

NATURAL ENGLAND BOARD



Meeting 3
21 February 2007

Paper No: **NEB P07 04**

Title: **Communications Strategy**
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1. Purpose

1.1 The purpose of this paper is to present to the Board the proposed communication strategy.

2. Recommendations

2.1 It is recommended that the Board:

- a. Approves the direction of travel set out in the communications strategy developed by the COI (Annex 1), including the following propositions:
 - Our approach to communications should be framed around a consistent interpretation of our role and brand proposition as an ‘authoritative campaigner’.
 - We need to embed communications considerations upstream in our delivery work.
 - **We should develop a centralised, embedded communications function with the appropriate capacity and skills; this will require an immediate review of the function.**

3. Background

- 3.1 In the period to vesting, our communications have focused on the areas needed for day one – staff readiness and launch. Following a successful launch and consideration of our external communications at the October Board meeting, we have identified a need to develop a communications strategy and plan to enable Natural England to communicate and deliver its Strategic Direction. This strategy needs to address the fundamental issues of building a first class communications function, communications priorities and activities, including channels and tools.
- 3.2 We commissioned COI Strategic Consultancy to work with the Board and staff to develop a communications strategy that addressed these issues and, importantly, benchmarked recommendations against best practice in other organisations in both the public and private sector.
- 3.3 Following widespread consultation with the organisation, including at the Board Outcome Groups, the COI has now submitted its final set of recommendations to Natural England (Annex 1).
- 3.4 The interim presentation to the Board Outcome Groups highlighted the following key themes:

- a. The development of a strong public facing brand;
 - b. Raising the profile of the communications function in Natural England;
 - c. Elevating the profile of Natural England's external communications;
 - d. The requirement for a centralised, embedded communications function with the required capacity and skills;
 - e. The importance of internal communications;
 - f. The development of a robust communications plan.
- 3.5 The final report incorporates these themes but additionally considers:
- a. Brand messaging;
 - b. The existing campaigns and Breathing Places activity;
 - c. A detailed analysis of recommended communications activities/tools and channels;
 - d. Risk factors and likely impact of activities;
 - e. Monitoring and evaluation.

4. Issues

- 4.1 Taking the key themes above, the main issues for the Board to consider are:

5. Building a relevant, focused public facing brand to achieve objectives

- 5.1 Natural England needs to have a distinctive and relevant brand positioning within the natural environment sector if it is to meet its objectives, engage the public and ultimately facilitate behaviour change. To achieve this outcome, the organisation needs to have a consistently owned understanding of our role that we project externally. The credentials of the organisation (namely that we are evidence based, solution oriented, a respected government advisor and deliver visible improvements to the natural environment at a 'landscape' scale), have led the COI to recommend that we take the role of 'authoritative campaigner' and that it is this role that should frame our approach to communications. However, it is vital that an overarching proposition and brand messaging is developed which enables Natural England to speak with one consistent, clear voice.

6. Elevating the profile of communications activities

- 6.1 If Natural England is to meet its objectives, the profile of external communications activities needs to be elevated substantially within the organisation. The existing campaign concepts and communications strategies need to collectively support our role as an 'authoritative campaigner'. In addition to targeting key audiences, stakeholders and customers, the COI report recommends that the general public is also a key brand target. Changing behaviour is part of the organisation's remit but owning an effective public brand will provide substantial leverage with other audiences.
- 6.2 The requirement for a centralised, embedded communications function with the appropriate capacity and skills
- 6.3 Communications needs to be far more embedded within the organisation and everything we do should have the customer in mind. Currently communications are treated as a downstream service provider at the delivery

end of projects and urgently needs to be incorporated at the beginning of the process. One of the key requirements to facilitate this change is to ensure that effective skills and capacity are in place to deliver communications throughout the organisation; the COI has emphasised that this needs to be tackled as a matter of urgency and that we need a centralised communications function to deliver this. A centralised communications function is not location dependent – however, it is important that we project a consistent corporate message across our operations, albeit with suitable regional flavour. Having the processes and management controls in place to ensure all activity is developed against strategy is therefore critical. The communications function needs to be capable of undertaking the implementation of the new communications plan immediately. We therefore need an immediate review of skills and capacity.

7. Implementing the plan effectively

- 7.1 The recommended plan requires considerable change and improvement. These include: a better press desk and media relations system, a website that is more focused on the needs of our customers, a larger education outreach programme and a market research function. We need effectively robust systems, processes and evaluation put in place to ensure consistent quality of delivery of our communications and effective brand management. Furthermore, the issues presented here clearly infer the need for the development of a substantial internal communications programme that re-launches the communications function, educates the broader organisation as to the role of communications, and embeds the brand proposition and messaging throughout.