

Assessment of the communications service in local authorities

The Improvement and Development Agency have developed benchmarks for communications that are used by IDeA in the Local Government Improvement Programme peer reviews. We asked local authorities to assess themselves against the benchmarks, which are displayed below:

Communications benchmarks

Level 1

Meets statutory requirements for disseminating information. Complies with Audit Commission performance criteria for communicating with the public by phone and letter and dealing with complaints. Produces a comprehensive range of clearly written and up to date information on specific service areas, activities and functions which are translated into other languages where appropriate and available in Braille and on tape on request.

Level 2

Communication seen as ensuring the public is better informed and is able to gain an understanding of the council's policies and priorities. Proactive dissemination of information in response to perceived needs. Information about councillors and council performance is readily available. A wide range of media used for communication including ICT. Has arrangements for communication with partners and stakeholders on major areas of policy or significant change e.g. budgets, new legislation.

Has produced guidance for staff and members on how to communicate and involve the public. Has designated specific responsibilities to members and officers for communicating on particular issues. Has access to specialist communications expertise and has a strategy for engaging with local press and radio. Has made some attempts to address inequalities in mechanisms used.

Level 3

Communication is a strategic issue. Timeliness, targeting and access are all considered and positive steps taken to engage local people, with special efforts to communicate with 'hard to reach' groups e.g. young people, ethnic minorities. Communication is two-way, enabling the authority to listen and learn. The opportunities presented by ICT have been thought through and are contained within the strategy. All communication is evaluated against the objectives set. The leadership of the authority and senior officers set the communications style and members are seen as good communicators. Training in communications and presentation skills is readily available and participation by members and officers is actively encouraged.