

## Consultation and Mass Communication

Date: 16 January 2023

Report of: Chief Officer Strategy and Improvement

Report to: Scrutiny Board – Strategy and Resources

Will the decision be open for call in?  Yes  No

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information?  Yes  No

### Brief summary

Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board has requested an information report on the council's approach to corporate communications and consultation and engagement. This request is in part a response to concerns that issues with large scale external communications could lead to an increase in the volume of calls to the council's contact centre.

This report sets out the council's approach in these two areas, focusing predominantly on the roles of the council's communications and marketing team, and the small corporate consultation and engagement function which is part of intelligence and policy. The report outlines their roles and responsibilities, describes the approach both take to their direct delivery of activity, and highlights where they may also provide broader cross-council oversight or advice.

Finally, the report notes that due to the directorate-led nature of these functions (in delivery terms) there are many areas which fall outside the remit of the central teams and are instead led from within directorates. It outlines recent and planned work to ensure cross-council oversight and minimise any issues.

### Recommendations

- a) Board members are asked to note the content of the report and consider any further scrutiny actions that may arise.

## **What is this report about?**

- 1 Every council service has a responsibility to communicate effectively with their service users, staff, partners, and the public at large – good communication is everyone’s business. Clear, accessible communications support better outcomes for everyone and enable the council to operate as efficiently as possible. Most of this communication happens seamlessly day-to-day, but at those times when more structured corporate communication about an issue, or consultation on a service or policy change is required there is expert support and advice on hand to help.
- 2 This report provides an overview of the roles two central corporate teams play in providing this support.
- 3 As is detailed below, communications and marketing will support services with ongoing communications activity, and offer advice on both corporate communications and promoting consultation and engagement opportunities effectively. Intelligence and policy have a small number of colleagues with dedicated expertise in consultation, on hand to support services to design and deliver high quality activity and maximise the learning they can gain through analysis of the responses received. Together these two teams provide expertise to support council colleagues, but in most cases responsibility for direct delivery of consultation and communications activity remains with local teams/services within directorates.
- 4 The two teams work side by side within the strategy and improvement service and regularly collaborate on consultation and engagement activity, including on large pieces of work such as the Budget Consultation or staff engagement surveys. Also, when a service has approached either team for support with a consultation, they would generally involve the other team for help with their specific area of expertise, for example: communicating and distributing the consultation, or for best practice on carrying it out. However, for the purposes of this report the specific roles and approaches of both teams in carrying out consultation and engagement work have been presented separately, to help with clarity about each of their roles.
- 5 The main detail in the report is separated into two parts. The first provides an overview of the remit and approach of the communications and marketing team, and the second focuses on the consultation and engagement function which is part of intelligence and policy.

## **Communications and marketing**

### **a) Background**

- 6 The council’s communications and marketing team provides professional guidance and support to the organisation with internal and external communications. This is achieved in a variety of ways, including using marketing and creative campaigns, advertising, media relations and social media.
- 7 The team of experienced communications and marketing professionals is made up of business partners, senior officers, officers, and assistants with a mix of specialisms – digital and social, press and media, content and storytelling, creative design and marketing and campaigns.
- 8 They take a consistent approach to working on projects, programmes and with service areas that supports the desired outcomes of our key organisational strategies and the three pillars – delivering inclusive growth, improving the health and wellbeing of all our citizens, and tackling climate change – helping to prioritise and plan communications activity that is focused on outcomes.
- 9 Business partners work with service leads and key stakeholders to understand and evaluate need and assess support requirements. They consider resource implications, relevant

constraints and timescales, provide strategic oversight and input and act as the key contact for the service to ensure consistency of approach.

- 10 Once work is prioritised and programmed a communications and marketing lead is established to collaborate with services to explore and consider communications activity as early as possible. They provide constructive challenge, insight, ideas, and evidence to help agree and deliver tailored, adaptable communications strategies and activity. These are planned using industry-standard frameworks to focus on continued evaluation and development and keep the work on schedule.

## **b) Communicating public engagement and corporate communications**

- 11 The communications and marketing team is often approached to provide support on public consultations from all services across the organisation. Services areas, as the project's subject matter experts, keep the autonomy to make their own decisions about engagement throughout, allowing them to decide how they want to implement change. Services are using a variety of tools to do this including Commonplace – an online citizens engagement platform – and Smart Survey – the council's corporate online survey platform. There is an expectation that services, project, or programme leads understand, evidence, and can articulate their objectives ahead of requesting the work they would like support with.
- 12 Sometimes the team is also asked to help with corporate communication (for example council tax and waste, and recycling). Regular statutory recurring corporate communications work such as council tax, school admissions or elections support are scheduled into work programmes in advance. Where new requests are for specific pieces of work in relation to projects that are already under way in services they are considered in the context of existing priorities, availability of resource and capacity planning. If the team can accommodate the work, they will signpost engagement points such as existing meetings, events and online questionnaires through targeted marketing and promotion. The aim is always to ensure consultation and engagement whether in-person or online is communicated effectively and efficiently, creating, and building awareness through clear and consistent messaging and accessible content. If, due to existing commitments or pressures, the team cannot resource the work, self-serve guidance will instead be provided on best value and no cost communications options.
- 13 Ideally major projects should involve the communications and marketing team at the early stages. Late requests compromise the ability to advise on and resource the project as significant related work may have already taken place prior to the team's involvement, such as research and insight, working with hard-to-reach groups, organising localised meetings, focus groups and using online engagement tools.
- 14 Experienced and expert officers in communications and marketing can offer ideas and best practice examples for sharing information and encouraging engagement. It is important to first build an understanding of what the consultation or communication is about and how people will be affected or impacted. We put people at the heart of communications by working out what are the best methods of explaining clearly to them what we are trying to say, and which are the best channels for enabling a two-way discussion so they can respond. With consultation this could be about highlighting the importance, value, and benefit of taking part and having your say. Whereas with corporate communications we want to make sure we are reaching the people of Leeds and that the message is understood.
- 15 In terms of consultation messaging this is overwhelmingly through the council's social media channels, as this helps to target relevant demographic groups and localities. But it can also be through traditional print methods such as posters, leaflets, interpretation boards or displays, presentation of plans, and consultation documentation – again we would ascertain resource capacity and availability. Colleagues would then work with the council's in-house creative team,

the translation team (when required) and the service to develop an effective plan for communicating the consultation. In addition, working closely with our press and media specialists we may also issue a press release or arrange interviews depending on the profile and nature of the consultation or communication.

- 16 To address how we improve communications to the public we are developing a shared calendar of future mass communications in Microsoft Teams that can be edited and populated by service leads. Support and oversight will be needed to maintain consistency of approach when inputting activity to ensure the tool is effective. Once we have a detailed timeline, we'll have a clearer overview to help us prioritise, and programme joint support by coordinating content creation, messaging and highlighting the value of good quality first point communications in limiting calls to the contact centre. This will be supported by quality assurance sign-off for mail, print and digital fulfilment. We will build awareness of the approach through clear communication with services, using findings in the initial phase to influence and inform how we work together.

## **Intelligence and policy - consultation and engagement function**

### **a) Background**

- 17 The council's overall approach for consultation and engagement is a directorate-led one as described above, with teams and individuals carrying out activity on behalf of their local services. Support to do this well is available from the small consultation and engagement function within intelligence and policy, who provide a corporate lead role focused primarily on sharing best practice, quality consultation design, support with analysis and improving access.
- 18 Some teams are responsible for delivering most local engagement activity including Voice and Influence of Young People and Carers (Children & Families), Tenant Engagement (Housing), Communities, and Connecting Leeds - Transport (City Development), which contain experienced consultation and engagement professionals who are in contact and work in partnership with one another and the corporate team. There are also individuals spread across all directorates who provide support locally as part of their day-to-day activities. These teams and individuals carry out a range of activity to find out what people think and do including formal consultations, evaluations, focus groups and satisfaction surveys.
- 19 Intelligence and Policy has 2.6 FTE staff focused mainly on consultation and engagement., primarily funded by the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) to provide statutory engagement support to Housing Leeds. They offer advice, support, and infrastructure to help services across the council carry out high quality consultation and engagement. They also directly deliver a programme of work including the annual Budget Consultation, Housing perception surveys, and internal engagement activity such as the Staff Survey and Wellbeing Pulse Surveys, as well as delivering engagement activity for services as needed and where capacity allows. A further project being considered for 2023 is a Leeds resident survey – potentially following the LGA guidance to be able to benchmark resident satisfaction. However, discussions on this are at a very early stage and there are potentially significant resource implications which have not yet been fully considered.
- 20 This central team are responsible for: managing the software and licences for the corporate online survey offer (currently SMART Survey), maintaining an online staff toolkit hosted on the intranet, and supporting the Citizens' Panel; a group of almost 2,000 residents that services can approach when carrying out engagement activity.

## **b) Undertaking consultations and engagement**

21 In summary, the main steps taken by services and teams across the council are:

- Setting objectives - being clear about what we are trying to achieve and checking if the information exists already.
- Identifying stakeholders – considering their specific needs.
- Considering method/s - to ensure key stakeholders are included and that there aren't barriers for some people to take part. This is where intelligence and policy colleagues can offer support and advice. Options might include:
  - online and postal surveys, online engagement platforms, face to face and online focus groups and workshops.
  - using Citizens' Panel to get the voice of Leeds residents.
- Planning communications – how best to reach stakeholders, for example social media and email contact lists, including working with other organisations that already have a trusted relationship. Services are recommended to approach their communications and marketing business partner initially for support and advice.
- Delivering the consultation or engagement activity – monitoring which stakeholders are taking part and considering whether further engagement is needed to involve those not taking part.
- Analysing results, summarising insight, and reporting findings. Again, intelligence and policy can offer support with this to ensure findings are accurate and reliable, and that the service is learning as much from the responses they receive as possible.
- Feeding back to stakeholders – Giving timely feedback on the outcomes and what actions we are taking.

## **c) Ensuring good quality consultation**

22 It is important that consultation and engagement activity is carried out to a high quality so that the right decisions are made, which are based on findings that consider the views of the communities affected, and so that any legal and statutory duties to consult are met. Good quality consultation builds trust, encourages future engagement, and can reduce unnecessary contact through busy customer services teams.

23 Intelligence and policy colleagues aim to ensure good quality consultation across the council through providing a range of tools for the services to use, alongside advice on best practice and support where needed, including:

- Offering training and advice on approach for example: use of clear and unbiased language when preparing consultations, to ensure questions meet project objectives and don't exclude some communities.
- Support when things go wrong, troubleshooting issues such as problems using the survey software or how to respond to difficult enquiries from the public. Contact details are well advertised.
- Maintaining a comprehensive Consultation and Engagement Toolkit of resources on the council's intranet, to help services plan consultation activity.
- Working with IDS to provide excellent software solutions, including to carry out robust and accessible online surveys.
- Delivering all or part of a consultation or engagement activity, for example:

- designing research materials, such as online or postal surveys.
  - processing and analysing data to identify and summarise key insights into reports that are engaging and easy to read.
- 24 Although few in number, consultation and engagement colleagues in intelligence and policy maintain a high profile through working on key projects for the main engagement activity producers across all directorates, leading by example through delivering to high standard. Contact details for the team are well advertised on the staff intranet and are referenced in key documentation, such as the report-writing templates and Financial Challenge pro-formas. Together, these steps ensure that staff direct enquiries to the core team, reducing unnecessary contact through other routes such as the service centre / IDS.
- 25 From 2023/24 the team plan to introduce an annual report of consultation and engagement, that would bring together all activity carried out across the council by all teams and individuals that work in this field; collating information such as key findings and the groups consulted. This would be shared with decision makers through the annual performance reporting mechanisms, with a view to widen access to key insights, reduce duplication and prevent unnecessary activity that could lead to consultation fatigue. Further to this the team plan to host a calendar of known upcoming consultations, so that when scheduling upcoming activity this can be informed by what other engagement is happening and to whom.

## **Managing demand and customer contact**

- 26 The approaches, advice and support highlighted above are aimed at ensuring communication and consultation activity is delivered to a high standard, therefore reducing as far as possible the likelihood of generating additional reactive customer contact through miscommunication or confusion. Of course, there will always be a need for some residents to get in touch with the council and customer service teams are ready and happy to help, but minimising unnecessary contact remains a priority.
- 27 The contact centre holds regular liaison meetings with service areas to discuss performance and agree actions that will improve the customer experience overall. These meetings are designed to highlight when key communications are due to be issued and give the opportunity for contact centre colleagues to provide feedback to services to make messages clearer for customers and prevent the need for customers to contact the council. When contact is unavoidable, the meetings ensure contact centre officers can be fully briefed in advance of communications being issued, and they can be prepared for queries which they can then handle more efficiently. Examples of this successful approach have included Housing's monthly tenant newsletters ensuring issues that tenants are regularly in touch about are adequately covered, and on Household Support Fund letters where learning was applied to add information to the letter which previously was missing but contact suggested many recipients required. A further recent example is the work undertaken with colleagues in the Blue Badge service to review, re-design and amend letters and forms for Blue Badge applications, giving clearer information on what proofs are required to complete an application, to help reduce follow up and avoidable contact. The quality of applications has since improved and more customers are now providing the correct documentation in the relevant format.
- 28 In some cases, the council has only a very limited ability to change communication which are issued even when we know they tend to generate additional contact – as is the case with annual canvass letters for elections which are largely prescribed by central government with limited to no opportunity to amend. At other times issues that have been outside of our control have led to significant spikes in contact, such as a banking error around the recent £150 Council Tax rebate, when despite efforts from communications and marketing and the contact

centre working together to quickly respond to the issue, additional spikes in contact were still seen.

29 In all these cases, as is highlighted for both communications and marketing / intelligence and policy above, early discussion with contact centre colleagues and the service areas responsible for the communication is the best route to avoiding communications being issued which have the potential to cause challenges down the line.

## Looking ahead

30 To summarise, the services and teams supporting corporate communication and consultations plan to take further steps to minimise the potential for communications to the public to fall below the standard we are seeking to achieve, and thereby avoid inadvertent spikes in customer contact in response. The proposals below are part of effort to continuously improve in this area, responding to challenges and changes in customer behaviour as they arise. We will:

- Develop a shared Teams calendar of future corporate communications that can be edited and populated by service leads, and where additional tailored advice and guidance can be provided by expert communications colleagues.
- Develop a review and sign-off process for large-scale corporate communications.
- Continue the important liaison between the contact centre communications team and services to get ahead of large-scale communications to customers. This has been highlighted in leadership communications and could be included in manager development later this year.
- Host a shared Teams calendar of upcoming consultations and engagement activity that can be viewed and populated by experts across the services and can be used to inform planning and sequential release of new consultations as appropriate.
- Introduce an annual report of consultation and engagement, bringing together all council activity in one report that would be shared with decision makers through the annual performance reporting mechanisms.
- Explore the feasibility of launching an annual resident satisfaction survey, which is at the very early scoping stage of assessing potential value and best approaches.

## What impact will this proposal have?

31 This report seeks to outline the council's approach to both corporate communications and consultation, enabling the Board to consider any further actions it may wish to pursue.

32 As is suggested in the previous section, the current approach seeks to balance the benefits of maintaining finite and specific expertise in the centre while ensuring individual services remain in control as the subject matter experts for the relevant project all against the backdrop of limited resources. This decentralised approach sees many more staff across the organisation being involved in consultation and communications activity as part of their normal roles. This is likely the most cost-effective approach for an organisation this size, but clearly brings with it some challenges around potential inconsistency in the appearance and approach used by different teams and makes it more difficult for any one part of the council to hold an overall picture of all the activity ongoing at any one time. These are challenges that the communications and marketing team and the consultation and engagement function continue to take steps to address, in order to ensure they have a level of cross-council oversight and that high quality consistent approaches are taken.

## How does this proposal impact the three pillars of the Best City Ambition?

Health and Wellbeing

Inclusive Growth

Zero Carbon

33 Effective consultation and communication with citizens, council partners and staff are vital in delivery of the Best City Ambition. The Ambition sets out, as part of the Team Leeds approach, some agreed principles for communication, co-production, and co-design which the council has committed to work towards.

34 Ensuring communications sent to citizens and partners are clear, and that consultation is undertaken in an open, accessible, and manageable way are key to ensuring the principles described in the Best City Ambition can be achieved. The proposed actions outlined in this report will strengthen the council's approach in these areas.

## What consultation and engagement has taken place?

Wards affected: n/a

Have ward members been consulted?

Yes

No

35 Given the nature of this report, no formal consultation and engagement was required. However, information and advice has been sought from other council services including the contact centre (Shared Services) to improve the quality of information provided to the Board.

## What are the resource implications?

36 There are no resource implications arising directly from this report.

## What are the key risks and how are they being managed?

37 There are no risk management implications arising directly from this report.

## What are the legal implications?

38 There are no legal implications arising directly from this report. The report also does not contain details of a decision which is why it is marked as not open for call in.

## Options, timescales and measuring success

### What other options were considered?

39 Not applicable.

### How will success be measured?

40 As discussed earlier, the contact centre regularly monitors the demand it is receiving from citizens and is successful in identifying when communications issued inadvertently lead to spikes in contact. This existing approach provides a useful way to monitor the impact of development work to address and minimise these issues moving forward.

### What is the timetable and who will be responsible for implementation?

41 Not applicable.

**Appendices**

- None.

**Background papers**

- None.