

CASE STUDY

City of York Council

Strategic communications review and consultation



Brief

The council's plans to move to a new headquarters in the city had been rejected amidst negative media coverage and criticism from stakeholders that the council had failed to communicate or consult properly on the project.

DTW was appointed in February 2009 to undertake a strategic review of all consultation and communications activities that had previously taken place on the project.

Following a successful review, DTW were then asked to manage a consultation programme giving local residents an opportunity to influence the design features on two new alternatives for the council's headquarters.

Approach

Phase I – strategic review

The strategic review was presented as a written report that looked at current practice and identified improvements for future work on the project.

DTW worked closely with the project and marketing and communications teams within the council.

This involved:

- Face to face discussion with the project and marketing and communications teams
- Focus groups with staff and residents
- Structured interviews with senior officers and members throughout the authority
- Interviews with external stakeholders
- A review of all news releases and media coverage, and
- A review of all digital and web based activity.

DTW's report recommended a number of changes in the way the authority approached the project.

Phase II – consultation

DTW were then engaged to produce consultation materials for the next phase of the project, where two possible alternatives were being presented to the public for the first time. As the alternatives were being promoted by private

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sector organisations, and the council was making its decision through a prescribed European procurement process, it was crucial that all the materials combined the twin messages of making the case for change whilst being neutral on the two alternatives proposed.

DTW wrote, designed and produced a written consultation document that was sent to each of the 76,000 households across York, as well as to council staff and the wider business community. DTW also created exhibition panels for use at a specific week long consultation event at the Mansion House in York city centre.

Both elements of work were undertaken against the backdrop of a controversial subject in a complex political environment to a demanding and set timeframe. It involved securing buy-in and support for the process and its outcomes from senior councillors and officials within the council and from the private sector developers that were represented.

Outcomes

Phase I – strategic review

DTW's written report was endorsed by the project team and the council's marketing and communications team, and has gone on to form the backbone of a new approach to communications on this project and others across the council.

Phase II – consultation

In total 8,267 questionnaires (both online and print) were completed and returned to the council. In addition, approximately 1,000 people visited the Mansion House Exhibition throughout the three day event.

The consultation activities formed the basis of more positive media coverage and greater support from stakeholders on the project moving forward.