angered respondents.

'It narks me that you have to pay on a Sunday and until 10 o'clock at night'
(Female, Charford)

One respondent in Charford was concerned that paying traffic wardens to work unsocial hours would be costing more than the revenue taken in tickets. While a respondent in the Bromsgrove group was also concerned about safety:

'You don't mind paying if your car's safe – but they still get broken into'
(Female, Bromsgrove)

4.1.5 Environmental Services and Street Cleaning

These issues were only spontaneously discussed in the Charford group. Several respondents felt the area was untidy and looked uncared for. Again the feeling that they were not getting value for money was displayed.

'We are paying to walk to the shop through rubbish. Sometimes out here it looks like Beirut on a good day'
(Male, Charford)

4.2 Communication and Information

Respondents were then asked what information they receive directly from the council. The following documents were discussed:

- Council Chat/council magazine
- Council Tax demands
- Council Tax Leaflets/where money has been spent
- Newsletter from local councillors

4.2.1 Council Chat and Council Magazine

Most respondents received the 'Council Chat' magazine. Only a handful claimed not to be aware of it or not to have received it. Opinions on the content and style etc are detailed later in the report but comments were again of both a positive and negative nature.

Some respondents were unsure of how often they received the 'Council Chat' magazine with several believing it to be about every 6 months.

All respondents who had seen it in the Bromsgrove and Charford groups agreed that it came inside the local free paper. In Hagley, some suggested it came with the Stourbridge news whilst others disagreed.

How it is delivered appeared to be a key issue in all of the groups with all groups classing it with the junk mail and other leaflets. In all groups people referred to 'shaking out the rubbish'.

'..that's the one that comes in the paper – and usually falls out all over the floor'

(Male, Charford)

'You read the paper – shake the junk out of the paper'

(Male, Hagley)

'The thing is, like most things like that, they come through the door and you throw them away.'

(Male, Bromsgrove)

All respondents agreed that there could be better methods of getting this kind of information to residents than inserting it in the free local paper. This method of delivery gained a lot of criticism from respondents in all groups. Even in cases where respondents kept it – it tended to be left unread and was frequently forgotten about.

Respondents in general were fairly positive about the magazine and agreed they would like to receive it or something similar. It was clear, however that they would like to see it delivered more personally.

'Personally I don't even bother to read it – to me its just junk mail – if it comes with the paper its just junk mail – if they want me to read it then I'd appreciate if being addressed to me or to the homeowner, personal rather than just in a paper'

(Female, Bromsgrove)

'I just think it's a mistake to put it with all the free leaflets because you look at them and think which one am I going to read? Which go in the bin?'

(Female, Hagley)

Despite criticism over the delivery method, some respondents had flicked through or read the magazine and were able to make other comments.

Positive comments included there being a lot of information in the magazine, interesting features such as recycling, things going on in the community, information about councillors and telephone numbers.

Only a handful of respondents claimed to read the magazine, whilst a slightly larger proportion claimed to keep it or flick through to see if there was anything of interest. Despite this, the majority were keen to receive or this or a similar publication.

'Its very informative. Some articles you're interested in and some you're not. No-ones going to like everything'

(Hagley)

'Quick flick through, then recycle bin – I keep them if they have numbers in or take the page out'

(Hagley)

'I found interesting things about recycling in it. And I think it has a list of the councillors'

(Female, Bromsgrove)

'I tend to browse through it – I don't really read it'

(Male, Charford)

Whilst people are keen to receive such a publication, delivered as it is and in the current format, several respondents felt the magazine was not worth it.

'I always flick through to see if there's anything that needs reading but the way its laid out there's nothing that jumps out'

(Female, Charford)

'As it is its not worth having'

(Male, Charford)

4.2.2 Council Tax Demands

Several brief references were made to Council Tax demands when considering information directly received from the Council but no further comments were made.

4.2.3 Council Tax Leaflets (Where the money has been spent).

Most respondents were aware that information came with their Council Tax bill about where money had been spent.

Some respondents claimed to read this information whilst others did not, or claimed to find it hard to understand. Whilst some were just happy to receive it others felt there was a need for further breakdown:

'there's normally a thing that says so much is going to the police etc but it just says how much is going to the council – it doesn't say what they are doing with it.'

(Female, Charford)

Most respondents were keen to receive this information but one respondent made a telling observation:

'It's the sort of information you never read but always want! If you didn't get it you'd ask for it but because it's there you don't look!'

(Male, Hagley).

4.2.4 Newsletter from Local Councillors

One respondent in the Bromsgrove group referred to information they had received from their local councillor specifically at the time of the elections.

Information from or about the Council was also received through the local papers. Whilst the papers sometimes contained positive stories about the Council, a lot of references were to negative aspects and complaints. Some respondents felt the Council could use the local papers more to advertise themselves and local events.

'There's always loads of stuff about the Council in the press – people complain about the Council in the paper.'

(Male, Charford)

'I think they rely too much on the Advertiser finding things out and putting it in the press'

(Male, Charford)

Residents in the Hagley group referred to not receiving the local newspaper about Bromsgrove. They received the Stourbridge News. As one respondent stated:

'The problem we get here is that the papers we get are the Stourbridge News and they're geared towards Stourbridge. I don't think I've ever seen a Bromsgrove free paper – the problem is we are closer to Stourbridge than we are to Bromsgrove but we are controlled by Bromsgrove.'

(Hagley)

One other spontaneous response from a male in the Charford group referred to a lack of positive news:

'It always seems to be bad news – we don't really get a lot of benefits going through – good news etc'

(Male, Charford)

The discussion was then moved on to consider what information respondents need or would like to receive and through what media.

Respondents appeared keen to receive information about both what had been done and what was going to be done in the future.

A magazine similar to Council Chat was claimed by most to be appropriate with a variety of suggestions of what could be included in it. Respondents were interested in knowing what events were coming up and what was happening in the area.

Events at leisure centres and different schemes could be publicised here. Information on roadwork plans/road closures and repairs to footpaths etc could also be advertised in the magazine.

'Really – what is going on in the area' (Female, Bromsgrove)

'It would be good if it could contain some information about road works as well' (Male, Bromsgrove)

'Local events/events for kids – its all word of mouth at the moment.' (Female, Charford)

A few respondents would be interested in information about the councillors and their contact details being included in the magazine but this was not seen to be something that needed to be in every issue.

'Doesn't need to be in all the time but now and again would be good. Come the elections and you get bombarded with stuff but other times you see nothing.' (Male, Bromsgrove)

Again respondents would be interested in seeing information here about where the money was being spent, what the council had done and what they were planning to do.

'it would be nice to have some sort of breakdown of where the money has been spent in the last year – something like that.' (Female, Charford)

'If they had articles saying last month we spent this on doing this job etc – then I'm sure you'd actually read it' (Male, Charford)

'Where they've spent the money and what the outcomes are' (Male, Charford)

Telephone numbers and contact information for various departments at the Council could also be included in the magazine, although some respondents in the Bromsgrove and Hagley groups suggested a preference for a separate card with the numbers on that you could keep by the phone. One respondent in the Bromsgrove group suggested the Council could perhaps run a series in the magazine with a different department and the work they do featured on in each issue.

'Which department does what and the phone numbers' (Hagely)

'I think if it was like on an A4 card with the numbers on etc – I think that would be more useful' (Female, Hagley)

'They could run a series of information ... every time one comes out it could be a different department.' (Hagley)

In all groups respondents were keen to receive the information personally. All groups discussed problems with it being delivered with the free papers referring to either not receiving it or it getting mixed up with so many other 'junk' leaflets and so thrown away rather than kept and read. Some respondents felt strongly about this stating that if the Council wanted them to read it, it should be addressed personally or at least to the householder, and that if it arrived in the post they would be much more likely to read or keep it.

'Needs to come more personally' (Female, Bromsgrove)

'It would make you read it rather than just think its junk mail' (Female Charford)

'I think it's a shame that it does come with the free newspaper because sometimes you get so many leaflets...' (Hagley)

'If it came through the post you'd be more likely to open it and read it. To see what it is – rather than something that falls out of the paper that you put in the bin.' (Male, Charford)

Respondents were also keen to receive a publication more regularly. The six month gap between editions was seen as being too long. The majority agreed that monthly would be the best. Anything more frequent than this would be too much, but if there is a bigger gap between, as it is now, people would forget about it.

'It needs to come more regular as well – it seems to me there's got to be something going on more than every 6 months.' (Male, Bromsgrove)

'Monthly – if its more than a month between you tend to forget about it. More often than that its too much'
(Male, Charford)

Several respondents in the Hagley group had not received the magazine. Some respondents thought it came with the Stourbridge News whilst others disagreed. One respondent in this group suggested the magazine could be made available to pick up in the library.

Respondents had differing views on the use of radio to communicate with residents. Whilst several respondents in the Bromsgrove group felt advertising on Beacon radio would be ideal, overall respondents were concerned that not everyone listens to the radio or would be listening at the right time. Other concerns were that you may not be in a position to write numbers down etc when listening to the radio and then you've missed them.

'That would be ideal. Beacon does a lot of informative...'
(Female, Bromsgrove)

'The trouble is when you listen to the radio you've never got a pen in your hand so you cant remember it – if there's an event on or something at a local leisure centre – you can't write it down.'
(Male, Bromsgrove)

'Its ok but it would only get to people who listen to certain radio stations'
(Male, Charford)

'I think radio tends to go in one ear and out the other – unless it was something major.'
(Hagley)

The Council's website was discussed briefly in all groups in terms of gaining information from and making contact with the council. Those who had seen or used the website were positive about it, although more than half had not seen or accessed the website, or did not have access. Several respondents were aware the information was there and suggested that would be where they would go if they needed to find information, such as telephone numbers. It wasn't seen as a website you would go to in order to read all of the information, but several respondents had used it to contact the Council by e-mail and one regularly used the job page.

'I know they've got a massive website haven't they because I go on there looking for jobs.'
(Female, Charford)

'Certainly used it in terms of planning applications and its fine. You can go through there and find the department you need.'
(Male, Hagley)

'I know its there and that would be where I would go if I need information but haven't needed it yet.'
(Male, Bromsgrove)

'Yes – to get contact numbers. It is useful isn't it – but its not something you would sit and read through.'

(Female, Charford)

Respondents were then asked to actually look at copies of Council Chat and other Bromsgrove District Council publications and asked to comment on the content, style, tone and image.

When flicking through them several respondents made spontaneous positive comments about the magazines and the content. One respondent in the Bromsgrove group pointed out the centre page to be the important page with the contact telephone numbers for different departments. This was agreed to be important information to be included in the magazine. Respondents were also keen on seeing information about what was happening locally. Overall however, whilst respondents realised that not everything would be of interest to everyone, the majority felt there was perhaps too much information in Council Chat. There were perhaps too many pages and stories with respondents stating a preference for less content focusing on more important issues.

'That's the important page (in the middle) numbers and services.'

(Male, Bromsgrove)

'I think there is just too much information in that one'

(Female, Bromsgrove)

'I don't think there's a lot in here that is particularly relevant really – that's going to interest a lot of people. I mean there's a full page here about a fudge show!'

(Male, Charford)

Most respondents liked the style of the magazine with several comments referring to the Council Chat magazine being bright, colourful and looking attractive. The Council Tax leaflet was less appealing. It looked less interesting with too many figures, a dark background and smaller print.

'It looks attractive'

(Female, Bromsgrove)

'It's a nice format – its not black and white and very official'

(Hagley)

'The council tax leaflet less interesting design. Too dark. Too many figures – hard to look at/keep attention.'

(Female, Bromsgrove)

Respondents were generally happy with the tone of voice. The information was aimed at the general public without being too formal or over familiar. Several respondents commented on the image of the council portrayed by the magazine. The magazine was seen to be very positive and by some respondents to be biased in only detailing what they have done well etc. Whilst it was a good to have the information some respondents were negative overall about the magazine in that it was almost false and that they could see through the positive bright appearance of the magazine.

'As with all councils they tell you what they are doing well – same with all councils – all the same'

(Male, Bromsgrove)

'They are obviously emphasising the positives aren't they – the positive things they do.' (Male, Charford)

'Its almost like they're fobbing us off – we'll give them that and it'll keep them quiet for a bit.' (Female, Charford)

'They seem to be full of congratulating themselves – saying we've done this and we've done that – you should be proud of us – we've put your money here and there – you should be proud to live in Bromsgrove etc but most of the people who live here don't really see it in that way. Its very optimistic and ambitious.' (Male, Charford)

Respondents were also given examples of similar publications from other areas to make comparisons. Two of these publications were similar (magazine format) and one was a newspaper format. Respondents' opinions on these, which were better or worse, differed both within and between groups.

The magazines were seen to be similar to Council Chat although one included more advertising. Adverts for local events were seen to be a good thing but overall there were perhaps too many general adverts included. Whilst advertisements were seen as a good way to help fund the magazine, there could be too many which would then lessen the appeal.

'This one is more advertising' (Male, Bromsgrove)

'This one's got advertising in it as well. Things that are in the area to do – that's not in the Bromsgrove one.' (Female, Charford)

The other example of a magazine gained differing opinions. Whilst some suggested there was more to it and the print was larger, others felt it was not as eye catching as Council Chat and that it was heavier reading.

'More heavy reading – not quite as eye catching' (Hagley)

'There's a bit more to this one – its quite good because its got statistics and stuff.' (Male, Charford)

The example of a newspaper format gained a lot of positive comments. Whilst some positive references were made specifically to the format others were more specific to the actual content. Several respondents saw the headlines in newspaper format to be more eye catching and the front page to have more appeal and encourage you to continue reading. Some preferred the layout and felt it was clearer than the magazines.

Other positive comments about this example were however more focused on the content. This was seen to be 12 pages of useful information with no adverts. It included information on council tax, things happening locally, pictures of the councillors and technical information.

'I like the newspaper because straight away you read the headlines' (Male, Bromsgrove)

'You read papers – I don't know why – because it's a paper!'
(Male, Bromsgrove)

'It looks a lot cleaner the way it is set out.' (Male, Charford)

'This one hasn't got a single advert – its 12 pages of information.'
(Female, Charford)

Opinions therefore varied as to which was the preferred format. Those who preferred the magazine format felt a magazine was easier to handle and that the newspaper looked cheap. Others felt a newspaper had more appeal and felt people would be more inclined to read the information in that format.

'I don't like that (newspaper) as much – looks cheaper.'
(Hagley)

'Magazine is a better size to handle.' (Hagley)

'These (magazines) are like the things you find hanging around at the doctors surgery and that – people never really look at – sort of read it if you've got nothing else to do.'
(Male, Charford)

Whilst some preferred a magazine and others a newspaper, the majority were more concerned with the actual content. Several respondents made reference to the need for some advertisements in the magazine with this being seen as a way to help fund the publication, although references were made to not wanting to see too many advertisements included.

'All they have to do is put a few adverts in and that will pay for it – but not too many.'
(Female, Hagley)

In conclusion, respondents were keen to receive a publication such as Council Chat magazine. This was seen to be the best way to get information to and communicate with residents. Whilst some felt the radio would be useful it would not work for everyone. The website was also seen by those who had used it in a positive light and was something they would use if they needed to.

In terms of the publication, the most important aspect was seen to be the content. Most agreed that it wasn't the quantity of information that was important but rather the quality. Residents were keen to know what had been done, where money had been spent and what was going to happen in the future. Some stories of interest and features on particular departments etc would be good along with advertisements to help fund the publication but respondents did not feel too much of this was appropriate. Whilst they held differing views on whether a newspaper or magazine format would be most appropriate the actual content was seen to be far more important.

'Collate it better. Reduce it so you've got where your money has been, is being and will be spent.' (Male, Charford)

'At the moment its not worth the paper its written on – too much adverts, not enough decent information.' (Male, Charford)

Another major issue for respondents was how the publication was delivered. All respondents agreed that they thought it needed to be more personal. Whilst some would be happy with it simply being delivered separately from the free papers – perhaps on a different day, others would prefer it to be sent to them directly (either addressed to them personally or to the householder). Several respondents claimed they would be much more likely to open it and read the information if it arrived in this way.

'The magazine is best – but if it came separate to other things you'd notice it more.' (Hagley)

'It needs to be more formal – addressed personally. It might make you feel like reading it.' (Female, Charford)

One respondent in the Hagley group would like to see more community meetings.

'Would be good to have a workshop – like this but where you could ask things and they could answer or get back to you with answers.' (Female, Charford)

In terms of information about the council tax and where money had been spent, several respondents felt that whilst this was information that should be available – detailed information would not be required by everyone. They felt it would be more useful to know where to get the information if you were interested rather than it be sent to everyone.

'Probably only about 5% of people would want it... more information doesn't need to be issued – you just need to know where to get it if you need it. Again – if you want more information, contact ...' (Female, Hagley)

4.3 Contact with the Council

Approximately half of the respondents had had reason to contact the council personally within the last year or so. Issues they had made contact with the council about included rubbish, wheelie bins and recycling, planning and new developments, road sweeping, street lighting, council tax and bonfires.

Respondents had used a variety of methods to contact the council including telephone, writing letters, calling in at the council offices and the new contact centre and emailing through the website.

4.3.1 Telephone

The majority of those who had contacted the council had done so by telephone. Their experiences varied with some people being very satisfied with the response they received and others dissatisfied.

Some respondents had got through to the right department or right person without any problems whilst others detailed problems here. Several respondents had made contact with the council concerning rubbish collection and recycling. On most occasions this had been successful with new bins and recycling boxes that had been requested being sent in a short amount of time. One respondent had called with a query over recycling that the person who answered the phone was unable to answer. She was however satisfied that someone called back with the answer within half an hour. Other positive experiences were detailed referring to the planning department and road sweeping etc.

'I contacted them about rubbish. The first person didn't know but she put me onto someone more or less straight away and they rang me straight back with the answer. What people say about ringing and getting passed around on the phone system didn't happen.' (Female, Bromsgrove)

'I phoned because the lid disappeared off my recycling box – 2 days later it was there – I think it depends who you get when you phone.' (Female, Charford)

One respondent in the Bromsgrove group specifically referred to contacting the new central hub by telephone, suggesting this system seemed to work well.

'I find the central hub, I think they call it, good. If you call they generally sort it out. There's a central area that you ring now and they put you through to the right department.' (Female, Bromsgrove)

Whilst they were not always able to give the answer residents wanted, in many cases calls were dealt with satisfactorily.

Other respondents however detailed experiences where they had had problems getting through to the right person, having to make 3 or 4 phone calls before managing to speak to the right person, not being able to get through or being passed around the system. Several respondents here suggested that when they had

problems getting through and getting their queries dealt with it discouraged them from contacting the council and so they gave up.

'when I rang it was the 3rd or 4th phone call.' (Hagley)

'I think people are put off ringing them, you don't know who to ring so you get on with your life and think someone else will ring.' (Hagley)

'Sometimes its hard to get through to the right place. You can be phoning – say you need to speak to so and so and you start bouncing around.' (Female, Charford)

'The problem is a lot of people have this problem with dealing with the council and not getting a satisfactory reply. It just puts you off doing it again.' (Hagley)

4.3.2 Letter writing

Experiences of writing to the council were slightly less satisfactory. One respondent in the Hagley group had written to the council several times regarding a new development behind where they lived. She was not satisfied with the response, discussing it to have been written in technical language that she did not understand. Another respondent (Charford) had written to the council to sort out the payments of his council tax but had not received a reply. He had then gone in to see the person who had the letter and said they were going to reply.

'Didn't get a response from letter – I went in and she got the letter and said 'I was going to write back'' (Male, Charford)

4.3.3 Personal visit

Overall, respondents who had actually visited the council offices or the central hub with queries were satisfied. Respondents discussed the staff they had seen to be friendly, polite and helpful with the reception areas being clean and bright.

'I went to the Dolphin Centre ones 2 weeks ago and it was nice – people seemed friendly.' (Female, Charford)

'The people we met in Bromsgrove were very polite and helpful so no complaints about that.' (Male, Hagley)

One negative aspect referred to at the main council offices was a lack of availability of parking spaces. One respondent in the Charford group was dissatisfied with the attitude of staff at the council offices. He felt that they were quite surly and looked down at you.

'Car parking's not good – you can't often get a space.' (Female, Bromsgrove)

'They are quite surly – I find them quite surly – especially when you go down face to face.' (Male, Charford)

4.3.4 Email

Several respondents had contacted the council by email through the website. One had contacted them about getting a second grey bin and was very pleased with the response.

'I did contact the council about a second grey wheelie bin – I sent them an email in fact – there was no problem- I had it within a few weeks.' (Female, Hagley)

Respondents had therefore had mixed experiences of contact with the council. Whilst some were happy with the attitudes of staff and way their queries were dealt with, others were not satisfied and thus in some cases put off contacting the council in the future.

Other issues discussed generally included the need for other members of staff to take responsibility and deal with queries when the specific person is not available and generally knowing who to contact about what. A lot of respondents were not sure who was responsible for what and some felt this could be improved. Customer service in general was seen by a few respondents to need some attention along with attitudes of staff.

'Its fine – it just depends – if the person you need isn't there you need someone else to take responsibility for the phone call – no good .. oh they're on holiday for 2 weeks – surely someone fills in. That's the biggest problem I've had.' (Female, Charford)

'Its actually knowing where to actually contact isn't it – you don't actually know who's in charge of what ... I think you just need a bit more direction to who's in charge of what. And if there's a problem you can contact this number – people have got busy lives ... they get passed over and told to ring so and so and in the end you give in.' (Female, Hagley)

'There does seem to be a very superior air to them when you speak to them, almost like they are looking down on you right from the start. Like if you're ringing us with your problems then you're obviously a bit unimportant.' (Male, Charford)

Respondents were then asked what the most important aspects were in dealing with the council and what has the biggest influence on how you feel about the contact afterwards.

Respondents in all of the groups felt the first contact was important. The initial response and waiting time was crucial to how they felt about the contact at the end. Customer service and staff attitudes remained in respondents minds throughout the contact experience. Whether or not the first person they spoke to knew the answer was not as important, providing they did know who to contact and were able to put callers through straight away or get them to call back quickly. The attitudes of staff and the response or waiting times were seen by all groups to be more important than the actual answers received. Getting a result or satisfactory answer – whatever it may be - was the most important.

'It doesn't matter if the staff who take the queries are knowledgeable as long as they know who will know. No-one knows everything- ok as long as they don't keep passing you on and passing you on again.' (Female, Bromsgrove)

'Getting any result really – then you know where you stand ... getting a satisfactory answer – that's most important – whatever it happens to be.' (Hagley)

Respondents did feel however that when they had been made to wait they would be more upset if they then didn't get the answer they wanted to hear.

'...when people are made to wait, the process isn't smooth, they are more likely to be angry if they don't get the answers they want. As long as the query is dealt with well, people are happier regardless of the answer.' (Male, Bromsgrove)

4.4 General Image

The final topic discussed in the groups was what influences the image residents hold of the council. Issues discussed included what defines a 'good' or 'bad' council, how much respondents felt they knew about Bromsgrove District Council, what drives the view they have of the council and how they could improve.

In considering what defines a 'good' council, respondents referred to communication, listening to the opinions of residents, taking notice and doing the things residents want to see done and keeping promises. Spending the money well and how residents want to see it spent was also seen to be a feature of a 'good' council.

'Communication'. (Male, Bromsgrove)

'One that listens to people'. (Female, Charford)

'Spending the money well – spending it on the things people want it spent on.'
(Male, Bromsgrove)

A 'bad' council was seen as the opposite – one that does not communicate with the residents, spends money poorly or not on what residents want it spent on and not keeping promises.

Several residents referred to other councils in defining what a bad council would be. For example, one resident in Bromsgrove had had a bad experience with her previous council with housing repairs not being completed when they said they would be and people turning up unannounced.

Whilst the amount of council tax residents pay, how well the council perform specific services and things such as the cleanliness of the area do influence peoples images of the council, the main influence agreed by all groups is seeing evidence of what the council have done. As one respondent in the Bromsgrove group pointed out

'...people don't notice the council when they are doing things well. When there's a problem they notice.' (Male, Bromsgrove)

The images people therefore hold of the council are derived from negative experiences as these are the ones remembered rather than the positives.

Whilst respondents are conscious of wanting to get their moneys worth from their council tax, the amount they pay doesn't appear to have a particularly large influence on their image of the council. This is much more driven by whether they see where the money has been spent and even more influential – whether they feel it has been spent on the right things.

'Evidence of what's been done – as long as the place is generally kept tidy and you don't see graffiti everywhere you think the council is generally doing a good job.' (Hagley)

The types of thing that lead residents to have a poor image of the council are untidiness such as litter in the streets and money being spent on things residents see as unnecessary or of less importance than other things they would see as priorities.

Whilst respondents in the Bromsgrove and Hagley groups were relatively happy with the cleanliness of the area, those in Charford were less so. Their image of the council was more frequently driven by the feeling that their area was forgotten or received less than other areas. Several respondents discussed litter to be a problem and the refuse collectors leaving rubbish to blow around the area. These respondents thought other areas, not necessarily in Bromsgrove, to be cleaner and more looked after.

'I went to the shop – went through the back alleys – there's just newspaper and litter all over the place – it hasn't been touched for ages... and when they collect the bins – when things blow away they just leave them.' (Male, Charford)

'Look at Birmingham – although they may pay more council tax than we do – I work on New Street and it's always clean. It doesn't matter how busy it is with the German markets there in Winter but it's always spotless. They might pay more but you can always see somebody doing something.' (Female, Charford)

A lot of respondents had in their minds things they felt needed money spending on them and were angered by schemes on which they felt the council were wasting money. For example, respondents in the Charford group referred to lane changes on the roundabouts and the new bus station having cost a lot of money and not really being necessary. Again here, what residents see the council doing and spending money on is driving the image they have of the council.

'Surely there's got to be more important issues than the bus station and the roundabouts.' (Female, Charford)

'If they did a questionnaire saying we're coming to the end of the financial year – we've got this much money left in the budget – what do you suggest we do ...I don't think anyone in the whole town would have suggested changing round the roundabouts.' (Male, Charford)

Seeing money spent on schemes that residents view as a waste of money then affects the views they have of the council. Respondents in both the Bromsgrove and Charford groups were unhappy with the car parking charges. This again influenced how they viewed the council. One respondent in the Bromsgrove group who referred to the car park charges said

'..the image you have of the council is influenced by what you see. For example the parking charges. And generally the negative things.' (Male, Bromsgrove)

Respondents were then asked how much they feel they know about the council and whether they felt Bromsgrove District Council was a good or bad council. Opinions on this differed significantly between the groups. Only one respondent (in the Bromsgrove group) was aware that the council were currently in voluntary engagement.

Respondents in the Bromsgrove group were fairly satisfied with the council. They felt they were fairly average. Several respondents in this group felt the local press gave

the council a lot of bad publicity and that it would be good for the council to counteract that by perhaps putting some good news etc in the local papers. Whilst they had improvements to suggest to the council publication they did feel that the council were trying to get information to the residents.

'I'd say they are good – we do get information from the council.' (Female, Bromsgrove)

Respondents in the Hagley group again varied in their opinions on whether Bromsgrove District Council was a good or bad council. One respondent stated it was difficult to know when they had lived in the area a long time and so didn't really have anything to compare it with. The 11 respondents in this group rated the council on a 1 to 10 scale with 10 being good and 1 being bad. Scores given ranged from 3 to 10 with the average being 6.2.

'I think they are average. Its difficult to compare to others when you've been here a long time.' (Female, Hagley)

Respondents in the Charford group were less pleased with Bromsgrove District Council. They felt that insufficient money was spent in their area and that the council were now more interested in the needs of commuters moving into the new properties being built rather than the people who had lived in the area for a long time. They felt there was a lack of communication between the council and the residents and that the money wasn't being spent in the best ways.

'They don't spend enough money in Charford. It gets forgotten about. They just think ... it's a council estate...' (Male, Charford)

'Thinking of the commuters and their needs and not of the people who have lived here all their lives.' (Female, Charford)

In considering ways in which they felt the council could improve some respondents made specific comments whereas others were more general.

Several members of the Bromsgrove group again referred to the need to drop car parking charges or at least make it free on Sunday or in the evenings.

Several respondents in the Charford group suggested the need for improvements in staff attitudes. They felt if staff were more friendly and helpful people would feel more encouraged to get in touch with the council.

'More friendly and helpful attitude would help ... you want to be encouraged to contact them if you've got a problem but its almost as if they are trying to put you off.' (Male, Charford)

Again, in the Charford group specific references were made to the need for the council to look more specifically at individual areas. For example – several respondents in this group would prefer a more regular collection of their wheelie bins and less regular collection of the garden bin. One respondent wondered if it would be possible to do this differently by area suggesting that in Charford the families were often larger and so created more rubbish whilst the gardens were very small. Perhaps the opposite to areas such as Barnt Green.

'That's the main thing they don't do – they don't look at individual areas.'
(Male, Charford)

A lack of communication on specific issues and the need for improvements here were discussed in all groups. For example, in the Charford group some respondents were and others were not aware of the new offices near the Dolphin Centre. They felt this type of information – where they needed to go for particular things needed to be communicated more fully.

'There is a lack of communication there then isn't there if people don't know there to go!' (Female, Charford)

As discussed previously in the report – there was a need to be able to see what was being done and knowing what the money was being spent on. Respondents in Charford wanted to see evidence of the streets being cleaned etc. Respondents in the Bromsgrove group felt there needed to be more publicity detailing where the money was going and what was being done.

'If the council want to communicate with you they need to let you know what's going on.' (Female, Charford)

'You don't really know what they spent the money on until you actively go out and find out for yourself.' (Male, Bromsgrove)

Several respondents in the Bromsgrove group discussed the need for more positive information about what the council were doing and had done. They felt that most of the information available- particularly in the local papers - focused on the negatives and that it was this that then stuck in peoples minds. They feel positive aspects need to be brought to the public's attention.

'I think it should be brought to people's attention when the council are doing something good. So people know ... not many people know the positives and the rest just see the negatives ... they should make a point of making everybody know what they have done well as well. If they're not willing to stand up and say we've done this ... how are people going to know.' (Male, Bromsgrove)

'You've got to know the negative side but it could be more balanced with the positive things the council are doing.' (Female, Bromsgrove)

Respondents in all of the groups would like to see more public consultation and opportunities to give their views. Local meetings and the opportunity to comment on things that were going to happen in the future would be welcomed.

'Local meetings.' (Hagley)

'Could let you know what's in the pipeline, then invite you to a meeting like this to discuss views. Communicate before these things actually get started. More consultation – we're thinking of doing this- come along and put your views in etc.' (Male, Bromsgrove)

'There's very few chances to air your views like this anyway. They're always sending us through things saying what they're doing, the positives and that but then there's not so much – well, what we're doing – is that good?'
(Female, Charford)

In conclusion it is therefore important for respondents that they see things happening and know what the money is being spent on. Several respondents would like there to be more consultation on this with residents. Overall, residents images of the council appear to be driven quite significantly by communication and being aware of what is happening etc and also feeling that the council are listening to residents and taking into account their views.

'They should listen to what people say and then actually act on it.' (Male, Charford)

5. DETAILED FINDINGS FROM THE STAFF GROUPS

Both groups seemed to speak freely and welcomed an opportunity to voice concerns that all participants shared. They began with a discussion of the general atmosphere within the Council and all agreed that morale is very low at the moment. Some staff with many years service felt that morale was at the lowest ebb they could recall. Staff numbers were perceived to be lower and the restructure has been very unsettling. It was claimed that staff were uncertain, disillusioned and wary. Most feel that they are struggling with new roles that have not been properly defined.

The result, for many, is a poor working atmosphere and considerable uncertainty. A major contributory factor is a lack of communication.

It seemed quite difficult to think of themselves as part of one organisation; some participants did not think that the council worked as one company. There was certainly evidence of different views amongst different groups of employees. The Dolphin Centre, for example, is a little isolated and functions autonomously. Staff there tend to think of themselves as working for The Dolphin Centre rather than the Council. They do not seem as badly affected by the low morale.

Between the Depot and the Council House there is perceived to be something of a "them and us" situation, certainly from the point of view of some Depot staff. Most staff rarely visit the Council House and feel like strangers if they do.

5.1 Primary information need.

Both groups were very preoccupied with what they saw as an immediate need for more information and better communication about the restructuring of the Council. They were aware that there had been considerable changes and a good deal of 'coming and going' of staff. Many seemed to understand, or at least accept, the need for change. But what seemed to have upset everyone was a lack of communication about what was happening.

Many did not know whether the restructure was complete or whether there was to be more change. Jobs were undefined, new job descriptions mystifying and seemingly based on the premise that individuals would simply take on new tasks without consultation. Some staff did not even know who their manager was.

No one seemed to have communicated at an individual level to allay fears and provide clarity. There seems to have been an assumption by senior management that staff would accept an approach of 'that's it, get on with it'. People perceive that managers are so focussed on the restructure that they are forgetting the staff. They are not making themselves available to discuss peoples' genuine concerns about their jobs. What was needed was 'a bit of TLC to show they are interested in us, rather than just getting us out of voluntary engagement'.

There was quite a lot of discussion on why there was not more explanation of what was happening. Some staff felt the restructure had been badly planned from the start and managers did not know what to tell them.

Others felt it may be because management were reluctant to communicate bad news. But people knew there was bad news, they resented being treated 'like children' and would much rather have the truth. Another suggestion was that a breakdown in communication had been caused by the departure, for whatever reasons, of many of those in middle management. They had been the obvious communication link between senior management and front line staff. Whatever the reason, the result was that everyone felt they were being denied vital information. This was information that they felt they should receive in person and probably at a 'small team' or individual level, rather than a larger staff meeting.

The marked lack of communication was a major factor in the decline of morale. Staff remain uncertain and the gulf between management and staff has become wider – staff feel they don't like to ask. Many people saw the result as a 'heads down and get on with the job' culture which was not at all helpful to any overall approach to teamwork.

5.2 Review of current information provision

Given their level of concern about the issues described above, the group participants found it difficult to consider the routine provision of information. However, they did review current documents and make some useful observations.

Different departments seem to have different systems for cascading information to staff, with differing degrees of effectiveness. The Dolphin Centre, for example, has a precise procedure that seems to work. Whereas, at the Depot, some staff could be out of the information loop entirely.

* Grapevine

The staff magazine is familiar to everyone. Most seem to receive it with their payslip although this does not apply to all Depot staff. Those who are not office based have to seek out a copy if they wish to have one.

Grapevine is seen as fairly lightweight, a news or 'gossip sheet'. It is probably aimed at lower grades of staff and is not seen as providing much of substance. The main content seems to be 'comings and goings' with pictures of staff. Whilst staff are not 'waiting for the next issue' - they probably have a quick look and then discard it – there is probably a place for this type of information provision.

At a superficial level, a few people felt that it comes across as an attempt to spread only good news, to convince staff they are happy.

Both groups remarked that Grapevine used to be a much larger "booklet" as opposed to the current A4 sheet. They presume it has been reduced to cut costs.

* Core Briefing

Not all staff see or are aware of this. Amongst the group of Council House staff there was a fairly detailed discussion of how it was meant to be used. One particularly knowledgeable person explained that it should be seen as a briefing document and the content delivered verbally to staff teams. There was evidence that in some cases it is just received as an email and it comes across as rather "dry". Those who understand its purpose see it as 'quite useful'.

* **Chief Executives Bulletin**

Some staff had never seen this; others think they may get it by email but perhaps don't always read it.

It is seen as the 'strategic' equivalent of 'Grapevine'. Those who do see it and read it say that it seems to be largely the same every month. One or two are not sure how much of what is in it they can take at face value, rather like a newspaper.

* **Briefly Bromsgrove**

This document, again, is not seen by all staff. It is felt to be rather dull and heavy going, not very easy to read. It is distributed again by email and it's fairly easy to choose not to read it.

Overall, staff were puzzled as to why there seemed so many briefings and bulletins. They were sure there was scope to rationalise and combine some of them. One member of the Depot group suggested they were part of the audit trail towards recovery and were needed at the moment. Once recovery was complete, there may be scope to combine some of them.

5.3 Future information needs and methods of delivery

All group participants were adamant that the most pressing need was for the clarification they sought over restructuring and their own roles. This information should undoubtedly be delivered verbally and, as noted earlier, to small teams and/or individuals.

Team meetings were a new introduction for some staff (mainly at the Depot) and some were slightly suspicious of the motivation behind them. However, they were welcomed in principle, as long as some benefit could be seen. One of the Council House participants spoke of an interim manager in her department who had made a success of team meetings. Staff had felt better and been more motivated as a result.

Looking ahead to the provision of more 'routine' information, it was clear that people did want to know more than just what was necessary for them in their job. Site specific information might be the next layer of interest. Depot staff, for example, would be interested in anything that affected the Depot, but much less concerned with what happened at the Council House. Another need for information had arisen partly from the restructure and this was that it was important to understand what other departments did and who was responsible for what. No one would be expected to have all this information but a broad understanding or access to more detail was essential to some in their day to day jobs.

Thinking of how this information was provided, people saw the need for perhaps two documents. One would be more of a 'briefing document' and one the staff magazine.

The briefing would deal with the corporate and strategic issues and be delivered as the current Core Briefing is intended.

There was some discussion in both groups about the use of email to deliver information. A number of disadvantages were noted:

- Not all employees have access to email. They would rely on others to print off any material and bring it to their attention.
- Few people have the time to read emails that do not seem to be urgent. Even to the extent that they are told to read 'in their own time'. Some are therefore deleted with barely a glance.
- Email can also isolate people and is not helpful to the idea of team building. It would, for example, be possible to communicate 10 times a day with someone via email, but walk past them in the corridor because you did not recognise them.

The conclusion was that email should not replace other forms of communication, particularly for a wider audience. An example was quoted of an 'edict that floated down from above' without any explanation, about the use of an electronic diary system, rather than paper. It has caused widespread concern and discontent, not least because there was no explanation or justification and no support offered.

The staff magazine should be expanded again from one sheet to something more substantial. It should contain some corporate and 'bigger picture' information as well as the current detail and 'gossip'. Also anything which would help people to do their job and anything which would restore a culture of pride, teamwork and job satisfaction.

The groups were shown an example of another staff magazine ('Contact' from Solihull) and some people thought it was much better than Grapevine. It was a good example of one document combining several of the things they wanted to see.

Particularly liked was the feature on 'teams' – Bromsgrove staff had been bemoaning the fact that the restructure had left them unsure of who did what within the Council and who they could ask for help on different issues. The feature in Contact seemed to provide what was needed.

It was described as 'enlightening'. They also felt that it was more professional looking than Grapevine. And they wondered if any additional cost could be offset by having fewer of the existing documents. A little relevant advertising is acceptable if it contributes to the cost of production.

5.4 The role of management

The staff attending the groups made it very clear that they would like management to be more visible and to take a more active role in the day to day business of their departments. Staff would feel more valued if their managers took time to get to know them and their jobs, perhaps spent a little time with them understanding daily routines and demands. It would foster mutual respect and give more credibility to management decisions.

Important information is always better delivered in person and everyone saw that managers have an essential role in providing information.

A point made in one of the groups was that Bromsgrove had placed little emphasis on staff training in recent years and it may be that some managers are not well equipped for the roles currently expected of them.

It was also suggested that managers could help to ensure that some 'good news' was spread as well. Despite the state of voluntary engagement and the acknowledged difficulties for the Council, some things were being done well and some service delivery was good. Some recognition of this would boost both morale and the image of the Council.

Another issue discussed in the groups was the passage of information upwards. Most of those attending felt they could talk to their line managers. But there was less confidence in their views reaching senior management and then being taken into consideration. Someone did point out that front line staff are 'the experts' and can make a contribution. Depot staff quoted examples of being consulted about equipment purchase but then being 'overruled' on financial bases.

6. DETAILED FINDINGS FROM THE MEMBERS GROUP

The Members attending the group brought with them a very broad range of interests and experience. Some were quite recently elected; others had served as long as 18 years. Several were also Parish Councillors.

6.1 Background Views

Members were clearly very conscious of the recent difficulties for the Council and felt that the general atmosphere was rather low at present. Some did not feel that they were yet 'part of a winning team', although an improving situation was acknowledged.

Undoubtedly, difficulties had been caused by the reorganisation and restructuring. Some staff were unsure about their roles, about new, and more specific, job descriptions and perhaps some things were being overlooked. Members noted several times that short term problems had been caused by 'all the changes and the moving around', but they did expect it to settle down.

It was also fairly widely agreed that staff were very busy and very stretched:

'We are desperately short of skilled staff'

A few Members did feel that it was time to take a more positive outlook and look to the future.

In the context of the discussion, the Communications Committee was mentioned – one of the Members attending sits on the Committee. But the majority did not seem to be aware of the existence of the Committee.

Views were expressed on a variety of communication issues but Members were mainly asked to focus on their own information needs. Other issues are covered in section 6.5.

6.2 Routine Communication

A distinction was made between information received routinely and 'ad hoc' requirements. Members' first reaction when asked what they receive routinely was:

'Too much!'

'Everything!'

'Far too much!'

They mentioned agendas, minutes, press releases and planning applications. With further prompting, also 'Briefly Bromsgrove' and the Chief Executive's Bulletin. There were many Boards, Committees and Task groups, all of which created paperwork.

The present system seems to be that they receive regular bundles of printed material, by post. (It was requested that this report noted that recent bundles had been sent in inadequate envelopes and that they had been damaged).

Having acknowledged that they received a considerable amount of material, Members went on to debate whether they really needed it all. For the minutes, agendas and planning applications, they concluded, albeit reluctantly, that they did. While they would never have the time to read it all in detail, they did want to know what was going on with the other agendas. They certainly felt they needed the opportunity to access any of the information.

One Member wondered whether it would be possible to offer a resume rather than full minutes. This was considered but rejected as creating unnecessary work.

There was then a considerable amount of debate on how this material should be delivered to them. This centred on electronic access. Those who were most computer literate felt that it was not necessary to have the printed material if they could simply be alerted, by e-mail, to what was available and given a link to access what they needed. They could then simply refer to what they wanted and choose to download and print what was necessary.

Computer problems may cause short term difficulties with this – some Members felt they may ‘miss’ things if electronic access was interrupted. One or two also thought they might overload their printers if they needed a long document.

Overall this seemed to offer, for many, a solution to the large amounts of paper they received. However, some Members chose not to use computers and therefore have no access to the website or e-mail. In this group of eleven, there were three with no computer. This was their preference and, while other Members might feel this to be a little outdated, they defended the right of others to have that preference.

The system must, therefore, cater for both sets of members – with and without electronic access. There was every indication that those with electronic access would be happy to consider replacing some of their routine paperwork with electronic links.

The press releases received could certainly be reviewed via the website.

Members also reviewed the more formal documents that they received:

[Briefly Bromsgrove](#)

(Sample copies were available) Opinions varied on this. Some felt it ‘useful’ others ‘a waste of time’. It was certainly not very attractive or easy to read. It was perhaps a ‘token offering’ of communication between staff and Members. There was frequently ‘nothing to report’ which could discourage some people from reading it, and some felt that all the content was available elsewhere. The majority view was probably that it did have the potential to be useful:

‘... the principle is good but it is not well executed – not very sexy’

One Member had found it useful as the only available vehicle to offer formal thanks to colleagues.

[Chief Executive’s Bulletin](#)

This attracted very little comment. Again it was not easy to read.

Members did wonder whether something more 'user friendly' could be designed to incorporate Briefly Bromsgrove and the Chief Executive's Bulletin. They would appreciate something which highlighted things important to them.

No-one attending the group seemed to be aware of any routine information which they did not receive. A few felt that they were sometimes not given important information soon enough. Examples were quoted of Chairs of Committees resigning and also the (perceived) lateness of the advice on the budget shortfall.

6.3 Ad Hoc Information Requirements

The main reason behind ad-hoc information needs – when Members need to contact officers directly – is in response to contact from residents. All Members agreed that this was the main cause; there may be others such as a need for background information on a specific topic. But resident queries were by far the most frequent, almost daily for some Members.

The most frequent topics were planning issues and road/street matters such as refuse collection. But it may be:

'Anything and everything'

Most Members seem to feel that such requests were usually urgent, because the resident sees them as important and urgent.

'We don't have easy problems, because if it was easy the residents wouldn't come to us.'

'We are the last resort.'

Members do have to make value judgements, because they are conscious of taking up officers' time, but it seems more than likely that they will have frequent, urgent need for information.

Their approach to obtaining that information varies and relates again to their access to e-mail. For some, the first reaction is to pick up the phone and try to contact officers directly. This seems appropriate if the query is urgent (which it usually is) or if it requires discussion. Others will usually use e-mail; perhaps they are at work themselves in the day time or find this approach more reliable.

Some Members spoke of getting frustrated when they could not make telephone contact and having to leave messages or use e-mail instead (not an option for everyone).

Letter writing is very rarely used. Partly because it has largely been superseded by e-mails (which are easier to write) and partly because Bromsgrove has a very poor record when it comes to replying to letters.

A personal visit to the Council House may be an alternative. It usually happens if there has been no satisfactory response by other means. Most Members prefer not to visit because they realise that they are preventing an officer from working.

'If there is a problem, go and see them, but don't make that routine.'

A personal visit would usually be linked to a meeting to make it worthwhile for the Member's time. And most Members also try to make prior appointments rather than unannounced visits.

In summary, the preferred approach would be to be able to ring and speak to the appropriate officer. **The main cause of dissatisfaction with the provision of ad-hoc information is being unable to contact the officer concerned by telephone.** The effect of this is to be unable to answer the resident urgently enough.

E-mail is both an alternative for these Members and the preferred means of approach for others, because they perceive that it suits both themselves and the officers better. It does give the officer time to consider a response also. Those Members in the group who use e-mail find it effective and that they are answered within an acceptable time frame.

All Members agreed that when they did make contact with officers, the response was good:

'I am treated with the utmost respect and if they didn't know the answer they will find it for me.'

'The officers are first class, they don't care who you are or what you are as long as you are trying to do your job.'

There were a few odd instance of queries not being answered and one Member had taken exception to what she saw as a 'blame culture', when officers criticised each other to her. But, overall, response to requests was very good, once contact was made.

In mitigation, people did note that it could be far more difficult to get answers from other public bodies such as gas and electricity companies, or train operators. Also, that dealing with the County Council could be less than successful.

'Here, if I have a problem the response is excellent; if I go to the County Council they try to keep me out.'

The group was asked to consider what they felt was reasonable in terms of information requests to officers. It was decided that it was reasonable to ask for anything they needed to solve a problem. If it was something they could handle themselves they would but if they got stuck, they would ask. They did not want to do the officers job for them, just to facilitate a solution.

There was no evidence that Members perceived any conflict over priorities when it came to information; no one felt they received less of a service than anyone else.

One specific issue was raised in relation to communication – many Members felt that, in the light of all the staff changes, they did not know who all of the officers were. They saw a need for introductions at the start of Council meetings:

'... last time there was a whole row of them I didn't know – couldn't see the name plates, didn't know who was interim and who was permanent.'

Another issue was that of feedback – if Members had agreed an action with officers, it would be helpful to have some indication of when it had been completed. This would enable them to re-contact any residents who had been involved also.

6.4 Improvements and Additions

Members were asked about two possible improvements to the lines of communication.

'Members Desk'

The option of a Members Desk was discussed, where all calls and requests were logged, assessed and response arranged. However, the Members in this group did not like the idea at all.

They thought it would 'cause chaos' and saw it as a 'delaying tactic'. It was just setting up a 'middleman' and they could perceive no benefit to themselves. It was felt to make contacting the relevant officer even more difficult than it is now.

'Members Bulletin'

A document exclusively for Members was suggested. But again, Members could see little use for this within the existing framework. They felt they already had 'too many bulletins' and that other documents would probably have the information they needed. It would only be adding to the already excessive amount of paper they received.

Thinking back to earlier comments about the shortcomings of 'Briefly Bromsgrove' and the Chief Executives Bulletin, it may be that once existing documents are rationalised, a Members Bulletin may be something that emerges.

'Members Forum'

This was something suggested by those at the group. They felt it might be helpful to have the facility to 'knowledge swap' between Members, to help each other. It was not discussed in any great detail, beyond deciding it would need to be well used, but an easily accessible forum may have some attraction.

6.5 Other issues

In the course of discussion, a couple of other issues arose and are briefly noted below.

Communication with the Public

Members were concerned that if there was any circumstance which created a lot of calls to the Council at any one time (such as a freighter breaking down and refuse not being collected) then the telephone system at the Hub could not cope. They thought the solution was a telephone system which could support a recorded message to explain emergencies and remove the need to speak to anyone in person. Other organisations had similar systems which seemed to work well. To do this successfully, there would need to be excellent lines of communication internally, to inform those who would create the messages..

In more general terms, it was essential to have the right information available to staff at the Hub, so they did not need to 'stonewall' callers. Several of the Members were concerned that staff did not always appear to know who to put callers through to.

Consultation

One of the Members felt strongly that there should be more consultation with residents. He thought that more effort should be made to listen to residents – the Council were in danger of treating residents with ‘arrogance’ ‘Spotlight’ meetings were good, but limited, more general consultation was suggested. Some of the other Members agreed that it was desirable for the public to have ‘a voice’.

