

Meeting:	General overview and scrutiny committee
Meeting date:	5 September 2016
Title of report:	Communication protocol for members
Report by:	Communications manager

Classification

Open

Key decision

This is not an executive decision.

Wards affected

County-wide

Purpose

To consider whether to make any recommendations to inform cabinet's consideration of the communication protocol for members which forms part of the communication strategy.

Recommendations

THAT: the committee considers whether to make any recommendations to inform cabinet's consideration of the communication protocol for members.

Alternative options

1. The committee may recommend that cabinet accept the proposed protocol as drafted or may identify changes which it would recommend that cabinet consider before adoption of the protocol as part of the communication strategy.

Reasons for recommendations

2. To respond to a request from the committee for clarification of the communications protocol for members to enable it to make a recommendation to cabinet.

Key considerations

3. At its meeting on 26 July the committee considered a draft communications strategy and made a number of recommendations for Cabinet to consider. Before making any

recommendation on the member protocol element, the committee also requested that clarity be provided on what was meant by 'the council' when the protocols referred to speaking on behalf of the council. Given that such a definition will vary depending on the matter under discussion and where that matter sits within the functions of the council, this would be unlikely to improve clarity. However, to improve clarity for members, revisions to the draft protocol (at appendix 1) have been drafted which seek to provide greater guidance on the role of members in different circumstances.

4. Debate and challenge are a healthy part of the democratic process and can strengthen decision-making. The purpose of the protocol is to provide guidance to members to ensure that there is clarity about the communications being issued on behalf of the council. Members of the council may hold a range of roles, and indeed views; the protocol is not intended to prevent members from voicing their views but to ensure that when doing so the press and public understand in what capacity they are speaking.

Community impact

5. There is much the authority needs to communicate to the community and an equal amount that the community needs to say to the council. How that is done will vary between levels of need and particular audiences. Whilst a large proportion of our audience are online and increasing use of social media can reach a wide audience with target messages, there will be some requirement for more bespoke contact.
6. Figures from the Office of National Statistics show that 11% of the Herefordshire adult population have never been on the internet. This suggests that there is significant potential, and for many people an expectation, that the local population interact with the council online. This still leaves a proportion of people who do not interact online and other mechanisms need to be considered to reach these people whether via the media or specific service support. Due to diversity across the Herefordshire community, it is important that the council communicates effectively with the right people, at the right time, in the right way.
7. The communication strategy will help the local community understand the key council priorities, as approved in the corporate plan 2016/20. It is important for tax payers of the county to know what the council does and the areas the council needs to focus on. Sharing those priorities is fundamental to creating a joint understanding of the role, purpose, and functions of the council.
8. Targeted communications will be implemented using knowledge gathered through a range of readily available data tools, though with the potential of further data collection necessary to ensure the council can continue to support the best methods of communication.

Equality duty

9. The Equality Act 2010 established a positive obligation on local authorities to promote equality and to reduce discrimination in relation to any of the nine 'protected characteristics' (age; disability; gender reassignment; pregnancy and maternity; marriage and civil partnership; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation). In particular, the council must have 'due regard' to the Public Sector Equality Duty when taking any decisions on service changes. This requires effective, targeted communication to any of the groups who need access to services, are affected by service changes or who are the target for a campaign.

10. A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:
 - Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by or under this Act;
 - Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
11. Where a decision is likely to result in detrimental impact on any group with a protected characteristic it must be justified objectively. This means that attempts to mitigate the harm need to be explored. If the harm cannot be avoided, the decision maker must balance this detrimental impact against the strength of legitimate public need to pursue the service remodelling to deliver savings. Effective engagement is a pre-requisite, along with supporting information to find alternative suppliers or services.
12. The implementation of digital services will mainly affect the protective characteristic of age – especially older people. It is important to address any instances where engagement has been available online only to avoid discrimination toward this protected characteristic. This can be overcome through effective, targeted offline information.

Financial implications

13. None arising from the recommendation.

Legal implications

14. There is no legal requirement to have a communication or engagement strategy.

Risk management

15. If the protocol is not sufficiently clear members may have difficulty following the guidance. Mitigation: The views of members of the committee will inform the decision by cabinet to ensure clarity.

.Consultees

16. Insight has been gathered through existing data from Understanding Herefordshire survey, the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, internal staff surveys and the council's Hereford 2020 communications survey.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Communications Protocol for members

Background papers

None.