

## **Agenda Item No:5**

Committee:	<b>Scrutiny Committee for Social Services and Health</b>
Date:	<b>25 October 2002</b>
Report by:	<b>Director of Legal and Community Services</b>
Title of Report:	<b>Public Relations Support to Best Value and Scrutiny</b>
Purpose of Report	<b>To give scrutiny members the opportunity to contribute to the county-wide review of communications, which is currently being undertaken</b>

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### **RECOMMENDATION – to note the report and comment as necessary**

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#### **Background and Supporting Information**

1. There is currently a council-wide review of communications, which will include making recommendations about the support that can be given to scrutiny and best value reviews. Any suggestions from members of this Committee in relation to public relations issues generally will be considered as part of this review.
2. Currently, the public relations office gives some support to scrutiny and best value reviews. This usually consists of issuing a press release during the consultation stage of the review, and another when the report is published. There is, of course, always scope to improve this coverage.
3. There are certain restrictions on the publicity we can give to the project boards working on the reviews. The main restriction is imposed by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Government Publicity. In press releases we only quote the chairmen of scrutiny committees, and this practice was recently endorsed at a meeting of all Scrutiny Chairmen. However, we could promote the work of the project boards more widely.
4. One of the issues that scrutiny and best value review teams must tackle if they wish to promote their work more positively is identifying the difference they will make or have made to the lives of the people in East Sussex. Many of the reviews have been into the 'back office'

processes or procedures adopted by the council. It is extremely difficult to interest the public in this as it is not seen as having a direct impact on them.

5. Even where we have undertaken reviews which do have a direct impact on the communities, it is often difficult to generate interest. One example of this is the review into care for older people. A press release was issued about this, but it is understood that no comments were received from the public in response. We may need to be much more proactive – for example one council carrying out such a review actually set up displays in local precincts, and bussed people out to homes, etc. to see first hand the care on offer. This led to some quality feedback but was, of course, time consuming and very costly.
6. The real issue behind this is resources both in terms of staff and finances. We have two press officers who work for the departments, cabinet, chairman and scrutiny and best value committees, and the demands on their time are great. They would be unable, for example, to attend every meeting. A better approach may be for one of the PR team to be invited to an early meeting of the review team, to help identify what opportunities there may be to promote the review. They could also attend a meeting nearer the time of the report to advise on how recommendations might be written to show their impact on the public. It should be remembered, however, that communications is not the preserve of the PR team – everyone has a role to play and should be aware of the importance of communication with the public looking for angles which may interest the media.
7. Members' views are requested.

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