

# Oxfordshire County Council Communications Peer Review

Feedback from the peer review team

6-8 July 2022

# The peer review team

- Lead Peer: **Smyth Harper**, Head of Communications, Lancashire County Council
- Member Peer: **Cllr Steve Morpew**, Norfolk County Council
- Member peer: **Cllr Rory Love**, Kent County Council
- Officer Peer: **Kamran Hussain**, Communications Manager, Milton Keynes Council
- Officer Peer: **Emily Taylor**, Digital Communications & Campaigns Manager, Telford & Wrekin Council
- Review Manager: **David Armin**, LGA associate consultant

# The purpose of peer reviews

Peer reviews are improvement-focused and tailored to meet a council's needs.

They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus.

The peers used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The team provide feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants or inspectors.



# The process of the peer review

- Peers reviewed a range of information to ensure we were familiar with the council, the challenges it is facing and its plans for the future
- The peer team gathered information and views from more than 30 meetings, in addition to further research
- We spoke to more than 50 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders



# Scope and brief for the peer review

As agreed, we have focused on the following themes in considering the council's approach to communications:

- **Ways of working** – the current delivery model and use of insight
- **Strategy and priorities** – how communications supports the strategic direction of the council
- **Digital communications and innovation** – using innovation to deliver effective, VfM campaigns and engagement
- **Narrative and place branding** – are officers and members clear about the council's story?

# Overall messages and observations

- A period of significant change
- Talented comms and engagement team; engaged and ambitious Council leadership
- There is a need to reset the relationship between the team and leadership, based around agreed strategic priorities
- The organisation needs to gain perspective on the LTN issue
- The LTN issue has been bruising and reduced the appetite for risk
- Involving communications and engagement at an early stage leads to remarkable results. Late involvement leads to firefighting
- Partner relationships are strong and an opportunity to build on these further
- Need to build relationships with the media at a senior level

# Ways of working (strengths)

- Well-resourced Communications Team, with wide-ranging experience and capability
- Comms team's talent and experience is recognised across members and officers
- Improvements to how communications are delivered have been noted over the past two years, particularly around Covid response and Homes for Ukraine campaign
- Big improvements in internal communications
- Positive relationships and good joint working with external partners, fostered by the Director of Communications, Strategy & Insight
- Team feels trusted and empowered by Communications management

# Ways of working (issues)

- Meeting and managing the high expectations of some members and senior officers
- Lack of clarity around which issues are escalated to senior management
- Need for additional pace on occasion.
- Plans, processes and strategies – stifling rather than enabling?
- Bold comms ambitions are not being met owing to occasional hesitancy and being overly risk-adverse, particularly around media relations
- Earlier involvement required in major projects to deliver effective and meaningful campaigns
- Embed guidance and ensure shared understanding of the support that backbench members can expect from Comms and other parts of the organisation
- A more proactive approach to communicating Scrutiny



# Strategy and priorities (strengths)

- Three key areas - tackling inequality, greener and healthier – are widely recognised
- Environmental priority very clear
- A real sense that direction has changed, both internally and among most partners
- Engagement around new priorities and budget well regarded

# Strategy and priorities (issues)

- Not clear about deliverables beneath the priorities - both organisation & Comms Team
- Being confident in promoting the Council's agreed priorities and strategies
- Sharpen the Comms team's awareness of working in a political environment
- The direct interaction between both the Leader and the Chief Executive with the Comms Team needs to be strengthened
- Opportunity for intelligent targeting of business and rural districts

# Digital communications and innovation (strengths)

- There is a will and desire from the team and from SLT and administration for the team to embrace digital comms
- Examples of successful campaigns which utilise new ways of communicating – Care Homes Week video, bus campaign
- Use of graphics/animations have improved and are being used well to enhance campaigns
- Using partner social channels (e.g. local universities) to share and disseminate messaging to a different audience

# Digital communications and innovation (issues)

- Video content needs a shared vision agreed between the administration, comms team and SLT
- Comms team members need to feel empowered and confident by continuing to develop the investment in skills and equipment
- SLT and administration need confidence that team can do it
- Website is a key digital communications channel which is currently very transactional – if ambition is to fully harness its value, it needs to sit in Comms
- Digital communications has the benefit of offering clear data and insight for use in evaluation beyond basic metrics (e.g. Google Analytics for customer journey etc) - need to use this but also build this into the start of a campaign and its objectives

## **Narrative and place branding (strengths)**

- Officers understand the change of political direction
- General understanding of the priorities and shift towards greener, fairer and healthier place
- Service areas feel connected to the new vision
- LEP & Districts sense new direction

# Narrative and place branding (issues)

- What does it mean in practice?
- There is a clear vision that people understand, but has it moved to the next stage which applies that vision that is unique to Oxfordshire?
- Is there a clear Oxfordshire story?
- Communications is the custodian of the Council's narrative, but it should be developed and owned by everyone in the organisation

# Recommendations

1. Leader needs to establish a regular working relationship with Comms leaders to ensure understanding, delivery and communication of key priorities
2. Clarify and streamline approvals process – for both communications and media
3. Explore support/training for Comms team of political awareness, as a pilot for the wider organisation
4. Comms leadership, SLT and administration to sit down and agree a shared vision on video content
5. Make use of relevant metrics and insight to evaluate and inform future Comms plans
6. Involve Communications team when projects are initiated, and around significant decisions
7. Continue to build on work with SLT and the administration to develop the Oxfordshire story so it can be owned and understood by all staff and members