MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

**FINAL REPORT OF THE
AD HOC SCRUTINY PANEL –
MEMBERS' COMMUNICATIONS**

CONTENTS

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. To present the draft final report of the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel following its review into Members' media communications.

AIMS OF THE REVIEW

2. The Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel sought to understand how Members receive and transmit media communications, and what support is available from the Council's Marketing and Communications team in this regard.

STRATEGIC PLAN 2021-2024

3. The scrutiny of this topic aligns with the Council's three core aims as detailed in the Strategic Plan 2021-2024[1]:

- People - Working with communities and other public services in Middlesbrough to improve the lives of local people.

- Place - Securing improvements in Middlesbrough's housing, infrastructure and attractiveness, improving the town's reputation, creating opportunities for local people and improving our finances.

- Business - Promoting investment in Middlesbrough's economy and making sure we work as effectively as possible to support our ambitions for People and Place.

Specifically, this topic contributes to the delivery of the Strategic Plan 2021-2024 as follows:

- People - Working with communities and other public services in Middlesbrough to improve the lives of local people.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

4. The terms of reference for the scrutiny panel's investigation were as follows:

A) To understand the Council's current position with regard to Members' communications; and
B) To explore what role social media plays in Members' communications.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

5. Communication is a critical function of everyday life and, increasingly, the ability to communicate effectively is held to a premium. The pitfalls of poor or malicious communication are well rehearsed and can have significant detrimental consequences. The ability to communicate effectively brings many advantages, with many leading organisations citing that effective communication can:

- Mitigate conflict;
- Increase engagement;

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[1] Middlesbrough Council's Strategic Plan 2021-2024

- Improve productivity;
- Improve client relations;
- Promote healthy workplace cultures;
- Improve direction;
- Boost satisfaction;
- Increase motivation;
- Strengthen teams; and
- Improve public impressions.[2]

6. While these benefits are directed towards businesses, their ethos can easily be applied to local government politics. For example: the Local Government Association (LGA) sees strategic communication acting as "…a trusted advisor, navigator and leader."[3] It is also recognised that councils not recognising the importance of strategic communications are likely to have ineffective links with their respective communities and stakeholders.

7. Politically, Middlesbrough Council has experienced a fractious political landscape since the elections of 2019 and it is undeniable that communication, specifically on social media, has played a role in that experience.

8. It was with these themes in mind that the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel was keen to understand what plans and procedures the Council had in place for Members' communications. In particular, the Panel aimed to understand what roles such procedures played in Members' presence on social media.

TERM OF REFERENCE A

To understand the Council's current position with regard to Members' Communications

9. Effective communication for councils is becoming more important, with the LGA finding during the course of peer reviews that "communications without strategy does not work." The importance and significance of communications within Middlesbrough Council is highlighted with the marketing team reporting directly to the Chief Executive.

10. The Council does not a have single strategic communications plan in place at present, however, one is likely to be implemented in the near future. It is intended that such a communications plan will complement the Council's Strategic Plan 2021-2024, align with the Council's strategic objectives and provide for how Members shape and receive Council communications.

11. Ordinarily, the Marketing and Communications Team receives requests that are reactive in nature, often requiring them to respond to matters quickly. This approach means that the team finds it difficult to shape messages that fully align with wider Council priorities. This reactive approach sometimes affects the team's ability to effectively communicate important work carried out by the Council, and the progress it is making against its strategic priorities.

12. While the Marketing and Communications team are sometimes perceived as the Council's Public Relations department, this has not officially been the case. However, the implementation of a communications plan, which would enable messages to be focused and directed, may allow this role to be realised, for the Council and Middlesbrough as a whole.

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[2] 10 Benefits of Effective Communication in the Workplace | Indeed.com
[3] Strategic communications in local government – the challenges and opportunities | Local Government Association

13. The implementation of a communications plan would not only direct and guide communications, but would also allow the team to utilise key stakeholders (including Elected Members and staff groups) to create and spread positive perceptions of the Town. By employing an interactive model of communication based on the hub and spoke system, the plan would enable effective transmission and receipt of an effective message, and facilitate feedback on that message for continual improvement.

TERM OF REFERENCE B

Explore what role social media plays in Members' Communications

14. Social media use has grown significantly in recent years and is, for a large number of people, a normal part of everyday life. As of 2020, there were 45 million active social media users in the UK, accounting for 66% of the population.[4]

15. While no definitive data demonstrates comparative usage, it would be fair to assume that national trends are reflected in Middlesbrough.

16. Social media is no longer simply a means of keeping in touch with friends and family, it now provides the standard by which people form and maintain social groups, and provides a key source for news consumption.

17. As such, social media can be an effective tool for elected officials that want to engage with and convey important messages to their respective communities. This is recognised by the LGA, which has published several guides and toolkits in this area.[5]

18. However, while social media can be advantageous for mass communication purposes it can also be used for nefarious purposes, with high-profile cases being so-called "fake news". Indeed, internet users today are generally less likely than in 2018 to validate online information sources, and one in ten do not consider the truthfulness of factual information they find online.[6]

19. The recent COVID-19 pandemic is an example of how an unwillingness or unpreparedness to analyse information on social media can lead to negative outcomes. The World Health Organization (WHO) has previously said that the,

    "…infodemic" surrounding Covid-19 spread just as quickly as the virus itself, with conspiracy theories, rumours and cultural stigma all contributing to deaths and injuries."[7]

20. Although television remains the most popular platform for accessing news and information (75%), the internet is used by 65% of people. Further, whilst the use of social media as a source of news and information has recently declined, a significant proportion (35%) of people actively do so[8].

21. Regardless of usage statistics, however, it is an unavoidable fact that digital means of communication is now a common, everyday, feature of most people's lives.

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[4] Updated: The Latest UK Social Media Statistics for 2019 - Avocado Social
[5] Councillors and social media | Local Government Association
[6] Adults' Media Use & Attitudes report 2020 (ofcom.org.uk)
[7] 'Hundreds dead' because of Covid-19 misinformation - BBC News
[8] Fewer people getting news from social media - Ofcom

22. Communications, whether from Council employees or Elected Members, can also provide a mechanism for behavioural change. For example, Bath and North East Somerset Councils ran a communications campaign to target hard to reach areas in order to increase recycling usage. Results of this campaign showed a 28% increase in reported usage of mini recycling centres, which was supported by tonnage data.[9]

23. Whilst the growth of, and reliance upon, digital platforms is an inescapable feature of modern life, it is crucial that the content of those platforms is accurate, reliable and relatable. As has been demonstrated with recent events, it has never been more important to avoid "fake news".

24. Naturally, improving the message, whether through tone and/or content needs to be replicated on other mechanisms, such as fit-for-purpose web infrastructure, that can facilitate the actions espoused on the social media message.

25. Controlling the message via communication plans is one facet of a wider issue; there is little point in controlling the message if the message itself is not fit-for-purpose. As previously described, it is recognised that more people have access, and pay attention to, information delivered via electronic means.

26. As a result, there needs to be a quality in its content that conveys an effective message. Different organisations will adopt different styles to suit their audiences and subject matter, whether this be through appealing illustrations or humour. For example, the Museum of English Rural Life social media account, when edited by Adam Koszary, posted content appropriate material in relatable language in order to appeal to a wider audience via shares and re-tweets outside of its core demographic:

27. Appropriate content for Members' communications has been raised previously and, whilst training for Members has been explored, it is important that such training is not only refreshed,

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[9] Improving recycling through effective communications (zerowastescotland.org.uk)

but delivered regularly. This is particularly pertinent given the availability of digital platforms, and to ensure that Members are kept as up to date as possible. Assurance of high-quality communications by Members would complement the marketing team's wider approach.

28. The Panel heard that concerns had been raised by Members regarding the transmission of important communications, sometimes affecting Members' wards, without prior consultation. Some Members had commented they had read about initiatives on social media before being formally told, including Boho X; the new campus for the Northern School of Art; and Urban Park. It was felt that communicating in such a way degraded transparency and left the decision making process open to criticism.

29. There has been a notable shift in communications emanating from outside the Council's formal communications arrangements.

30. Whilst publicity about the Council and the work it carries out are welcome, Members are concerned that without a formal and consistent approach to communications there is a risk information is driven by the few not the many. The introduction of a formal communication structure for Elected Members (to complement the above mentioned communications plan) would not inhibit communications, but instead ensure consistency and equity of the message.

31. Whilst the communications plan would direct and structure messages, it is equally important that all Members adhere to communication best practice principles, as well as Member behaviour in accordance with the Code of Conduct.

32. Ensuring direction, consistency and appropriateness of Members' communications will require entrenchment within the Council's existing constitutional framework. Doing so will complement other mechanisms which, when combined, will provide flexibility and security for all Members and staff in the communications process.

33. The Council has both a Social Media Policy and IT Use Policy, both of which contain important information about proper conduct via electronic means. The Council is currently revising its Member Code of Conduct in line with the LGA's Model Code of Conduct, which was released in May 2021. As such, the Panel is keen to ensure the principles of these existing policies are reflected in the revised Code.

CONCLUSIONS

34. The Scrutiny Panel reached the following conclusions in respect of its investigation:

35. It is undeniable that we live in an information age where competing voices struggle to have their message heard. It is therefore critical that the Council takes appropriate action to ensure that its communications resonate with its residents.

36. From an operational perspective, the introduction of a communications plan that aligns with the Council's strategic priorities will help keep the message relevant and informative.

37. Politically, there will always be a difference of opinion between Members and they should be free to avail themselves of media platforms to promote Middlesbrough where possible. However, a mechanism should be implemented that all Members are bound by, which ensures the quality and equity of the messages being transmitted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

38. As a result of the information received, and based on the conclusions above, the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel's recommendations for consideration are as follows:

1. **That a communications plan be implemented that aligns with the refreshed Strategic Plan 2021-2024 to ensure consistency and direction of council communications.**
2. **To ensure Members are well versed on social media etiquette; a training package be delivered to Members on the appropriate use of social media. Training should be carried out as a mandatory requirement on an annual basis (minimum).**
3. **That the principles of proper behaviour on social media be reflected in the revised Member Code of Conduct; and**
4. **As a corollary of recommendations one and two; a framework be developed to provide clarity to all Members on the appropriate use of social media.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

39. The Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel would like to the thank the following for their assistance with its work:

- Andrew Glover – Head of Marketing and Communications, Middlesbrough Council; and
- Tony Parkinson – Chief Executive, Middlesbrough Council.

ACRONYMS

40. A-Z listing of acronyms used in the report:

- LGA – Local Government Association

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Councillors and social media | Local Government Association

Strategic communications in local government – the challenges and opportunities | Local Government Association

How fake news has exploited COVID-19 (pwc.co.uk)

Checklist for councillors | Local Government Association

Adults' Media Use & Attitudes report 2020 (ofcom.org.uk)

COUNCILLOR JANET THOMPSON
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The membership of the Scrutiny Panel over the course of the review was as follows:

Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel 2021/22

Councillors; D Coupe, C Dodds, T Higgins, J Hobson, J McTigue, D Rooney and M Storey.

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