

Delivery of Professional Communications Support

Resources and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date: 27 November 2017

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Wards: All Wards
Parishes Affected: All Wards

1. Purpose and Reasons

- 1.1 This report updates the Committee on the progress made in the last 12 months in enhancing the capability and delivery of the Council's Communications Team.
- 1.2 The approach and examples of delivery so far in 2017/18 covered in this report will better enable the Communications Team to support Council services and the delivery of the Swindon Programme.

2. Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to:

- 2.1 Note the progress made in the past year developing a strategic communications function within the Council, forging stronger relationships with service areas to better plan and deliver communications activity.

3. Detail

Establishing a strategic communications function

- 3.1 A restructure of the Communications Team was completed in November 2016 in order to create new capability and capacity to deliver more proactive communications activity in support of Council priorities. A new set of role profiles and grade mix achieved an overall net saving in staff costs. The team currently has 9 occupied posts (9 FTE), with two vacancies.
- 3.2 The core role of the Communications Team is to recommend and deliver communications solutions on behalf of Cabinet Members and Corporate Directors / Heads of Service linked to their priorities. This includes, for example, engaging communities in proposed service changes and helping Council staff to understand and contribute to the delivery of the Swindon Programme.
- 3.3 Since the start of 2017, we have recruited over 50% of the team to fill the new job profiles and are now better able to proactively engage service areas to identify and forward plan communications work. All members of the Communications Team have undertaken communications training based on best practice

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principles developed by the Government Communication Service within the Cabinet Office.

- 3.4 In March 2017, we consulted LAG and CMT in developing a 2017/18 Council-wide Communications Strategy and Workplan that sets out the team's approach and areas of focus. This placed an emphasis on working collaboratively with service areas to forward plan proactive communication campaigns and projects to support their service priorities. Also, ensuring communications representation at management meetings so we have early sight of emerging issues and reputational risks and are able to advise on managing these.

Communications delivery in 2017/18

- 3.5 Our work encompasses digital (including social media), media relations, marketing, design and print, internal communications and staff engagement. Our aim is to ensure all communications output makes a measurable difference to clearly defined objectives agreed with Cabinet Members and Corporate Directors / Heads of Service.
- 3.6 All our campaigns and projects are documented using a consistent template that answers the fundamental questions: *who do we want to get to do what and why? How we will know if it has worked?*
- 3.7 Over the past 12 months we have delivered communications activity across a wide range of subjects and issues, including:
- Arranging proactive media opportunities to promote awareness and understanding of the Council's role supporting improvements in education standards and attainment, including the Swindon Challenge.
 - Producing the 2017/18 Council Tax booklet sent to 86K households that explained where the Council gets its money from and how it spends it.
 - Organising a four-day Town Centre Showcase event (July 2017) to update 600 visitors on the Council's regeneration plans.
 - Warning and informing residents of road projects within the Borough such as M4 J16 and Akers Way improvements, helping them understand why this work is needed and the benefits.
 - Running a targeted campaign (summer 2017) that helped attract over 1,200 new subscribers to the garden waste service.

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- Supporting the Building Control team to generate new business leads by marketing their services to builders, agents and private home owners.
- Promoting the dog fouling PSPO consultation that attracted over 750 public responses.
- Providing Council-wide communications support around the launch and ongoing delivery of the Swindon Programme, including organising 11 staff briefings in September/October 2017.
- Delivering an internal campaign this autumn that led to over 800 staff getting a flu vaccination (up 45% on 2016).

3.8 Beyond staff resource, these projects and campaigns have been delivered on a no or low cost basis. Evaluation reports are produced for each piece of work, to document what was achieved and lessons learned to inform future activity.

Media relations / reputation management

- 3.9 Media relations remains a core function of the Communications Team to protect and enhance the reputation of the Council, through promoting awareness and understanding of proposed service changes, policy decisions and the chances for residents to help shape these. Our focus is to continue developing strong relationships with Corporate Directors / Heads of Service to horizon scan and provide support on emerging reputational risks and opportunities.
- 3.10 Media coverage involving the Council is monitored and summarised in a daily email sent to all staff, both produced at no cost beyond a small amount of staff time. We also compile data to understand the volume and sentiment of coverage generated by our proactive and reactive media work.
- 3.11 During October 2017, the Communications Team issued 17 media releases that resulted in 51 pieces of coverage, 66% of which were positive in sentiment. The team responded to 43 media inquiries that resulted in 126 pieces of coverage, 41% of which were positive in their sentiment, 33% negative and 25% neutral.

Use of social media

- 3.12 Over the past 12 months we have evolved how we use the Council's corporate Twitter and Facebook accounts, forward planning content to make these relevant and engaging channels for residents. This includes the use of videos and images, refining our approach in response to the engagement data on both

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platforms. We now have over 9,600 followers on Twitter, having attracted 2,000 new followers since April 2016.

- 3.13 We have recently completed an audit of Council social media accounts operated outside the Communications Team, making recommendations to CMT on reducing these to down to those that are active and properly supported.

Internal communications and staff engagement

- 3.14 A dedicated post within the Communications Team, appointed in August this year, leads on internal communications and staff engagement. An audit of existing internal communication channels and activity is currently being carried out, to include seeking input from managers across the Council on how we can better support them to communicate corporate information to their teams.
- 3.15 The input from this audit will inform the development of a Council-wide staff communications and engagement strategy next year, linked to objectives around improving specific measures in the staff survey.
- 3.16 A staff communications and engagement plan has been developed to support the delivery of the Swindon Programme, working closely with the officer leads. This will take onboard insight and feedback from the audit of existing internal communication channels and activity.

Communications response to emergency planning incidents

- 3.17 Following the reorganisation of the Communications Team, a key focus in 2017/18 has been reviewing and putting in place new processes for how we provide communications support to out of hours emergency incidents.
- 3.18 This includes introducing a duty rota and dedicated emergency communications mobile phone number recorded with the Control Room through which communications support can be requested 24/7. We have put processes in place to improve our capability and resilience operating remotely out of hours.
- 3.19 Members of the Communications Team have completed internal emergency planning training, attended external multi-agency training events and the Council's monthly internal emergency planning meetings.

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Visual identity

- 3.20 Since the summer, we have been working with colleagues across the Council to implement some quick wins to renew our collective responsibility for applying the Council's existing visual identity consistently and professionally.
- 3.21 This includes mobilising a group of staff across service areas who are involved in applying the Council's visual identity, for example on vehicles, signage, uniforms and documentation. Our aim is to support these colleagues to project a smart, professional image of the Council when the time is appropriate to naturally replace or update items on a cost neutral basis.
- 3.22 A standard corporate Powerpoint template and email signature format have been rolled out to staff and made available on the intranet. We are exploring how, as part of the staff induction process, we can make new colleagues aware of the importance of the Council's visual identity, which links directly to our reputation.

Continuous communications improvement

- 3.23 Our focus this year has been to introduce new ways of working to engage service area more proactively to forward plan communications work.
- 3.24 Inevitably it will take time to develop and mature these relationships across all service areas, using the work we have delivered this year to help build consistent internal understanding of what strategic communications can offer.
- 3.25 A year in, there is untapped potential to do more work with service areas to develop evidence and insight driven communication campaigns that contribute to their service outcomes. Over the coming weeks we will be working with Corporate Directors / Heads of Service to identify further opportunities where we can do so effectively, identifying sufficient planning lead-in time and resource
- 3.26 Our ambition is to be recognised and respected both internally and externally for the quality, creativity and professionalism of our communications advice and delivery in support of Council priorities. We are well-placed to do this, building on previous work that earned a gold award in 2016 Public Service Communications Awards and silver in 2016 CIPR South West PRide Awards.
- 3.27 In a continually changing communications landscape, we recognise the need to have a strong culture of professional development and continuous improvement within the team, staying close to emerging trends, new tools and channels. The Communications Team is also represented in the first staff cohort for the Future and Aspiring Leaders courses launched in the summer.

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- 3.28 We have invited the Local Government Association to carry out a three day communications review in January 2018. This will involve interviews with elected members, officers and partners. The review should provide valuable, independent recommendations to guide how we can maximise the contribution of communications to support Council priorities.
- 3.29 We are also working with the LGA to undertake new resident research to generate up to date insight around their communication habits and preferences, as well as views on the Council that we can compare with other authorities.

4. Alternative Options

- 4.1 The Council could decide not to operate and resource a Communications Team. However, that would remove professional communications skills and experience that support Cabinet Members and Corporate Directors / Heads of Service and in managing organisational reputational risks.
- 4.2 Consistent with other local authorities, a strategic communication function with clear commissioning and management links to the wider organisation can make a measurable difference in supporting Council priorities.

5. Implications, Diversity Impact Assessment and Risk Management

Financial and Procurement Implications

There are no financial or procurement implications arising directly from this report.

Legal and Human Rights Implications

- 5.1 Legal and Human Rights considerations have been taken fully into account in compiling this report. It is considered that the recommendations of this report are compatible with Convention Rights.

All Other Implications (including Staff, Sustainability, Health, Rural, Crime and Disorder)

- 5.2 There are no other implications arising from this report.

Diversity Impact Assessment

- 5.3 A Diversity Impact Assessment has not been completed for this report, as it is a progress update on the work and approach of the Communications Team.

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Risk Management

- 5.4 Risks will be managed in line with department risk management techniques and programme management.

6. Consultees

- 6.1 The Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer) and Director of Law and Democratic Services (Monitoring Officer) are consulted in respect of all reports.

7. Background Papers

- 7.1 None

8. Appendices

- 8.1 None