LGA communications peer review

Harlow Council

October 2022

Feedback report

1. Executive summary

There is an increasing recognition across Harlow Council of the importance of communications and a shared desire to improve.

The council's position statement for this peer review was very honest about the communications challenges the organisation faces and many of our recommendations were already highlighted as gaps. This self-awareness provides an encouraging basis to move forward.

The political leadership is ambitious, clear about its purpose and keen for that to be communicated. This change of pace and direction has challenged the way the council has traditionally approached its communications but is something that can and should be harnessed.

There is a genuine commitment amongst staff to the council and Harlow the place. We were impressed by the passion that people clearly demonstrated, which again if exploited is a powerful asset for the organisation.

The communications team is seen as hard working and diligent and is well-led by a respected manager whose steadfastness is recognised across the council. The team is widely thought to have done a good job in difficult circumstances during the pandemic, working and delivering at pace to communicate vital messages.

Although the commitment to good communications is very much in place, the conditions are not. There is widespread frustration across the council with the current approach. The processes for delivering communications are unnecessarily complicated and hierarchical, and too often the outputs are traditional and lack impact.

Harlow currently lacks both the right systems and, crucially, the culture for communications to be effective. People told us the council was beset by a 'culture of caution' which meant 'people don't know how to make things happen' and that the organisation had 'lost its way on how to be big and bold'.

Communications is very traditional and largely reactive, but this is a product of an organisational culture. Complex and hierarchical sign-off process for both internal

and external messages mean that communications does not move at the pace members and staff expect.

The council's tone of voice has become very corporate, flat, and uninspiring – but this a direct consequence of a risk averse approach which appears to be institutionally embedded.

There is a need and desire for communications to become more bold, creative, and human. This will require a change in culture, but with support from the top of the organisation and a recognition of the need to try different things and take some risks, it is achievable. Part of the key to this is to have a communications voice at 'the top table', which is at the key decision-making meetings and telling truth to power.

The most immediate priority for the council is around internal communications. A permanent chief executive is being recruited and there is a significant budget challenge for 2023/24. There will be a need to engage with staff in a different way and to build upon some of the recent and valued improvements to internal communications – such as the Interim Chief Executive's videos.

There is a real frustration amongst colleagues with the current approach to staff engagement. We were told by many people that morale is low and that there is an information vacuum in the organisation. These concerns can be translated into opportunities, and if the council embraced a more engaging and open approach to internal communications there would be a huge amount of goodwill.

The council's external communications needs to move from being traditional and reactive to being more strategic and campaign-led. This will not happen overnight, but there are some practical steps that can be taken to start making that shift.

Currently, the council does not have an understanding of how people in Harlow access information about the council or prefer to. This also appears to be a consequence of an organisational culture where, as one person told us: 'there is a lack of focus on the resident'.

Gaining that insight will help underpin a new communications strategy, allowing the council to prioritise its resources where it knows the impact will be made. There is also a need to translate the vison set out in the corporate narrative into a clear set of

communications priorities and refreshed narrative for the organisation. These are the strategic pillars that can lead to a step change in the way the council communicates and engages with its residents and partners.

There is a positive, dynamic, and inspiring story to tell about Harlow as a place. We heard members and officers talk enthusiastically about the new hospital, garden town and the regeneration of the town centre. Partners are very enthusiastic and willing to get behind this story but frustrated at the current lack of opportunities to do so.

Work to develop a place narrative for Harlow appears to have paused because of some historic disagreements over previous brand work. Now is the time to reboot this work, bring that story of Harlow to life so it reflects the council's current ambitions for the town.

Communications in Harlow is being hindered by hierarchy and systems are stifling outputs. But with a braver, bolder, and more confident approach there is a real opportunity to make improvements quickly.

2. Key recommendations

There are several observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council. We have divided up our recommendations into 'quick wins' – actions that can and should be implemented as soon as possible – along with more medium-term issues.

Quick wins

2.1 **Develop dedicated communications plans for known key events on the horizon – the setting of the 2023/24 Budget and the appointment of a new chief executive**. These are urgent priorities for the council that require dedicated communications resource and oversight.

2.2 **Start to think differently about the council's approach to communications – be more creative, bold, and risky – and move away from a reliance on traditional channels**.

2.3 **Address technological and cultural barriers to effective communications (e.g., staff unable to access social media on work devices)**

2.4 **Review and streamline the council's approval processes for external communications.**

2.5 **Ensure there is a greater communications presence at the 'top table' and in other key forums (e.g., informal cabinet)**. Allow the Communications Manager to attend and contribute to key discussions at Senior Management Board (SMB).

2.6 **Grow relationships between communications and elected members, ensuring they are aware of the support on offer to be advocates for the council and are encouraged to do so.**

2.7 **Carry out a skills audit within the comms team – and invest in training and development where it is needed.**

2.8 **Become more outward facing and build stronger relations with local communications partners – learning, sharing, and collaborating**. The team need to start getting out more, initially within Harlow and Essex but then ultimately beyond.

2.9 **Address the lack of resident insight (either from data held by partners or through new research) to establish how people access information about the council – and how they want to.** Look to commission a resident survey to determine people's views of the council and their communications preference. This will provide rich insight to inform communications activity.

Medium term

2.10 **Carry out a staff survey, including questions to establish how colleagues want to be engaged with.**

2.11 **Develop refreshed priorities based on the corporate strategy and a new narrative for the organisation**.

2.12 **Use the refreshed priorities and new narrative to agree a communications strategy and annual campaign plan**. The annual plan should be agreed by Cabinet and SMB.

2.13 **Introduce forward plans based on the newly agreed priorities and campaigns**. These tactical plans (e.g., media grids) need to be based on priorities the whole organisation is bought into.

2.14 **Reinvigorate the council's approach to place leadership to build and**

develop a compelling narrative for Harlow. The LGA can offer support to help reboot the place narrative for the town which partners are keen to get behind.

2.15   Reset the relationship between the communications team and the rest of the organisation – be clear about what it does and does not do.

2.16   Overhaul approach to campaign planning, evaluation, and reporting – ensuring impact and delivery is the focus rather than outputs.

3. Background and scope of the review

3.1 The peer team

It was a pleasure to be invited by Harlow 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 review were:

- Lead Peer: **Fran Collingham**, LGA Associate and former Assistant Director of Communications at Coventry City Council

- Member Peer: **Cllr Rory Love OBE**, Kent County Council

- Officer Peer: **Sandy Eaton**, Strategic Communications and Marketing Manager, Stevenage Borough Council

- Officer Peer: **Michael Hann**, Strategic Communications Manager, Huntingdonshire District Council

- Review Manager: **Matt Nicholls**, Head of Communications Support and Improvement, LGA

- Shadow Peer: **Daisy Roberts**, Senior Media Relations Officer, LGA

- Shadow Peer: **Nick Sutton**, Senior Media Relations Officer, LGA

3.2 Scope and focus

This review was commissioned by the council's Communications Manager in conjunction with the political leadership. Following a change of administration in

2021, there has been a focus on improving services and the way the council works – this has included seeking to change the ways in which the organisation communicates with its different audiences. It was therefore felt this was an opportune time to commission a peer review to provide a critical friend perspective on the council's communications.

The following scope was agreed for the review:

- **Structure, capacity and ways of working**. Does the council have the right level of resources and the right mix of skills to ensure it has a high performing communications function now and in the future? How effective is the council's external communications?
- **Priorities and strategies**. Does the council have a clear set of communications priorities?
- **Role of members**. To what extent does the council's communications activity reflect the priorities of the administration? How well supported are members to be advocates for the organisation?
- **Internal communications**. Is the council's staff engagement and internal communications effective? Are the right channels and activities in place to ensure colleagues are kept well informed and engaged?

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer reviews are improvement-focussed 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 comprehensive position statement.

The team then spent three days onsite in Harlow, during which they:

- spoke to more than 60 people, including a range of council staff together with councillors and external stakeholders
- gathered information and views from more than 25 interviews, focus groups and meetings
- collectively spent around 150 hours to determine findings – the equivalent of one

person spending more than three weeks in Harlow.

4 Principles of good communications

Communications plays a key role in ensuring councils can continue to lead their communities in challenging and uncertain times.

Good communications supports 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 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 both 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
- Support talent acquisition
- 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 is **owned by everyone**

5 Feedback

5.1 Structure, capacity, and ways of working

Harlow Council has a centralised communications function comprised of 5 FTE posts. Led by a Communications Manager, it also includes two communications officers, a graphic designer, and a web communications officer.

Although we were told some other parts of the council will spend some money on marketing activities – for example the Harlow Playhouse – the bulk of the council's

communications resource is channelled through the corporate team.

According to the LGA's [annual heads of communication survey](#), the average size of a district council communications team is 4.1 FTE – with a further average of 2.4 FTE performing communications related roles in other parts of the organisation. Therefore, communications in Harlow has around about the level of resource we would expect for a council of its size.

The communications team is responsible for the majority of the council's corporate communications – including press releases, the main social media accounts, the quarterly Harlow Times resident magazine, internal communications, printed materials, and some campaigns.

Members of the communications team were praised by people we spoke to during the review. They are seen as hard working and committed to the council. In particular, the team is seen as having risen to the challenge of the pandemic by ensuring relevant messages could get out to businesses and residents in both a timely and creative fashion.

The Communications Manager is viewed by colleagues as a highly capable and experienced professional, who is widely respected across the organisation. However, it was clear to us that there is an over reliance on one individual. This is creating pressure points in the service and a single point of failure.

There is a tendency in the council for all communications requests to be channelled through the Communications Manager, who as a result of being pulled in so many different directions and managing competing day to day demands does not often have the capacity to operate strategically.

Many people we spoke to raised the number of management layers which exist above the Communications Manager. The post holder currently reports into the Customer and Media Services Manager, who is managed by the Assistant Director for Corporate Services that reports to the Director of Governance and Corporate Services.

The wider senior management structure of the council is outside the scope of this peer review, but the current reporting lines for communications are widely viewed as

being cumbersome and unnecessarily hierarchical.

In our view, the most important thing is whether a communications team has the right level of access at a senior level in order to influence strategically – rather than the pay and rations of reporting lines.

However, it is clear that the Communications Manager or the wider team are very rarely 'in the room' when important discussions in the council – either at SMB or informal Cabinet – are taking place. This could be a consequence of the senior management structure, or indeed a historical culture within the organisation, or indeed both.

A very easy 'quick win' would be to allow the Communications Manager access to key meetings and discussions – particularly in a period when the council is likely to be taking some difficult decisions – to allow him to provide professional advice, rather than being told what has already been decided and asked to communicate it. This would not involve any changes to existing management structures but would help ensure communications input into any strategic discussions which might carry some reputational risk.

The relationship between the communications team and the rest of the organisation is very transactional. In the absence of a planned and strategic approach to communications (as we will discuss in section 5.2) the service is very reactive, either to demands from different services or external enquiries.

The council's social media output is widely seen as having improved and become more engaging over the last two years. However, people we spoke to also said that some of the positive lessons from COVID – when communications had to move faster and needed to be engaging in order to have impact – have not been carried through to the post pandemic world.

The council's communications is very traditional. There is a disproportionate focus on the issuing of press releases – the Communications Manager estimates '50 to 60 per cent' of his time is spent on this area of activity. This would be less of a concern if the agreed content of the press release was being adapted and used effectively across a range of different communications channels, but it would appear the issuing of the statement is seen as an end in itself. This is partly a result of constrained resources, but also a reflection on the traditional approach which means opportunities are being

missed to communicate in a more engaging and effective way.

Even in an era where the influence and reach of the local media is in decline, there will remain a need for any council to issue press releases on significant issues. However, in Harlow it appears to be the primary mode of external communication in almost all circumstances.

The over reliance on press releases is being exacerbated by a cumbersome sign off process. If there are disagreements on the content or wording of a statement – at an officer or member level – they can be held up in 'the system' for considerable periods of time. We were told on numerous occasions about one particular press release which has been the subject of internal disagreement for several months.

The current sign-off process for press releases is causing considerable frustration and taking up a significant amount of organisational resource. The council's Chief Executive is often the final arbiter of disputes about the wording if statements or whether they should be issued, which will be appropriate in certain circumstances, but should not be happening routinely. We would recommend the council introduces a media protocol which sets out clear guidelines for the issuing of press releases, including who will be quoted, the sign off process and agreed timeframes. Whilst this will obviously not solve some of the policy disagreements which might exist, a protocol would at least help try and prevent clearance happening 'by committee'.

Another consequence of the traditional approach to communications is that the council does not appear to be making the most of the skills and expertise it has. The communications team possesses people with experience of running behaviour change campaigns, for example, but this is not currently being utilised and is understandably causing some frustration.

Members of the communications team clearly want to do the best job they possibly can for the council, but currently feel part of a service that is reactive and often viewed as blockers by other parts of the organisation. 'We don't want to be seen as the comms police but as the comms facilitators,' one person put it to us.

We would recommend the council carries out a skills audit of the communications team. This can be used to identify gaps where there is a need to invest in development, but also to highlight strengths which can be better exploited and where the team can learn from each other.

Around the time of this peer review, a post in the team became vacant. The opportunity to recruit a new team member should be maximised, using a skills audit to identify gaps and to amend the job description and person specification accordingly.

Many people we spoke to felt there was too much of a formal tone of voice to the council's communications. As one person put it: 'Comms plays it too safe. There is too much corporate speak'. This is in part due to the hierarchical approach to communications we have highlighted. Without the licence to be creative and sometimes even edgy, the tone of the council's communications will inevitably be like it currently is.

There is also considerable scope for the team to be more outward facing, to get out more and collaborate both in and beyond Harlow to learn and share with peers across the public services communication's family. For example, there is an Essex public sector communications group which meets regularly and could be better tapped into. Likewise, communications partners in Harlow are very keen to engage more with the council but have grown frustrated by the limited opportunities they have to do so.

The communications team also appears to have become slightly detached from the wider organisation. There is a patchy relationship with different service areas, where contact will occur on a particular issue but there is often not a planned approach or regular meetings. A situation has arisen where some departments are even drafting their own press releases and sending them directly to the relevant Cabinet member for sign-off – bypassing the communications team entirely. This should not be happening and needs to be addressed by a new media protocol.

In addition to a new media protocol, there is a need for stronger guidelines around the setting up of social media accounts. Some services have established accounts without liaising with the communications team, and whilst there might be legitimate objective for doing so this should be done through a business case rather than unilaterally. Although there is a social media policy in place, it would appear this is not being adhered to.

There is a need for a better understanding across the organisation around branding and the council's identity, which in some cases is not being applied consistently. This is causing frustration for the communications service. As there is a lack of understanding about the purpose of the team and how it can help the organisation,

documents like branding guidelines are ignored and people are creating their own collateral. This lack of control or consistency means the council's identity is not being effectively managed.

A potential way the communications team could reset its relations with the rest of the organisation would be to better communicate what it does – and does not do. The setting up of social media accounts or drafting of press releases could be a result of people not understanding what the role of the communications team is in certain circumstances, which might be addressed through some internal profile raising. Some council communications teams produce comprehensive guides of the services they provide to officers and members, and whilst this level of detail might not be required in Harlow at the very least some clearer information on the intranet may be beneficial.

There is a need for closer and stronger links between the communications service and other public-facing teams in the council, in particular customer services and events. There should be systems in place for communications to share emerging prominent issues with customer services, in particular, but this does not appear to always happen.

The council's position statements for this peer review recognised that social media content is very broadcast and highlighted how some posts around housing or the town centre can generate hundreds of comments, which are then not responded to. It was suggested that additional customer service support could be provided to engage with residents on social media, which is something we would support – particularly for responding to direct messages about service-specific issues.

If the council is to change the way it approaches social media and interacts with the public, there will be a need to overhaul some of the outdated internal policies which would be a barrier to this. Staff are currently barred from accessing social media on council computers, which makes little sense given it is through these channels that many residents will engage with the organisation. People should be trusted to use social media at work responsibly, with any conduct issues being dealt with by the appropriate employee policies.

We heard differing views about the council's website. Some concerns were raised about the ability to find some key information about the council, but this may stem from a lack of understanding about what the primary purpose of the website is. The

website has been primarily designed as a transactional, customer-focussed platform rather than a communications tool to promote the council and the town. In our view, the two things are not mutually exclusive.

5.2 Priorities and strategies

A significant frustration for the communications team is that it is routinely involved at the end of the planning process and not the beginning.

This is by no means a problem unique to Harlow, but it stems from an approach to communications which is not planned, strategic or driven by organisational priorities.

To the council's credit, it recognises key parts of the communications jigsaw are currently missing – namely a communications strategy, a corporate narrative, and an annual campaign plan.

There are several steps that need to be taken in order to put communications on a more proactive and strategic footing. The first priority should be to address the lack of resident insight which is undermining the council's approach to communications.

The council does not currently have any data or evidence around how local people access news, how they find out information about the council – or how they would prefer to. This means communications activity is not based on evidence about the best way to engage with parts of the community and is falling back by default on traditional methods such as press releases and the Harlow Times.

We were asked on several occasions to give a view on whether the council should continue publishing Harlow Times or pivot towards a more digital approach. Whilst many councils have started to move in that direction, ultimately the decision should be based on insight and the views of Harlow residents. Similarly, a lot of the communications team's resource seems to be spent liaising with the Your Harlow online news outlet. Whether this is disproportionate or not can only be answered by data and how many residents are engaging with this platform.

We would recommend initially that the council works with its partners to establish what resident insight might already exist in Harlow. In the absence of such data, the council should consider carrying out its own research into how people access

information and – crucially – prefer to. This information is invaluable for campaign planning, helping to ensure messages get to the right audiences through the right channels.

The LGA provides template questions for establishing [how residents access news and information](#) and also offers [advice and support for councils looking to commission resident surveys](#).

Insight from the resident survey will help inform a new communications strategy and where the council should invest its resources. However, before developing this strategy there is a need for the organisation to develop a set of clear communications priorities.

The council's corporate strategy effectively sets out the administration's ambitions and broad vision. However, from a communications perspective it could benefit from being distilled into a more concise set of priorities for the next year to 18 months. Those priorities can help then drive a new organisational narrative, which will help staff, partners, stakeholders, residents, and businesses make sense of the vision and mission in the corporate strategy.

A strong corporate narrative can help unite people behind a common purpose and direction for the council, as well as creating the context for change. It should also sit at the heart of a new communications strategy for the organisation. The LGA has produced a toolkit for councils on [developing a corporate narrative](#).

Following the adoption of a new communications strategy, we would recommend the council agrees – at Cabinet and SMB level – an annual campaign plan. Although priorities will often change, and unforeseen events will need to be responded to – as the last two years have demonstrated – this planned approach will help ensure communications activity is more focused on the most important issues for the organisation. It will also help shift the focus away from tactical, traditional, and reactive communications to a campaign-led approach.

Once the annual plan is agreed, we would suggest the council adopts a system such as the gold, silver, and bronze approach that many other authorities use – or a similar system such as a RAG rating. This would involve 'gold' activities receiving a full strategic service from the communications team, 'silver' work being more light touch and tactical and 'bronze' involving departments delivering a lot of the activity

themselves, with some support from the team as required. We believe such an approach would give communications the structure and clarity it needs, allow the team to plan more effectively and make better use of the resources it has at its disposal.

As highlighted earlier in the report, partners are very keen to work more closely with the council – particularly around telling the story of Harlow and its people. More broadly, the lack of a place narrative is also hindering the council's communications.

In 2018 the council commissioned external consultants to help develop the Discover Harlow place brand. Some of the visual identity of the brand, and the Discover Harlow website, is still active. This work was praised by many people we spoke to but appears to have reached a hiatus.

Clearly, Discover Harlow was commissioned under a previous administration and any place narrative would need to reflect the council's current ambitions around key priorities such as economic regeneration. However, the absence of that story about Harlow does mean that opportunities are being missed to work with partners to promote the town.

Although it does not need to be the Discover Harlow brand which takes the place narrative forward, some of the detailed work that would have gone into that project will still be of use.

We would recommend that the council reboots its approach to developing a place narrative – recognising that this is an important area of work, regardless of what it is called or what branding is used. The LGA has worked with many councils around the creation of a place narrative and would be very happy to discuss this with Harlow.

The council has recently developed a new community engagement strategy. It is encouraging to see that a focus is being put on how the organisation can better engage its stakeholders, but it appears this strategy has been written in isolation from the council's broader communications activity. Integrating this work into a new communications strategy will be important to ensure the speaking and listening parts of the authority are joined up.

5.3 Role of members

The arrival of a new administration following the 2021 local elections resulted in increased expectations of the communications team.

New Cabinet members have understandably been keen to hit the ground running and communicate their priorities and vision. It is fair to say that the communications team, and also some other parts of the organisation, have found it challenging to move at the pace expected of them.

This is not through a lack of effort or desire on the part of the communications team, but again a reflection of how corporately the council has been risk adverse and reactive in its approach to communications.

As highlighted earlier in the report, the clearance of press releases is often how this cultural challenge manifests itself. Cabinet members have become hugely frustrated about the time it takes to sign off media statements. As one member put it to us: 'Getting a press release out the door is a constant struggle'.

Although some of these issues relate to the lack of a clear media protocol, fundamentally it comes back to the lack of a strategic approach. Without a clear set of agreed communications priorities, a narrative and a strategy the sign-off process for press releases becomes by default the mechanism through which these issues are debated. In short, the time-consuming focus on the wording and approval of media statements is emblematic of wider cultural problems.

Another cause of frustration for members has been the absence of a forward planning weekly grid for communications activity. This had been introduced following a request from the Deputy Leader but has now stopped. It would appear this is because the grid was in effect just a list of what the communications team was working on and therefore not a proper planning tool to capture everything going on across the council.

A grid detailing which press releases the communications team plans to issue is of limited value, but when the council has agreed communications priorities and campaigns then there is no reason why a detailed forward planner should not be in place.

Members do feel communications worked well around the setting of the last year's

Budget. This was an example of where there was a clearly understood purpose and all parts of the organisation recognised their roles in delivering that. However, it is clear this approach is not embedded on a day-to-day basis.

There is a shared desire on the part of both the Cabinet and the communications team to move beyond a relationship which is transactional (e.g., signing off statements) to one which is mote strategic and forward-looking, so the opportunities are very much there to be grasped.

The Communications Manager meets weekly with the Deputy Leader (also the portfolio holder for communications) which is positive. There is a clear need for closer relations between the communications team and portfolio holders, but within the existing structures there is a lack of capacity and capability to achieve this. Part of the issue again comes back to the over reliance on the Communications Manager. Members understandably see several layers of management with responsibility for communications but do not feel they often receive the support and advice they want.

Backbench members and committee chairs are currently an underused communications and engagement resource. There is an appetite on their part to play a greater role and more could be done to make use of their skills and links into local communities. Members know their local areas better than anyone and can be used to connect with residents and inform communications tactics. As an example, the communications team could develop templates (e.g., press releases and social media content) for key campaigns and initiatives that councillors could amplify through their personal channels. Growing these relationships with elected members could reap big rewards – potentially adding more than 30 additional communicators to the authority.

Although not strictly an issue for the communications team, some concerns were raised about the system for members reporting ward-related issues. It is felt this can be time consuming and is causing frustration, which can have wider implications if it hinders the ability of councillors to respond to issues raised on social media, for example.

5.4 Internal communications

There is recognition that internal communications have improved to some extent in recent months.

The first steps have been taken towards creating more engaging content, in particular through videos featuring the Interim Chief Executive, which have been well received.

However, the positive reaction to these videos is emblematic of a deeper frustration with internal communications more broadly. There was an overwhelming consensus amongst people we spoke to that other forms of staff engagement are traditional, stale and broadcast. This is a consequence of onerous and bureaucratic sign-off processes.

The biggest frustration staff have is with the weekly bulletin, which is usually sent late on a Friday afternoon. There does not appear to be any rationale for sending the email at this point in the week – other than that is the point at which it is usually signed off by SMB. It does not make any sense from a communications perspective to send the bulletin out so late in the week. As an example, we were told the briefing during the week of the Queen's death contained a lot of useful information about events over the weekend and impacts on services – but arrived in people's inboxes long after most people had finished their working week.

The content of the bulletin also attracted much criticism. Many people described it as boring and top down, focusing mainly on decisions that had already been taken rather than attempts to invite engagement or focus on achievements.

Colleagues in the council feel there is an information vacuum. They want to hear from directors and assistant directors about their priorities and what is happening in the organisation. This would give a sense of purpose to the wider work they are doing and an opportunity to see the difference and the contribution they are making. This is currently missing, and staff we spoke to were clear it was impacting upon morale.

The immediate financial challenge the council is facing, along with inevitable changes to ways of working, will have significant internal communications implications. It does however represent an opportunity to start doing things differently immediately. A top-down Friday afternoon bulletin will not be sufficient to bring staff along on the potential journey ahead, so there is an urgent need to start looking at more engaging ways of communicating with staff.

The use of video is one obvious alternative to emails, but more use could also be made of platforms which came to fore during the pandemic like Microsoft Teams to provide more (virtual) face to face interaction. Many staff were critical of the intranet and criticised its functionality. It is not seen as a useful tool or channel for finding information about the council and its policies and procedures.

It is not just around big issues like the budget that the council could do more to engage with staff. Colleagues want to hear success stories and see their work celebrated. The 75th anniversary of Harlow provides a wonderful opportunity to mark how people working for the council have helped shape and create the town they live in. Members would also welcome the opportunity to engage with staff more, for them to talk about what the corporate strategy means for them in practice rather than it being a document that arrives in an email late on a Friday afternoon.

The council has not carried out a staff survey since 2019, during which time there have obviously been enormous changes to the way people work. We would strongly recommend a staff survey is carried out to test the mood of the organisation, levels of employee engagement and also how staff wish to receive information – which should form the basis of the approach to internal communications going forward.

The arrival of a new chief executive at some point in 2023 represents a huge opportunity to reset communications with staff and the organisation's culture. But there is an immediate need to start making changes now and to put the building blocks in place for their arrival.

6 Next steps

Through this review we have sought to highlight the positive aspects of Harlow Council's approach to communications, as well as outlining the challenges and opportunities for improvement. We have drawn on our experience of working with councils across the country to review Harlow's communications in the context of best practice in the sector. We would like to thank all those involved for their candour and positivity in the role that communications plays.

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Further communication support from the LGA can also be accessed through Matt Nicholls, Head of Communications Support and Improvement: matt.nicholls@local.gov.uk