

Appendix 1

COMMUNICATIONS AT THE LGA

A NEW APPROACH TO MAKING INTELLIGENT INTERVENTIONS

Draft paper, v1 4 October 2011, LB

ISSUE

1. As we have seen only this week (council tax story, 3 October 2011), the current system of approving reactive comments to media stories is hopeless – the more controversial the issue, the longer it takes, and the more watered down the final quote is – so the process takes a long time, and the output is an unusable quote
2. This was discussed at the recent Leadership Board Awayday on 14 September 2011 at which the following points were made:
 - We should **move away from reacting to every press enquiry**. Because we are not a single issue organisation, we should be able to pick the issues we want to go public on and campaign on. Communications is there to support our corporate priorities.
 - Where we do want to respond however, **our lines should be clear** and worked out in advance. We don't want to react to everything. But we need to be able to respond to important opportunities quickly when they arise – and aggressively rebut inaccuracies where they are plainly wrong.
 - We need to give **leeway to key individuals** to make the media running on a story. It is sometimes better to get the message a bit wrong and be part of the debate rather than leave people thinking local government just hasn't got a view.
 - We need to look at **the machinery of the organisation** - the relationship of the policy and programme boards with the communications team and the political group offices, to ensure we can deliver timely, interesting messages on priority issues.
 - Local government did well generally with communications with the civil disorder issue because of local government's instinctive response. With the recent coverage of the National Trust on local planning - to the exclusion of local government - **should we have come out stronger** against the National Trust and taken the opportunity to put our views across?
 - However, we should be **realistic about the politics**. Sometimes members will not want to be critical of central Government; sometimes members will not want to support the Government line because of the party politics.

Appendix 1

- Pensions is an example of an issue where we have a coherent group of proposals which could have resonance with employees and with the public. Is this an area we should be exploiting? If Unison is with us – good. If not – we could still make a sensible case.
 - This requires work in advance. Do we get this story out to the media before waiting for the press to call us? We should also think about the leeway we give to the LGA spokesperson.
3. The LGA is a politically-led organization. But this does not mean that everything it says has to be either couched in political terms, or has to fit a political agenda. Many issues facing local government are in fact apolitical and are best looked at analytically and intelligently, by objective experts before then being the focus of communications activity.
4. The LGA has many such analytical ‘brains’, covering every aspect and issue of the local government world. Currently these people sit in the various programme boards, which tend to work a bit in ‘silos’ and are not always very joined up with communications, especially when it comes to promoting their experts in the media.
5. Sometimes this is fine – there are numerous issues on which the LGA will want to lobby more ‘behind the scenes’ and, indeed, will be more effective in doing so. But this is not a paper about lobbying, as such – it is about how the LGA can more effectively and intelligently intervene in policy debates on the public stage, particularly in the media.

SUGGESTED APPROACH

6. There are two principles on which a new approach to solving the above problems might be based:
- The development of an LGA ‘Expert Panel’ whereby its policy leads on the key issues affecting local government are promoted as authoritative, independent, experts, especially to the media;
 - Giving LGA political groups freedom to make their own comments so they do not have to agree a line together, but can essentially provide the media with different reactive soundbites from their different respective party positions.
7. Although this would be something of a departure for the LGA, there are plenty of models for such an approach in the outside world. Local authorities themselves, for example, are used to a much clearer separation not only between political groups, who are free to make their own party

Appendix 1

political comments on an issue affecting the council, but also between non-elected officers and elected councilors. Officers are often used if the council needs to put up an authoritative media spokesman on an issue regarded as more technical than political. The GLA also has this separation between politicians and officers, and allows senior officers to comment on major aspects of London policy, as well as allowing relevant politicians a free rein.

8. In order for this to work

- the LGA's 'experts' would have to be given proper independence, properly free from political influence, or their currency would quickly become cheapened in the media – the key will be the genuineness of the objectivity and the quality of the analytical thinking;
- having said that there would also need to be a robust process for selecting the experts and some parameters agreed about their work, to keep it within corporate objectives and in order that it does actually contribute to, and further, the local government agenda;
- the experts should be actively encouraged to build relations with think tanks and other innovative generators of policy thinking, including for example academics and relevant institutions;
- individual experts would need to be marketed, directly to the media (some organisations use a credit-card style 'call an expert' calling card) and on the website and through other channels – in many ways they would become much more of the 'face' of the LGA. Media training should also be conducted;
- the LGA experts should by and large not react instantly to the latest local government story, unless there is a genuine fit with the work they are doing and they can make a genuinely authoritative and objective intervention. A quick, simple process for approving this should be set up, with the chief executive making the final decision, not political leaders.

Appendix 1

RISKS

9. The media may find it confusing to receive different points of view from the same organisation.
10. Once it becomes known that the LGA corporately is no longer reacting instantly to the latest big local government story, media opportunities may start drying up.
11. LGA members may complain that they are not being properly represented.
12. The chosen experts may be put under pressure by political groups to come up with conclusions or statements which support relevant party policy.
13. There may also be arguments about the experts themselves and whether they are genuinely representing a non-political view, putting pressure on both the experts themselves and on the LGA.
14. Political groups could try to 'spoil' each others' attempts to gain media coverage by sabotaging the process – eg putting out disruptive communications until deadlines have passed.

CONCLUSIONS / NEXT STEPS

15. The view of the author of this draft paper is that most, if not all, of the above risks can be managed effectively if the appropriate processes are put in place – as mentioned, there are plenty of highly effective models for this approach in the world outside the LGA.
16. The approach outlined would achieve a number of corporate objectives:
 - it will, above all, make the LGA worth listening to and a body worth reckoning with, instead of the current situation where much of what it says is 'lowest common denominator' and therefore uninteresting and unheard, thus devaluing credibility and authority. The LGA's experts would not comment for the sake of it, but only intervene where they genuinely have something to say;
 - it will genuinely add value to the local government sector by coming up with intelligent, new, interesting interventions in policy debate and achieving prominence for this in the media – and in this way help to 'support, promote and improve' local government;

Appendix 1

- it will demonstrate a maturity of the organisation in being able to accommodate different views without agonising for hours over one or two words for fear of offending a membership who may in any case not be hearing what the organisation thinks it is saying.
17. Next steps are for those attending the meeting on 4 October 2011 (and other political group representatives copied in to this paper) to comment on this draft back to the author, Luke Blair.
18. Luke Blair to discuss next steps with John Ransford with a view to preparing a second draft for discussion at next appropriate leadership board.

END