

## **Divisions Affected – All**

### **CABINET**

**19 September 2023**

## **LGA Peer Review on Communications: Six Month Update Report of Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

### **RECOMMENDATION**

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
  - a) Agree to respond to the recommendation contained in the body of this report, and
  - b) Agree that relevant officers will continue to update Scrutiny for 12 months on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendation, or until it is completed (if earlier).

### **REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND**

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and its recommendation.

### **INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

3. At its meeting on 28 April 2023 the Performance Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered an update report on the progress of actions arising from the Local Government Association Peer Review on Communications in the six months since it had last gone to Scrutiny.
4. The Committee would like to thank Councillor Glynis Phillips, Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Susannah Wintersgill, Director of Strategy, Insight, and Communications, Kerry Middleton, Head of Communications, Marketing and Engagement for preparing and introducing the report, and for attending to answer questions.

## SUMMARY

5. Cllr Phillips introduced the report, which was an update on progress made against the recommendations made in the LGA Peer Review on Communications and also on the observations made by the Committee when it had originally been considered in September 2022. The report set out the action plan relating to the LGA's seven recommendations and the progress made to date.
6. In response to the presentation the Committee raised multiple topics for discussion. These included the practical impacts of the LGA's recommendations around meetings between the Leader and Director of Communications, the relationship between communications and politics, maximising the utility of the Council's website, and the challenges of disinformation.
7. The Committee makes one formal recommendation concerning meetings between the Leader and Director of Communications, and two observations relating to the political dimension of the communications and the utility of the Council's website.

## OBSERVATIONS

8. One of the LGA's observations in its original report was that there was 'sometimes insufficient political awareness among officers'. During discussion at the Committee this was interpreted differently across members, with some interpreting it as meaning that communications were imbalanced in favour of the administration and others taking the view endorsed by the LGA report, that it was the fundamental job of the communications function to be facilitating the priorities and objectives of the Council once political decisions had been made. Given the split within the Committee it is hard to make a representative comment on the performance of the communications team in delivering a politically neutral service. There is, however, a point on which the Committee can speak with much greater unity.
9. There exists, as codified within the Officers' Code of Conduct in the Constitution, a very sensitive balance of responsibilities for officers. This states that they must 'serve the Council as a whole. It follows you must serve all members and not just those of any single political group, and must ensure that the individual rights of all members are respected'. At the same time they are told 'Your role is to serve the Council in delivering services to the local community, providing advice and implementing its policies.' Where there is a politically contentious policy there is a tension between being effective at implementing that policy and still being seen to serve the entire Council, rather than just a particular group or groups who back that policy. The way that communications are managed within a political environment has political consequences, meaning that the communications team are faced with this tension more acutely than most.

10. The LGA's recommendation was for political awareness training, which has been delivered to the relevant officers. This output, the completion of training is, however, a one-and-done solution to what is inevitably an ongoing challenge. Evidently the training is designed to equip officers to manage the balancing act into the future but it is important to recognise that the training is the enabling step towards the outcome, and not the outcome itself. Training is necessary - but not sufficient - to ensure fair delivery of communications and the Council must remain vigilant in monitoring how well this balance is being delivered and remain open to good-faith challenge.

**Observation 1: Political awareness training is not on its own sufficient to manage the delivery of corporate communications in a politically balanced way, and the Council must not think that because the LGA's recommendation has been fully completed that the issue is 'closed'.**

11. During discussion of the Council's website, a comment was made which provides an interesting insight into the Council's perspective on the function of its website. That insight was that the website is run primarily by the ICT department. This suggests that, historically at least, the website has been viewed as a technical tool to allow transactions first and foremost. However, for many, many people the Council's website is either the only way it engages with the Council, or the first. As such, it is also a crucial tool for communications with residents, service users and businesses and not simply a forum to enable transactions. The Committee is pleased to hear that there is significantly closer joint working between the ICT and communications teams regarding the website. Nevertheless, ultimate ownership by ICT rather than communications indicates that, incremental improvements by joint-working notwithstanding, the nature of the website will remain more transactional than engaging. There is greater potential utility to be wrought by making the website primarily a tool for communication rather than transaction.

**Observation 2: Notwithstanding recent incremental improvements by joint-working, the Council's website remains largely transactional in nature. This under-utilises its potential, which would be more fully realised by it being seen and treated as primarily a communications tool and run by the communications team.**

## **RECOMMENDATION**

12. One of the recommendations of the LGA report was that the Council should 'establish a close working relationship between the leader and the director and head of communications to ensure understanding, delivery and communication of key priorities.' The Council has worked to achieve this with the update report stating 'A regular timetable of fortnightly communications planning and review meetings between the leader and the director of communications is in place.' The Council has, therefore, followed through on the advice given to it in the peer review.

13. The Committee does, however, query whether the structure being recommended by the LGA is more suited to when one political group (or even better, party) forms the administration. In a situation such as the Council's, with a multi-group alliance, there is a challenge of ensuring political balance not only between administration and opposition, but within the administration itself. In this instance there is an imbalance in access to, the understanding drawn from, and influence over these meetings between the two groups forming the administration. If these meetings are of sufficient importance as to be included as part of the LGA's recommendations the Committee suggests that they are sufficiently important to require equal treatment of both sides of the administration. It is important to be clear that the Committee makes no comment about the workings of the current system and whether any unfairness has arisen; that is not the point. The point is that the Council should not be relying on political generosity or fair play to maintain fairness when there is a structural solution which would negate any reliance on that entirely. As such, the Committee's view is that the Deputy Leader, as the representative of the second political group in the alliance, should also be invited to participate in the fortnightly meetings between the Leader and Director of Communications.

**Recommendation 1: That the Deputy Leader is invited to participate in the fortnightly meetings between the Leader and Director of Communications**

## **FURTHER CONSIDERATION**

14. The Committee has requested that it be kept updated on progress against the action plan in the 2023/24 civic year.

## **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

15. 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.'
16. 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: Pro-forma Response Template

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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