

1. Outline

- 1.1 The Council commissioned Westco, a trading company of Westminster City Council, to provide interim communications support between May 2019 and October 2019. As part of the work Westco carried out an improvement programme to help develop capability, strategy and skills. This report sets out details of that programme.

2. Background

- 2.1 Last year the LGA, with the PRCA, Solace and LGcommunications, published a new best practice guide for local government communications called #Futurecomms. The guide talks about the importance that a strategic approach to communications plays in everyday public services. A healthy democracy is built on the ability of public services to connect with their community. In doing so, well planned and executed communications plays a significant role in connecting people with information, advice and support to improve lives.
- 2.2 Westco, which is a trading company of Westminster City Council, has provided strategic communications support to local authorities since 2002. During that time, it has built a reputation as one of the public sector's leading communications agencies.
- 2.3 Plymouth City Council commissioned Westco to provide interim Head of Communications support between May 2019 and October 2019 during a period where there was a vacancy for the post.
- 2.4 As well as providing operational support for the management of communications during that period, Westco was also asked to provide help for a wider improvement programme.

This piece of work was led by Westco's Executive Director of Communications, Simon Jones who is also the Chair of LGcomms, the professional development body for local government communicators and one of the architects of the new best practice guide.

- 2.5 PCC has commissioned communications reviews in the past. This programme differed in that it was designed to offer practical hands-on support and development work focused on improvement.
- 2.6 Some aspects of the improvement work are ongoing, with Westco continuing to provide interim communications management support for a period of 2-3 days a month while the Head of Communications post remains vacant.

3. Communication resources in Plymouth

- 3.1 PCC has fewer resources dedicated to communications than the majority of councils in the UK, according to the latest LGA benchmarking which is taken from a survey published in December 2018.
- 3.2 In 2019/20 Plymouth's estimated spend on communications will be £497,323 with an established FTE of 8 (excluding graphic designers and apprentices).

Table 1: Resources (FTE count) in local government communications teams.

Table 6: Number of communication staff in FTE by authority type			
	Average (Mean)	Median	Ratio per 10,000 population
Shire County	19.6	20	0.19
Shire District	5.5	5	0.43
London Borough	19.8	18.6	0.69
Metropolitan District	18.7	15.5	0.47
Unitary Authority	9.4	9.4	0.48
Combined Fire Authority	6.8	6	0.05
All	9.4	7	0.31

4. Improvement programme

- 4.1 The improvement programme looked at the following areas
- Communications planning and prioritisation
 - Skills within the team
 - Digital engagement and reach
 - Brand identity and narrative

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5. Communication planning and prioritisation

- 5.1 A significant part of the work was focused on strengthening the way that communications is planned and deployed, moving from a model the was heavily predicated on short

term (weekly) goals to longer-term goals to support wider strategic priorities.

- 5.2 This would ensure that Communications is better planned when it comes to supporting major projects such as the opening of The Box, delivery of the Charles Cross transport scheme and the Mayflower 400 programme.
- 5.3 Through the improvement programme a new long-term planning grid has been established and new methods of operating have been established. Communications now operates a 'Business Partner' model to ensure that effective links are place between the team and service areas across the council. Design principles were co-designed with the team on how this would work in practice. The purpose of the business partner arrangement is to ensure that individual members of the communication team can advise service managers while at the same time `receiving intelligence that is fed into the planning system and acted upon.
- 5.4 It is recognised that in the delivery of communications for any local authority there are many competing demands that go well beyond the level of resources that are available. If the demands are not properly managed this can lead to a less effective communication service. Following Westco's work a new system of prioritisation is being put into place for the development of a 2020/21 Annual Plan. The level of resources that are used for major communication programmes is judged against three criteria which tests the ability of the work to (a) improve lives, (b) reduce the cost of public services and (b) build trust and confidence.
- 5.5 As part of the new planning system, Communications now works closer with the policy team. A monthly strategic meeting has been established to help align resources around major public affairs opportunities.

- 5.6 Through the planning process there has been far greater emphasis on exploiting national opportunities for the Council. For example, the Editor of the Local Government Chronicle spent a day in Plymouth in October 2019 to find out about the major investment that is happening across the city, including the open of The Box.
- 5.7 The outcome of the new model is that there is now less focus on reactive, or unplanned communications, with greater focus on serving longer-term requirements with greater visibility and input from the Corporate Management Team and Cabinet.

6. Skills within the team

- 6.1 PCC is fortunate to have a highly skilled and experienced communications team which provides good level of service. The team are essentially made up of people who can deploy a range of skills across digital and traditional media. This is reflected in relatively high levels of engagement on social media. For example, PCC's Facebook account engages more than 11,900 people across the city. This compares well with Bristol (7,800), Southampton (12,800), Exeter (11,200) and Portsmouth (15,400).
- 6.2 The improvement work focused on strengthening storytelling skills within the team by seeking to ensure that as much content as possible is community-focused in a way that will drive engagement and interest. Through the work there has been more emphasis on developing case studies to help

make information more meaningful, relevant and community-focused.

- 6.3 There is also now a sharper focus on when the council should employ video and when it should not. Too much video content on social media channels can drive down engagement because it is difficult to cut through in an environment where people are bombarded with hundreds of messages every day. The focus is now on quality over quantity, producing content that has far higher value and therefore much more likely to be shared.
- 6.4 A good example of the new approach was a video that the Communications team produced on roadworks that are happening across the city, which included a fly-through map across the city explaining what details of each project. The video was viewed 10,744 times.

7. Digital reach

- 7.1 The improvement work is helping PCC strengthen its wider digital maturity and reach.
- 7.2 PCC recently launched a 'newsroom' on its website (www.plymouth.gov.uk/newsroom) to make content far more accessible. The approaching is helping PCC move away from writing traditional press releases that are more targeted at local media to content that is community focused.

Around 36,000 people receive regular updates from the

Council via email on a variety of topics from information on roadworks to bin collection changes.

- 7.3 Through the improvement programme there is a significant focus on improving PCC's digital reach via email – for example by promoting sign-up opportunities across both local and national websites that Plymouth residents use.
- 7.4 Since the work there has been an 80% increase in the number of residents who receive the council's weekly newsletter, Plymouth News, which distils information from the newsroom.

8. Brand identity and narrative

- 8.1 The improvement work also looked at Plymouth's investment narrative and the relationship between investment marketing and visitor marketing. It has recommended closer integration between the two to help maximise opportunities.
- 8.2 It is recognised that Plymouth already has a powerful place brand in "Britain's Ocean City". It is felt that an integrated marketing approach across a variety of audience groups covering the existing community as well as visitors, students and potential investors could further strengthen the brand while more fully involving other key partners, including local business.
- 8.3 It has recommended that further work is carried out on this which will include looking at how the integrated marketing model has been deployed in other cities.

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