

Communications Function Review 2010

FINAL REPORT JULY 2010

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Introduction

In August 2008, public service communications managers decided to review the communications function across the New Zealand public service. The review was motivated by senior communications practitioners' desire to better define communications practice in the public sector, and to identify and implement improvements that would strengthen the ability of public service organisations to communicate effectively.

State Services Commissioner Iain Rennie agreed to sponsor the review and directed the group, under the oversight of a steering group, to produce a report on its findings.

The result was the *Communications Function Review 2009* (A report to the State Services Commissioner). That report:

- defined government agency communications
- provided a brief history of the function
- described the state of communications across New Zealand government agencies, and
- developed principles for the delivery of government agency communications.

It also made 12 recommendations (see Annex) for further work to improve government communications delivery in the short, medium and long term.

Working groups of communications staff from different state agencies, led by communications managers, were established to complete the work needed to fulfil the recommendations.

This report marks the culmination of the review and the implementation of its recommendations. It is designed as a guide for chief executives and other senior managers who have a direct interest in managing the communications function within New Zealand's public sector.

The full reports of each review working group are available in a set of online appendices along with the resources and guidance developed as a result of the review on the Network of Public Sector Communicators website (<http://www.psnetwork.org.nz/resources/>). These are signposted from this report.

Together, the report and its appendices (available online):

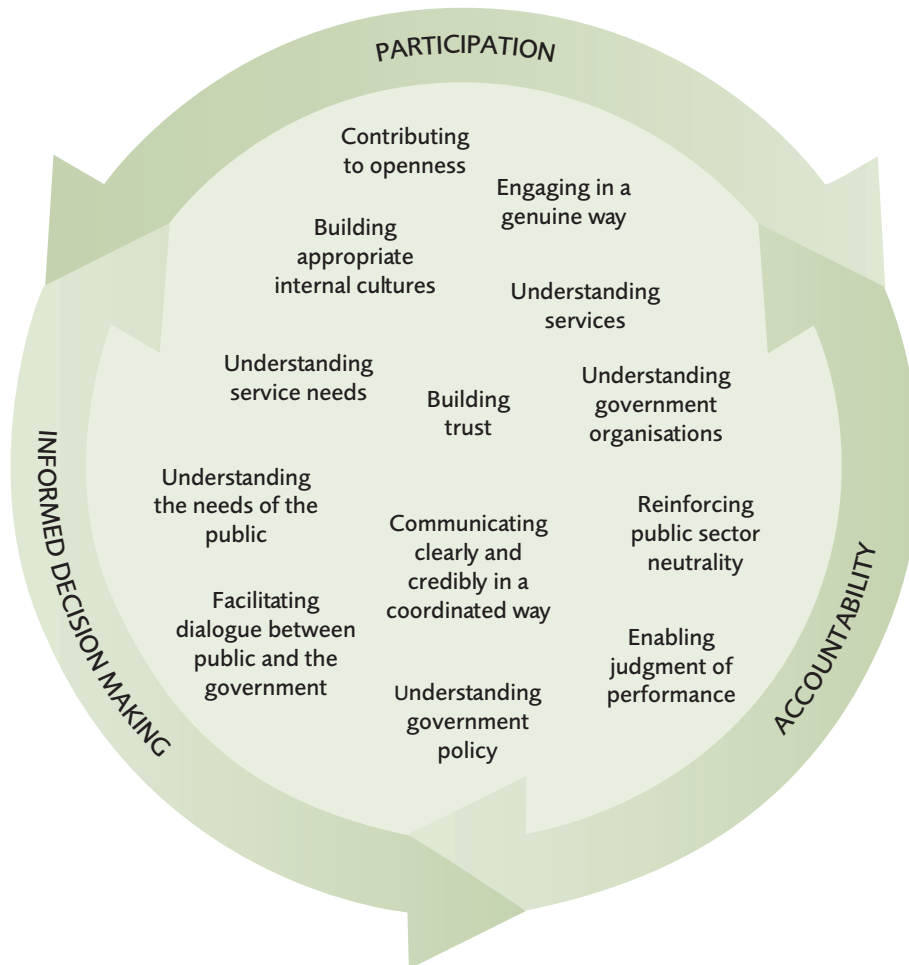
- clarify the role and purpose of public sector communications and the competencies needed to deliver quality communications services
- strengthen communications training and performance evaluation
- provide guidance to chief executives and other senior managers with a direct interest in managing the communications function, and
- provide better shared resources and support coordinated procurement.

It is hoped that the findings of the review and the resources and guidance developed as a result will significantly strengthen communications practice in the public service and, potentially, the wider state sector.

Communications function

Rationale

Effective communication enables an informed and participating public.



Definition

"The public sector communications function enables the effective flow of information and ideas between an agency and its internal and external publics, to facilitate participation, service delivery, and informed decision-making, and to build accountability and trust in government.

This is achieved by developing, delivering and evaluating public agency communications based on good practice communications techniques, supported by the principles of integrity and neutrality of the public service."

This definition and rationale have been combined in a two-page summary for distribution to communications staff (see Appendix 1).

See Appendix 1:

- Two-page summary of state sector communications definition and rationale.
- Material from review working group on communications definition and rationale.

Competencies

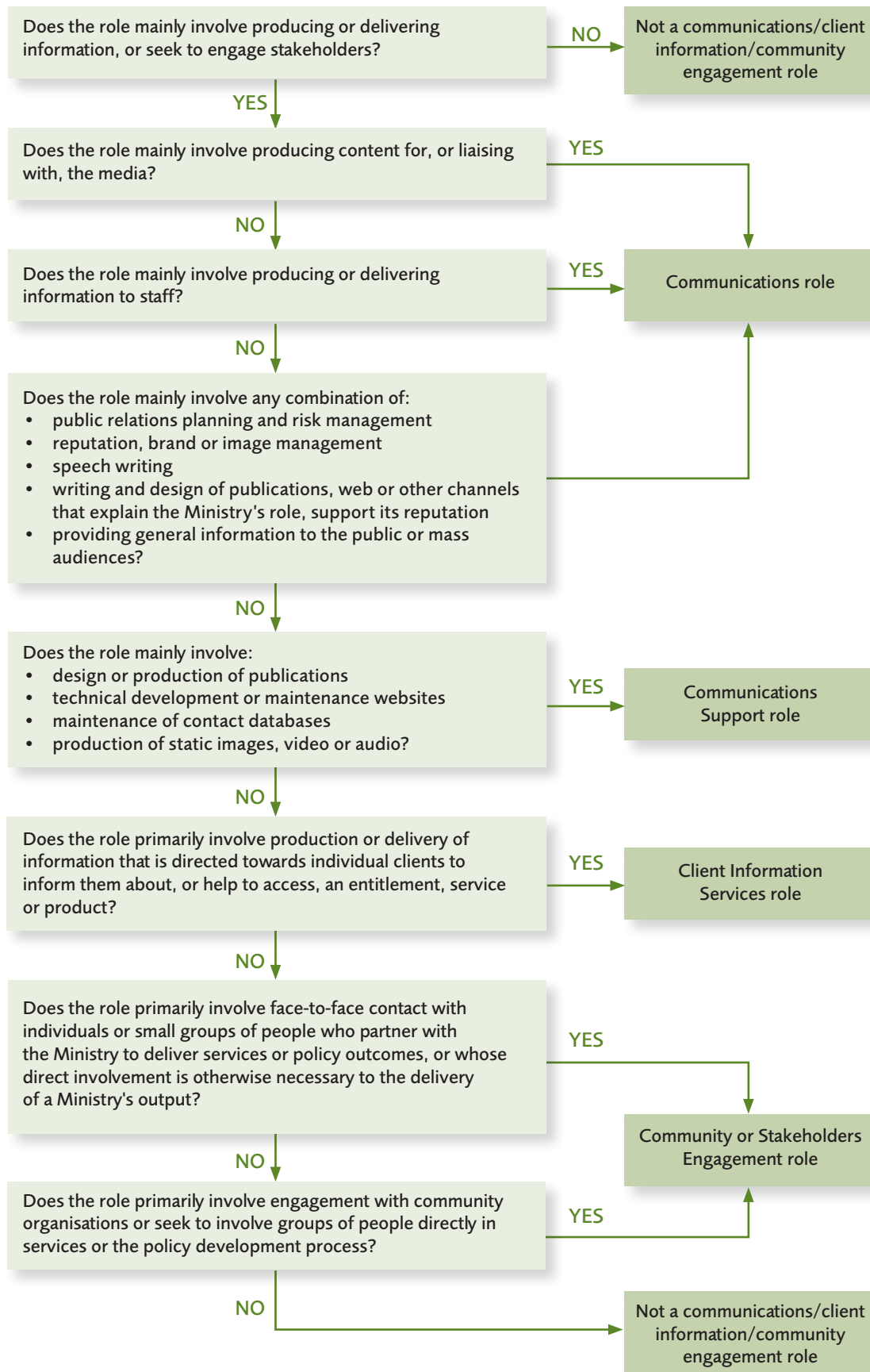
The review team carried out work to identify what constitutes a core communications practitioner and develop a set of competencies for communicators.

Three systems were looked at – the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) codes, for determining a core communications practitioner, and the Lominger and United Kingdom Government Communications Network (GCN) frameworks for developing a set of competencies needed in core communications roles.

The ANZSCO codes, a job classification system used in the public service, were found to cover some, but not all, communications roles. However, they did not provide guidance as to which roles were core communications roles (e.g. media advisor) and which support communications (e.g. community consultation and engagement).

The following decision tree, which can be applied to any job, was recommended instead using work undertaken for the Ministry of Social Development.

DETERMINING HOW TO DESIGNATE A ROLE



Of the two competency frameworks assessed, the review team chose the Lominger Competency Model as the system that would integrate across New Zealand public sector HR practice.

Lominger is a proprietary system that provides a set of HR/skills and evaluation tools based around using 'card sorts' to identify competencies critical to success. It is already used in both the private and public sector in New Zealand as a basis for identifying role competencies.

A series of workshops using the Lominger Competency Model was held for communication practitioners, to agree a common set of competencies for position guides at communications director, communications manager, senior communications advisor and advisor levels of the communications function.

The objective was to identify between six and 10 critical behavioural competencies for each of the four communication levels. The core competencies identified (which are cumulative from junior to senior) are set out in the table below.

LOMINGER COMPETENCIES FOR COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS IN THE NEW ZEALAND PUBLIC SECTOR

Core competencies	Advisor	Senior advisor	Manager	Director
Action orientation	Dealing with ambiguity	Decision quality	Managerial courage	Business acumen
Composure	Informing	Negotiating	Managing and measuring	Conflict management
Customer focus	Process management	Political savvy	Motivating others	Perspective
Integrity and trust	Self development	Strategic agility	Building effective teams	Standing alone
Interpersonal savvy				Managing vision and purpose
Learning on the fly				
Problem solving				

Note that leadership is an integral element across all senior communications positions.

See Appendix 2:

- Report from working group to the Communications Review Steering Group.

Leadership and accountability

Performance measurement and evaluation

The review team carried out a literature review of communications performance models (including the United Kingdom Government Communications Network resources) and surveyed senior government communications professionals to determine what tools are being used in New Zealand.

The survey revealed the most common performance measurements used in government organisations are monitoring press clippings and the like for mentions of their organisation (77 percent) and keeping a register of media enquiries (71 percent).

Very few organisations survey the New Zealand general public (24 percent), use publications performance measures (24 percent), the UMR Mood of the Nation survey (18 percent), or staff engagement surveys with organisation specific questions relating to the communications function (12 percent).

The review considered there was a significant mismatch between the most effective tools and those most used in the New Zealand public service.

The **most effective** tools for delivering meaningful communications performance measurement were considered to be:

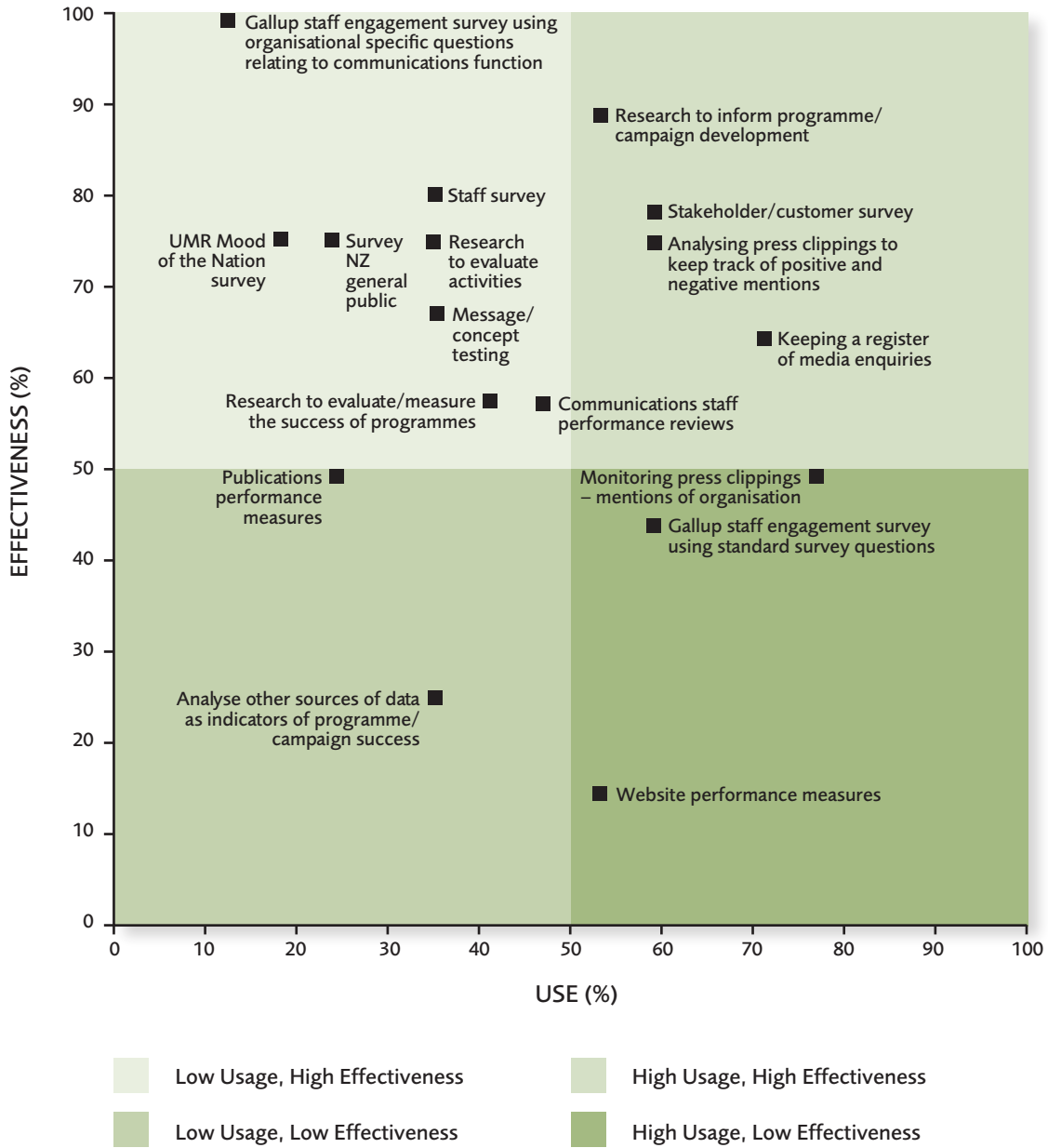
- staff engagement surveys (using organisation specific questions relating to the communications function)
- research to inform or evaluate programme/campaign development
- staff surveys
- stakeholder/customer surveys, and
- analysis of press clippings to keep track of positive and negative mentions.

The **least effective** were considered to be:

- website performance measures
- analysing other data sources as indicators of programme or campaign success, and
- staff engagement surveys if only using standard survey questions.

The chart on the following page shows the relationship between usage and effectiveness. (Note: these results are indicative only as the number of people rating the effectiveness of some of these measures was very low.)

USAGE VS. EFFECTIVENESS



Although many New Zealand government agencies are researching their communications for development purposes, far fewer are using research to measure performance and evaluate the **outcome** of their communications.

The international literature review revealed that while evaluation is regarded as a core communications requirement, much of the discussion covers the difficulty in evaluating, the lack of measurement in the sector and the variety of methods being used by practitioners.

Internationally the public relations profession has not agreed upon a common set of criteria or tools. Many use a wide range of tools and evaluation practices to overcome the limitations of each individual method. No one method is considered 'most effective'. The area where there is greatest agreement is internal communications, which is considered easier to measure and monitor, by using staff surveys and feedback.

Given the lack of agreement internationally, the review team decided it was not possible to determine best practice measurement reporting tools within the timeframe available.

Instead a sub-group has been set up to:

- develop a guide to government communications evaluation in New Zealand by adapting the work of the United Kingdom's Government Communications Network and other best practice guides from the United States, and including case studies and examples of the methodologies used by New Zealand government communications departments
- determine whether a generic framework/common reporting tool(s) for government communications performance measurement is required or desired
- investigate the feasibility of creating a database across government agencies to use as normative data.

See Appendix 3:

- *Developing Government Communications Performance Measurement and Evaluation* – includes:
 - results of government communications survey and international literature review
 - links to international reports, publications and websites reviewed.

Induction package for chief executives

The review team has developed an induction package on the communications function for chief executives (see Appendix 4).

The package provides the basis for a conversation with an incoming chief executive about the role of communications in their organisation; to deepen their understanding of the function and sharpen their expectations of the role of the function in their business to drive improved performance.

The induction covers the following areas:

- definition of the function in the public sector context
- governance and form of the function within agencies
- managing an agency's reputation
- internal communications and brand
- all-of-government communications.

See Appendix 4:

- *Chief Executive Communications Induction Package* (A report to the Communications Review Steering Committee).

Training module for communications practitioners

The review team has developed a training module for government communications practitioners (see Appendix 5). The module is designed to reinforce their responsibilities under the State Services code of conduct, *Standards of Integrity and Conduct* – namely to be fair, impartial, responsible and trustworthy.

The module covers:

- the definition of the public service communications function
- key principles in the *Standards of Integrity and Conduct*
- relevant parts of the Cabinet Manual 2008
- E-government guidelines.

The module provides case studies, which help to illustrate the consequences of not following best practice, and review tasks. It will be delivered to communications practitioners through the established training fora, like the Network of Public Sector Communicators and PRINZ.

See Appendix 5:

- *Training Module for Government Communications Practitioners.*

Chair of Communications role

The review team looked at the merits of creating a 'head of profession' for government communications and whether such a position would add sufficient value to warrant the investment.

Research included assessment of the current New Zealand operating environment, international models for heads of profession and the roles they play in the state sector.

The review concluded that creating a Head of Communications role would have benefits, but was not achievable in the short term.

This was due to a range of environmental factors.

- Creating the new position could be perceived as being in conflict with the government's intention to reduce the number of communications staff in the public service.
- Public service chief executives interviewed as part of the review were generally not in favour of centralising the communications function and doing so was potentially in conflict with chief executives' independence under the State Sector Act.
- The Better Administrative and Support Services (BASS) project already underway includes considering the possibility of centralising some services, including corporate communications.

Instead the review team supported creating a part-time Chair of Communications role, to be filled from among public service communications managers and directors and appointed by public service chief executives.

It is envisaged the Chair will continue with day-to-day responsibilities and activities within their department or agency with an agreed percentage of their time being allocated to the role of chair.

The aim of the role is to lead government communications and improve performance across the sector, develop best practice standards and guidance, centralise services and coordinate information across the sector.

The role will add value in a number of practical ways including:

- standardising practices such as training and measurement
- helping with recruitment and appointment panels
- developing professional competencies
- sharing resources and information
- chairing communication practitioners' monthly meetings
- coordinating responses to emergency and crisis management
- coordinating public information campaigns
- coordinating advertising programmes and publications.

The Chair will be supported by a Deputy Chair and a governance panel of chief executives and will receive administrative support. The State Services Commissioner and the Chief Executive of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet will be responsible for managing the role and function.

The governance panel will also be able to receive advice or consult with a senior communications practitioner operating outside of the state sector, such as the Chair of the Network of Public Sector Communicators, the President of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand or the convener of the Wellington chapter of the International Association of Business Communicators.

The Chair and Deputy Chair are due to be appointed in August 2010 and will operate on an annual rotation system.

In addition to the core public service, there would be advantages in having the role cover the larger Crown entities, e.g. Accident Compensation Corporation, Housing New Zealand, New Zealand Transport Agency. This would help to align activities across agencies that deliver major state-funded or statutory services.

It is proposed that the State Services Commissioner review the role after two years.

See Appendix 6:

- *Communications Review Recommendation 8: Head of Profession, Communications.*

Machinery of communications function

Good practice communications units

Chief executives surveyed as part of the *Communications Function Review 2009* commented that a 'one size fits all' communications structure was not appropriate for application across public sector agencies, given the specialty nature of many of them.

However, there is a lack of reference information available to chief executives and other senior managers on what constitutes a modern, efficient and effective communications unit.

The review team set out to address this lack of information by researching best practice with a view to providing chief executives with information on good practice in structuring and resourcing communications functions.

The original intention was to provide information in the form of a matrix, which would allow chief executives to select the characteristics of their agency and then see what communications resource requirements were appropriate.

However, the review team concluded there were simply too many variables to provide an accurate and useful matrix that would allow a chief executive to consult a table and say "for a department of this size and function these are the communications resources I will need".

Instead the team decided the intent could most usefully be met by providing:

- information on the strengths and weaknesses of different models for organising communications functions within an organisation
- examples of communications structures within three actual organisations of varying size and function – a small policy ministry, a medium/large operational department and a large operational department with significant non-departmental activity.

The resulting "Guidelines for organising your communications function" (see Appendix 7) provides guidance on the range of services the function should deliver and the strengths and weaknesses of different models for delivering those services.

It also provides examples of communications structures in three government agencies as described above. The communications functions in the organisations chosen are considered to be good examples of the type and size of resource that may be needed.

Any organisation has communication needs that are general to the whole organisation (corporate communications) and communications that are specific to particular operational or support units, or projects.

Invariably there is some tension between these needs. However, organisations that communicate effectively successfully resolve these inherent conflicts and are able to meet the needs of both the organisation as a whole and those of business units and projects.

As with all good design, form should follow function. The starting point for any discussion should be "what communications outcomes do we need to achieve for the organisation as a whole, and for the individual parts of the business?"

Different models should be judged against how well they meet those needs and if there are trade-offs between competing needs, these should be explicitly acknowledged.

See Appendix 7:

- *Good practice public service communications unit* (Communications Function Review 2009) – includes:
 - Appendix 1: "Guidelines to organising your communications function".

Making British resources available to New Zealand practitioners

Communications practitioners in the British Civil Service have access to a wide range of online resources provided centrally by the Government Communications Network (GCN).

At the beginning of the review GCN was approached to see if it would be prepared to share these best practice resources with New Zealand. It agreed and made its full online resources available.

As many of these resources are specific to the British context it was necessary to review them and decide which were suitable for New Zealand and whether these needed to be modified in any way.

Guides and tools in the following categories are currently being migrated to the Network of Public Sector Communicators website (<http://www.psnetwork.org.nz>) and will be available in the second half of 2010.

- Strategic planning
- Communication planning
- Evaluation
- Stakeholders and audiences
- Insight
- Branding
- Working in government
- Creative management
- Internal communication
- Digital communication
- Campaign implementation.

See Appendix 8:

- *Machinery of Function – Recommendation 10: Consultation on the stock-take of the UK GCN web resources.*

Relationships with ministerial communications staff

Communications practitioners in government agencies must work within the framework of a politically neutral public service whereas ministerial communications staff work in a political environment. This can sometimes cause tensions when the two need to work together.

A briefing template, based on a document used by the Department of Internal Affairs, has been developed to help government communications staff establish good working relationships with communications staff in the offices of the Ministers they serve.

The template clarifies responsibilities and relationships between agency and ministerial staff and can be used to brief press secretaries following their appointment to a Minister's office or a change of government.

The template suggests briefings cover:

- background on the agency
- how it works with Ministers' offices
- how it approaches issues such as planned communications, alerts of potential issues and requests for information
- agency resources, e.g. briefings to incoming Ministers, websites, annual reports
- formal departmental reporting to the Minister
- parliamentary questions
- contact details for communications staff.

See Appendix 9:

- *Briefing for press secretaries.*

Procurement guidelines

The review undertook to develop a set of standard guideline procurement documents tailored for the communications function, drawing on existing material and in conjunction with the Ministry of Economic Development's procurement group.

The Ministry of Social Development (MSD) was asked to lead this project as it was already undertaking significant work internally, and on behalf of other agencies, to promote coordinated procurement.

This work included:

- establishing a panel of providers to approach for design services
- commencing a print procurement tender with common use provisions so other public sector agencies could leverage off favourable rates and best practice
- negotiating a government advertising rate for government telephone and online directory services with service provider Yellow
- reviewing the relationship with other key providers such as New Zealand Post.

The review team was also aware of the need to coordinate with the Independent Government Procurement and Shared Services work and limited its recommendations to those that were achievable in the short term.

The recommended approach is to:

- establish a cross-government 'centre of excellence' approach to share best practice advice on procuring a range of communications services
- provide a draft for the first centre of excellence deliverable, an online procurement toolkit tailored for public sector communications groups and practitioners – this will be hosted on the Network of Public Sector Communicators website (www.psnetwork.org.nz)
- explore ways and means to leverage from shared, joint and collaborative value-for-money communications procurement practices
- coordinate a cross-government and provider event to discuss more effective communications procurement practices and processes – by 1 November 2010.

A high level project plan has been drafted for developing the online procurement toolkit (see Appendix 10) and MSD has started discussions around establishing membership for a cross-agency working group. The group will help scope and develop content ensuring the toolkit is relevant and fit for purpose.

The Ministry has also scoped and started drafting content for the proposed online content. This includes:

- Registration of Interest (ROI) and Request for Proposal (RFP) templates
- letter templates
- engagement and contract negotiation advice
- Frequently Asked Questions and Glossary of Terms
- suggestions for developing and managing successful supplier relationships
- sector case studies and ROI/RFP examples
- a directory of public sector contacts experienced in communications procurement
- links to relevant professional resources.

The toolkit will be promoted across government as a 'virtual' centre of excellence and repository of best practice advice on communications procurement.

See Appendix 10:

- *SSC Communications Review: Report on Recommendation 12 – Communications procurement*, includes:
 - Appendix A: "Public sector communications supplier procurement toolkit initiative".

Conclusion

This report concludes the public service Communications Function Review begun in 2009. The review has produced advice and resources with the potential to significantly strengthen the ability of public service organisations to communicate effectively.

Whether this improvement is fully achieved will depend on what happens next.

The recommended governance for the profession, through the Chair of Communications and chief executive advisory panel, is intended to ensure the work that has been completed is implemented, and the profession continues to build on the results of the review to improve communications practice and performance.

Roll-out of the resources cited in this report will promote a common understanding of the purpose of the communications function and the competencies needed to deliver best practice public sector communications. It will also improve coordination, training and resource sharing by communications practitioners.

The report has also identified some areas, such as developing standardised performance measures, where more work needs to be done.

The review Steering Group would like to acknowledge the considerable commitment of time and effort by communications professionals across the public service that has been needed to complete this review. This work was undertaken in addition to individuals' departmental responsibilities and demonstrates real commitment to improving communications.

That commitment provides reassurance that the outcomes of this review will be used and that both public service organisations and the citizens they serve will benefit as a result.

Annex: Communications Function Review 2009 recommendations

1. Reference documentation is prepared which clearly articulates the rationale for the communications function as a critical component in the development of policy and delivery of services in the public sector.
2. That a short, memorable, but all-encompassing function definition be agreed and provided to public service departments for incorporation in appropriate documentation relating to the communications function.
3. That further work is undertaken, in conjunction with the SSC's Human Resource (HR) Capability survey team, to identify what constitutes a core communications practitioner according to the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) codes, and distributed to the HR teams that input the survey data.
4. Work is completed, in consultation with SSC, on a set of competencies for communicators. These competencies will be both technical and behavioural, using the Lominger and United Kingdom Government Communications Network (UK GCN) frameworks and include a component for senior managers.
5. Drawing on Government Communications Network (GCN) web resources, a set of best practice measurement reporting tools be developed and made available to all core public sector agencies. Such tools be trialled for one fiscal year and then be incorporated as agreed measurements in departmental statements of service performance.
6. An induction package on the communications function be prepared and piloted for all newly appointed public service chief executives in conjunction with the State Services Commission's Manager, CE Services and Agency Performance Improvement.
7. Heads of Communications to develop a training module for all communications practitioners in the public service agencies reinforcing their responsibilities to uphold and espouse the values set down in the code of conduct for public servants – namely to be fair, impartial, responsible and trustworthy.
8. That the State Services Commission (SSC), in conjunction with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), make an assessment within a one-to two-year timeframe whether creation of a 'head of profession' for communications would add sufficient material value in the New Zealand context to warrant investment in creation of such a position.
9. Research is undertaken into the best practice communications units from which guideline information is produced on the makeup of 'model' units for agencies of varying size and type. Guideline material to be included as a component of the Chief Executive Induction packs.
10. Final consultation is undertaken on the stock-take of the United Kingdom Government Communications Network (GCN) web resources and arrangements are made with the [New Zealand] Network of Public Sector Communicators to make available information to all as an ongoing source of guidance on best practice.

11. The existing Department of Internal Affairs (DIA) guideline document relating to relationships between agency communicators and communicators in Ministers' offices be consulted with ministerial advisors and SSC officials for refinement and preparation of a formal, ongoing document circulated before the end of 2009.
12. A set of standard guideline procurement documents be prepared, drawing on pre-existing material and in conjunction with the Ministry of Economic Development's Procurement Group, tailored for the communications function. The templates to be made available to all procurement sections of all government agencies.

