

Non-Executive Report of the: Overview & Scrutiny Committee 25/03/2019	 TOWER HAMLETS
Report of: Sharon Godman Divisional Director Strategy, Policy, and Performance	Classification: Unrestricted
Overview and Scrutiny Committee Challenge Session; Communications	

Originating Officer(s)	Sharon Godman, Divisional Director Strategy, Policy, and Performance Genevieve Duval, Strategy and Policy Officer
Wards affected	All Wards

REASONS FOR URGENCY

The report was not published five clear days in advance of the meeting. Therefore, before the item can be considered at this meeting, the Chair of the Committee would need to be satisfied that it is important the recommendations are heard now rather than being delayed further.

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1. This paper submits the report and recommendations of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's review of the council's communications with residents for consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is recommended to note the report and recommendations.

3. DETAILS OF REPORT

- 3.1. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee identified the Council's communications with residents as the focus for this Scrutiny Challenge Session. Resident engagement is a key priority in the council.
- 3.2. The Communications service encompasses a wide range of vital responsibilities and at the most practical level includes providing accurate information to a range of local stakeholders and handling press inquiries. But communications also includes running promotional campaigns, leading

behaviour change, managing crises whether natural or man-made, reputation management and internal communications. The cost of poor communications can be devastating to the Council's reputation, both internally and externally.

- 3.3. Communications in Tower Hamlets has traditionally been reactive in nature, with a heavy reliance on the Council's former weekly publication, *East End Life*. Much of the content published in *East End Life* was determined by the funding and support it received from service providers, which resulted in little knowledge of appropriate communication channels or support for delivering effective communications campaigns. Since the introduction of the 'Best Value Action Plan' there has been an improvement in internal and external communication in the council.
- 3.4. Since 2018 the communications service has been a fully consolidated service. The service has moved away from a model where communications was carried out by individual service areas, and now follows a more coordinated and systematic approach. The Council has been able to coordinate its communications activity to be able to more accurately link to corporate priorities. Communications is now a key strategic function of the organisation, and while much improvement has been made over the last four years, there are still questions around its overall effectiveness.
- 3.5. There were a number of key reasons for this session, including concerns from Members about the limited readership and reach of 'Our East End', a magazine published every three months which provides important community updates for residents. Concerns were also raised about limited access for digitally excluded or disabled residents, and the potential adverse impact of the demise of the East End Life newspaper on digitally excluded residents and protected equality groups. Members have also raised concerns about the continuous negative image of the Council and lack of a clear and consistent engagement with mainstream and BAME media outlets. Members also wanted to ascertain whether our internal communications support the pace of organisational change given the Council's transformation agenda.
- 3.6. The Challenge Session therefore aimed to ensure that communications promotes increased engagement with residents and stakeholders, and effectively tells the Tower Hamlets 'story' to strengthen the relationship. It also aimed to ensure the communication function supports corporate objectives and identify how Members can support the function. Members wanted to review the quality of communication with local residents in order to develop a clear understanding of the communications issues facing the service. The Challenge Session was underpinned by six key questions:
 - What is the current readership and reach of Our East End and digital media?
 - What are the different avenues to inform and engage stakeholders?
 - What areas are we looking to develop in the future?

- How does TH compare with neighbouring boroughs?
 - Who are we not fully reaching? What will we do differently to support residents who are digitally excluded or have language difficulties?
 - How were the objectives in the new strategy developed? Who did we consult? How they are going to be monitored and evaluated in future?
- 3.7. The report with recommendations is attached at Appendix 1. 14 recommendations have been made:
- **R1:** That the Council utilise its staff members to be bold and innovative and to be ambassadors, communicators and thought leaders to tell the council and borough's story.
 - **R2:** That the Council explores how it could work better with partners to develop its brand and support its communications
 - **R3:** That the Council use best practice examples from other boroughs and organisations to improve how we can better hear the voice of seldom heard groups, and ensure we hear all voices rather than just speaking to the 'gatekeepers'.
 - **R4:** That the Council provide a weekly update on the Member Hub about upcoming events and issues, which Members can send out to local residents via social media.
 - **R5:** That elected Members act as ambassadors of the council's brand and assist the communications team with outreach and consultation.
 - **R6:** That the Council better utilize the communication function to inform and enable residents to engage in the lifecycle of its strategic and operational decision making
 - **R7:** That the communication team develop a digital tool to allow residents to share views and concerns.
 - **R8:** That the Council appoint a named lead Member for resident engagement
 - **R9:** That the Council ensures that data and intelligence from communications is being used strategically to plan within the Council.

4. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1. The session aimed to improve communications with residents. Through the developments of the recommendations a consideration was given to improving communications for all protected groups.

5. OTHER STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 This section of the report is used to highlight further specific statutory implications that are either not covered in the main body of the report or are required to be highlighted to ensure decision makers give them proper consideration. Examples of other implications may be:
- Best Value Implications,
 - Consultations,
 - Environmental (including air quality),
 - Risk Management,
 - Crime Reduction,
 - Safeguarding.

6. BEST VALUE (BV) IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The recommendations in this report are made as part of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee's role in helping to secure continuous improvement for the council, as required under its Best Value duty

7. SUSTAINABLE ACTION FOR A GREENER ENVIRONMENT

- 7.1 There are no direct environmental implications arising from the report or recommendations.

8. RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 There are no direct risk management implications arising from the report or recommendations.

9. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 There are no direct crime and disorder reduction implications arising from the report or recommendations.

10. COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER

- 10.1 There are no specific financial implications arising from the recommendations within this report. It should be possible to deliver the recommendations using existing Council budgets and resources.
- 10.2 However, should the need arise for any additional resources, officers will be obliged to seek appropriate financial approval before making a commitment.

11. LEGAL COMMENTS

- 11.1 The Council must comply with the Code Of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 2011 in respect of all its communication activity. The broad recommendations highlighted in the report comply with the code of practice.

- 11.2 However, the method of implementation will also need to be reviewed at the point of implementation in the light of the code. Also, the Code requires a increased level of care in times of heightened sensitivity, for example, during the time immediately prior to an election. The method of implementation will need to have regard to this.
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Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents

Linked Report

- NONE.

Local Government Act, 1972 Section 100D (As amended)

List of “Background Papers” used in the preparation of this report

- NONE

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