

Tower Hamlets Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Communications Challenge Session



March 2019

I am pleased to present this report which explores the effectiveness of the Council's communications to key stakeholders. Good communications are a key pillar for helping to drive organisational strategy, and this Challenge Session is particularly relevant in the current period of intense organisational change. The Council's transformation programme, revised management structure, and new corporate values have had a direct impact on the way in which the Council thinks about its communications and captures local voices.

Although there are lots of ways in which Tower Hamlets does engage well with its residents, there is always room for improvement. The restructure that the communications team has undergone in recent years has aided the Council's ability to reach residents, but the service still suffers from constraints in resourcing. On an operational level communications is interfacing well with the rest of the organisation, but the strategic interface needs improvement. There needs to be better interfacing with the intelligence captured from communications and engagement and strategic planning in the council.

Digital exclusion has traditionally been seen by some within the Council to be a particular problem in Tower Hamlets. There are currently many voices that we are not hearing. Our local borough has a diverse population, who have historically relied upon traditional media formats such as television and newspapers. Within an increasingly digitised new environment, it is important to consider how effectively we are reaching our local residents and making sure we are not leaving anyone behind.

This report therefore makes a number of practical recommendations for the Council for improving communication. The recommendations focus on better integration of communications within the organisation, becoming better ambassadors for the brand and using elected Members to tell our story to residents, engaging more effectively with seldom heard groups, and encouraging the Council's services to be bold and innovative about how it uses the communications function to tell our story.

I would like to thank the Council officers and the Communications Directors from our own Council and Hackney Council, who gave their time and effort to contribute to this Challenge Session. I am also grateful to my Overview and Scrutiny Committee colleagues for their support, advice and insights.

Councillor Bex White
Scrutiny lead for Governance

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1. Recommendations

Tower Hamlets story	
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
Best Practice	
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'.
Elected Members	
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.
Organisational structure	
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.

2. Introduction

- 2.1. 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.
- 2.2. 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.
- 2.3. 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.
- 2.4. 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.
- 2.5. 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.
- 2.6. 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?

Session approach

- 2.7. The session was chaired by Councillor Bex White, Scrutiny Lead for Governance on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and supported by Genevieve Duval; Strategy and Policy Officer.
- 2.8. Andreas Christophorou, Divisional Director of Communications and Marketing at LBTH, provided an overview of communications in the Council and detailed further plans for improvement. Polly Cziok, Director of Communications, Culture and Engagement from Hackney Council, also attended as a guest speaker to provide an overview of how Hackney’s communication campaigns strengthened their brand and engagement with residents.

Members in attendance:

Councillor Bex White (chair)	Overview and Scrutiny Committee Member
Councillor Abdal Ullah	Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee Chair
Councillor Mufeedah Bustin	Overview and Scrutiny Committee Member
Councillor Andrew Wood	Overview and Scrutiny Committee Member
Councillor Mohammed Pappu	Overview and Scrutiny Committee Member

Neil Cunningham	Overview and Scrutiny Co-Opted Member
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London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Andreas Christophorou	Divisional Director of Communications and Marketing
Daniel Kerr	Strategy and Policy Manager, Strategy, Policy and Performance Division
Genevieve Duval	Strategy and Policy Officer, Strategy, Policy and Performance Division

London Borough of Hackney

Polly Cziok	Director of Communications, Culture and Engagement, Hackney Council
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3. Local Context

- 3.1 The Tower Hamlets communications improvement journey started with a Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Review in 2015. The impetus for the review was that the Government wanted to see improvement in the Council's communications, including modernising its functions and adhering to the publicity code¹. The review found the Council's communications to be lacking in strategic approach, particularly because the service was not centralised to support the corporate priorities. Communication channels were extremely limited and out of date, with the Council putting most of its resources into a weekly newspaper to 130,000 households. The review also found evidence of spend on media advisors in the Mayor's Office and that the monitoring and demarcation of activities with a political interest and for "political advertising" were failing to comply with the authority's Best Value Duty².
- 3.2 At the time of the Peer Review, the Council's communications function was not centralised and did not have a strategic function within the organisation. The majority of work that services performed was mainly based around emergency communications and damage control over the Council's reputation. There was no coherent brand and overall morale was low due to the experience of staff Members through the ongoing restructure of the Council. There were also no formal mechanisms to carry out communications research and evaluation, and the communications team were lagging behind in executing their digital communications channels.
- 3.3 In 2016, the Council's communications team was restructured and centralised. The service effectively moved away from the previous model, where communications was largely carried out by individual service areas, to a more centralised model, where the bulk of the Council's communications activity is centralised, in order to ensure it is linked to corporate priorities. Communications is now a key strategic function of the organisation, alongside Strategy, Policy and Performance with both Divisional Directors reporting directly to the Chief Executive. The Divisional Director of Communications sits on Corporate Leadership Team and manages a centralised campaigns budget. The Communications Strategy is aligned to the corporate priorities and the communications team has been developing new infrastructure including communications channels and protocols, along with insight and measuring impact.
- 3.4 Three key pillars were created through the process of the restructure, which included external communications, digital and internal communications. External communications covers the delivery of the

¹ The code states that publicity by local authorities should: be lawful, cost-effective, objective, even-handed, and appropriate, have regard to equality and diversity, and be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.

² LGA peer review 2015: https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Transparency-data/LGA_report.pdf

Council's campaigns with directorates using a government campaign model. It also brings in services such as Granicus and Social Sign, which segment residents and businesses based on their interests and other factors such as geographic area, in order to communicate better with residents via email, text message and social media on the issues they are interested in. The digital communications pillar covers management of the website and intranet, including working with Customer Service on moving services online. This function is now much more involved in the digital transformation of the Council and the merging of digital technology across the organisation in order to open data to residents and work with them to improve the borough.

- 3.5 The internal communications pillar has been transformed through developments such as plasma screens in Council buildings which are remotely controlled by communications; poster frames advertising Council campaigns and information to staff; and a new, measurable, electronic newsletter. The team has also become more involved in strategically supporting major staff events such as the Chief Executive Roadshows and Staff Conference. There has also been a significant emphasis on training and development within the organisation, including the introduction of internal campaigns that support transformation such as Smarter Together and the new Town Hall.
- 3.6 Despite the successes so far, there is still a long way to go to develop the full communications infrastructure, to build a larger, more segmented audience, and to change the organisation's culture. Organisational culture is a key component for the Council moving forward and communicating organisational progression to staff is fundamental to its development and success. The Council is currently involved in a significant transformation programme, which provides a good basis for reviewing the current state of the Council's communications. The management structure has already been revised through this transformation so far, and new corporate values (Together, Open, Willing, Excellent, Respect) have been developed and adopted with strong staff involvement. These are positive indicators that the broader transformational journey will continue to evolve.
- 3.7 The 2018/19 Communications Strategy is based around the transformational features, and has three main objectives:
 - To provide strategic advice and support across the Council to deliver better outcomes for residents, businesses and staff.
 - To continue to develop our infrastructure to provide the Council with modern platforms to effectively engage with people and measure the effects.
 - To support Tower Hamlets to tell its story – helping to change our reputation inside and outside London.

- 3.8 The Communications Strategy is aligned to the Strategic Plan, the Tower Hamlets Plan, and follows the 'Smarter Together' principles of better partnership working and the use of digital technology to achieve better outcomes for the Council.

4. Findings

The Tower Hamlets Brand

Place branding

- 4.1. The Tower Hamlets brand has been damaged over the last decade, which has partly been attributed to the incidents that have occurred internally at the Council. A combination of critical local media coverage and historic issues in the borough are felt to have contributed to negative views of the area. This has had significant implications on the way the Council communicates externally. Due to the borough suffering a bad reputation, much of the time and energy of the communications team has been spent on countering negative news stories and press. This has meant significant time and resources have been taken away from other communications functions. The team has been trying to reverse this approach, to focus more on promoting positive news stories and building a stronger, more positive brand for the borough
- 4.2. A key challenge is that there is a general lack of knowledge about the borough existing in the public domain. The borough possesses many assets, but these are commonly overlooked by people and sometimes even mistaken for being part of another borough. The borough has more assets in its realm on average than most other boroughs in London, yet people do not often associate them with Tower Hamlets, demonstrating that there is a significant gap in knowledge and education about the area. A contributing factor to this problem has been that the Council is not very good at 'telling its story'. Council staff have typically not been very motivated to step up and broadcast information about Tower Hamlets to wider audiences. This poses a risk for the Council's brand, because if the Council is not able to tell its own story, then those elsewhere will.
- 4.3. The borough faces a number of specific challenges in terms of its local population, which are relevant to the development of the place brand. Issues such as high child and pensioner poverty, extensive housing waiting lists, child obesity, and poor air quality have contributed to building a negative perception of the borough. These challenges are likely to continue to be issues for the Council going forward, so efforts to foster a new perception and understanding of the Tower Hamlets 'place' is essential for the Council's reputational journey. The strategy to develop the 'Place' campaign will need to harness the most valuable selling points of the borough, particularly its centrality to London, its deep London history, and its rapidly growing population size.
- 4.4. The 2018/19 Communications Strategy draws attention to some of the most valuable selling points that Tower Hamlets has to offer. These include the fact that Tower Hamlets is a world class centre for learning and innovation, that Queen Mary University of London is helping to create a Life Science Centre in Whitechapel, that Barts NHS Trust

hospitals train more than 4000 people at any one time for medical careers, that there are two million visits a year to the borough's eight Idea Stores and libraries; and that the Government Digital Service is driving cutting edge innovation from its headquarters in Whitechapel. The diversity of Tower Hamlets is also a selling point. The borough has a proud history of immigration, diversity and equality, with over 90 languages spoken, and residents born in over 200 different countries. Residents have also fought fascism in the Battle of Cable Street and the roots of the Suffragette movement were on Roman Road.

- 4.5. The Council's branding guidelines were last refreshed in 2007. Because communications was not a centralised service at this time, there was an ad hoc approach amongst the organisation as to which aspects of the brand were advertised. In the present day this has created a situation where people do not have a positive association with the Council brand. The Council has recently been involved in a research phase for refreshing the brand guidelines. By the middle of 2019 the communications team hope to have in place new guidelines which will feature on everything the team does, including vehicles, premises, uniforms, signs and documents. The approach emphasises being united in building the brand, and cultivating a positive sentiment towards it.
- 4.6. There is a clear need for the Council to develop a fresh narrative and identify its role in supporting local residents, in order to provide a good pre-requisite for its place brand. By developing its place brand, the Council will become more familiar with its narrative and story. The brand needs to fit in with the overall vision for the Council and cannot afford to be something that exists in the abstract, or disconnected from the wider work of the authority. Brand recognition is also an important factor; the Council's branding needs to run through everything it does.
- 4.7. An important driver to develop the place brand is to attract inward investment and visitors. Improving and enforcing the borough's brand would work as a means to promote outside investment, tourism, and would aid the local economy as well as contributing to the future prosperity of the borough. It is important for the residents of Tower Hamlets to have confidence in their Council, and a resilient place brand would help to foster pride and community cohesion.
- 4.8. Working more closely with partners and stakeholders is crucial for the development of a more coherent vision for Tower Hamlets. Although it is appropriate for the Council to take a leadership role in the development of the brand, it should have buy-in from a broad range of stakeholders outside of the authority who have a role in promoting the place. The use of third parties would also add greater strength to the brand and overall message. The Council could form closer partnership with its major stakeholders in the borough in relation to its communications, such as Canary Wharf Group, and capitalise on opportunities to promote and develop the borough's image and branding.

Council ambassadors

- 4.9. The types of stories that people hear about Tower Hamlets have a strong influence on its reputation. If negative information is broadcast across the Council's audience, then the public take these negative messages away and use it to form their opinion of the borough. While this issue still occurs occasionally with face to face engagement, the internet and social media have amplified this problem on a much larger scale. Social media is a powerful tool, and can be used to build both a positive and negative image of the Council. The Council's Director of Communications highlighted that people have ten times more contacts to engage on their own professional LinkedIn platforms compared to an organisations corporate account, so it is important to consider the role everyone has in being ambassadors of the Council and the borough.
- 4.10. The Council need to do more to encourage Council officers, Members, and partners to be ambassadors, communicators, and thought leaders who all have a part in telling the Council's story. Within the Council, officers should have an awareness of the story and be proactive in telling the Council's narrative to peers and Members of the public. This would involve using professional social media accounts to promote the positive events happening in the borough. Within the borough, the Council and its partners and stakeholders should also be familiar with the Tower Hamlets story, and tell the borough's place narrative. Elected Members should also be encouraged and supported to act as ambassadors for the Council.
- 4.11. Recognising that staff members have a role to play in communicating information about their own services to the communications team, officers should provide the team with details about their project milestones and specialist knowledge that will create opportunities to tell the Council's story. To ensure staff are thought leaders, they should talk about the innovative work that they are doing in trade publications (via communications), at events they attend and on social media platforms. Within the borough, partners should speak about the good work they are doing and ensure that Tower Hamlets as a 'place' becomes an integral part of their messaging.

Customer service

- 4.12. Customer service is important determinant of the Council's overall reputation, given that negative or positive experiences of interacting with the Council can be broadcast by customers through digital channels to large audiences. The session highlighted the central role communications has in helping to improve the customer service experience of local residents. This is particularly relevant against the backdrop of the Council's Customer Service Transformation programme, which aims to improve the customer journey through digital innovation

and partnership working³. Some of the focus areas for improvement include transforming the Council's website to encourage digital transactions and improve online experience, ensuring that the Council's branding and messages are displayed throughout the physical and virtual world, making sure the language and presentation is understandable, and ensuring that every engagement provides an opportunity for people to join the Council's engagement networks. It is essential that reputational issues are picked up and dealt with quickly.

Recommendation: 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.

Recommendation: That the Council explores how it could work better with partners to develop its brand and support its communications

5. Best Practice – Hackney Council

5.1. The London Borough of Hackney's transformational work on their communications service is a best practice example of what can be achieved over a longer period of time. Hackney suffered similar reputational challenges to Tower Hamlets in the last decade, and undertook a major communications journey to transform its branding and approach to resident engagement. Having already been through this journey, Hackney is a useful reference for Tower Hamlets as it embarks on its own journey, and serves as a demonstration of what can be achieved within the a similar length of time. Their experience also provides a robust example of mass stakeholder engagement, to assist in shaping the strategic direction of the Council.

Hackney 'A Place for Everyone'

5.2. The 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, brought significant investment, change and opportunity to Hackney. While that had many positive benefits, it also accelerated the rate of social and economic change that was already happening locally. Hackney was evolving quickly, and becoming somewhere that many people did not recognise. While many residents saw positive benefits of the change, many people felt threatened or excluded by aspects of it. The Council recognised that it needed to make sure it fully understood the way people were feeling and responding to change, and needed to find a way of explaining that the ambitions of the Council were still focused on equality, fairness and inclusivity. Hackney's story needed to be repositioned so it was clear that we wanted Hackney as a place and as a Council to work for every resident⁴.

³ LBTH Customer Service Transformation Plan
<https://democracy.towerhamlets.gov.uk/documents/s138828/6.3a%20Appendix%201-%20Customer%20Service%20Plan.pdf>

⁴ LGA, Hackney: A Place for Everyone Campaign <https://www.local.gov.uk/hackney-place-everyone-campaign>

- 5.3. Over 2015/16, the Council carried out a major borough-wide engagement exercise, asking residents for their views about the change that Hackney had experienced over the past decade. The 'Hackney a Place for Everyone' (HAPFE) was launched in March 2015 and ran for over a year, to allow residents to share their thoughts and feelings over an extended period. Questionnaires were sent to all households and businesses in the borough, and a black taxi cab was converted into a video booth so it could go around the borough and enable the Council to ask residents and visitors what they thought about change and gentrification, and how it had impacted on their lives. The Council also attended over 50 local events – including markets, train stations, estates based fun days, festivals, health services and cultural events. The Council held events with their online citizens' panel to gather thoughts, feelings and ideas for action. Another event was held with stakeholders from the night time economy to discuss how they could work together to balance the needs of the night time economy. An event was also held to discuss the future of housing in the borough over the coming years and develop recommendations to shape the Council's future approach to housing.
- 5.4. Hackney's work in particular targeted seldom heard groups in the local community, through organised focus groups. The groups included young black men, those living with disabilities, residents living in temporary accommodation, and care leavers. Lessons can be drawn from this work specifically for Tower Hamlets' future initiatives to engage its own hard to reach and seldom heard groups. In Hackney's case, they took a more sophisticated approach to listening to the groups. It is important that the Council demonstrates that it understands the group, and that it goes to where the group is to show that the Council is properly listening to them.
- 5.5. The 'Place for Everyone' brand was shared with service areas at Hackney Council and they were supported to adapt it for their own areas. It became part of the language the organisation used to talk about its services, its ways of working and its ambitions for Hackney as a place. 'Place for Everyone' taught the Council that the divisions it put up between 'communications', 'consultation' and 'engagement' were restrictive and ultimately meaningless. The campaign was a borough wide project that shaped the future story and strategy of the organisation. It was led by the communications and consultation service, but involved the whole organisation.
- 5.6. The reaction from residents and employees to HAPFE was very positive. The Council engaged roughly 5,000 people. More than 3,000 responses were received from the resident questionnaire, and another 2,000 people took part through focus groups, events, by using the video taxi, or taking part in face-to face research. Anecdotally people reported how much they had enjoyed the interactive, light hearted elements of the video taxi, and the footage had been used in staff and partner communications. Every single member of staff attended the Chief Executive's 'Change for

Everyone' roadshows, which allowed them to make sure that everyone was a part of this new way of working.

Communications driving organisational strategy and direction

- 5.7. Hackney's journey also demonstrates how good communications can drive the organisational strategy and direction and help to develop a corporate narrative. Amidst the unprecedented change in the borough, the Council had to make sure that its corporate narrative moved with the times and reflected the realities of the communities. Through the outreach work with the HAPFE campaign, the Council was able to secure a large quantity of qualitative data⁵ which could be used to help shape organisational strategy and underpin policy development. It was also important that work was done internally to support staff through their own organisational change.
- 5.8. The Council used a targeted programme of events for their staff to connect staff with the organisation. For years staff had heard about financial cuts and doing more for less, but that was no longer a message that resonated with people. The Council decided to roll out a programme of Chief Executive Roadshows to set out the organisation's strategic ambitions. Language was kept in line with the Council's external messaging and the work was called 'Change for Everyone'. The slogan was mirrored in messages across internal platforms and employees were encouraged to send their ideas of how they were planning to change their ways of working to help the organisation become a place for everyone. The campaign became a full scale organisational and culture change programme, which addressed everything from recruitment and retention, to developing organisational values.

Case study: Resident engagement – bringing voices in earlier

- 5.9. Hackney's 'Dalston Conversation' provides an example of a successful exercise in introducing local voices earlier on in Council decision making processes. The neighbourhood of Dalston had been affected significantly by the broader gentrification in Hackney, and the Council recognised that some residents weren't responding well to the pace of change. It was important to engage local voices in the decision making process at the earliest point of the development process to ensure the public felt they were being heard. While change inevitably meant new buildings, new business investments and new people in the area, the focus for the Council was on making sure residents felt it wasn't at the expense of existing communities and the things they valued.
- 5.10. The Council recognised that it couldn't control all of the changes, but it wanted to make sure that Council owned land was being developed responsibly, and effective planning rules were being put into place to coordinate and police private development. It also decided it wanted to

⁵ LGA, Hackney: A Place for Everyone Campaign <https://www.local.gov.uk/hackney-place-everyone-campaign>

do more to improve local public spaces, support existing businesses and encourage local start-up firms, and make sure that people from all backgrounds had access to the rich art, culture and creative activities available in Dalston. Because of Dalston's transformation, the Council was determined to make sure that new buildings and private investment also didn't put the area's character and heritage at risk.

5.11. The Council created a number of platforms for residents to communicate, including face-to-face engagement events, online submissions via the website, and through the establishment of a 'Dalston Conversation' page on Commonplace. Through these mechanisms the Council was able to act as a champion for existing business and culture and have an honest exchange of dialogue with its residents about plans for the future. The Council was able to collect relevant data and insights from its local community and use the feedback to shape change in the borough.

Principled-based approach

5.12. Hackney Council also follows a principled-based approach to engaging residents and hard to reach groups. These include:

- 'Meaningful' engagement with residents, businesses, and stakeholders to assist with shaping proposals, including involving residents and stakeholders with testing solution and delivery models.
- Timely engagement, which builds time into planning for service changes, savings proposals, and new projects, promotes meaningful public consultation.
- Inclusive outreach methods can boost engagement with under-represented groups, to ensure the voices of the most affected are heard.
- Direct engagement, where residents and businesses are engaged directly rather than through mediation with community leaders or other representatives also achieve better overall engagement.

5.14 Hackney also offered practical steps for improving resident engagement. This includes developing an organisation wide engagement calendar which enables every opportunity to engage with residents to be mapped in one place, using video to capture individual stories; creating a consistent engagement brand to tie together campaigns, sharing learning and insight with colleagues, and using every opportunity to find out what others are doing.

Recommendation: 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'.

6. The role of Elected Members

- 6.1 Elected Members need to play a bigger role in engaging with local residents and being ambassadors for the Council. There is desire amongst Members to talk more positively and openly about the 'place' and a strong sense that some of the negative perceptions of the borough, or indeed the Council, do not always reflect the reality of conversations Members have with their residents. The Mayor's priorities for the Council are widely recognised across the organisation but it is less clear whether that understanding extends to residents. For this reason, it would be important to appoint a lead member for resident engagement. .
- 6.2 While officers and services have an integral role in communicating the Council's story, this function should also extend to elected Members. Members hold important positions within the local community, and are an underutilised resource when it comes to telling the Council's story and being ambassadors. This is especially relevant at a time when there are clearly constraints on resources and barriers to the communications service being able to deliver a high level outreach programme in the community. There is often a disconnect between the role that Members play in listening to the voices in their local community and the role they have in representing and promoting the Council.
- 6.3 Members value the support they are offered to help them better communicate locally but feel more could be done to help them stay informed and act as ambassadors of the brand. They also appreciate the advice given by the Council's media officers. Although Members still receive copies of certain Council documents, there are no specific mechanisms to keep them informed. Some Members said that they sometimes have to look for information proactively or discover a major event has happened in their ward through the local news rather than the Council itself. This is a weakness, as Members are some of the most effective advocates for the Council and they tend to be highly trusted by their communities, and are already engaged in wanting to help spread messages locally.
- 6.4 There would be value in introducing a weekly ward-specific briefing for all Members on upcoming events and issue in their wards. This would be in conjunction to the existing briefing that Members receive. There is also a desire from Members to be able to send out proactive, ward specific communications and updates to residents. Ward-specific communications could be sent out to residents to advise them of any upcoming developments in their area, or information around specific crimes or events that have occurred in the area in that week. There

would also be value in Members receiving regular updates from the communications team on any public tweets or announcements that the Council is going to be sending out, that might have a significant impact on residents in their ward. By having an awareness of the information ahead of its publication, Members will be better prepared to respond to any questions or concerns from residents.

Recommendation: 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.

7. Organisational structure

- 7.1. The Council has undergone a major restructure in recent years, which has provided a well-defined role for the communications service. As the Mayor and the Council's leadership outline the focus for the organisation and their vision for the borough, the communications team has a vitally important role to play. Communications must continue to help the organisation articulate its aspirations, how it will deliver on its pledges, and set out the priorities within the context of the challenges the organisation faces. The ongoing structural and cultural shifts within the organisation raise questions about how Communications sits within the Council and how it interfaces strategically and operationally within the organisation.
- 7.2. Amid the restructuring and the centralisation of the Council's communications service, it is clear that the service does lack resources to be able to execute full scale community outreach in the borough. There are clear challenges to achieving centralised engagement and consultation with the resources on hand. The biggest challenge that the service has started from the beginning and there are not enough resources available to facilitate the desired level of outreach. In order for the service to be able to do so, it is assessed that they would need a team in place for a period of approximately two years, as well as a database to store information collected from engagements. Because of these constraints, there is more room for elected Members to facilitate outreach and consultation.
- 7.3. The communications team's strategic and tactical role in supporting the cultural change has been encouraged by new channels of communication that have been introduced more recently. These include plasma screens across Council sites, a Tower Hamlets Managers' Briefing, Yammer, the staff intranet, posters across all sites, lightboxes, and staff events and conferences. The Smarter Together campaign and the development of the new Town Hall are also key mechanisms by which the Council's culture has transformed. Smart Together represents a positive change in the way the Council tells its story, with a move towards being more agile and strategic in approach.

Stakeholder engagement

- 7.4. The Council's community engagement strategy supports the community to influence and shape the borough, and is currently in the second year of a three year delivery plan. At its heart is a greater emphasis on using a coproduction framework and improving the stakeholder experience of engagement. As part of the delivery, a simpler, standardised and more streamlined system for stakeholder engagement is being introduced, to replace the current de-centralised approach. A guidance/toolkit for Council consultations and engagement is being developed alongside an online consultation hub, and training will be provided to staff. These will help ensure consistently high standards of stakeholder engagement across the council.
- 7.5. As referenced in the Communications Strategy, a variety of channels are assisting the Council in holding its conversations and moving away from broadcast. These include smart newsletters, online communities, a consultation hub, and having smarter social media. These are all channels where the Council could store details of residents and businesses on contacts lists and begin to have conversations with them, or provide them with news or opportunities to engage on subjects relevant to them. There are other streams of work at the Council which also provide similar opportunities, such as the single view of the customer, and the channel shifts to move customer contacts or transactions with the Council online. These take some time to build, particularly in terms of growing the subscribers, and the key is to work together across the Council, rather than services working in silos.
- 7.6. The Council is behind other local authorities in regards to use of data, ways of working, technology, partnership working and outcomes. Recent staff surveys have found that 51% of staff feel informed, but this does not always translate into staff involvement. The Council could be doing more in regards to capturing and storing the data and insights from its customers, which are not being effectively collected or used in broader functions at present. There is more work that could be done to ensure data is collected and used internally to support strategic planning
- 7.7. The issue around data use also highlights a broader question about how the Customer Service team is informing the work of the Council. Customer experience is the number one factor that influences the Council's brand and reputation, so services need to ensure they are capturing concerns raised and responding appropriately. The communications team are involved in ongoing work with services, including the Customer Service team, to help move transactions online to deliver better experiences for customers. There is a clear need for a customer service media account and a corporate media account to be established, in order to assist in streamlining these functions and improving the overall effectiveness of customer service.

- 7.8. Learning from Hackney illustrates that there is a need for more meaningful resident engagement earlier in the lifecycle of the Council's entire strategic and operational decision making. By introducing local voices earlier Hackney was able to make informed decisions which acted in the best interest of the local community and strengthened local democracy. The Council's culture toward resident engagement has not traditionally emphasised the importance of resident voices in the earliest stages of its decision making cycle and often will involve residents at a point when they have to inform or validate existing Council decisions as opposed to having input from the inception of a project. This requires a significant cultural shift to achieve and is an issue that was also identified through other Council scrutiny activity, including the most recent Budget scrutiny review in 2019. The Overview & Scrutiny review of the budget recommended that 'the Council identifies potential savings and engages businesses and local residents earlier in the year so service users and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee can better contribute to the development of budget proposals'. In this review of Council communications, Members identified that this approach needs to be adopted for all Council engagement.
- 7.9. One suggestion that was raised in the challenge session was for the Council to adopt an online tool, such as Commonplace, which would allow residents to share their views and concerns through an online portal. The Commonplace app has been used in some previous Council activities. The app operates as an online engagement platform to help reduce the risks of regeneration, housing, transport and infrastructure projects through more open, trusted, and diverse community engagement⁶. The tool helps to improve participation by ensuring access for the whole community and ensures data gathered is valuable. The platform can also be cost-effectively rolled out to new projects and communities. A mechanism similar to this which is regularly used would assist the Council in bringing in residents earlier.

Recommendation: that elected Members act as ambassadors of the council's brand and assist the communications team with outreach and consultation.
Recommendation: That the Council better utilize the communication function to inform and inform residents into the lifecycle of its strategic and operational decision making earlier
Recommendation: that the Council take practical steps to improve its engagement with residents, such as adopting an online portal tool to allow residents to share views and concerns.
Recommendation: that the Council appoint a named lead Member for resident engagement

⁶ <https://www.commonplace.is/>

Recommendation: that the Council ensures that data and intelligence from communications is being used strategically to plan within the Council.