

## **Divisions Affected – All**

# **PERFORMANCE & CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**28 APRIL 2023**

## **LGA peer review on communications: update on action plan**

**Report by Susannah Wintersgill, Director of Communications,  
Strategy and Insight**

### **RECOMMENDATION**

**1. Performance Scrutiny is RECOMMENDED to —**

Note the council's actions taken in response to the recommendations in the report from the July 2022 LGA communications peer review.

### **Executive summary**

2. An LGA peer review of the council's communications, marketing and engagement function was undertaken from 6 to 8 July 2022.
3. A preliminary report by the LGA peer review panel was considered by the Performance & Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee at its meeting of 30 September 2022. The committee was subsequently provided with the full LGA report once available. A copy of the full report is available at Annex A.
4. The LGA peer review team made seven key recommendations in their report:
  - (a) Involve the communications team at an earlier stage when projects are initiated and around significant decisions.
  - (b) Establish a close working relationship between the leader and the director and head of communications to ensure understanding, delivery and communication of key priorities.
  - (c) Clarify and streamline the approvals process for communications and the media.
  - (d) Explore support and training around political awareness for the communications team and use this as a pilot for the wider organisation.
  - (e) Cabinet, the senior leadership team (SLT) and the director and head of communications to agree a shared vision for video content.
  - (f) Make use of relevant metrics and insight to evaluate and inform future comms plans.

- (g) Continue to build on work with SLT and Cabinet to develop the overarching narrative for Oxfordshire so that it can be understood and owned by all staff and members.
5. At its meeting of 30 September 2022, Performance Scrutiny made three observations for Cabinet, which were considered at the Cabinet meeting of 18 October 2022:
- a) That recent experience demonstrates that upstream integration of communications is crucial to successful policy development and implementation and should be pursued as a priority.
  - b) 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.
  - c) Communications resources for Scrutiny remain unresolved.
6. The communications team developed an action plan based around the seven recommendations and has been implementing this since July 2022. A summary of actions taken or underway is outlined below.

## Action plan

**Recommendation 1:** Involve the communications team at an earlier stage when projects are initiated and around significant decisions.

- 7. A communications grid, which details planned activity, is circulated on a regular basis to members of Cabinet, SLT, the extended leadership team (ELT), and Scrutiny Chairs. This not only provides a forward look at what activity is planned over a two-month period, but also an opportunity for new projects and communication requirements to be flagged to the communications team.
- 8. A review of forward plan templates has been undertaken and questions have been included in agenda request forms about whether a communications plan is needed for the project in question and whether the communications team have been informed. This includes papers for SLT and Informal Cabinet.
- 9. The director of communications, strategy and insight attends Informal Cabinet meetings, and meets with individual members of SLT on a regular basis to ensure the communications team has sight of proposed projects and decisions.

**Recommendation 2:** Establish a close working relationship between the leader and the director and head of communications to ensure understanding, delivery and communication of key priorities.

- 10. A regular timetable of fortnightly communications planning and review meetings between the leader and the director of communications is in place.

**Recommendation 3:** Clarify and streamline the approvals process for communications and the media.

11. A media protocol is in place, which has been shared with members of Cabinet and SLT to ensure all parties are aware of the support available to them and processes to be followed.
12. Media training took place for Cabinet members in summer 2021; this was supplemented in September 2022 with a refresher session for Cabinet and SLT, with a focus on answering public questions prior to the Oxfordshire Conversation Q&A events. More indepth media training for Cabinet members and SLT is planned for May and June 2023, which will be carried out by an external media training company.
13. Work is underway to build closer relationships with the local media, particularly with a view to profiling the leader and chief executive. Regular meetings with the editors of Oxford Mail and BBC have been set up with the head of communications and the media and communications manager for reciprocal information sharing and to explore editorial and broadcast opportunities.

**Recommendation 4:** Explore support and training around political awareness for the communications team and use this as a pilot for the wider organisation.

14. Members of the communications, marketing and engagement team have attended the LGiU political awareness training course, where it is deemed beneficial to help support them in their roles. The communications management team is also providing support and mentoring for new members of the team or those less experienced.
15. Members of the wider Customers, Organisational Development & Resources directorate have also attended the LGiU course, where recommended for their roles.

**Recommendation 5:** Cabinet, SLT and the director and head of communications to agree a shared vision for video content.

16. A video strategy was shared and agreed with Cabinet members in summer 2022 and is being implemented. This included adopting a more fleet of foot approach to video production, particularly around cabinet decisions. A review of the engagement we have received on a variety of video content has been carried out and this is being used to update the strategy.

**Recommendation 6:** Make use of relevant metrics and insight to evaluate and inform future communications plans.

17. This was a recommendation accepted as already grounded in the communications, marketing and engagement team's day-to-day work. The team compiles detailed metrics for each marketing and communications campaign to assess its performance. A quarterly report is circulated to members of Cabinet, SLT and ELT, which provides metrics and insight for

marketing campaigns, social media engagement, media coverage, newsletters, consultations and internal communication.

18. Further opportunities have been explored, and will continue to be explored, as part of maintaining best practice outputs. These include implementing social listening as part of our social media management suite of tools to inform and help shape communications campaigns; and moving email communications to staff and members to an online platform so that audience and engagement levels can be accurately measured.

**Recommendation 7:** Continue to build on work with SLT and Cabinet to develop the overarching narrative for Oxfordshire so that it can be understood and owned by all staff and members.

19. A number of workshops took place over summer and autumn 2022 with Cabinet and SLT to explore the council's vision and the accompanying narrative to communicate that vision. The narrative was included in the updated strategic plan 2023-2025.
20. Further work on an overarching narrative for Oxfordshire is planned following the arrival of the council's new chief executive.

## **Observations from Scrutiny**

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

21. As set out in paragraphs 7, 8 and 9, steps have been put in place to help ensure that communications is considered, and the team involved at, an early stage of project and policy development. This is a key focus for the director and head of communications.

**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.

22. As set out in paragraph 14, members of the communications, marketing and engagement team have attended the LGiU political awareness training course to increase their political awareness. The head of communications is working to embed a more proactive and front-foot approach to communications relating to major policy decisions across the team.

**Observation 3:** Communications resources for Scrutiny remain unresolved.

23. The director and head of communications are working with the Principal Scrutiny Officer to identify upcoming opportunities for communicating the role and work of Scrutiny throughout the year.

## **Financial implications**

24. There are no budgetary implications arising from this report.

## **Legal implications**

25. There are no legal implications arising from this report.

## **Staff implications**

26. There are no staff implications arising from this report.

## **Equality and inclusion implications**

27. Equality and inclusion implications have been and continue to be considered as part of the development and implementation of the action plan.

## **Sustainability implications**

28. There are no sustainability implications arising from this report.

## **Risk management**

29. There are no direct risks to manage arising from this report. Communications risks are identified and mitigated against, where possible, in the development of any activity led by the team. This includes in the implementation of the action plan.

## **Susannah Wintersgill**

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Annex A: LGA peer review of communications – full report

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