

Divisions Affected – All

CABINET
18 October 2022

LGA Peer Review on Communications

Report of Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to —**
 - a) Agree to **NOTE** to the observations contained in the body of this report.

REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND

2. This report contains no recommendations, meaning Cabinet is not required to make a formal response. It may, of course, wish to respond to any of the observations detailed below when it considers this report.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3. The Performance Overview and Scrutiny Committee were provided with a presentation on the outcomes of the recent LGA peer review of communications at its meeting on 30 September 2022.
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Glynis Phillips, Cabinet portfolio holder for Corporate Services, Claire Taylor, Corporate Director – Customers, Culture and Corporate Services, and Susannah Wintersgill, Director of Strategy Insight and Communications, for preparing and introducing the report, and for attending to answer questions.

SUMMARY

5. Glynis Phillips, Cabinet portfolio member for Corporate Services introduced the report. The review's origin lay in the need for an independent peer assessment of concerns causing disquiet amongst certain members in relation to the Communications team. The review sought to clarify whether the current

ways of working supported the strategic direction of the Council, the level of innovation in communications with both members and the public, whether the team was clear about the Council's priorities, and the adequacy of the resourcing for the Communications function. The report which came back contained both strengths and weaknesses but was on balance extremely positive. Reviewers were extremely complementary about the competence and leadership of the team and found the level of resourcing to be adequate.

6. Susannah Wintersgill, Director of Strategy, Insight and Communications, drew out this feedback further. The review had found that the Communications team was both talented and passionate, and that talent found its opportunity for impact with an ambitious and engaged leadership wanting to make their mark. Relationships with partners, developed particularly during the pandemic, had continued and were a source of strength. The timing of involvement from Communications was key, with early involvement helping to smooth policy implementation, with later-stage involvement tending more towards firefighting. Further work was required to cultivate relationships with the diversity of media locally, whilst also building relationships at a regional and national level. Finally, given the time of the review, the LTN issue was highlighted as engulfing much of the Communication team's capacity. The Committee was updated on key actions taken in response to the recommendations made by the report. These included the integration of Communications into strategic planning meetings, the development of new Video and Media Strategies, trialling training on political awareness, and a review of the Council's digital presence.
7. In response to the presentation the Committee noted the professionalism of the Communications team. Issues discussed included the learning from the Council's experience around LTNs, the management of political risk and the Council's risk appetite, the role of Cabinet portfolio holders in communications, the balance of investment between Communications and other areas of the Council and the degree to which the scale of resourcing was necessitated in response to the Council's policy, and whether the geographical focus of communications was equitably distributed.

OBSERVATIONS

8. The Committee agreed to make a number of observations to Cabinet. These are not formal recommendations requiring a response, but important areas of feedback for the Cabinet's consideration.
9. The need to have communications be embedded within the Council's policy-forming and implementation process from the very outset is a clear priority within the review. The Committee is pleased to hear the actions taken by officers in response to this. Multiple changes are being made to ensure Communications are informed of forthcoming policy changes, and that processes are in place to ensure that the involvement and scope of the Communications team is considered and its actions reviewed throughout the entire process. Having heard from officers that the experience of the Council

with LTNs was largely caused by the late involvement of the team in the process, the Committee would like to add its weight in identifying this as the core priority for the Council in responding to the review and looks forward to seeing further progress when this topic is reviewed in the future.

Observation 1: That recent experience demonstrates that upstream integration of Communications is crucial to successful policy development and implementation and should be pursued as a priority.

10. As the review notes on a number of occasions, the Communications team is well-led and its members are highly professional. Committee members' experiences corroborate this assessment. However, the review does recognise that the team is not immune to pressures. Described as 'bruising', the Council's the LTN experience was felt by reviewers to have had a material effect, and reduced the Council's appetite for risk. Although understandable, the Committee is keen to make the point that some of the Council's policies are highly ambitious and designed to alter deeply-embedded behaviours. As such, they are liable to challenge. To the Committee's view, if the Council does play safe in its communications and not address more contentious issues, the ultimate consequence will be that where pushback against those policies exists, it will not be extinguished but simply left to a later point in the process and become harder to manage. The Council must not, therefore, be reticent about talking about its policy agenda, even if it may be controversial.
11. Pressure on the Communications team is not simply external, however. The need for training on political awareness identified as a recommendation is an indication that the political environment of the Council is a source of internal pressures on staff also. As referenced, the Committee wants to reiterate its recognition of the professionalism of the team, but at the same time wishes to draw attention to the ongoing challenge the team faces in balancing its responsibility to communicate messages on behalf of the Council, which is run by an administration, and not allowing that to elide into communicating on behalf of the administration.

Observation 2: Notwithstanding the clear professionalism of the Communications team, they are subject to pressures and there remains a risk that Communications may tend towards excessive risk-aversion or to politicisation.

12. One issue identified within the LGA's feedback was picked up by the Committee as not having an action to deliver it, namely that there should be 'a more proactive approach to communicating Scrutiny.' The Committee wholeheartedly believes that Scrutiny's role as a critical friend means it can help to smooth the progress of important and contentious topics. Not only does it offer a suitable forum for members of the public who want to engage in policy debate to make their views on these topics heard before decisions are made, but it also provides an assurance role for the wider public. As noted by the review, the Council's experience with LTNs illustrates how valuable this niche can be. Proactive communication of Scrutiny would amplify engagement with this opportunity, and the Committee is keen that sufficient resource is

devoted to Scrutiny's work that the value it can add to the Council is maximised.

Observation 3: Communications resources for Scrutiny remain unresolved

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

13. The Committee has agreed to include an update on progress made against the review's recommendations as part of its item on the Consultation and Engagement Strategy in April 2023. Relating to discussions over the relative adequacy of resources in other parts of the Council, a review has been requested in the next civic year to consider the performance of the Law and Governance function.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

14. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.
15. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

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Annex: None

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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