

Wiltshire Council

Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

17 March 2020

Final Report of the Communications with Councillors Task Group

Purpose of the report

1. To present the findings and recommendations of the task group for endorsement by the committee and referral to the Cabinet Member for Communications, Communities, Leisure and Libraries for a response.

Background

2. In 2017 the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of OS Management Committee met with the Cabinet Member for Communications, Communities, Leisure and Libraries, to discuss a potential scrutiny review, which could consider the Council's internal communications with elected members.
3. On 7 November 2018 a further discussion was had, where some Terms of Reference (below) were put forward. It was agreed that such a scrutiny task group would add value and on [20 November 2018](#), Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee (OSMC) endorsed the establishment of the Communications with Councillors Task Group.
4. This task group links to the Council's Business Plan 2017-27 priority of 'becoming an effective and efficient council' and reports into OSMC, as the scrutiny committee with responsibility for the communications portfolio.

Terms of reference

5. The following terms of reference for the task group were endorsed by OSMC on [20 November 2018](#).

Terms of Reference

- a) To review Wiltshire councillors' experience and expectation of internal communications from the council across its service areas.
- b) To contribute to the work already underway to develop a new online information portal for Wiltshire councillors.
- c) To make recommendations to ensure that the communications received by Wiltshire councillors take into account their expectations to assist them in undertaking their role as effectively as possible.

Membership

6. The task group comprised the following membership:

- Cllr Trevor Carbin (Chairman)
- Cllr Gavin Grant
- Cllr Ruth Hopkinson
- Cllr Graham Wright

Methodology

7. The task group is grateful to the following witnesses for contributing to the scrutiny review:

Individual	Title / Job Role
Cllr Allison Bucknell	Cabinet Member for Communications, Communities, Leisure and Libraries
Libby Johnstone	Democratic Governance Manager – Wiltshire Council
Ian Robinson	Director of Data, Digital and Technology – Wiltshire Council
Tulip Tipper	Senior Occupational Development Trainer – Wiltshire Council
Ceri Tocock	Head of Communications, Events and Marketing – Wiltshire Council
Robin Townsend	Director of Corporate Services

8. Alongside receiving verbal evidence from the individuals above, the task group considered the following information:

- Wiltshire Council: Media Protocol

9. The task group also created a survey for all 98 unitary councillors, asking for their views on internal communications with elected members. The survey was made available from 8 to 30 October 2019. A template of the survey's questions can be found at Appendix 1.

10. Between March 2019 and March 2020 the task group met six times. This report and its preliminary recommendations have been discussed with the executive and senior officers.

Evidence

Media Protocol

11. The task group reviewed the Council's media protocol, which had been drawn up in 2015. This review was partly in response to discussion had at [21 May 2019](#) Full Council; where Cllr Ian Thorn queried the Council's media protocol.

Councillor Survey

12. To obtain evidence about how the Council communicates with elected members, the task group undertook a survey of all 98 unitary councillors. The survey received 48

responses; which represents just under half of the entire Wiltshire Council membership.

13. The survey ran from 8 to 30 October 2019 and was promoted through two e-mails to the entire Council membership during 8 to 30 October 2019 and a [Briefing Note](#), circulated to all members on 10 October 2019.

Survey Key Findings

14. Most respondents reported that they checked their e-mails on a daily basis and a majority reported that they use either The Directory or the intranet to access information, however, many stated that The Directory's information required updating.

The Intranet

15. Despite most respondents reporting that the intranet provided good access to information, some stated that it required improvement, and nobody felt that the intranet's information was 'excellent'. For example, it was cited that information on the intranet could be difficult to find, because the 'search' function did not always work properly.

Hot Wire Alerts

16. Most respondents appreciated the 'Hot Wire' alerts, detailing that they were a timely way of being kept in-the-know and they work well being circulated via e-mail.

Elected Wire

17. As with the 'Hot Wire' alerts, a majority of respondents praised the way that these communications kept members up-to-date and successfully highlighted key issues. Some asked whether the information could be presented in a more eye-catching way, to help grab the reader's attention.

Policy Updates

18. Respondents favoured this form of communication and detailed that it provided useful, relevant and interesting information. A minority highlighted that these updates were too long and perhaps they would benefit from having an 'Executive Summary' at the front.

Briefing Notes

19. This was the form of communication that respondents preferred the most (closely followed by the planning communications), because of the useful information that Briefing Notes contain. Additionally, having the Notes available on the website made it easier for members to find the information at a later date.

Delegated Decisions

20. The majority of comments demonstrated that members find these communiqués difficult to digest. For example, if the division name could be referenced in the subject line and title, or if the decision could only be e-mailed to the relevant division

member(s), then this would help to better filter the information that councillors receive.

Planning Communications

21. A majority of respondents found communication on planning to be good, specifically the weekly list of planning applications that are e-mailed to members. However, others stressed their frustration at the planning portal often being out of action.

Our Community Matters

22. The survey results showed that most respondents felt the 'Our Community Matters' communications were useful.

Social Media

23. A majority of respondents do not follow the Council's social media accounts, however, for those that do follow the accounts, Twitter and Facebook are the most popular with everyone reporting that they find the accounts useful.

Webcasting

24. Just over half of all respondents (51%) do not use the Council's webcasting function and this could be because it is not available for all council committees, with most voting that they would like the functionality to be extended to Area Boards. Of those that use the function, most members tended to use web-casting to catch up on a meeting that they were unable to attend.

Officer Response Times

25. Exactly half of all respondents stated that officers responded within the timeframe set out within the constitution*, whereas the other half felt that officers did not respond within this timeframe.

**The Constitution states that e-mails and telephone calls from Councillors will be acknowledged by Officers within two working days with a substantive response provided within 10 working days and, if this is not possible, an explanation provided within this timeframe as to the reason why and when a response can be expected.*

Additional Comments

26. Councillors outlined that, on the whole, access to Wiltshire Council information was good and timely. However, documents could often be too lengthy and sometimes e-mails to shared team-wide mailboxes did not always receive a response.

Suggestions for Improvement

27. The main areas where councillors highlighted improvements could be made were:

- **E-mail subject lines:** these could be better utilised to summarise the information contained, to enable a councillor to more easily distinguish what is/isn't relevant to them
- **Councillor Portal:** as with Briefing Notes, if all communiqués to all councillors could be recorded/stored in one area, then it would enable a member to more easily access information
- **The Directory:** the information contained here requires updating
- **Social Media:** councillor training would be beneficial
- **New policy:** any communications regarding a specific division should always be circulated to the relevant division member, to better enable councillors to represent the public

Digital Hints and Tips

28. The task group attended a bespoke training session on 'Digital Hints and Tips', to learn how to make the most of the Wiltshire Council technology available to them, such as a laptop. This session specifically looked at harnessing the functionality of Skype and Microsoft Outlook, to best support members in their roles.

Councillor Induction Programme: 2021

29. Members provided input into the design of the Councillor Induction Programme for 2021 and discussed the information provided to Councillors when they are deciding to take on their roles.

Conclusions

Media Protocol

30. The task group agreed that the Council's Media Protocol required updating, as it was five years old and referred to outdated internal structure charts. Additionally, the Protocol could benefit from greater clarity around how an individual member could obtain assistance with the media/press. Members felt that implementing such an update would be fairly straightforward.

Councillor Survey

31. The survey's results showed that a majority of members do not fully utilise the technology available to them, such as the web-casting function, using MS Outlook to view others' availability (via their calendar), or making the most of social media to keep up-to-date with real time information. The task group concluded that if technology was better exploited by councillors, they might report an improvement to the council's communications.

32. Alongside this finding, the task group concluded that there were several areas where communication with elected members would benefit from slight amendment. For

example, if emails circulated to all members (e.g. delegated decision notices) listed the division name in the subject line first, then councillors would more easily be able to filter what is/is not relevant to them. Additionally, The Directory required updating; as it was not an accurate record of officer roles and responsibilities.

33. Furthermore, as planning matters could often be contentious, if any information circulated to the relevant parish clerk was also circulated to the relevant division members, members would be better enabled and informed to represent their communities.
34. In line with this, as well as the fact that evidence showed that only half of survey respondents found officers **did** respond within the constitutional timeframe, the task group felt that officers needed to be reminded of [Protocol One](#) in the Constitution, specifically paragraph 11.2 which states that: *'Officers should ensure Members are informed as appropriate on matters relating to their local division. This includes representations on local issues, where it appears the Member had not already been informed'*.

Digital Hints and Tips

35. After attending their bespoke Digital Hints and Tips session, task group members felt more confident to make effective decisions on behalf of their communities. As a result, the task group concluded that all councillors would benefit from attending these training sessions; specifically, those around email management and using Skype as a tool to contact officers and check someone's availability.

Cllr Induction Programme

36. Members agreed that it was important for digital information to regularly be updated. Alongside this, they felt that at the induction programme members should be made aware of the digital literacy skills that they would require. If members felt that they did not have the necessary digital skills at induction, this would be an appropriate opportunity for members to attend digital induction sessions, so that they felt confident about making the best use of the Wiltshire Council technology provided to them.

Proposal

37. To endorse the report of the Task Group and refer it to the Cabinet Member for Communications, Communities, Leisure and Libraries for response at the Committee's next meeting.

Recommendations

That the Cabinet Member for Communications, Communities, Leisure and Libraries considers implementing the following recommendations:

- i. **Updating the Council's Media Protocol 2015 via:**
 - a) **Including an up-to-date and accurate internal structure chart**

- b) Detailing how an individual councillor can seek assistance for media/press enquiries.**
- ii. For emails circulated to all Wiltshire Councillors (e.g. delegated decision notices) to have the relevant division title listed first in the email's subject line.**
 - iii. For the Council's Directory to be updated by individual officers and managers to ensure accuracy.**
 - iv. For the planning notification circulated to a Parish Clerk to also be sent to the relevant division member(s) (where appropriate).**
 - v. To encourage all members to attend the Council's Digital Hints and Tips sessions, to learn how to make the most of the technology available to them.**

Cllr Trevor Carbin, Chairman of the Communications with Councillors Task Group

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – template of survey questions

Background documents

Links have been provided in the body of the report

Appendix One – Template: Councillor Survey

The following information is a PDF template of the online survey made available to all Wiltshire unitary councillors from 8 to 30 October 2019.

Due to hyperlinks, the following questions are not readable in an offline format:

- *Q3, Q3A and Q3B*

The first response option of Q3 should read 'Grow'.

Q3A should read: 'How often do you access Grow to obtain internal information?'

Q3B should read: 'How often do you access the Councillors' Intranet Area to obtain internal information?'

Additionally, Q8A and Q9A would only appear if a respondent ticked the 'Other' option in Q8 and Q9.