



## **TIE - a step change in communication**

### **The Brief**

Liddell Thomson was asked to advise the Chair of TIE on improving the direction and leadership of the company's communication activity and, in particular, to

- Test the perspectives and attitudes of senior, experienced communication practitioners familiar with Edinburgh and the city's current circumstances
- Explore the potential interest in and the pre-requisites of a senior communication role with TIE

The context for the assignment was the Chair's intention to re-position the role of communication, in its widest sense, to become core to the performance of the business, a powerful and influential force in setting strategy and managing and facilitating day-to-day operations. This would be a Board position. The further contextual consideration was the potential to expand the role beyond TIE to a wider transport remit and possibly to a larger and even more influential role representing the city as a whole.

### **The Process**

Liddell Thomson contributed to a list of names of communication specialists and others with senior communication roles in the private and public sector and undertook to talk, in confidence, to four highly-experienced, highly-regarded communicators with experience and gravitas who would be familiar with, or be alert to the communication challenges facing TIE and the city of Edinburgh as a whole. Each was approached personally and in confidence and was not made aware of the subject of the discussion in advance. Each conversation was based on thirteen core questions and each was assured of the confidentiality of the discussion.

### **Current Communication**

All of the interviewees rated TIE's current communications as poor and un-coordinated from public, corporate and personal perspectives. Senior level communication with TIE had improved under the previous Chair, but there was a consistent view that operational communication was not as effective as it could and should be. There was a recognition that TIE's reputation was not always under its own control because of the roles and perspectives of other public bodies.

There was concern about communication with the travelling public and poor co-ordination with other bodies, such as police, fire and other transport organisations, though TIE's consultation activity was considered *very good* by one interviewee, as was its pre-Christmas electronic messaging on routes into the city.

*"When I lived in Edinburgh, I would receive a piece of paper saying something would happen; then another piece of paper saying there had been some delay or change...by time the action happened and the shock it induced, I'd forgotten about the bits of paper. Yet someone somewhere had communicated and a box had been ticked"*.

*"I'm not sure they realise there's a wider hinterland of East and West Lothian and Fife man people travelling in and out of the city that need to be informed"*.

*"They set out to do things meaningfully, but circumstances seem to work against them"*.

The reasons for current failings were attributed to TIE having no strategic approach, with no one experienced in communication or with muscle at a senior level in the organisation.

Each was adamant that TIE's reputation was recoverable, with the right approach and hard work.

*"They have to keep picking away at the hard shell of distrust that surrounds them"*.

*"TIE is carrying out something which others have made a decision about – the provision of trams - they should not take all the problems on their own heads"*.

*"TIE can't do it all itself; it needs a strong edge, political support and alliances and to find people with common needs and purpose"*.

*"No works of any kind should be signed off until the head of communications is satisfied all the necessary pre-communication has been done".*

*"Language is too technical and remote".*

*"TIE must build credibility and regular communication with senior politicians, community and business organisations in advance and be fast if things go wrong".*

*"Get everyone of importance on the same positive hymn sheet".*

*"They've got to get to the wider public – no easy feat – but they also have to get to corporate Edinburgh, the people who have businesses, offices, headquarters and who work in the city".*

*"They need to build networks of people in corporate life – influencers and multipliers – and keep them regularly engaged. It's not enough to engage at working level, they've got to get to the leaders".*

*"Need to sell benefits more – pretty pictures are not enough".*

*"Billboards are in place, not always at the right places, but they could be regularly updated with interesting factual information about what's happening and what will happen – and what we have to look forward to".*

*"They need a new set of tools for modern communication – the press is not the be-all and end all".*

*"In some organisations the front person is the Chair and that would be effective for TIE. The power base is critical".*

*"A director with the full support/access to the Chair and the other key figures would have a chance for success".*

### **Personal attributes and characteristics**

There was commonality in the attributes and characteristics required in leading TIE's communications.

- A trusted, proven, experienced communicator of the highest integrity
- Someone with 'street credibility' – trusted by politicians and journalists
- Politically – with a small 'p' - astute
- Understanding of how Edinburgh/Scotland works
- A clear sense of the real challenges and the way ahead
- A strategic thinker with a strong vision
- Strong-willed, clear-thinker
- Someone with energy, patience, creativity and diligence
- A team worker and a networker – established relationships
- Persuasive with excellent verbal and written skills
- Charisma and experience in public speaking and in the media
- Used to working outwith personal comfort zones
- Hard worker with good shoe leather and thick skin.

For the wider, city communication role in particular there would need to be

- No alternative agendas, only the good of Edinburgh
- No political allegiance or agenda
- Respect and trust of Edinburgh City Council

*"It's important the person coming into post is trusted in his/her own right; there is little, if any 'banked' trust and respect for TIE so the new player would have to have a high degree of personal goodwill".*

*"Personal integrity that transcends TIE's current reputation".*

*"Someone who realises it's not just about Edinburgh, it's about Glasgow and other parts of Scotland as well".*

*"Hiring a traditional communicator or PR person would be a mistake – it would send signals of spin doctoring and would undermine the potential of the role".*

*"Someone who will not be diverted by political mischief and egos".*

*"There is a danger is hiring someone who knows too much and is too involved already. Some objectivity would be a good thing".*

*"Taking on someone who is not aware of the people and the nuances would cost valuable time in getting to grips with the issues".*

### **The challenges of the role**

There was common appreciation of the complexity and challenges of the role.

The greatest concerns were over clarity of the role, responsibilities and powers; all-party acceptance of a spokesman role (for the city) and political interference and ego.

*"It is vital to ensure that councillors really appreciate the threats to the city's reputation if the city does not present itself cohesively".*

Also critical were the co-ordination of the efforts of the various public and private sector organisations with a vested interest in Edinburgh's success, creating a common agenda, mutualising benefits and building and maintaining trusting relationships

*"Key players have to realise that the reputation/perceptions of the city are declining".*

*"It is vital to de-politicise the presentation of Edinburgh".*

*"It's important that staff in all key organisations are on message – a common agenda for everyone".*

*"Older executive out of their comfort zones in terms of new media".*

*"Co-ordination is critical; currently there is either lethargy or a failure to appreciate the reality of Edinburgh's situation".*

*"We need to harness and focus all public/private sector communication resources in Edinburgh – create a virtual support team".*

### **Imperatives of the role**

The management of reputation is a long-term commitment. A stop-gap appointment with no career progression, would not appeal to most of those interviewed. TIE needs to demonstrate it is serious about communication and a serious long-term appointment is recommended.

A senior communication role with TIE alone is not enough to tempt these senior players to leave their current positions. The wider transport role, and in particular, the greater city role, would be a motivating factor, subject to a number of conditions and circumstances.

- 1 Edinburgh City Council's appreciation (at official and all-party political levels) of the realities of the city's reputational risk because of politicking, factionalism and self-interest, reflected in a genuine desire to support and facilitate a senior communication role with the freedom, the seniority and the power to unite, co-ordinate and change the way the city is presented within Edinburgh and beyond.
- 2 Absolute clarity on the responsibilities and accountabilities of the role which should report direct to the Chief Executive of the Council, with status equal to the city's functional heads and a member of the senior management team.
- 3 A realistic budget and a small, core support staff and authority over all communication people and activities within Edinburgh City Council and its subsidiaries.
- 4 A role title that reflects the strategic significance of the post eg Director of Strategy; Director of Strategy and Policy; Director of Corporate Affairs; Director of Community Affairs.
- 5 A remuneration package which reflects the status and significance of the post. (None of the interviewees mentioned salary as an attraction of the role).

There were differing views about which role should come first, though all of the interviewees appreciated that a gradual progression from TIE, to transport to city, would be the more practical and realistic way in the current political climate. If this were the preferred way forward, and the initial appointment was as Director of Corporate Affairs/Director of Community Affairs for TIE, the following would be requisites:

- 1 Appointment to the Board, reporting to the Chief Executive/Chair, with responsibility for all communication and with *real* power and influence in the direction, management and operations of the business.
- 2 The job offer would indicate a career development path, with likely timescale, to the senior communication role with Edinburgh City Council, subject to satisfactory personal performance.
- 3 Allocation of budget and support staff to adequately resource the scope and scale of the role's requirements.
- 4 Appointment to the Edinburgh City Council senior management team, with equal status and authority, to drive co-ordinated communications and advise on/manage reputational issues, initially on TIE and transport, but widening in time

While a communication position restricted to TIE does not hold the same appeal as the larger role city role, there is sufficient challenge to interest communication professionals. Status and, particularly, salary would be key factors in positioning the role and attracting an appropriate calibre of candidates. A wider recruitment trawl would be required, if none of the current targets could be persuaded to accept the more contained role at this time.

### **Moving Forward**

From both TIE and City of Edinburgh perspectives, our preferred solution would be to seek the council's endorsement and formal commitment to either the immediate or the subsequent appointment of a communication specialist as outlined in this paper.

Ideally, the council's position would be determined before speaking further with the individuals engaged in our research. If the council's position is not determined, but the city communication role remains a strong possibility, the Chair of TIE and the Chief Executive of the City of Edinburgh Council should jointly meet each of our interviewees informally and privately to endorse our findings and to have more detailed discussions, as an extension of our research.

Should TIE/the council wish to go forward with one or more of those helping in this research, a formal interview process could be instituted either for the TIE role in its own right, or for the wider city role envisaged in this paper.

If the appointment is to be for TIE alone, with no progression to a wider city role, and none of those assisting our research shows interest in this limited role, the position should be advertised (also demonstrating TIE's intent to improve communication) and further identification of potential candidates pursued at pace.

Short term arrangements can be put in place to provide strategic communication advice and support to TIE until an appointment is made.

**Colin Liddell**  
**18 January, 2009**