

LGA communications peer review

Oxfordshire County Council

July 2022

Feedback report







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1. Executive summary

The past two years have been a period of significant change for Oxfordshire County Council. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, there has been a new administration bringing a new political direction for the authority following the May 2021 elections; the partnership with Cherwell District Council has ended; and the joint Chief Executive (which was a shared role with Cherwell) has departed, returning to their substantive post at Cherwell. There is an interim Chief Executive now in place at the County Council.

It has also been a time of change and challenge for the Communications, Marketing and Engagement service. The service underwent a full restructure in March 2020 just before the first lockdown, and COVID-19 dominated the priorities, outputs and resourcing levels of the team for the next 18 months. The ending of the partnership with Cherwell in summer 2022 resulted in further change, with the joint service ceasing and staff returning to their employer organisation.

The service is a real asset for the council - it is a professional and passionate team which is delivering engaging and creative work for the benefit of the people of Oxfordshire. Through the leadership of the Director of Communications, Strategy & Insight it has established good relationships and is well regarded among partners across the county. There is scope to build further on these partnerships and take more advantage of partners' links to particular communities, such as the more rural district council areas and the universities.

The political leadership is still relatively new. The Fair Deal Alliance (comprising the Liberal Democrat and Green partnership and the Labour Group) is engaged, ambitious and hungry to make its mark. It wants a high profile, which creates a great opportunity for the communications service to maximise successful delivery.

There is a clear need for the communications team to reset its relationship with the political leadership so that this potential can be realised. There is willingness among all concerned for this to happen. There has been a disproportionate focus on specific areas of controversy which do not represent the broader work of the team. Specifically, the ongoing furore around low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) has threatened to overshadow and engulf the team's work. It is inevitable that an issue such as LTNs would prove controversial and give rise to strongly held and polarised views among the communities affected. The entire organisation needs to gain some perspective on this issue. Better engagement between the LTN project team and the communications service to co-produce a communications and engagement strategy and plan will be crucial as future schemes develop. The organisation needs to accept that these schemes are controversial and will always generate some negative views, and the best response is to clearly explain the rationale for their introduction and their benefits and promote agreed council policy.

The peer team is concerned that the dominance of the LTN issue has given a skewed view of the team and its abilities to the political leadership and the wider organisation, as well as reducing the team's confidence in adopting a proactive approach. The whole organisation needs to move on. The ambitious new administration means there is permission to be bold and the communications team needs to be confident in promoting the agreed policies and priorities of the council.

The biggest challenge for the communications team is that there is a tendency within the organisation to involve the team at a late stage towards the end of a project. Where the team is involved from the start, they deliver great work. The peer team heard some brilliant examples of the fantastic work the communications team has delivered as a result of early engagement and co-design such as the Homes for Ukraine scheme, Climate Action Oxfordshire, the Delivering the Future Together organisational development programme, work with libraries, and museum rebranding. Where they are brought in at the end, they will be firefighting and dealing with problems which could have been avoided. This is unsatisfactory for both the communications team and the services and councillors they are supporting, and detrimental to the confidence there should be in the team.

The relationship with the local media is key. There is a focus from the political leadership on raising the profile of Oxfordshire County Council on a national stage, and it is therefore appropriate that the communications team is supporting Cabinet members in securing coverage for the council in national publications. However, this must not be at the cost of diluting the service to the local media which will influence the reputation of the council among many Oxfordshire residents. The peer team heard that Oxfordshire still enjoys a vibrant local media, both in print and broadcast.

We heard that some people view the relationship with the media to be defensive and at times unresponsive. This is not the intention of the communications team, but it is clear that more work needs to be done to proactively tell the council's story. The communications team, the political leadership and the Chief Executive want this. The communications team needs to support, facilitate and advise on building and developing direct relationships between the media and the council's senior managerial and political leadership.

Everyone we spoke to recognised that, despite the challenges, the communications service has made great strides in recent years. With more trust from the organisation, supported by its political and managerial leadership, challenging blockages where these occur, the service can achieve even more. But this trust will need to be earned and sustained by a proactive, constructive and problem-solving approach from the communications team.

2. Key recommendations

There are several observations and suggestions within the feedback section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council, related to the themes and areas of focus for the peer review:

Ways of working

2.1 Involve the communications team when projects are initiated, and around significant decisions. This will be key to ensure effective communications support, anticipating potential communications challenges and developing plans to mitigate these. In turn this will build confidence in the support available from the communications team.

2.2 Clarify and streamline approvals process – for both communications and media relationships. This should enable a quicker response whilst ensuring that appropriate safeguards are in place and foster good relationships with internal stakeholders and the external media.

Strategy and priorities

2.3 The Council Leader needs to establish a regular working relationship with communications leaders to ensure understanding, delivery and communication of key priorities. This will help to ensure that communications activity is well aligned to the agreed policies and priorities of the council and further strengthen relationships between communications professionals and the political leadership. A good relationship between them is a feature of effective local government communications, when based on a clear understanding of respective roles and responsibilities.

2.4 Explore support/training to develop the communications team's political awareness, as a pilot for the wider organisation. There appears to be a lack of confidence in promoting the council's agreed policies and priorities, and sometimes insufficient political awareness among officers. The communications service may well be reflecting the wider organisation in this. Developing greater political awareness should enable more effective delivery of the council's agreed priorities and objectives.

Digital communications and innovation

2.5 Communications leadership, the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and the political leadership of the administration to sit down and agree a shared vision on video content. There needs to be a common understanding of where video is an effective medium for conveying the council's messages (and where it is not) based on evidence to ensure best use of resources, and how such content is to be prepared and presented.

2.6 Make greater use of relevant metrics and insight to evaluate and inform future communications plans. This will enable decisions on the methods, channels and audiences to be informed by evidence to enable the most effective use of resources.

Narrative and place branding

2.7 Continue to build on work with SLT and the political administration to develop the Oxfordshire story so it can be owned and understood by all staff and members. SLT and the council's political leadership are currently engaged in a series of away days which include consideration of the council's vision and future direction. This should enable the development of a coherent narrative of the council's ambitions for Oxfordshire. Whilst communications should become the custodian of that agreed narrative, it needs to be shared and owned across the organisation.

3. Background and scope of the review

3.1 The peer team

It was a pleasure to be invited by Oxfordshire County Council to carry out this communications peer review. Thank you to everyone who gave up their time to share their views with us. Communications peer reviews are part of the LGA's sector-led improvement offer and are delivered by local government peers. The peers who delivered the peer review were:

- Lead Peer: **Smyth Harper**, Head of Communications, Lancashire County Council
- Member Peer: **Councillor Steve Mophew**, Norfolk County Council
- Member peer: **Councillor Rory Love OBE**, 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

3.2 Scope and focus

Oxfordshire County Council established a new structure for its Communications Strategy and Insight Directorate in March 2020. Following this, a new Director and a Head of Communications, Marketing and Engagement have been appointed and communications staff from service departments integrated into the central team. The council and its communications service has subsequently experienced the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. Following the elections in May 2021 a new administration – the Fair Deal Alliance - took over control of the council with a changed political direction and fresh priorities for the authority. A shared service arrangement for communications with Cherwell District Council came to an end on 1st July 2022. A review of the council's approach to communications and the role of the Communications, Marketing and Engagement teams within that is therefore timely.

The following scope was agreed for the review:

- **Ways of working.** How effective is the current model for delivering communications, marketing and engagement? Also, how is insight being used to inform communications activity?
- **Strategy and priorities.** How strategically and politically aware is the Communications, Marketing and Engagement team? Is communications activity aligned and integrated with the overall strategic direction of the organisation and able to deliver the leadership priorities of members and officers within the bounds of political neutrality?
- **Digital communications and innovation.** How does the team compare to other similar councils in operating a modern communications service that uses innovation to deliver effective, value for money creative campaigns and engagement?
- **Narrative and place branding.** Are officers and members clear about the council's story and what they are working towards?

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer reviews are improvement-focused and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government communications to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information, including the position statement prepared by Oxfordshire for the review.

The team then spent three days onsite in Oxfordshire from 6 to 8 July 2022, during which they:

- spoke to more than 50 people, including a range of council staff together with councillors and external stakeholders
- gathered information and views from around 30 interviews, focus groups and meetings
- collectively spent around 150 hours to determine our findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than four weeks in Oxfordshire.

4. Principles of good communications

Communications plays a key role in ensuring councils can continue to lead their communities in challenging and uncertain times. LGA communications peer reviews are based on our understanding of the following general principles of good communications.

Good communications support the delivery of everyday services that people need and value and can play an increasingly crucial role in transforming and saving lives. A healthy local democracy is built upon councillors campaigning for and representing their communities; they need to be kept informed in order to fulfil that role. To be strong and ambitious leaders of places, councils need to ensure residents, staff, businesses and partners are communicated with effectively.

Effective communications relies on a mix of communications channels, including **media relations** (producing media releases and statements for distribution to local, regional, national and specialist media and responding to queries from the media), **direct communications** to residents (leaflets, publications, social media) and **internal and partner communications** (working with employees, members and stakeholders to ensure everyone gets consistent, timely information about the council to help them do their jobs effectively and advocate on behalf of the council).

Successful communications campaigns use a mix of all these communications channels, delivered to identified target audiences and robustly evaluated.

Building trust and confidence, and through that, strengthening relationships with citizens, stakeholders and staff, should be the starting point for any successful organisation. To succeed it requires recognition of the importance of strong strategic communications to act as a trusted advisor, navigator and leader.

Local councils that do not adequately recognise the importance of strategic communications in terms of resources, skills and its place in the structure, are likely to be the ones that struggle the most to connect with their residents, staff and stakeholders.

In summary, good communications should:

- Articulate the ambition for your area
- Improve corporate and personal reputation
- Support good political leadership
- Help engagement with residents, partners and staff
- Build trust
- Rally advocates
- Drive change and deliver savings
- Attract investment (and good people)
- Be used to manage performance
- Strengthen public support and understanding

It is delivered through:

- **Leadership** – clarity of purpose and commitment
- **A distinctive brand** – what you stand for, values and trust
- **A clear vision**
- Being **authentic** to your local area
- Adopting a **strategic approach to communications** - communication without strategy does not work
- Developing a corporately agreed, fully evaluated **annual communications plan** - not just sending out ad hoc stuff
- Making sure all communications activity is based on **research and insight** and that campaigns are linked to corporate priorities and resourced accordingly
- Investing in **evaluation**
- Ensuring communications are **owned by everyone.**

5. Feedback

5.1 Ways of working

The Communications, Marketing and Engagement teams are well resourced with wide-ranging experience and capability. The team's talent and experience is recognised across members and officers. Team members feel trusted and empowered by communications management. From 1 July 2022, when the shared service arrangement with Cherwell ended, there are 28.7 FTE posts across the Communications, Marketing & Engagement service¹. According to the LGA's [Annual Heads of Communications Survey \(2021\)](#) the average number of staff undertaking communications work for county councils in England was 21.3 FTE in September 2021. Such benchmarking data needs to be interpreted with caution, as the scope of communications responsibilities will differ across councils. However, this does underpin the peer team's view that Oxfordshire's Communications team has the capacity to deliver a comprehensive and proactive communications service.

Improvements to how communications are delivered have been noted by many people over the past two years, particularly around the Covid-19 response and Homes for Ukraine campaign. This includes major improvements in internal communications, such as the support to the Delivering the Future Together organisational change programme. The new structures in the communications service have helped to deliver these improvements.

There are positive relationships and good joint working with external partners - across the wider public sector, key institutions such as the local universities and also those involved with the business community such as the Oxfordshire LEP. These have been fostered by the Director of Communications, Strategy & Insight and underpinned by regular meetings. The communications team have weekly meetings with their colleagues from the district councils across Oxfordshire. The districts have been closely involved in joint campaigns, such as those around climate action, Homes for Ukraine and Covid-19. Recently there has been a focus on work with Oxford City Council around transport in the city. Going forward, similar focus could be given to enhanced working with the rural districts, tapping into their expertise and contacts to deliver effective communications activity across the whole county. There

¹ In this report unless otherwise stated references to the communications team should be read as encompassing the Communications, Marketing & Engagement service

are opportunities to co-design future campaigns, utilising the communications resource from the districts, subject to their capacity to contribute to or lead such joint campaigns. The council should continue to ensure that it engages with the full range of stakeholders across the county in key consultation exercises.

Notwithstanding the sense of trust and empowerment reported by communications team members, the peer team found a lack of clarity around which issues are escalated to senior management and that on occasion there could be more senior oversight of potentially sensitive issues – which may help to generate confidence in the service across the political leadership and senior managers of the council.

Management oversight needs to be balanced against the calls for additional pace in the communications response on occasion from some people the peer team spoke with. The Communications team has developed a number of plans, processes and strategies. The peer team questions if these have become stifling rather than enabling, and that aiming for shorter policies and better guidance would be more helpful. The social media 'Playbook' developed by the communications team was held up by several people as a positive example of an enabling tool. There should be clarity around who can do what, effort made to avoid any sign-off delays and to ensure that meetings add value.

The communications team needs to both meet and manage the high expectations of some members and senior officers, which it has the capacity and capability to do with a more confident approach. The new administration's bold communications ambitions are not always being met owing to occasional hesitancy and being overly risk-averse, particularly around media relations. Earlier involvement is required in major projects to deliver effective and meaningful campaigns, which will enable the communications team to inform, influence and help deliver communications strategies and campaigns and enable more proactive risk management. Earlier engagement should lead to more effective communications support, building the credibility of the team with key stakeholders. The peer team's discussions with leading members suggest they are open to such earlier engagement, and to developing communications strategies as part of discussions originating at informal Cabinet, which is attended by the Director of Communications, Strategy & Insight. This more proactive approach could break what appears to be the current vicious circle of late engagement with communications leading to an unsatisfactory response and a loss of confidence in the service, and therefore a sense within the service that they are not valued and vulnerable to criticism. These concerns underpin the peer

team's suggestion of a reset of the relationship between the communications team and leading members and senior officers.

The peer team's discussions with a small sample of backbench members suggested some frustration with their relationship and support from the communications team, a team which is in any event not resourced to provide a comprehensive service for all councillors and needs to focus appropriately on promoting the agreed policies and strategies of the council as set by the Cabinet. The peer team understands there is a protocol in place that sets this out the strategic advice and guidance available to all councillors, and that communications is covered as part of member induction. However, the perception of some backbench members is that this protocol is applied inconsistently and that they are unclear of where they could get support, for example in the event of a challenging social media campaign in their area.

The peer team understand that there are currently vacancies in the council's Democratic Services team which may be exacerbating this sense of a lack of support. There is a need to embed guidance and ensure shared understanding of the support that backbench members can expect from the communications team and other parts of the organisation. A more proactive approach to communicating the work of scrutiny, where appropriate, would be an opportunity for the service to work more with backbench members at the same time as promoting these policy development and accountability elements of the council's work. However, this in turn will need clear work plans for scrutiny and support from Democratic Services.

5.2 Strategy and priorities

Following the establishment of the new Fair Deal Alliance administration, there is a real sense that the direction of the council has changed, both internally and among most partners. Three key themes - those of tackling inequality, being greener and healthier - are widely recognised and the environmental priority and desire to tackle climate change is very clear. However, the full list of nine agreed priorities are not widely recalled and neither the organisation nor the communications team are clear about the deliverables that sit beneath these priorities. This large number of priorities makes it more difficult to set out a clear statement of what the council wants to do. Greater clarity around deliverables is required, which the peer team understand is one the areas that the current series of 'away days' for the Cabinet and SLT is seeking to address.

The engagement and consultation around the new priorities and budget are well regarded across the organisation, including the efforts made to involve young people, and are an example of the positive impact that early involvement of the communications team can have.

There is a need for the communications team to be more confident in promoting the council's agreed priorities and strategies. In this apparent reticence it may simply be reflecting the wider organisation which the peer team heard can be cautious and risk-averse, a legacy of the Operation Bullfinch serious case review into child sexual exploitation in 2015, which attracted widescale national media coverage.

This may also derive from some misunderstandings around working in a political environment. This is leading to a situation where requests from Cabinet members are sometimes inappropriately viewed as being 'political'. Whilst the [Local Authority Publicity Code](#) does prevent council resources being used for party political purposes, it does not preclude communications activity around agreed council policies. This distinction appears to have become blurred and misunderstood across the council, not just within communications. Training in political awareness and working in a political environment could well be beneficial, for members of the Communications team and officers more generally. Political awareness training for the communications team can be facilitated by the LGA and tailored to meet the needs of the council.

The direct interaction between both the Leader and the Chief Executive with the communications team needs to be strengthened. Whilst the Leader is not the portfolio holder for communications, greater engagement between communications and the Leader will help ensure that messaging reflects the council's key priorities and further develop the political leadership's confidence in communications and help embed consideration of communications issues and advice early in policy development across the council's wider agenda. Similarly, greater engagement with the Chief Executive will promote consideration of communications challenges and opportunities across the organisation. The peer team understand that, until recently, interactions between Cabinet members and officers of the council have been limited, reflecting a hierarchical culture. Wider interaction between members and officers would be beneficial, provided this is based on a proper understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities. A positive development recently is the series of awaydays which are helping to strengthen the working relationship between the Cabinet and SLT.

5.3 Digital communications and innovation

There is a will and desire from the communications team, SLT, and the political leadership for the council to embrace digital communications. There are examples of successful campaigns which utilise these new ways of communicating, such as the Care Homes Week video and the campaign to increase bus usage. The social media playbook developed by the communications team is welcomed by services as a brilliant way to liberate teams to make use of bespoke channels, but within an accepted framework.

The use of graphics and animations have improved and are being used well to enhance campaigns and internal communications.

Partners have noted the increased use of modern communications techniques and digital media by the council. This presents opportunities for increased use of partners' social media channels to share and disseminate messaging to a different audience, for example through the local universities to reach young people through their preferred media.

The use of video content is proving contentious within the organisation, with different expectations across the political and managerial leadership about what is appropriate. Communications leadership, SLT, and the political leadership need to reach a common understanding of where video is an effective medium for conveying the council's messages (and where it is not), based on evidence, to ensure best use of resources and how such content is to be prepared and presented. The main measure for this should be impact, not volume. Communications team members need to feel empowered and confident in producing video content by continuing to develop the investment that has been made in skills and equipment.

The website is a key digital communications channel. The council's website is very transactional. Whilst a transactional website is vital for the effective delivery of a modern council's services, this should not be to the detriment of promoting the council's services and campaigns in innovative and engaging ways or influencing Oxfordshire residents to make positive choices. The website should be transactional, promotional, and a driver for behaviour change.

Currently, responsibility for the website sits with ICT. However, if the ambition is to fully harness its value as a communications tool, including to help influence

behavioural change, responsibility should sit with the communications team. If it were to hold responsibility for the website, communications would need to have access to the necessary technical expertise to ensure the maintenance and development of the website. Irrespective of where such responsibility sits, there needs to be increased pace in the development of the website.

Digital communication has the benefit of offering clear data and insight for use in evaluation beyond basic metrics (e.g. Google Analytics for exploring the customer journey etc.) This gives opportunities to better evidence and share the impact of campaigns and to demonstrate which communication techniques are more effective in different contexts. Oxfordshire should make greater use of these insights, including website analytics, but the criteria for evaluation need to be built in in advance, based on the agreed objectives for the campaign.

5.4 Narrative and place branding

Officers understand the change of political direction following the formation of the Fair Deal Alliance administration. Moreover, there is a general understanding of the priorities and shift towards achieving a greener, fairer and healthier place. Importantly, services can see how their work is connected to the new vision. Partner organisations too sense the new direction, in particular the district councils and the Oxfordshire LEP.

This gives a starting point for developing a compelling narrative of place. There is a clear vision that people understand, but the peer team questions if this has moved to the next stage which applies that vision in a way that is unique to Oxfordshire? This will require greater clarity around what the priorities and the deliverables that underpin these mean in practice.

The council should continue to build on work by SLT and the political leadership to develop the Oxfordshire story, so it can be owned and understood by all staff and members. SLT and the Cabinet are currently engaged in a series of away days which include consideration of the council's vision and future direction. This should enable the development of a coherent narrative of the council's ambitions for Oxfordshire. Whilst the communications team should become the custodian of that agreed narrative, it needs to be developed with inputs from a range of stakeholders, and then shared and owned across the organisation. To take forward its work on such a narrative, the council may wish to consider a facilitated workshop, which can be

arranged and supported by the LGA. The LGA also has a [toolkit](#) that the council may find helpful when considering each stage of developing a narrative.

6. Next steps

Through this review we have sought to highlight the positive aspects of Oxfordshire County Council's approach to communications, as well as outlining the challenges. We have drawn on our experience of working with councils across the country to review Oxfordshire's communications in the context of best practice in the sector.

Will Brooks is the LGA's Principal Adviser for the region. Will is the main contact between the council and the Local Government Association, particularly in relation to improvement and access to the LGA's resources and packages of support. William's email address is: william.brooks@local.gov.uk or he can be contacted on 07949 054421.

Further communication support from the LGA can also be accessed through Matt Nicholls, Head of Communications Support and Improvement who can be contacted on matt.nicholls@local.gov.uk or tel. 07786 111078. There is an opportunity for councils who have undertaken a communications peer review to arrange a follow-up visit to assess the impact of the peer review and progress made in responding to the findings of the original peer review.